



# Information

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# Azarith Healer

by [Rhaegar](#)

Original STUB  [Action Adventure Fantasy Female Lead LitRPG Magic](#)

**Warning** This fiction contains:

- Gore
- Profanity
- Sexual Content
- Traumatizing content

Heya.

The heavily edited version of the story will slowly be published through Kindle and Kindle Unlimited (there will be Audiobooks too). Due to exclusivity for the infinite money glitch that is Kindle Unlimited, the heavily edited section of the story will be exclusive to Amazon but a small cut of each sale goes to Royalroad.

Find Book One here (Chapters 1-74): [Book One - Ebook/Kindle Unlimited](#)  
Audio: [Book One - Audio](#) narrated by Andrea Parsneau

Find Book Two here (Chapters 75-151): Pre-Order will be up soon. Want to remove chapters already to make sure there are no issues with Amazon.

Next to the published book on Amazon, I only post Azarinth content on Royalroad, Scribblehub, and Patreon.

A new world with nearly unlimited possibilities. A status, classes, magic and monsters. Sounds good? Well, for Ilea it didn't come quite as expected as for some other protagonists, nor was there a king or god to welcome her.

The grand quest? Well, she might figure that out someday but for now, a new world with new food is prize enough. Her fists at the ready, she's prepared to punch and get punched, however long it takes and however many limbs she might have to regrow.

A story I've started writing now quite a while ago. Transported to another world, somewhat standard fantasy setting with my beginner attempts to make it dark but funny. There are Litrpg elements here but I do hope it's not too heavy and annoying. The fights should be interesting and aren't just numbers vs numbers. Contrary to the title the protagonist will be quite an offensive fighter.

Ilea Spears is your average sarcastic kick-boxing fast food worker and soon to be student. She will be transported to another world rather conventionally and will be confronted with survival in the wild.

Give it a shot and let me know what you think. My experience is incredibly lacking. If you find yourself hating it early on, do convey your anger in a detailed comment or review :) I want to get better but without any feedback it's simply quite difficult.

Quick heads up: Around chapter 120 there are a bunch of longer PoV changes that I discontinued again shortly after. The Arc around chapters 150-200 is darker than the rest and the themes shift quite a bit. Just know that it goes back to what you've come to know after that section.

Thank you for reading.

Quick update June 2019: Many complaints regarding the formatting, specifically spacing in conversations and of course the usage of the present tense in the first 36 chapters have been addressed. I'm of course learning by

the day but compared to how it was before it should be an improvement at least.

Chapters usually around 3k words

Cover art by [Kevin Catalan](#)

# Chapter 75 A Guild and a Bed

## Chapter 75 A Guild and a Bed

Ilea happily tried four different menus from the card and left the restaurant two hours later satisfied. ‘Now what to get first...’ she thought as she walked through the city. Someone next to her suddenly grabbed at her and she spun around, stopping the hand with her own and putting pressure on it while looking at the man’s face.

The hand gave in with a crunch of bone as the man screamed in the street. Some people stopped but most decided to just ignore it and minded their own business. “What do you want?” she asked as she healed the broken bone. She didn’t actually intend to break it but might’ve been a little on edge around so many people. Especially after that night in Earl’s shop.

“I...I’m...you’re joining the hand right?” the man gulped and asked.

“None of your business.” she stated and started walking away.

“I would like to be your agent, organize jobs and all that for you. Would you like to....” Ilea didn’t hear the rest as she blinked into a nearby shop before blinking behind into the next street.

‘Fucking annoying...maybe I do need to wear my armor...’ she thought and entered an armory right after.

“Hello miss. Anything specific you’re looking for?” the woman asked in a polite tone. The store looked incredibly fancy and Ilea was sure that if it weren’t for the question marks the level 80 woman likely saw above her head, she’d be kicked out in two seconds.

“Yea, comfortable leather armor...with a hood.” she said and the woman quickly nodded.

“Please follow me, what’s the price range you’re looking for?” the employee asked.

“What ranges do you have?” Ilea asked in return.

“We have cheaper sets starting at two gold coins. Higher quality ones starting at five gold and specialized creations starting at ten gold.”

“The high quality one then, five to eight gold is fine.” Ilea said and soon stood in front of several very nice looking leather armor sets in a back room. She decided on a brown one that looked especially comfortable to wear. It had a lot of fabric below as well so it wasn’t necessary to wear anything under the armor.

“That’s six gold then. Would you like to change immediately?” the woman asked and seemed happy at Ilea’s nod while she grabbed the gold from her backpack and handed it over.

“That’s all, thanks.” Ilea said and the woman nodded and walked away with the money while Ilea changed. She simply blinked out into the street again and put up her hood, hiding her black hair and blue eyes a little. ‘Hopefully I don’t look as poor anymore for someone to just grab me and try to become my secretary or whatever...’

“You’re wearing inferior armor. I think that’s dangerous.” Aki said.

“I know, right now the benefits outweigh the risk though and I’ll try the trick you mentioned with the storage item soon enough.” she said and betrayed her statement by going into a cake store. She simply walked around and made five cakes vanish before she put three silver coins on the counter. The cakes were sold for less but she didn’t want to count out the coppers.

It was likely that nobody would’ve stopped her from simply stealing the cakes but Ilea already had a lot of gold, no reason to make life harder on

someone that decided to bake cakes in a world filled with magic and monsters.

‘Next thing...hmm yes...yes that is very much an important thing...’ she thought as she looked at the store in front of her. It looked much the same as all the other buildings with its stone walls and European architecture. At least that was what Ilea compared it to. The buildings around her looked similar to Salia though a little more geared towards practicality and less towards artistry.

The difference in the store in front of her was what was inside, as is often the case with stores and any building. Ilea walked in and was immediately greeted by an annoyed looking man standing in front of a book. “YES. What do you want?” he asked, with an obviously fake smile on his face.

“I want to buy.” Ilea said.

“She wants to buy. And who says you’re allowed to buy?” the man asked, catching her so off guard she was literally speechless. The gears in her head started turning again and she was ready to reply when a young woman walked in from a side room.

“Michael stop it. Miss how can I help you?” the woman smiled at her and motioned for her to follow.

“I want to buy a bed.” Ilea simply stated and followed the woman.

“Sure, they range from four to ten gold. All made with real feathers and masterful labor.”

‘Isn’t that enough to feed someone for years? What kind of luxury shop have I ended up in...’ Ilea thought but just shrugged and followed the woman.

“Do you have drake feather beds?” she asked and the woman nodded.

“There’s one remaining I believe. Seven gold. Would you like to try it out?” Ilea nodded at that and was brought into a room with a rather large bed, though not quite queen size.



“Leave the room for half a minute please.” Ilea said. “Don’t worry I won’t steal it.”

The woman reluctantly left the room and waited outside. Ilea saw her sighing and signaling towards the man who looked on from downstairs. Ilea quickly lay down on the bed and nearly moaned at the magical feeling. She smiled as it vanished into her inventory and blinked upwards to not fall on the ground. The wooden frame came with it as well.

She walked back out and handed the woman seven gold coins. “Business done?” Ilea asked and the woman nodded. “Thank you, it’s a lovely bed.” she said and left the building, smiling brightly at the man who looked at her with mockery in his eyes.

‘That man lives a dangerous life....’ she thought and exited the store. ‘To the hand then...’

Ilea walked through the streets for another two hours, looking at anything that interested her though she had noticed some people had started following her a while ago. They didn’t engage so she was fine with it. Having talked to some guards she knew where the hand was located and slowly made her way there.

Soon Ilea arrived at a symmetrical building that looked a little like a temple. Two people with level 202 and 205 stood next to the doorway that was the shape of a triangle. She walked up to them and entered without hindrance. Her shadows didn’t seem to follow her inside and Ilea decided to investigate if they follow her again.

Inside the room opened up into a massive hall. White stone similar to ivory decorated it though the feeling was much different compared to the Taleen great hall. There were paintings on the walls, plants and carpets brought warmth and a high society feeling to the room. Even more so than the armor shop she had been in before.

Ilea walked up to the woman standing behind a counter in the middle of the hall. She was surprised to see that the clerk was level 173 and a mage. “Yes?” the woman asked.

“Hey, I’d like to join the shadow’s hand. Is this the right place to do so?” Ilea asked.

“Yes yes. You have to be level 200 to join but seeing as you got inside that should be fulfilled. Now there are two ways of joining, either you get a contract and work off your debt or you pay one hundred gold upfront. You will be treated as an initiate either way, I hope you understand. Though if you pay you can leave at any time. No questions asked.” the woman explained and Ilea nodded.

“I’d like to know some more but I’ll definitely go with the paying upfront.” she said and the woman took a small bell from her desk and rang it. A man who looked to be in his forties suddenly appeared next to the desk and extended his hand to Ilea. His gray hair more a factor of attractiveness than it was one of age.

Ilea shook his hand as he introduced himself. “William Hendricks. Nice to meet you.”

“Name’s Ilea.” she answered.

“Ilea then, would you please follow me. A couple formalities to fill out before you can join. Any question you have I’ll answer to the best of my capability.” he said and motioned for her to follow. “Teleportation?” he asked and she motioned for him to continue.

The man vanished and Ilea perceived him appearing in a room on the first floor. She followed behind with a Blink and took a seat opposite the man who was sitting down as well.

“Perception and teleportation. Already two very valuable assets to have. You would like to join with the fee?” he asked and Ilea nodded.

“Though I would like to have a better picture of what exactly I’m buying if you would be so kind.” she said and looked at the question marks next to the warrior title of the man. He nodded and started explaining.

“I will do the short version. Ask whenever you need me to elaborate. The shadow’s hand is a mercenary guild famous for it’s highly qualified members and their strength. As long as you pay and do not try to harm humanity as a whole we will do the job. As a member you either join with payment or without. With payment you can leave whenever you want to, there are no strings attached. Though otherwise the treatment you will receive won’t differ greatly from the non paying members.

You won’t have to do guard duty and you will get the whole pay for the jobs you finish. Additionally you may refuse any job without reason. You will be evaluated by me and two other high ranking members and put into a team of five. You will train and learn with them for the next six months while doing jobs depending on your capabilities.

You will receive lodging here but of course may stay wherever you like. As long as you are here for mandatory trainings and classes. As a paid member you may refuse your assigned squad once and only once. Members are put together into teams to get the best synergy of abilities.” Ilea interjected here.

“There are classes, what are the mandatory ones and what else is there?”

“Mandatory are team fighting, team tactics and monster knowledge. The first one four hours a day and the other ones each one hour. No classes when you are out on jobs. Each group gets assigned an instructor, these may change as time goes on.” he paused for two seconds and continued.

“There is a range of other classes you may visit. Each with at least a level 100 instructor in the specific field or skill. You may choose freely here but if there are less than three members in a class you will have to pay a fee depending on the class.” he finished.

“Can I join classes again after the six months is up? What if I leave the guild at some point?” Ilea asked.

“Of course you can. And as long as you don’t work against humanity as a whole or the guild, you won’t be banned from our services. I do not see a reason for anybody to not associate with us anymore but there is the possibility. It’s akin to a ban and all documentation we have on you will be erased. You won’t be allowed to take jobs anymore or to join a team. After the six months you won’t have an obligation to the guild anymore though, not if you have paid beforehand.” he said and continued.

“You may leave for fifty years and come back to join a team and take jobs again. We won’t allow less than five people to take jobs except if you are a higher ranking member.”

“Alright, so it’s more an initial training and then just a network used to get together teams and do jobs.” Ilea clarified and the man nodded.

“Though the influence and recognition we have reaches further than what you describe.” William clarified.

“Yes, I see. Well then I don’t see a downside.” Ilea said and grinned at the man. He stayed stoic and simply opened a drawer to remove paperwork from.

“This is the contract, read through it carefully and make sure you agree to all of it. If you don’t comply to the rules you may be banned from the guild.” he explained and put the stack of papers on the table.

“Alright, I’ll read it downstairs and tell the woman to signal you as soon as I’m done.” she said and the man nodded and watched her disappear into the hall downstairs.

Ilea read through the contract in the next hour and made sure that there were no loopholes. Aki confirmed as much when she was done and signaled to the woman working at the reception. The contract was pretty straight forward and even less shady than the one Ilea had signed to work at the fast food joint. ‘Guess instead of level 200 lawyers they have level 200 mages...’ she thought as William appeared again next to the woman.

“Do you agree to the contract?” he asked and she nodded.

“Ready to sign and start.” Ilea said and smiled at him. She wasn’t proud about the itch she had to fight the man. See him turn into a wild warrior. ‘It’s been a while hmm...’ she thought and sighed before following the man back into his office.

The contract was signed with mana and her written name though Aki assured her there was no binding magic involved. He wasn’t even sure anything like that existed and he’s probably seen more than most powerful mages walking around.

Ilea had put the gold into her backpack in preparation for paying while reading through the contract, though she couldn’t be sure William didn’t know about her storage item. If he did, he didn’t show it. She got the gold out of her backpack and stacked the money on his table. He watched and counted until finally nodding and taking the money. It vanished immediately upon his touch which made Ilea feel a little silly.

“We can do your evaluation tomorrow right after midday if that is ok for you. Do you need specific materials, an environment or anything else during the evaluation to show us your full capabilities?” he asked.

“No, I should be fine anywhere. Not under water if that’s possible.” she said.

“I’ll note that. In that case I suggest the underwater warfare class, if it’s not an intricate incapability.” he said and got up.

“I’ll think about it. Where do I stay until tomorrow?” Ilea asked, thinking of sharing a dorm room with a bunch of smelly guys.

“As a paid member you will get your own rooms. Wait down in the hall, an assistant will take care of you shortly. And it’s a pleasure to have you join us Miss Ilea.” he got up and shook her hand before she blinked down into the hall.

It didn't take long until someone else showed up. Level 120 this time, Ilea couldn't help but ask this time. "Hey how is someone with your level working this job?" the man looked at her sideways.

"You get training here and opportunities. And you can already work on the fee you'd have to pay at level 200 to join as a member. The positions are actually very hard to get, though every other new member I talk to asks me that. Sometimes I get to go along expeditions or can join a team that will have me." the man concluded and Ilea decided not to pry any further.

It did make sense and would be a gradual rise in strength instead of her own explosive one. The man most certainly knew much more about monsters and tactics than she did. And that didn't mean he lacked any of the experience she had gotten when fighting. Perhaps he lacked experience when fighting alone but why would he need it? He would probably be in a team for the rest of his life.

"Welcome to the Shadow's hand." the man said as the two reached the end of a corridor. Some other people were walking around and Ilea got quite a bunch of glances. Coming out of the corridor, something akin to the Root opened up before them. The architecture of the different houses was the same as the rest of Ravenhall but the whole thing was built quite a bit more vertical.

'A city inside the mountain...yet a small one to be sure.' she thought as she looked around. The lighting came from massive magical constructions above, mimicking a sun without it being blinding to the eye. Ilea kept following the man who accelerated his pace for some reason. There were dozens of people either walking around or talking to each other.

Food was being sold or made and Ilea even saw some smiths and stores. "Are they part of the Hand as well? Or independent?" she asked the man in front of her.

He answered a minute later after they had entered one of the houses to the right. "They have contracts with the hand and aren't allowed to sell anywhere else. It's a bit of a gamble if you ask me but it ensures we only have quality work here. And I believe their contracts work in a similar way

than the ones from the members do.” he explained and walked to the first floor of the building.

Using a key to open the door, he gestured for her to enter. “Your rooms. As a paid member you have the apartment for yourself. Any looting or unwanted entrances are to be reported. Trespassing is considered enough for a ban but just as a tip from someone who’s been here for a while...don’t keep too much of your valuables here. There are some ridiculously good thieves and rogues here. Some of them make it a challenge...” he said and handed her the key before walking back to the door.

“Good luck...” he said and Ilea nodded towards him.

Ilea smiled and looked around. A fully furnished apartment with three rooms and a toilet. She checked through it all with her eyes and sphere. It was very rich. The bed was nearly of the same quality as the one she had bought earlier that day. The toilet was close to something she’d have on earth and the carpets and decorations didn’t disappoint either.

Compared to the expected dark theme that the Hand seemed to have, this room was more focused on a dark red and gold while the walls were white stone. She wondered if it was perhaps inspired by the dwarves. Or even originally built by them.

# Chapter 76 Storage Skills

## Chapter 76 Storage Skills

Ilea put her hood back and jumped on the bed, smiling at its softness. ‘So tomorrow is the evaluation. And then I’ll get a team and some education. Seems like I’m at the same point as I was in my previous life then.’ she thought and balled her hand into a fist ‘Just that I can punch holes in walls and survive the attacks of specialized magic death elves...’ she smiled and closed her eyes.

It had been a while since she had last slept. “Aki, wake me if anybody comes.” she said to the dagger and dozed off in a matter of minutes.

“Wake up!” came the call and Ilea’s eyes shot open, her buffs flaring to the max as she faintly perceived a person vanishing from the middle of the room, something was wrong with it them though. She quickly checked her belongings but found nothing wrong with them and nothing removed.

Ilea was sure that the person’s silhouette at least looked feminine as she used her Hunter’s Sight to check for and clues left behind. Though there was nothing...no new smell in the room and other than a very faint touch to the rug in the room there was nothing. Sadly whoever it was had touched the ground too faintly to leave any comprehensive track.



'I'll ask around I guess...' she thought and jumped back to her bed. Nobody that looked familiar was in her sphere of perception.

"What did you see?" she asked Aki as she got up again and walked towards the windows. Though the place inside the mountain seemed small, there were enough people and merchants that it seemed just as busy as outside in the city proper.

"I immediately woke you as soon as I sensed someone. Whatever it was vanished at your waking before I saw something. I do not believe it was illusion magic though I also don't think someone actually was in the room...it was something I've not sensed before..." Aki finished.

"Something you've not sensed before huh...well if anywhere I think we're gonna find quite a bit of that here." she said and walked back to the bed, sitting on its edge. "How long did I sleep?"

"One hour thirty two minutes and thirteen seconds." Aki answered.

"You're making that up aren't you?" she said and twirled the dagger after unsheathing it.

"It was around one and a half hour..." he said and was promptly thrown into the wall.

"So you know how long an hour is now?" she asked as she made her armor vanish into her necklace. She was now standing in the room with only her underwear and necklace.

"I figured it out, yes. Why are you getting naked? I hope you're not making good on the coitus comment." Aki said and got a snort from the woman.

"I'm trying your thing...works with both armor and clothes right?" she asked and summoned the talen clothes she had removed earlier. They appeared jumbled on top of her.

"You really are untalented. I've never heard of anybody having difficulties with that...just picture yourself dressed I guess." Aki said from his position

on the wall.

The clothes disappeared again and came back. The same thing happened though this time at least the chest piece appeared near the chest and not on her head like before. Ilea tried for the next half hour and finally figured it out. It wasn't just about picturing the clothes on her but she had to think about the position of the arms, the legs, the hole for her heads and she had to picture the clothing stretched out and not jumbled. She was sure that people who had spatial storage either were told as much or they had to try just as long.

Next came the armor. Though it had more separate pieces and intricacies Ilea managed to summon it onto her body after just fifteen minutes of trying. The next step, combining the two and then switching between her leather armor and her taelen and elven combination occupied her for another half hour.

Aki looked on as his new wielder switched between armors in mere seconds. He didn't actually know how long it took someone to learn to do that as all his previous wielders who had spacial storage items had already mastered this technique and likely long before they had found him.

A strange pride filled him as he watched his master, no, wielder put on her clothes. She was certainly different than all the others before her. The last human who had wielded him was doing so thousands of years ago and the man had discarded the dagger after realizing the new sword he had found was better for killing.

He watched the woman laugh as she switched clothes in front of the mirror and felt a warm sensation. 'Perhaps she is the one.' he thought as he still hung on the wall, piercing the stone of this ancient place.

“I’m getting good at this...” Ilea said and blinked to the wall where she removed Aki and put him in his sheath on her waist. She was wearing the light brown leather armor again and put up her cloak before she looked through the apartment again. ‘I like it. Though it’s not mine...’ she thought and unsheathed Aki again.

“Does it hurt or is it bad inside the necklace?” she asked and waited.

“No, it’s similar to a meditative state. Though I would prefer to stay outside if at all possible.” the dagger answered.

“That’s fine then, just for the toilet.” she said and made him vanish.

Her business done, she sheathed Aki again and left the apartment, locking it in the process. Walking down she realized that the apartment below hers was empty and seemed undisturbed. Her sphere wasn’t blocked by anything so she assumed others would see her just as well if they had the right abilities. Not that she cared deeply. Privacy wasn’t necessary but certainly welcome. She would get it in time.

She walked out into the street and looked around. Some people were playing music on different instruments while a beautiful voice was singing. One level further down, separated by two flights of stairs was a fountain and around it something akin to a main square. Across from her apartment was another house pretty much the same as hers. She could see half of what was going on inside, though at the moment it didn’t seem like anybody was there.

To the left were more stairs that led to the corridor and out into the Hand’s main building or what she assumed to be the main building. Some merchants were selling food up there but she decided to walk downwards and check out the square. Several people changed their behavior slightly as she approached though only two or three of them actually turned and looked at her. There

were people on the ground playing a game of dice with a clawed insect in the middle of them. It reminded her of the scene with the cobras in some old movies she had watched.

They certainly looked different than whatever she had seen in the adventurer guild before. Just the gear alone showed that. Ilea didn't approach anybody and just checked out the different stores that seemed more like luxury yard sale stands. At first the whole place didn't seem very different from the Root but having a community based on higher leveled adventurers brought a certain amount of high society with it.

Though as luxury as it was, so were the prices. Magical items and monster parts were being sold in the square and Ilea quickly lost interest in the seemingly useless things. Though many an adventurer was bartering with the vendors. They certainly had a use but Ilea wasn't into alchemy or building magical constructs, she was more about destroying them.

Perhaps there was a way to use them to improve her armor or maybe find a way to attack but she had quite some time to figure that out. 'Six months I'm gonna be here...well maybe. I can leave at any time after all.' she came to a stop another level further down, where the houses on either side were occupied by smiths.

She checked out some weapons but decided to move on. 'That village Lorcan mentioned should be reachable in less than an hour from here...' she had seen the name on her map and she really liked the man's sword. Buying from another smith seemed to be ill advised before she even went to check out what the man had to offer.

'What do I even want from a smith...' she thought suddenly and put the battle axe back that she had held in her hands. She walked onwards and quickly reached the end of the open space. Tunnels and elevators led down or up from a small square at the bottom of the square and somebody would sometimes come up for go down. Though it wouldn't serve her to simply go down and explore. She'd likely see enough of this place rather soon.

Interesting was that none of the people she saw were wearing the black misty armor that she had seen the Hand use before. 'Maybe everyone here is an

initiate...or perhaps you're simply not allowed to wear it here...' she thought as she subconsciously moved away from a man who nearly bumped into her.

It was on purpose of course but Ilea didn't mind in that moment. She would get enough enemies here as it was, no reason to accelerate that. She was already walking back upwards when she noticed the man had bumped into someone else. The small woman who had been bumped into flashed a quick grin that Ilea only saw thanks to her sphere. The woman then turned around and looked at the man with fear in her eyes. The two talked for a while before the man pushed her away, though Ilea saw how she slipped something into his pack. Nothing seemed to happen to the pack and the man walked on.

Ilea couldn't find anything wrong with the pack either but the hair on her neck had stood up when whatever it was the woman slipped in seemed to vanish into his pack. The whole situation had renewed her conviction to be very careful in this place and maybe try for at least a couple hours not to make a scene.

Soon she entered one of the many bars and ordered a couple mugs of ale before sitting down at a table in one of the corners. The place was by no means empty but certainly not comparable to an english pub on a football championship finale. The ale tasted good, not as good as Walter's Ilea decided but good.

Surprisingly the smell inside the bar was nothing to scoff at. Compared to the Root Ilea felt like she had everything she wanted from an adventurer town without too much dirt and shit. The people seemed to have a little more tact as well. Except for the likely murder she had witnessed there were no brawls. Probably because a lot would get destroyed if anybody here got serious.

There had been a rule about fighting in the contract. It strictly said to do so only in the designated training areas and arenas. Killing somebody had to be reasonable and at least three witnesses had to confirm that both parties agreed on a fight to the death. The winning person would still have to pay a sizable fee as killing someone above level 200 would be a big loss for humankind, or so the Hand thought.

Ilea enjoyed it in the bar and only got happier as a group of people decided to perform some live music. There were level 130 bards there, likely trying to get recognition or even trying to get hired by somebody in the room. One young man was especially enchanting with his lute.

Ilea hadn't even noticed the time passing as she enjoyed the atmosphere, the food and the entertainment.

"May I join you?" a man with rough gray hair and a glint of red in his eyes had come up to her table and asked to sit down on it. She checked the room and noticed that it had gotten quite a bit fuller, apparently the musical entertainment in this specific pub was quite desirable. She nodded and watched the musicians again. To her surprise and pleasure the man simply sat down and enjoyed his drink while listening.

Half an hour later the musicians who had played lined up and received applause from the onlookers before they walked around and collected donations. Ilea had thought she was a bit loose with her money though what these people displayed seemed on a different level altogether. Gold coins were tossed into the hats and even some rings or likely expensive artifacts or monster parts were donated.

'Must be quite the killing you make if you play here...' she thought and tossed a bunch of silver coins into the hats that were held towards her.

"Liam, there you are. Oh, found new company?" a woman who had walked up to the table sat down next to the man and started talking.

"Hey Demora. I don't know her actually, only free space with some quiet I could find. Already back? I thought you'd go deep into Karth this time." the man, apparently called Liam asked the woman.

"Yea that whole thing kinda fell short. We lost our tank to a shredder. Not a nice sight. He was pretty fresh though, was bound to happen. And with the elves attacking again we decided to leave it there." Demora said and sat down next to the man.

Ilea sat back and continued drinking, she had several filled mugs in front of her. The barmaids, all above level 100, had learned quickly about both her ability to drink quickly and her generous tips.

“Javis wanted to go with a fresh tank?” Liam asked and she confirmed while shaking her head.

“He was good looking too the lad.” she said and motioned for one of the barmaids. “The offer still stands you know. We’d love to have you on the team.” she said but the man waved her away.

“The answer’s the same and it will stay the same.” he said and took a sip of his drink.

“Suit yourself.” Demora said, obviously not happy about his answer. She simply left the place, leaving one of the barmaids stranded with two mugs in her hand. Ilea, in her opportunist brilliance motioned to the woman who seemed relieved that she found someone to help her out.

The mugs were placed on the table and Ilea paid. It was ale just like the one she had already been drinking. Looking over to the man, she found him looking at her. Though it was no surprise as she had already seen that with her sphere. Motioning to one of the mugs, the man sighed and nodded before a silver coin appeared in his hand and was flung her way.

She wasn’t quite sure if the coin had been summoned or if it was simply a sleight of hand. Ilea didn’t care much and continued to watch the bar.

“Never seen you before.” the man suddenly said. “201. Your first day here?” she nodded slightly though neither of them were looking at the other.

“Word of advice. Stay away from that woman.” he said and continued drinking in silence. Ilea noted that and did the same. A bit later more musicians came and played but Ilea had already left. She was walking up towards the exit of the small town of extraordinary adventurers and thought about the impact that a cave in would have on the overall forces of humanity in Elos.

She smiled at the idea and thought about her chances of survival. With her resistances, physical strength and durability she would probably make it. Getting out would be time consuming but rather easy in the end. ‘Not as much for some of the manges or rogues...’ she thought as she exited into the corridor that she had been led through earlier that day.

Backtracking her steps, Ilea soon reached the entrance hall again and walked up to the reception. A different person was occupying the desk this time. The man turned around and smiled at Ilea a little awkwardly as she approached from behind. He was already at level 204 she noticed, a little surprised at the reception duty someone like him was given.

“Hey, just a quick question. I’m allowed to leave the city whenever I want right? As long as I’m here for the mandatory classes and assessments. The contract wasn’t very clear about that.” she asked and looked at the man. His gray eyes stared back at her as he stammered out his response.

“Y...you...you c..can. Y...yes. No...rule agai...against leaving..th..the city.” he managed and Ilea smiled at him while nodding.

“Great, thanks.” she wasn’t a hundred percent sure that what the man had said was the truth but she didn’t really mind even if she broke any rules. It was good to know when one did so though and the contract really didn’t mention leaving the city. There was no requirement to stay anywhere really. Still maybe it was obvious that one had to stay inside the Hand’s headquarters.

The man nodded a little too quickly at her and turned back around as she walked past him and towards the exit. ‘He’s cute.’ she thought and went back into the city proper. ‘Still have around half a day...’ she thought as she looked at the dark sky above.



# Chapter 77 Evaluation

## Chapter 77 Evaluation

*'bling' 'Identify reaches lvl 7'*

'Well hello there...been a while since you last showed yourself...must be because of all those 200 and above people down there...' Ilea thought.

"So what do you think?" she asked as she walked through the city. Ilea noticed that there was nobody following her anymore so it had likely just been a security measure to find out why she had been in the city. There was more air outside and after all that musical entertainment she enjoyed the more quiet evening city life.

'Half the people in the headquarters probably wouldn't have to sleep a lot.' she thought.

"It's an assortment of powerful people. Though be aware that compared to the elven and dwarven communities I've seen they are but a band of children, playing a game they do not understand." Aki said from his position on her waist.

"What do you mean, they're all above 200, same goes for the elves I've encountered so far..." Ilea said as she jumped up a building to get a better view of the city.

“Hmm yes, though those are the frontliners. If it’s still the same...and trust me elven culture doesn’t change over night...then the elves you’ve fought were all rather young. Or foolish. It’s true that deeper inside the elven territory the residents might not be stronger in level but certainly in cunning and experience. They’ve held their positions over thousands of years, and for good reason.” he explained.

Ilea shrugged as she jumped from building to building. “Well we don’t really have a choice but to try our best. Even if the adversary is thousands of years old and probably has just as many points in their status.”

“I wouldn’t say you’re an adversary. More a thing to train their youth with or to find interesting classes and ways to use magic and technology. You tend to think too much of your own species, you’re not the center of Elos.” Aki said.

“I know that...I’ve known that as soon as I saw that Basilisk use its magic. Though if anything we’re persistent and good at surviving.”

“That you are.” Aki concluded.

Ilea wandered around the city roofs for a while, enjoying the stars shining above. Even after close to a year it was incredible to see them. A muffled cry a couple streets over made her perk up though and she blinked closer until she was close enough for her sphere to perceive the full scene.

Two men in armor were punching a young girl, ripping away her clothes. Ilea wanted to make sure and continued watching, getting close enough to blink in and intervene when an eerie melody filled her ears. Her head started throbbing hard as blood leaked out from her nose. She stumbled to one knee and closed her eyes as every hair on her body stood up in alarm.

*‘ding’ ‘Mental Resistance reaches lvl 9’*

The melody changed its flow to a quicker one and Ilea activated her shroud of ash, immediately taking away a layer of the powerful spell and the influence it had on her. The eerie melody turned into faint humming that came from a couple streets over.

Deciding to go there, Ilea suddenly stopped in her tracks, realizing that the two men were in the process of killing each other. They were attacking with reckless abandon and no regard for their own safety as each one's weapon found the other's flesh. The humming stopped as both of them fell to the icy ground, their blood painting the cobblestone a tinge of red.

Ilea blinked towards where the sound had come from and saw a woman running away. Smiling, she followed. Turning a corner though there was nothing. No smell or prints in the snow. Walking back to the scene of violence, the girl had already ran away as well. Saved by strange magic.

“What was that magic?” she asked as she put her hand to her chin, looking at the two bodies, soon to be found and buried.

“Mind magic to be sure...though very subtle...I thought I had lost you there for a second.” Aki said. Ilea grunted and left the scene. Deciding that she'd want to use her new bed again after all. One of them at least.

Waking up after a glorious full eight hours, Ilea blinked at the light coming in from the windows. The curtains moved a little as she turned around in her bed. ‘Warm..’ she thought and tried to get out of the blanket unsuccessfully. With a stroke of brilliance the blanket vanished into her necklace. “Better...” she said and enjoyed the light breeze coming in from the windows.

Outside music was playing and she could hear people bartering and laughing. “Wait...” she suddenly said, her eyes opening again “...where's the wind coming from?” she stretched on her bed and blinked right onto the toilet.

Her business done, she walked out, summoned Aki and threw him into the wall. She had decided not to have him anywhere steal-able. Of course she still had her necklace but one had to actually touch her to remove it and Ilea felt safe enough with that. With all her skills, she had woken up from much less.

Summoning her leather armor, she checked herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess and she didn't even own a brush. 'Wait no I do...' she thought and went back into the bathroom. There was an assortment of tools there, two of them being brushes. She sat down on the bed and started working, with her pain perception disabled of course.

Half an hour later she put the brush into her necklace and got up to get Aki. "Let's go get some food, I'm starving." she said and twirled around the blade.

"Why do I not believe you?" the dagger asked while he was being sheathed.

"Because your character is shaped by my being?" Ilea more stated than asked and got a grunt in response. She smiled as she exited the building and walked upwards towards some of the food stands. They were selling all sorts of meat dishes, curry and even kebab. Quite the range of goods in a small square like that.

Though sadly none of that was eligible for breakfast, or so at least Ilea thought. One of the merchants sold something that looked similar to donuts though and Ilea decided that would do. Or five of them would do. 'How did I not get fat in my last life? I mean one or two are ok but five...for breakfast. Am I a hobbit?' she thought and then remembered that her funds were a bit too limited to eat five donuts every morning. Not anymore though and with her newfound stats and skills that turned her body into something superhuman, a couple baked goods more here and there didn't really make a difference.

'Let's not forget all the fighting...' she thought and walked up towards the main hall. It was still a little early but she didn't want to go into one of the bars, for the same reason really. The hall was just as empty as it had been the day before, one or two people would occasionally walk through but the bulk of the members were either somewhere else or in the small city.

Ilea walked up to the reception where again a new guy was sitting. He had a lower level than the one from yesterday though. "Hey, two questions." she said and rested her hands on the desk. The man just motioned for her to continue, helping out members and orienting new ones was his job after all.

“What’s the city called where members stay? And where can I find information on available classes?” she asked.

The man scratched his stubbly beard and mumbled his response. “The city has different names I think. Most refer to it as Viscera. You can find the list of available classes at the bottom of the town, near the elevators.”

“Viscera? As in guts?” Ilea asked and the man just grinned and nodded. “Thanks, gonna check it out.” she said and he waved her away.

‘Viscera huh...seems a little too peaceful for that but hey what do I know?’ she thought as she walked back into the town and down towards the bottom. It was getting close to noon so she couldn’t lose too much time. The classes could also wait until later but she was curious.

‘Hmm, that’s a lot...’ she thought, standing in front of the stone that listed all the available classes and further information. ‘How do they update carvings?...oh yes, magic...’

- *Alchemy I*
- *Alchemy II*
- *Alchemy III*
- *Astronomy I*
- *Astronomy II*
- *Algebra I*
- ....

Ilea read through the list and found nearly everything she could think of on there. She had thought the classes would be more focused on fighting but then again something like the knowledge of stars or geometry might actually come in handy for some specialized classes. What if your power comes from the stars and their alignment, Ilea was sure something like that existed.

And William had mentioned that one could pay for classes with too few attending people so a lot of them likely had one or two pupils. ‘Why even have all that...’ she thought as she listened in on the conversation the two

women next to her were having. Apparently they weren't paid members and had to choose at least three classes in addition to the mandatory ones.

'The privileged rich...though I don't think mandatory education is a bad thing at all...' she thought and made her way up to the main hall again, different ideas for learning in her head.

Adam held his hands to his face, stopping his trembling hands. The paper in front of him was grabbed and crumpled up. Tossed to the dogs as thousands before it. He sighed and opened the bottle of strong alcohol on his desk. Holding the cork in his hand he looked straight ahead and put it down into the bottle again.

The dogs were still munching on the paper when a knock could be heard from the door. Adam waited for the dog to stop chewing before he made both of them vanish, back to the realm of beasts. Getting up he summoned his coat and his intricately designed notebook. He flipped through it as he approached the door of his office. The maroon wood under his boots grated a little as his finger came to a stop.

'Ah yes, new initiate. Fifth one this month.' he thought as the book vanished again and he opened the door.

"Elder Strand. The initiate is ready." the woman bowed. She worked hard, level 130. It would take a while for her to reduce her debt to zero and reach the required level to become a member but Adam was sure she could do it. A brilliant mage with marvelous classes. He smiled at the woman genuinely and nodded.

"I'm on my way." he said simply and walked down the stairs.

‘This is the third one that I supervise this month...’ his teeth ground together at the thought and the lost time in his work.

The man reached his destination fifteen minutes later as he descended one of the elevators at the end of Viscera. A tasteless name for something beautiful and old. He walked out and into the big corridor that held around a dozen big doors to the left. Choosing the third one, he opened it and entered.

William was there, as he always was. ‘The man will become elder as soon as one of us bites the dust...’ he grinned and saw the man nod towards him, likely grateful that at least one of the elders was on time and took his duty somewhat seriously. Though he couldn’t fault most of the others. They did more for the guild than he ever did. Focusing on the task at hand he joined the others.

Sidney was there as well and completed the requirement for three higher members of the guild being there for the evaluation. ‘A good combination too, she’s gonna be pushed to the limit...’ he looked at the initiate, she was wearing leather armor, had black hair and blue eyes.

Her slight grin told him that she was a little too cocky, not ready for the guild but when he looked into her eyes he knew there was more. ‘She’s a veteran alright...though a young one at that.’ he thought, saddened as he was many times before at the requirements of becoming strong.

‘She could’ve lived a happy life on some farm...’ he thought but shook his head. The farm wouldn’t be if it weren’t for them and others who were prepared to fight. He wouldn’t stand in her way.

“So let me start then. I’m Elder Strand. Please quickly explain your classes, abilities and where you would see yourself in a team of adventurers.” he said and stepped up to the others. “Explain as freely as you can. Everything we

learn here will stay here and is only used to evaluate an appropriate team for you to join.”

He could see that she didn't trust that completely but still she started explaining. “I'm mostly hand to hand. I can attack by pushing destructive mana into an enemy I hit. I can take quite some damage as well and I can heal. Both myself and others, though it's apparently much weaker than a dedicated healer.” she finished and looked at them.

“A healer...that's a quite rare and valuable ability to have at this level. Well let's test the extent of your abilities then.” Adam said. “We'll start with damage sustain...please stand a bit further away. William here will attack you with increasingly powerful ice and water magic. Tell us as soon as you lose more than thirty percent of your health.” he explained and motioned for William to start.

Of course a tank did have specific elements or weapons he was especially strong against but they also had to be ready for any kind of attack. Today it was ice and water, mostly piercing types of attacks.

“I just bought this leather armor...” the woman said, obviously a little attached to the clothing. Sidney motioned to a corner of the room where some chests were sitting.

“You have some things in there. Please just take clothes, armor doesn't come into account here.” Sidney explained. The initiate nodded and went to change. William summoned a wall of ice that would obstruct their view of her. Unnecessary Adam thought, though he didn't comment on it.

The girl was quick and went to the middle of the room, dressed in some very basic clothing. “Let's start then.” William said. With that a number of blue runes appeared on the woman's body, followed by red firey lines. Her eyes seemed to become even brighter as a shroud of ash came into existence around her.

‘Ash Wielder...impressive.’ Adam thought though he did not know the other class of the girl. ‘I believe the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of that defensive spell can be rather



impressive...' he thought as the first ice attacks didn't even make the woman move.

Bigger and bigger blocks of ice hit the initiate but she simply shrugged it off. The blocks turned into spikes and then lances. Finally a massive lance managed to pierce through the shroud and impaled itself into the girl's chest. Not far though and she simply ripped it out again, the wound closing before their eyes.

William stopped for a second and blinked but Adam was smiling. "Continue, she hasn't lost thirty percent." he said to the ice mage.

The man nodded and summoned more ice lances, first bigger and then more numerous. They continued to pierce but the woman just shrugged at the wounds. Her clothing was torn to shreds as time went on and more and more lances attacked her.

"That was thirty...I'm back to eighty percent...and full again but that was thirty in between." the woman said.

"That certainly qualifies as a tank role. I've seen tougher at your level but combined with the healing you're certainly up there. And I have the feeling you're more mobile. Try again but this time you're allowed to dodge." Adam said and the woman nodded. He didn't miss the slight smirk on her face.

'Show me something...' Adam thought. William started where he left off and the woman went into motion. Even Adam was surprised at her speed, something that could possibly rival even Verena, were she at her level. 'Body Enhancers...and with that defense as well...' he thought and watched as the stone hall was destroyed by ice. Not a single lance managed to hit the woman, she dodged them in the last moment with minimal movements.

'And efficient too...' Adam thought and motioned for them to stop. He didn't feel like having William run out of mana here. An embarrassing sight that would be, though it would be an interesting battle if he had seriously tried.

"You've been fighting alone haven't you?" Adam asked. The woman didn't respond but he was sure. Rarely did body enhancers turn into such balanced

fighters when they were in a team. Though he didn't know about her destructive capabilities yet.

“Next up technique. Sidney. If you will.” he said.

“With pleasure.” the woman said and smiled as she grabbed two wooden swords but hesitated. The wooden ones were replaced by dull steel swords.

“Just try to dodge and attack without skills....to be sure can you hit the ground for me first?” Sidney asked, twirling around her swords.

# Chapter 78 Excursion

## Chapter 78 Excursion

The woman nodded and punched the ground in a similarly fast and elegant way as the movements of her dodging had been. Adam didn't feel any mana exit with the punch so she was likely only using her strength and innate skills which enhanced that. A loud boom echoed and a crack formed in the stone floor. A small crater showed where the woman had hit. Sidney smiled even more brightly though and nodded.

"I can take a couple of those, but don't overdo it. If you even get a hit in..." she said and suddenly appeared next to the initiate. Adam watched the woman duck and punch at Sidney though the fist was dodged by a sideways swirl and a back step.

"You're prepared...I like that..." Sidney said and attacked again. The two met in the middle as punches and swings were exchanged. The better reach of the swords meant Sidney had the initial advantage though none of her swings hit, they were all deflected by the woman's arms or hands, hitting the blades at their flat parts. Even more attacks were simply dodged though.

After fifteen seconds of trading, the initiate finally managed to get in closer. Her fist was about to hit Sidney when she vanished and appeared five meters further back. To her surprise though, the initiate appeared as well and finished delivering her blow.

‘She waited until the teleport was used again...’ Adam thought as he watched Sidney cough up blood. Suddenly a reddish fire formed around Sidney as she grinned at the initiate. William walked up to Adam in the meantime.

“We should stop this if nobody should get hurt.” he stated. Adam knew the man simply told him out of obligation to the guild, he likely didn’t care either way. ‘I would usually stop this but it seems like they’re having fun...’ he thought and didn’t say or do anything to stop it.

Sidney’s speed accelerated and with each blocked hit the initiate was pushed back a little. Bruises were forming where she had been hit and she switched to a more dodge focused defense. Both started using their teleportation spells more frequently, appearing and disappearing all over the room. Both Adam and William had no problem following them but neither had the illusion of being able to match their mobility. ‘Not like this at least...’ Adam thought.

The initiate started using her defensive shroud to reduce the impact of Sidney’s hits but still she was pushed back. Suddenly one of Sidney’s swings connected, the full force of it entering the initiate’s torso. With it though she held onto Sidney’s arm and delivered a punch towards her chest, sending her flying. Sidney landed on her feet and skidded for a meter until the initiate was upon her again.

Seemingly ignoring Sidney’s attacks the woman started trading blows whenever possible and pushed the sword master on the defensive. Soon Sidney had blood covering most of her face and torso. The initiate on the other hand didn’t look worse for wear. At least everything except for her clothes. Though Sidney’s was a little shredded in parts a well.

“Stop.” Adam said loudly and the initiate teleported backwards ten meters. Both were breathing heavily and Sidney went down to one knee, grinning at her adversary.

“Now you can show us the healing as well. Sidney how low are you?” Adam asked as he walked to the woman.

“Sixty five percent or so.” Sidney said and spit out blood. The initiate appeared next to Sidney and looked at Adam.

“Go on.” he said and watched. Upon her touch, mana flowed through Sidney and specifically healed the wounds and bruises she had sustained. It took a while but she was back to her top in under a minute.

“You can heal specific injuries at least. You have to touch the target?” Adam asked and received a nod.

“Yes, well as soon as you’re applying the healing spell I don’t think you’re much behind a more dedicated healer. Though I assume you can only heal one person at a time. The teleportation certainly helps with the touching requirement.” he said and ignored the woman’s still lingering hand on Sidney’s shoulder.

“For technique, Sidney?” he looked at the woman who slowly got up again, brushing away the initiate’s hand from her shoulder.

“Adequate or better for her level. Fighting skills at least in the second stage.” Sidney said and Adam nodded.

“You’re certainly a balanced warrior. Believe me though even for people like you a team is invaluable.” Adam explained though her gaze told him she knew as much already.

“I’m aware.” she said, confirming his feeling.

“Neither of you have used the edge of your weapons. I would like to see yours though.” Adam said and looked at the initiate. She nodded as he gathered his mana. A magical construct formed as he concentrated and one second later a fully realized level 50 drake stood in the room with them. Adam was confused at the big smile the creature summoned from the initiate but he concentrated on the task at hand. Soon he would be back in his office, there was no question about her capabilities already.

“Kill the drake. Use your full power, only skills you can use several times after one another.” he said and walked back to Walter with Sidney.

The woman walked up to the drake and looked towards Adam. He nodded and watched as she petted the monster and then punched. A wave of mana

from seemingly both her classes went into the animal and tore its innards to shreds. The beast nearly exploded to its back as blood and guts cluttered on the ground, some of it getting on the woman.

“That’s a five or six.” William said and Sidney nodded.

“Again with something bigger...” Adam said and used more mana this time. A level 100 Monster toad came to life a couple meters away from him and lazily hopped towards the initiate. It was massive and would show just how far her powers would dig into an enemy. This time the woman didn’t hesitate and attacked immediately. The frog survived the first hit and died on the second.

“Thanks, that’s enough.” Adam said and the initiate walked towards them again. Only some pieces of clothing were remaining and blood covered at least a third of her body, little of it her own. “You can use another set of clothing before bathing.” Adam said but the woman looked at William.

“You’re ice and water?” she asked and the man understood. He summoned his mana and a stream of compressed water punched into the initiate, pushing her back a little. Her skin alone resisted the attack but the blood and guts didn’t resist just as well.

“Thanks.” she said and went back to where she had left her leather armor. This time William didn’t feel the need to erect an ice barrier. Two minutes later the initiate stood in front of them again.

“You’re more than qualified and can fill several roles in several teams. Though I would suggest a tank and healer combination for you as a main thing. Depending on the enemy you can help attack or distract. Considering how little damage a lot of warriors and mages can take I want to put that to use. Do you object?” Adam asked.

“No, that’s alright.” she said and Adam nodded.

“Great, then thanks again for the demonstrations. We will decide on your rating and put you into a team by tomorrow. You’re a paid member right? Then you can refuse a team once, though I assure you there are gonna be

people you hate in each of them.” Adam explained. “At noon tomorrow please come to the main hall again, an assistant will take care of you.” he finished and received a nod in reply.

The initiate looked at them and even winked to Sidney before leaving the room.

“What’s her name?” Adam asked, a while later in a warded room at the end of the training corridor.

“She calls herself Ilea, Elder.” William answered.

“Resilience 10, Speed 10, Attack 6, technique 9. Do you agree?” the two others nodded at Adam’s assessment.

“She would be a great member for nearly any team.” Sidney said.

“Well three of the newcomers from this month are without a team yet and we have that Alymie who refused his first team.” Adam said and the others seemed uncertain.

“One attack mage, a trapper and two influencers...they do need a tank and healer desperately.” William said.

“I would say two attack mages...” Sydney said. Only the evaluators had a vague idea of everyone’s abilities. To form teams it was a must.

“It can work certainly. So it’s decided. Team 34 then.” Adam declared and Sidney chuckled at that.

“Not for long I think...” she said and Adam agreed.

“William can you handle the rest?” he more demanded than asked before he got up from his chair. William nodded as Adam exited the room. ‘Back to work then.’ he thought, his face getting serious.

“How’d you think I did?” Ilea asked as she sat on her bed and ate one of several meals she had bought right after the evaluation. “You saw everything right?”

“Yes, thanks for the placement.” Aki said. “I think you did very well and I agree with their decision to put you into the tank role. A good thing too that you are, too many choose something destructive and get blindsided by an assassin or ranger.” he explained.

“Something you’ve experienced?” she asked.

“Oh yes...more than a couple times. And assassin types tend to die just as easily to their own kind, not meaning race.” the dagger said.

“Mhm...” Ilea commented, falling backwards onto the bed. The ceiling had a surprisingly intricate design. ‘Not quite like the dwarves...’ she thought though it might’ve been a possible addition by somebody else at a later time.

“You think the dwarves built this place?” she asked, throwing Aki at the ceiling, disturbing some of the beautiful design by another cut. She was getting better at throwing for sure, though had still not received a skill for it.

“It’s certainly possible...a lot of underground cities were built by them and then abandoned for one reason or another. What they build tends to last



though, especially the Taleen kind.” the explanation from the ceiling made a lot of sense to Ilea.

“You were inside a Taleen city, what was your last wielder looking for there?” she asked.

“An artifact of great power. The elf did not share a lot with me, a quiet one yet you saw my personality...” Ilea nodded in her lying position before blinking up to retrieve Aki.

“We have a day, and I have just the right place to visit...” she said and rushed out the apartment. Ilea had an idea what the powerful artifact might’ve been but she wouldn’t reveal quite yet what was held inside of her beautiful necklace. She walked out of Viscera at a quick pace and reached Ravenhall in a couple minutes.

Standing atop a building, she ducked for cover and summoned her notebook. ‘There it is...’ she thought and held her finger over the place indicated on the map. ‘Let’s see if we can get something cool...’ she spread her wings and flew straight towards her goal, not wasting any time in hiding her ability to fly. Why have something as useful as that and not use it?

Though it might come in handy as a trump card, never playing one’s cards could become an issue as well. Especially if it was something like her ability to fly, which substantially influenced her travel speed. ‘Or amazing armor in a boss fight...’ she thought back to the Praetorians while looking down on her leather armor. ‘If only I had mastered the clothing change ability....no, stop it Ilea. Regret will bring you nothing.’ her thoughts didn’t reduce her ability to perceive her surroundings and especially not the wind flowing through her hair.

A smile tugged on her lips as she started twirling and speeding up, farther and farther away from the city of Ravenhall. In the next hour of traveling through the mountain chain, Ilea tried to avoid any encounters with the wildlife. Further levels to her second class could be very detrimental whenever it would advance. Her skills had to grow.

To that end the air was filled by ash and ember, painting a trail of gray behind the flying warrior. Her body heat changed as often as her wings pushed against the air and ever so few were the minuscule pieces of ash controlled by her manipulation.

‘Oh wow that one looks cool...’ she thought as she stopped in the air to look at a massive level 180 troll fighting against a pack of direwolves. They weren’t nearly the troll’s level but their speed made up for it. The wounded were saved by their brethren while more of them would attack the slow moving troll from behind.

The fight dragged on to nearly half an hour when the troll finally fell, dead and bleeding from a hundred cuts and bite marks. The wolves went to enjoy their lunch as Ilea looked on from above, a little annoyed at the reproachful lesson dealt to her by nature itself. ‘And they call it lone wolf...’

She reached her goal twenty minutes later at a lower point of the mountain chain. A city around half the city of Ravenhall stood embedded partly into the mountain itself, as it seemed custom to build on top of mountains. Or at least it had been to whomever had build these cities. Though with magic a lot that would seem impractical proved the best of solutions, or the safest.

Ilea’s goal didn’t lie within the city of Morhill, but a supposed small village that would not be far from there. Landing a couple meters away from a guard on the walls of the city proved to be the right entrance, as the young man stumbled back and tried to shoot a flamebolt at her. Tried and succeeded.

Though the attack simply painted her face a little bit reddish. Luckily for the man he hadn’t aimed for her leather armor, though Ilea likely didn’t plan on finding out the process of how Morhill dealt with murderers that day.

“Stop that. I’m not your enemy.” she said in a neutral voice. The disappearance of her wings and time to realize his situation seemed enough for the man to calm down considerably.

“What...why did you, who are you?!” he babbled out more than said clearly.

“I’m not your enemy. I’m looking for a small village...and the smith who lives therein.” she said and didn’t give the man time to collect his thoughts.

“Balduur Birch, ever heard of the man?” she asked, walking closer to the man.

“Old Birch, yea he doesn’t smith for people anymore. Nobles from all over Lys and even farther have tried. Sure thing he won’t do nothin for you.” the man spat and chuckled.

“Where will I get rejected then?” she asked and moved her backpack, putting a hand inside and removing a silver coin.

“Oh miss, I apologize. It’s an hour south on foot, just go straight there, ya won’t miss it!” he said and pointed in a direction. The coin was flipped towards him as Ilea’s wings materialized behind her. She was gone before the coin reached the man’s greedy hands.

‘Gold really is useful...or silver in this case...’ she thought.

“You’re really bad with money...” Aki said a while later but she simply ignored him, looking out for the village in the distance. This time she didn’t intend to make quite the same impression and landed as soon as she saw the specks of houses in the distance. An hour on foot as advertised had been crossed in a mere minutes by her speed and ability to cross over any obstacles put in her way.

The last stretch took as long as the flight from Morhill but she was rewarded with a comfortable lack of attention as she arrived in the village. A sign read

Indur and a rough looking man in heavy armor greeted her at the entrance of the village. There was a chest high stone wall and Ilea could spot five guards from her angle.

“Hella there travela. What’s ya buiness in Indur?” the man asked and moved the top of his helmet to reveal a surprisingly charming face. Though he was not smiling and had Ilea been in this position on earth she would’ve probably been quite a bit less confident.

“I’m looking for a warm place to stay for a while before I continue my travels. Ale and food are welcome as well.” she said and smiled to the man, pulling back the hood from her head. The gesture and answer seemed to soothe the man a little, though she didn’t know how much either played into the favorable result.

“The inn is the central building in the village. Toll is ten coppers.” the man said to which she nodded and removed her pouch from her backpack. Handing over the copper, she hung the pouch onto her waist. The armor did provide with several straps for just such an occasion.

The guard took the money and gestured for her to enter the village, closing his helmet again after she had passed.

Checking her messages as she walked into the village, Ilea smiled and dragged on the strap of her backpack.

*‘ding’ ‘Ashen Wings reaches lvl 13’*

*‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 7’*

Her flying skill had advanced on her way to Ravenhall a little as well though it was a welcome surprise that it did so again on her way to Indur. ‘Now, let’s see what this Birch can do..’

# Chapter 79 Iron

## Chapter 79 Iron

“Wow that was good...” a heavy breath left the First Hunter as she slumped back on the bench she occupied. The empty plates in front of her told a tale as old as nearly a year now. Whatever Ilea was known for, a bad customer it was not.

“Glad you liked it lassy!” a burly woman in her forties walked out from behind the bar to gather up all the plates left by her patron. The only one at the time. It had been afternoon and it seemed as if people living in a small village didn’t have the luxury to frequent the inn both in the morning and afternoon.

“I’ll pay.” Ilea said, stopping a burp from escaping her highly feminine figure, accented by the belly that for once didn’t stand for fertility and new life. Though considering how much calories her body somehow managed to burn she did have to ask herself if there wasn’t some sort of alien inside of her, benefiting from her indulgences and ready to burst out in the most inopportune moment.

Ilea skidded a little lower on the bench and enjoyed the rustic look of the inn. It was a mixture of wood and stone. The oil lamps gave the place a warm feel though Ilea wondered if it weren’t a little bit of a fire risk to install said facility. ‘Maybe she’s a water mage...’ she thought but couldn’t quite get a feeling for the woman. She did have the mage tag but that could be as widely ranged as a person’s personality could.

‘Though fire is certainly popular...’ Ilea thought and finished her ale.

“That will be eighty coppers.” the woman said and received two whole silvers. The coins vanished too quickly for Ilea to change her mind, a testament to the inkeep’s abilities.

‘Everything’s cheap when you have a dwarven treasury inside your necklace...hah never thought I’d say that sentence.’ she thought as she walked up on the bar.

“Can you tell me where I can find Balduur Birch?” she said, quite sure that the woman would be substantially more open about helping her after the generous tip.

“The smithy’s three houses this way.” she pointed towards the back of the inn. “To the right, though be warned. The man has a temper and he only smiths for the village, cept for some rare occasions.” she explained and smiled mischievously at Ilea, making it unclear if it had been for the upcoming suffering or for her expected success.

Not one to mind too much, Ilea left the inn and made her way towards the intended destination. The snow crunched under her boots as she walked on the dirt ground. The village only held around twenty houses in total though most of them seemed big enough to hold at least a family of five. There were very few people around though, Ilea assumed most of them were hunting or training. The guard had been at level 120, quite a bit higher than your average villager. At least that was what she assumed.

Perhaps the life inside city walls was why so many of the people living there didn’t chose to become stronger. Not that Ilea judged them, they certainly didn’t have to. ‘It’s such a waste though...everyone should experience the joy of flying...’ she thought and opened the massive oak door that lead inside the second biggest house next to the inn. The smithy.

“Anybody home!” Ilea shouted into the room, unsure whether she had intruded or if it was intended for customers to walk into this place.

“Another one...how often do I have to tell you...” a grumbling yet loud man’s voice could be heard coming from somewhere downstairs.

‘He has a beard...’ she thought just before the man entered from a side room. He was burly and had a beard as massive and brown as the door attached to his house. The arms didn’t disappoint either. His eyes stared angrily at her as he came to a stop two meters away from her.

*[Smith – lvl 181]*

“WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT?” the shout was certainly not a shock but nonetheless unexpected.

“I just really REALLY need to use a toilet.” Ilea said and smirked at the man. This apparently was not the right approach, as he closed in on her much quicker than she had expected, his arm shooting out to hit her where she stood.

Her buffs flared up as she intercepted his hand with her arm, skidding a meter backwards. She smiled though, rather happy that she could match his strength so closely. Her grin betrayed her thoughts as the smith looked at the tiny woman before him.

“Well look at that. You’re strong, I give you that.” he said and moved back his arm. “Now begone with you, you’ll spoil my focus!”

“I’m a friend of Agor, who is currently in Dawntree. He was the one who told me about you. Well I do believe I inquired about his sword.” she smiled with a little less edge in it, deciding that she’d been fooling around enough. The house was nice, it would be a shame if he threw her through it.

“Agor...” his voice changed a little. “So you’ve come to pay his debts. Finally”

“Oh you little shit.” she said and balled her fists.

“HAHAHAHA!” the man laughed, making Ilea clench her fists even more. She couldn’t help but smile though but it was very close to her giving him a

similar greeting as he did to her a minute ago.

“Now tell me the man’s first name so I believe the story...” he said, quickly turning serious again.

“Tell me the first and last letter. It seemed important to the man and I’m not gonna just give you that...” she said and he nodded, seemingly happy with her answer.

“L as in lumber and N as in necromancer.” he said, giving her the correct letters.

“Lorcan.” she simply stated and a small smile tugged on his mouth.

“I can see the lad liking you. Has always been one for the meatless. Now follow me down.”

“Meatless...should’ve seen me in the inn...” she mumbled and followed, realizing that perhaps the innkeeper was what he’d consider somebody with enough meat on her bones. ‘They’d fit, in a both cute and scary way...’ she thought, not surprised to find an expansive smithy quite a bit further down than a normal cellar would be.

There were several different forges, different machines and tools hanging on the walls or strewn around on the ground. Weapons ranging from simple looking swords to intricate waraxes similar to what a Norse god would bring to the battlefield. “Well that’s one hell of a forge you have here...” she said, finding dozens of runes on each machine and piece of equipment.

“Now I have one rule lass. No matter how strong you are you have to show me something interesting before I’ll continue this conversation, no matter if you wish for a new weapon or to use my toilet.” he folded his arms in front of him, a gesture Ilea couldn’t quite comprehend, even with her sphere perceiving it from every angle.

‘Two birds with one stone...’



“Hey Aki, you remember when I told you I’d throw you into the next forge I’ll find?” she asked, confusing the smith in front of her. “Ever seen a screaming dagger?” she asked as she threw Aki into an open forge.

“AAAAAAAAAAH YOU FUCKING BIIIIITCH!!!” the screaming turned from angry to pain as Ilea stared into the smith’s eyes.

“That’s enough, get it out.” he said, though he seemed more interested to see the dagger than to save it from its predicament. Ilea shrugged and walked to the forge, simply putting her arm inside and grabbing the dagger instantly. Her sphere and heat perception made this action possible.

“You remember right?” she said as she removed the dagger that didn’t even seem to have a bit of a shine to it. ‘A lot more is likely needed to melt this guy...’

“I do I do but that was unnecessary...if I could do anything I’d swear you revenge.” Aki said though he seemed to have calmed down already. Ilea wasn’t sure how the dagger even perceived heat or pain. Maybe it had to do with a memory, not something she really wanted to induce.

‘I’ll ask him as soon as I get out of here...’

“That interesting enough?” she asked in a leveled tone, quite sure that the smith would be impressed.

“It certainly is...this is dark magic girl, something I haven’t ever seen before. May I see it?” Balduur asked and Ilea handed over Aki.

“His name is Aki.” she said as the smith turned over the dagger.

“Any info on the quality?” the smith asked. “The metal isn’t something I’ve seen before either and that certainly says something. It looks dwarven in design but I can’t be sure.”

“Sadly not, can’t identify it. Though it’s apparently very very old.” Ilea answered. The smith turned the dagger around a bit more before handing it back to Ilea.

“Well that’s certainly interesting. To say the least. I don’t suppose you’re selling?” she simply stared at him and held out her hand. The smith sighed and handed it back to her.

“So you’re a friend of that useless adventurer. Name’s Balduur Birch, what are you looking for?” the man said and held out his hand. Ilea smirked a little bit and grabbed the man’s hand upon which her buffs activated and a battle of handshakes ensued. Both parties used mana to increase their strength and Ilea could only hold on with her reconstruction healing the damage as it was being done.

Ilea’s sphere had told her that another person had joined them in the cellar workshop about a minute ago but she chose to concentrate on the handshake while staring into the smith’s eyes. They looked at each other like predators fighting over a newly found hunting ground.

“Dad, you’re doing it again. Let the woman go.” a raspy voice came from the woman standing a couple meters behind Balduur. The man’s grip didn’t soften at all as he continued to put his life blood towards destroying Ilea’s hand. The woman walked closer and shook her head as her supposed father replied.

“This one’s tough...” he said and shook his head, letting go of Ilea’s hand. She smiled as the cracked bones in her hand came back into the right position.

“She certainly looks it...no broken bones?” the woman asked, obviously surprised. “So she showed you something interesting...may I see it too?” she asked and walked closer to Ilea.

“I’m Ilea, you’re this man’s daughter?” the question got a scoff out of the woman as she received the out held and unsheathed dagger.

“I am I am, I believe the arms are not hereditary though perhaps I am adopted.” the woman said and looked the dagger over, her eyes glowing a dark blue. “This is...new...very interesting.” she stopped after a minute and handed Aki back to Ilea. “I’m Iana, nice to meet you. So we finally have a customer again. He’s getting more and more demanding.”

“People are getting more and more stupid and arrogant.” the man simply responded as he walked to one of the forges. “So what do you want, I do hope you have the gold or something else to pay.”

“I’d like to see your dagger again for a while, maybe half an hour or so?” Iana asked and Ilea nodded.

“Enchantments on one thing for free then.” she said and smiled. The girl nodded and happily walked away while staring at Aki with her shining eyes. ‘More than mine...’ Ilea thought and watched the girl’s back. Her white braided hair swayed a little in the artificial airflow caused by one rune or the other in the cellar.

Ilea turned her head to look at the smith who was stacking metal ingots of differing kinds on top of a heavy steel workbench. “Hammer, sword, shield? You’re strong enough to wield pretty much anything and you look like you’re dexterous enough to wield whatever it may be efficiently as well.”

“I’m not sure really, I normally just fight with my hands alone.” Ilea said, walking closer and picking up some of the ingots. ‘I have no idea what this is...’ she thought as she clanged two of them together lightly.

“Gauntlets maybe? Or are you using magic that is unleashed upon attacking?” the smith asked, visibly annoyed at her actions.

She stopped and put the ingots back down. “The latter, most of the damage comes from the mana released. At least I think so.” Ilea said. Balduur nodded at that and lifted his right hand to his chin in a thoughtful gesture.

“Well then the metal won’t help a lot. It might be useful in some cases but generally speaking direct contact is the best by far for skills like that. Still perhaps I can make you something to be used whenever you face something where your skills might be useless...” he said and Ilea nodded in response.

“That would certainly be helpful. Maybe two pairs, one heavy one and one with spikes on top?” she said and lifted some of the metals. “What’s the heaviest you’ve got?”

Balduur smiled at the question. “Oh I’ve always wanted to do something like that...rarely useful black obsidian from the north. If it’s ever used, it’s as a counterweight. Though very durable it doesn’t mix well with other metals and quickly brakes off anything you attach it to. I’ll make you a pair of gauntlets starting at the elbows. Come help me get the ingots...” he said and motioned for her to follow. “Did I mention very rare and expensive as well?” he asked though Ilea didn’t react, if anybody had the funds it was her.

“What about the sharp one?” she asked and he chuckled immediately.

“Oh I know what we’re gonna use for that. And I have an idea for the form as well.” he said as they reached what seemed to be the main storage room. Ilea couldn’t deny that the sight of all the metals and tools inside looked incredibly impressive. There were all sorts of colors and different shines, all of it seemed meticulously cleaned. With her sphere she saw many runes etched into the metal shelves and was sure they were responsible for the absence of dust in the room.

It all looked new. The smith led her towards one of the corners of the room and motioned to the bars on the ground. There were eight pieces of metal that didn’t look particularly impressive to look at. They didn’t have much of a shine to them but Ilea was sure they would be something special. The man was supposedly a very good smith after all.

“Try to lift one.” he said and smiled though from an angle where Ilea wouldn’t have seen him were it not for her sphere. She decided to play his game and grabbed one of the bars. The muscles in her arm strained to the max as she barely moved the metal an inch from its position. She moved her body to have a better balance and tried again. This time the metal moved, though only a millimeter.

State of Azarinth and Form of Ember came alive, their shine reflecting beautifully from all the metals in the room that allowed it. Even though only her neck, hands and head were exposed and thus the only sources of light. The bar was lifted slowly as Ilea strained against the weight. Slowly she lifted it until it was finally as high as her stomach.

She couldn't help but be proud of the annoyed expression on the smith's face. Using her other hand to stabilize the bar the weight became manageable and she smiled at the man next to her.

"Get two." he said smugly and walked by her, a light glow forming around him as well as he grabbed two of the bars and lifted them. It didn't look any less difficult for him than it was for Ilea. Though she didn't see it as a problem, only a testament to the metal's quality and usability. She could already see the uses with her necklace. Though the viability of her necklace strategy that she could now apply to her armor was yet to be tested in a fighting situation.

The two walked twice to bring the eight bars to one of the biggest forges in the cellar. The magically created air certainly helped them not to pass out on their short yet very difficult walk to their destination. Twenty minutes later the eight ingots rested near the forge and were ready to be smithed.

"Your hand girl." Balduur said and looked intensely at her arm, likely taking measurements for the gauntlets.

"What's the other metal?" Ilea asked, realizing that they had only gotten one kind.

"We'll get that one now....I hope it's gonna be enough. Let me draw it out for you first alright? Oh and we'll have to discuss the cost as well." he said and motioned for the woman to follow. Iana had nearly had her half hour with Aki and Ilea planned to make use of the free enchantment, likely for the heavy gauntlets.

The two went upstairs again to a room Ilea hadn't seen before, at least not with her eyes. Balduur moved the plates and candle holders from the wooden table and opened a chest nearby. Revealed was a roll of paper which was expanded on the table to create a big space to draw on. Ilea watched on for the next ten minutes as the smith wrote down numbers and measurements. A little bored, she had started playing with the candle sticks, lighting one and burning one of the wooden plates the smith had put away from the table. Whatever little ash was left from the signed plate, she tried to lift with her

ash manipulation. It was fascinating to her, seeing the ash move a little into the air.

Balduur seemed to be done a couple minutes later and looked at her. “Are you done burning my house down?” he asked with raised eyebrows. Ilea nodded and put the plate down.

“I am...Iana really is taking her time...” she said as she joined the smith next to his calculations.

“She is, well let’s start then. The materials, and I assume you want all the eight ingots to be used, and my labor will come out at twenty five gold coins. I’m aware that that price is rather high but go and try to find black obsidian and buy as much as is being used for your gauntlets here. The rest isn’t cheap either but definitely considerably less than the obsidian.” he paused for a second, likely to let the price sink in. Ilea was undisturbed though and simply motioned for the man to continue.

“That is just for the heavy gauntlets. The blue steel ones come out at fifteen gold as the making will be quite a bit more difficult. Materials are cheaper though. So we’re talking forty gold plus a five gold increase for the plate you burned.” Ilea didn’t react and simply nodded.

“I want half of that in advance and will need around two weeks to complete the requests. Any additional enchantments you want from Iana will cost too and might take just as long.” the smith finished. “I doubt you’ll get the gauntlets very far with your current strength though.” he smiled at her.

Ilea decided then to reveal one of her prized secrets, sure that a smith this capable would be a beneficial ally to have in the future. One that could know some of the secrets she bore. She summoned twenty three gold coins onto the table where she held her hand. The smith didn’t react and simply waved his hand over the money, making it vanish.

“Iana will like to see that storage item as well, she’s very good with them. I believe you have seen Lorcan’s sword? So that’s how you’ll get the gauntlets out of here then?” he asked and she nodded. Though she wasn’t sure how

much spaces the gauntlets would occupy, they would be ridiculously heavy after all.

“Then I’ll make some quick plans for the gauntlets for you.” the smith said as a pencil appeared in his hand. He looked at her again, stopping his work as she hadn’t moved away yet.

“Can you make me a bow as well? A heavy one with ridiculously huge arrows...” she asked, a little inspired by the ranger she had met in Salia. A smith back in the Taleen dungeon had already promised her such a weapon but now she really wanted one.

“I can do something like that, sure. Will be another four gold but you can keep the advance for now.” Balduur said, happy that Ilea finally left the room and him to his work.

# Chapter 80 Team

## Chapter 80 Team

Walking down the stairs, Ilea found Iana intently touching and looking all over Aki. The dagger didn't seem to mind and was actually engaged in a conversation with the woman.

“So you believe it to be dwarven in nature?” He asked and Iana grunted her confirmation.

“Yes, though it's nothing I've seen, at least not as complete as is engraved inside of you. I can barely see through the complex layers at the top though perhaps I'll be able to decipher it in time.”

Ilea decided to join the conversation there and leaned on the wall nearby. “Like half an hour of time?” she asked and startled the girl with her sudden approach. ‘Craftsmen and women don't seem to be very perceptive of their surroundings...’

“Oh yes, I've been keeping him. Apologies.” Iana said and quickly handed her the dagger.

“A second free enchantment perhaps?” Ilea asked, getting a defeated sigh from the woman.

“I'll never be able to make a decent living with dad refusing all customers and working for free for the ones he actually allows...” Iana complained.



“Why not make your own shop? You seem to be quite capable enough to be servicing any big city and its respective nobles...” Ilea suggested but Iana just shook her head lightly.

“It’s complicated.” Ilea accepted the answer and sheathed Aki.

“How much more time would you need to decipher whatever you found?” she asked.

“Oh I’ll figure it out in time. I have the outer layers in my head and will draw them out in the next hour. A helpful skill with enchanting.” the girl explained, showing a beautiful smile.

“Perfect, then you’ll get him in a couple weeks when I come to pick up my things.” Ilea said and decided not to show the smith her armor just yet. He would be occupied enough with her new gauntlets and bow for a while.

“Before I go though, another thing. Can you take a look at this?” Ilea said and held her necklace towards Iana.

“Sure, let me see...” she said and leaned in, her eyes starting to shine blue. From this distance Ilea could make out complicated lines in her irises, almost like runes. “Interesting. Definitely dwarven, Taleen if I’m not mistaken. Seems rather rare, a very nice find. Sadly it doesn’t seem like the work is much better than any modern enchantments. Very stable though, I doubt anybody could weasel their way inside.” Iana explained.

“Weasel their way inside?” Ilea asked. Iana nodded, confirming her statement.

“Yes, usually you have to wait for the amount of time the item had been bound to someone by mana. There are certain very expensive and difficult ways to reduce that time or to get in earlier without killing the owner. Not usually worth it though except in very rare occasions. Or simply for curiosity’s sake. There are rumors that the current empress of Lys got to power by breaking into her brother’s storage ring, though only rumors...”

“And you think that would be more difficult with mine?” Ilea asked.

“Yes, nearly impossible. Even with the best enchanters and materials I’ve heard of. And it would take ages. So you’re fine, as long as you don’t die.” the smile on the girl’s face didn’t quite fit the statement but Ilea completely understood.

“Thanks. So I’ll be back in a couple weeks, we can discuss enchantments then.” Ilea said and nodded to the woman who repeated the gesture. Walking upstairs, Ilea shouted close to the same thing to Balduur who pushed his pencil a little too strongly into the paper as a reaction. She smiled at his frown that she only perceived with her sphere before she left the house, Blinking on top of it.

Snow had started to fall in the meantime, removing the beautiful view of the mountains around the village. Ilea’s wings spread and lifted her up into the storm. Flying back was made much more difficult because of the weather and Ilea only managed to avoid crashing into rocks and cliffs thanks to her spherical perception and high reaction time. She continued to try and manipulate parts of the ash she generated with ash surge but couldn’t manage to raise it in level this time around.

Neither did her flying skill level up. She landed again on the walls of Ravenhall a couple hours later, without having encountered anything substantial on her way. Most monsters would likely stay inside as well in a storm like that. Or more likely they would be living higher up or in some caves.

The troll Ilea had seen though would be quite the challenge for most adventurers she had seen until she joined the hand. Likely a reason they were stationed in Ravenhall and not somewhere on the plains. Though Ilea didn’t know what dangers could wait in the plains either.

The suns were setting as she stood on the walls, looking over the city before her. The guards that saw her didn't seem to mind much, likely used to such behavior by the members of the hand. 'Doesn't seem very wise...' Ilea thought and jumped down into the city, landing with a thud.

She walked through while visiting every restaurant she could find to buy any meals they had already ready or wouldn't need more than fifteen minutes to prepare. Her necklace filled with hot and steaming food as she walked on and she did hope it would stay that way. 'Would be a mess if all of it just jumbled together in there...my armor would smell...'

She reached the entrance to the hand's main quarters another couple hours later and walked down Viscera's road while yawning.

Closing the door behind herself in her apartment, Ilea unsheathed Aki and threw him to the nearby wall before going on the toilet. A couple minutes later she was lying on her bed and looked up at the beautiful ceiling. "So tomorrow I'll get a team....what did you think of the weapon ideas?" she asked Aki.

"I was with Iana while you were discussing...though I saw you carrying something that seemed very heavy..." the dagger answered from his place in the wall.

"Gauntlets, one pair very heavy, black obsidian or something Balduur said. And one pair with Blue steel, I'm assuming there's gonna be spikes or blades attached somehow." she explained.

"Hmm, yes. Those are good ideas, especially for enemies who have defenses against mana intrusion, which I believe your skills to be." Aki said and continued "Don't start to rely on them too much though, your skills are first and will always deal the most damage...or will if you hone them."

Ilea turned on the bed to look at the dagger. "I'll keep that in mind, thanks." she said. "On another note, why the reaction to fire? Do you experience pain or what is it?" the dagger didn't answer her question and simply hung on the wall quietly as a dagger would. A minute later Ilea rolled back to look at the

ceiling again, accepting that Aki didn't want to explain. "I won't do it again." she said and sat up.

"I'm gonna enjoy some live music, wanna come?" she asked, blinking to the wall.

"I would like to." Aki said as he was pulled out of the wall and sheathed.

The two walked downstairs quietly, joining the few people who were walking on the stairways leading down to the elevators. She decided to try a different bar and went to the one two stairways down from her apartment and to the right. When the one she had visited the day before seemed to be very rustic and focused on wood with warm light, this one was nearly purely furnished with stone.

There were cushions to sit on and the light was produced from magical lamps, giving different parts of the establishment different vibes. Ilea decided to go where the light was blueish before sitting down. There was a single woman playing on her lute as she got in, making the atmosphere a lot more relaxed than what the other bar further down Viscera had been.

A waitress came up to her a couple minutes later and nodded at her order of three mugs of different ale. She was still looking for something as tasty as Walter's and would keep her limited stock for now. What better place than the elite adventurer guild of the Shadow's hand to look for something like that.

She enjoyed the more relaxed atmosphere and especially that nobody came up to her except for the waitress herself. One of the ales came somewhat close to Walter's but it wasn't quite the same. Apparently it was the house ale made by the owner himself.

Ilea left after enjoying a satisfying evening and prepared for bed. Aki was stored in her necklace to not bore him too much while keeping him as safe as possible, at least from theft. Or perhaps kidnapping, depending on how the law in Lys would define a conscious dagger. Ilea drifted off to sleep with that thought and enjoyed an uninterrupted night.

"How long do we have, oh dearest clock?" Ilea asked, twirling Aki around in the air after waking up. 'How have I not gotten a twirl skill...' her thought was interrupted by Aki's answer.

Apparently the scheduled meeting with her newly assigned team would happen in just one hour, barely enough to get something to eat. At least in Ilea's opinion. She didn't already want to use up the meals she had stored, deciding to use the close sellers as long as they were available.

Viscera looked the same as it had the days before. The surprising part though was that the food being sold looked and smelled quite different. Even the style of music seemed different. 'They really put a lot of money into this...or maybe the members do...' Ilea thought as she walked through the small town. She bought a meal consisting of pig, rice and peppers. It definitely had what she would've considered an Asian touch but the spices here were a bit different than what she had been used to on earth.

A lot of the food she had consumed so far had been a bit blander but here in Viscera it was quite the opposite. She walked up towards the corridor leading towards the main hall and ate from the bowl she had gotten with the meal. With her find in the dwarven treasury, money really wasn't much of an issue. At least for the foreseeable future.

'As long as I don't become queen and have to finance my own country I think I'm fine...' Ilea thought as she walked past the numerous high level adventurers with their fancy armor or robes. Again nobody was wearing the black shadowy armor she had associated heavily with the Shadow's Hand.

The corridor and main hall were rather empty again and she reached the city of Ravenhall in a mere minutes of travel. Her bowl was already missing a third of its initial content but she decided to get a bit of a better view for the rest. Jumping up a nearby house, her wings sprouted and with a quick ascend, she was flying over the city. ‘The lake seems nice enough.’

The hour passed in but a moment as Ilea enjoyed the blue sky and snowy scenery. Truly a magical place that would’ve likely been a beautiful skiing area filled with tourists or simply an empty place too dangerous to stay alone in on earth. At least without a tent.

Ilea tried to get a piece of meat out of her teeth as she waited in the main hall of the guild. Right before she decided on simply removing her jaw with her pain deactivated, someone walked up to her.

“You must be Ilea.” The man said and waited for her confirmation.

“I am. You guessed right out of the ten people here.” She said. The man looked at her a little annoyed, not missing the sarcasm but obviously not finding it to be funny.

“Lead the way then.” She said and the man nodded. Contrary to what Ilea had thought to be a meeting inside or near the main hall, the attendant led her through Viscera again and down one of the elevators. The same one she had used the day before.

“Here you are...” the man said, nodded and was quite visibly glad to see his job done. Ilea decided not to further annoy the man, lest her food be poisoned again. ‘Poison resistance is never a bad thing though...’ she thought as she entered the rudimentary stone hall.

There were magical lights at the top of the hall and just like the one she had been tested in, this one held several chests at one side of the room. Compared to the one before though, this one was higher and ended in angles instead of the room being in the form of a rectangle. A smile immediately bloomed on Ilea as she walked towards the only person already in the room.

It was the man she had seen before, with the grayish eyes. He had been studying the ground before him since she had entered and continued to do so upon her approach. Though Ilea didn't feel like the man hadn't been paying attention. "Hey, I'm Ilea." She said to which the man finally looked at her.

"...Kyrian" He answered, with a sense of uncertainty.

'Is he uncomfortable around me?' Ilea thought and sighed, walking to the side and sitting on one of the chests. Her hood had been up the whole time. She was just about to ask something when the door opened again and another man entered. He opened the door with both hands, swinging them far and entering with a confident stride and a smirk on his face. Ilea was impressed by his clothing, both seemingly practical but beautiful. A vest and long jacket in red and black colors. Though there were many people in Viscera looking similarly colorful.

The smirk turned to a frown as he approached Ilea and Kyrian. "You. What are your abilities." the man said as he stopped a couple meters in front of Kyrian.

"I..I use metal to..." he was interrupted by the door opening again and two people entering. A woman looking to be in her thirties and a bald man with a serious expression. Ilea waved lazily to the two as they approached, getting a smile from the woman and a glare from the man.

"Alright everyone's here. Eve I'm assuming you too. Come out please." the man said, taking charge of the group and already getting an irritated look by the man in the red and black coat.

A giggle could be heard around them when a young woman faded into existence right next to Ilea. 'Nothing in the sphere...' Ilea thought and warily looked at the girl.

“I’ll be here in a minute.” the woman said, smiling brightly. The light leather armor and blond hair made for a rather striking view. Both Ilea and the man in the coat seemed to share that opinion, if one would rate their stares.

“Alright then we start. So as you all know this is the team you’re gonna be in. Paid members have one chance to switch. And one only.” the bald man said, looking at the man in the coat.

“This will be the team fighting class and I will be your teacher or rather, supervisor. Your team tactics teacher is here today as well but I will let her introduce herself in a minute. If you kill anybody in your team or render them incapable of fighting ever again you will be kicked out of the hand, so try not to do that. We do have a healer and I would like to hear about your capabilities in your introduction please.” the man said and continued.

“My name is Joseph Trail. You may call me Joseph. Now, I believe in a more practical approach in getting to know one another so please just say your name and role you would see yourself filling in the team.” he said and motioned to the man with the coat, who was seemingly already struggling to stay quiet.

“My name is Trian Alymie.” he said and looked around, seemingly proud of the statement until he sighed. “Oh boy...this really is my last choice?” he asked Joseph who just stared at him with cold eyes. Trian sighed again and continued.

“We’re one of the most influential families in the empire of Lys and it would do you good to remember that.” he paused, waiting for the words to sink in when the doors to the room opened again and the girl standing next to Ilea vanished, only to be replaced by that same girl walking towards them. She smiled and waved at them.

“Don’t stop, I’m here I’m here!” she said. Ilea thought her to be of similar age to herself though her demeanor seemed to be a little more playful. Trian coughed which made Ilea chuckle. He angrily stared at her but continued.

“I’m a lightning and vampyrist mage and as you can see the highest level of you all at two hundred fifteen. I’ll destroy whatever stands in my way and



will fill exactly that role in the team.” he finished and looked around, glaring at Ilea again who smiled back.

‘He seems charming.’ she thought and decided to continue.

“Name’s Ilea. I’m a common pleb and have some ability in healing, getting hit really hard and hitting back.” she said and looked from Trian to Kyrian, the challenge in her eyes vanishing when the latter looked at her.

‘God his eyes are fascinating.’ she thought as she smiled at the grinding teeth of Trian she heard with her sphere. The second thing that made her smile was that she could perceive the last girl with her sphere, meaning the one from before had likely been a mirage or an illusion.

# Chapter 81 Class

## Chapter 81 Class

“I’m Kyrian. I’m a metal mage and will be able to slow down the enemy.” he said simply and looked down again.

“Can you speak up?” Trian asked in a mocking tone but was ignored by the others.

“My name is Claire, I’m a rune and explosion mage and I’ll be able to trap enemies. Additionally I’ll be your team tactics instructor, nice to meet you all.” she said and bowed towards the others.

Ilea already smirked before Trian even said something about the fact that a team member would be an instructor but to her surprise the man kept his mouth shut and simply looked at the woman with a glare. The last person to introduce themselves was the woman who had joined them mere minutes before.

“I’m Eve and I’m an illusionist and singer. It’s nice to meet you all.” the woman smiled brightly and waved at them.

Joseph clapped his hands then to get the attention of the team. “Alright, now that we all know each other’s names let’s actually get to know one another. You’re team 34, currently the lowest ranking team in the Shadow’s hand, not that I or anybody here should care too much about that. Ilea.” he said and looked at the woman. “How good is your healing? We would have to book one for these trainings if you’re not up to the task.” he asked.

“As long as nobody dies it should be fine, though I need longer to heal others than a full fledged healer at my level.” she said and Joseph nodded.

“Well only one way to find out the extent of your abilities then. We’re gonna do some bouts then. Who wants to face Ilea first?” Joseph said and looked through the group. Before anybody could say something though he pointed to the metal mage. “Kyrian. You two seem like you wouldn’t kill each other immediately. Come on, show us what you have.”

The man nodded and looked at Ilea, his eyes quickly sinking down to the ground again as he turned and walked to the middle of the hall. “Don’t worry about destroying anything, I’ll be able to repair it. Ilea, I hope you know the limits of your powers. If either of you don’t think you can continue the fight simply say so, or gesture if you can’t talk anymore for some reason.”

‘Doesn’t seem very safe...’ Ilea thought as she joined Kyrian in the middle of the hall with a smirk on her face.

“Now try not to go soft on me...I can take it.” she said and switched into a fighting stance. The others walked around the hall to either get a better view or a more comfortable seat.

“I didn’t plan to.” Kyrian answered quietly.

“Ready? Start whenever.” Joseph said from the side.

Ilea watched Kyrian focusing on her, the gray in his eyes seemed to intensify when a needle like object entered her sphere, making her move her head slightly to see the projectile pass. Metal balls, needles and spikes came out of the man’s backpack which he slid off his shoulders a moment later. The spheres started rotating round him as the needles and spikes hovered over and next to him.

The first spike was released and shot right towards Ilea’s chest. Though she perceived that the needle from before came at her back from behind. Something told her that she shouldn’t get hit by the piece of metal, even though it seemed so small and non threatening. With a small turn of her body, both projectiles shot past her, getting an interested look from Kyrian.

‘My turn...’ she thought and advanced on the man, dodging past the needles shot towards her. Her pace slowed as more and more projectiles flew towards her as she moved to the sides and even backwards. As the needles were distributed around the hall it became harder and harder to simply dodge them.

Ilea decided to show her first card as ash extended around her and took the view from anybody that wasn’t able to perceive through the black dust like substance. She was immediately sure that Kyrian had no way to see through it as the projectile attacks became less direct and more chaotic, random even.

It wasn’t a certainty that Kyrian wasn’t simply fooling her but Ilea didn’t have another choice but to advance further. More and more ash filled the hall around the two combatants as Ilea circled against the man. She had to admit that his control of the needles and frequency of attacks was incredibly efficient at keeping her at bay.

At this point there was ash all around the man and Ilea decided then to move in. A blink got her right next to Kyrian and her fist shot out to punch his back. The impact shot through her arm and his back as spikes extended from the closest metal sphere, cutting deeply into her skin. Her destructive mana shot through the man before she jumped away again, holding her side.

Kyrian had stumbled to the side, holding his shoulder while breathing heavily. Ilea on the other hand walked backwards slowly and back into the ash while her smile vanished. The cut on her side refused to heal and she knew exactly what the cold feeling radiating from the wound meant. Her hands started to shake as she perceived the man slowly steadying himself, the pieces of metal that had fallen down around him starting to hover again.

Acting on a whim Ilea unsheathed Aki and cut into her side, through muscle and flesh until she cut out everything around where she had gotten sliced by the sphere of metal. Confirming her suspicion, the wound started healing again albeit a little slower than normally. It took a while of dodging and healing longer before she was ready to engage again, her hands still shaking.

‘Let’s do this then...just a bunch of curses...’ she thought, her shroud coming to life for the first time in the fight and her wings spreading inside the ash

still filling the surroundings. Jumping up, she spread her wings, blinking into Kyrian's melee range to deliver a kick at his head. A needle scratched at her shroud but didn't manage to get through right before her foot connected and knocked the man down.

She blinked away again before the needles and spikes shooting towards her managed to do any damage. The man got up again slowly, coughing blood this time but he didn't signal for the fight to end.

Ilea felt as the mana gathered around the man even though she didn't have her Magic Perception anymore. Suddenly the spheres of metal burst apart and thousands of needles flew towards her. There were too many and too spread out for a blink to really do anything so Ilea simply held out her hands to try and minimize the damage.

Her shroud of ash fought against the onslaught of needles as more and more pierced her defense to try and get through her armor and skin. Some managed to get through and the cold feeling of the now familiar curse spread from the small wounds through her body.

Half a minute later Ilea opened her hands and started to rip the needles out of her body. None managed to pierce too far inside of her. The ash around them was disturbed enough by Kyrian's spell that she could now see the man panting before her, seemingly struggling to stay on his feet.

'Used up his mana...' she thought as more and more needles clanged on the ground with a metal noise, the cold and numb feeling leaving her body slowly. Though some of it remained even with the metal removed. It was not enough to get her down though and Kyrian seemed to realize that as well. He lifted his arms and opened his mouth.

"You win, I'm out." he said and nodded to Ilea. "Good fight. I'm sorry." he said, confusing Ilea a little. Until that moment she hadn't noticed the tears streaming down her face and the shaking hands on her side. Her wound slowly but surely closed as the curse was pushed out of her body.

*'ding' 'Curse Resistance reaches lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Ash Surge reaches lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Ash Surge reaches lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches lvl 18'*

“Not bad, not bad.” Joseph said as he slowly approached the two fighters, standing opposite each other. He completely ignored the tears and shaking Ilea was showing, likely having an idea where it had come from. “So Kyrian doesn’t seem to have enough to push through a heavily agile armored target. You did manage to slow her down and your defense was pretty good considering her ability to teleport right next to you. The spiked metal spheres are very useful but your mana ran out rather quickly.” Joseph finished, coming to a stop a little to the side of the two.

The others had joined the middle as well. Ilea tried to get the shaking under control and had her eyes closed as Kyrian commented on the analysis.

“The ash was a problem, I...I had to keep her busy while not being able to see her. More mana used than normally...” the man said while the scattered needles started to move towards him at a slow pace.

Joseph nodded and prepared to answer when Trian chuckled and pointed at Ilea. “Why the fuck are you crying? You won you idiot.” he said but Ilea completely ignored him, proud of that achievement. She still had her eyes closed and her hands were shaking considerably less than before.

“Leave her alone.” Eve said, her expression cold and hard.

“Now now, stop this now. You’ll all get the chance to face each other every single day in the next couple months. I’m sure she has a good reason to cry Mr. Alymie.” Joseph said and looked towards Kyrian again.

“It was not a good matchup for you, that is for sure. I think the offensive approach even at the cost of a higher mana usage was the right decision

though try to be more mobile and get a bigger picture of the battlefield. The ash was not as spread out as you might've thought and a simple sprint to one direction might've given you enough to focus your attack again. Considering Ilea's similarly offensive approach there was little you could do though. Get a skill to see through the ash for next time." he finished and Kyrian nodded.

"How w..would I do that?" Kyrian asked and received a small smile from Joseph.

"Finally, a member of the hand willing to listen. Try to fight in the dark, train with a blindfold or even pierce your eyes out. We have healers that can deal with that. Fighting in a blinded state might at some point yield a skill for you to see with not just your eyes. A very valuable thing for everyone but especially someone like you, who needs that much precision to make use of their full power." he explained and Kyrian nodded.

"I request to fight Trian next." Ilea said after the man had stopped talking.

"Sure you can go again so soon?" Joseph asked while Trian smiled at her.

"Oh I'm sure. Kyrian can you remove it?" Ilea said. She wanted to see if Trian's cockiness was grounded on any actual skill or simply a result of his upbringing. Either way it would be a fun fight. Hopefully he would not be able to curse her as well. Kyrian nodded and the little remains of the cold feeling inside her immediately vanished.

"Do you need healing?" Ilea looked towards Kyrian who was rebuilding the metal spheres.

"He's fine, don't heal everyone if they're still able to walk and fight. It would be detrimental for us to have a healer at hand at all times for every little injury." Claire said from the side and Ilea found herself agreeing. She would've healed the man anyway but considering he would be having her back for likely at least the next six months, she decided to go with Claire's way and nodded, joining the waiting Trian in the middle of the hall.

The others walked back to the sides and Ilea just now noticed the walls of earth and scattered runed stones on the ground next to the people watching.

The last attack at least not only had her as a target, though doubtfully an intentional circumstance.

“Now that was certainly an impressive shower of metal but seeing you would be our tank I’d have to test your defenses with actual power. Don’t cry again please.” he said and grinned at her.

“You’re talking a lot. Kyrian’s metal has a certain specialty to it that I’m sure you’ll experience quite soon. Come then.” she said and activated her buffs and shroud.

Trian nodded as blue lightning sparkled between his fingers. A sudden crack sounded through the hall as a bolt of lightning hit Ilea’s defenses with a loud boom, shredding through her shroud and washing through her body.

“That’s it already?” Trian said as he looked at her, though he prepared again quickly as Ilea’s smile didn’t waver even for a second.

“Isn’t that supposed to be my question?” she asked, the little damage healed nearly immediately. Her lightning resistance doubled by shroud of ash reduced the damage of his attack by a significant amount, not forgetting the shroud itself that had to be pierced first.

Contrary to Ilea’s expectations, her opponent wasn’t tricked into any rash actions with her taunting but instead his smile widened as he launched the next attacks. She got into motion and advanced towards him with unpredictable movements, the lightning striking into the ground next to her. Some strikes singed her shroud or her skin but nothing did any significant damage.

As she got closer though she noticed the strikes getting stronger and quicker in execution, the lightning manifesting closer and closer to her, leaving very little time to react. Though with her reflexes and speed that time was enough to change a direct hit to a mere glancing strike that did little to stop her unyielding approach.

Three more steps and Ilea reached him, standing face to face with the man her fist advanced towards his sternum but the mage vanished right before her



fist reached him. Instead she found a pulse of electricity flow through her as a massive burst of power and heat flashed through her, burning a part of her insides.

She turned again to face the man as hunter's recovery repaired the damage impressively fast. Half of it was already healed before her head even turned to him.

"You're still standing?" the man said, though his tense stance and light panting betrayed the tone of his voice. "That would've killed an ice troll..."

"Impressive power but if that's all you have you're not going to win this..." she said, now completely healed and meditating in the calm moment to keep her mana as high as possible. A sudden pull had her blink at the man, with her eyes that is. She noticed her mana ever so slightly dropping faster than before.

"I've never seen this...what are you doing?" she asked and locked eyes with the man.

"It's a very rare class. And you will learn why quite quickly..." he said as lightning materialized above Ilea. This time though it wasn't blue in color like it was as a natural occurrence but red. She dodged in the last moment but still felt a part of her power leave her when the next strike already came down on her.

'You're not gonna win this...' she thought and blinked towards him. He vanished again, leaving behind the same pulse of lightning as before but this time she was prepared and vanished as well, just before she was hit. A battle of teleportation ensued as the two mages vanished and reappeared in quick succession. Ilea noticed a little amount of her power leaving her constantly in addition to the mana required to uphold her skills.

Deciding to use a similar tactic as she had against Kyrian, she started using her ash surge after every blink. She was rewarded by Trian trying to go to places where no ash was, leaving him slightly predictable. The third blink left Ilea arriving a moment before him and her fist connected satisfyingly

with his stomach right after he appeared, her mana flowing into him and the hit pushing all the air out of his lungs as he was thrown backwards.

Trian rolled twice in the air, hitting his shoulder hard on the ground before he skidded to a halt when Ilea appeared in front of him. The moment of shock and the disruptive mana that had flown through him left his reaction time a little slow when she grabbed his arm and squeezed, breaking the bone below his coat. Immediately she felt her power drain and not just her mana.

She swung the man by his arm and landed his body hard in the ground below them. The drain continued but less strong. She landed on top of him and started punching into him. Three punches landed hard on his face before a massive burst of lightning shot Ilea away and dragged more of her mana and life energy out of her. She landed on her feet and looked towards the man who was rising with red lightning manifesting around him, levitating him above the ground.

“It’s been a while since someone pushed me this much...” he said and smiled. Ilea couldn’t help but feel excited as well, her wings sprouting as she felt the power from all her buffs flow through her.

# Chapter 82 Vampyr

## Chapter 82 Vampyr

Joseph watched on as two people from his newly assigned team clashed together, red lightning flashing and painting the whole hall as the woman's fist smashed into the ground, cracking it and sending stone flying.

The magical lamps above flickered as more and more red lightning landed around Ilea who was dodging incredibly efficiently. Her body moved, powered by no doubt second stage fighting and movement skills and seemingly a lot of experience. Joseph pierced the ashen mist used by the girl to inhibit the view of her opponent and concentrated to keep up with the fast paced fighting.

He was aware that the longer the fight went on, the more of an advantage the vampyrist would have. Though he was shelling out spell after spell just to keep Ilea away from him. Every so often she would manage to predict his movements and get a punch or a kick in though Joseph was betting on Trian more and more. It didn't matter to him though as with them in the team, he would certainly climb as their designated team fighting teacher. His face was stone though and didn't show any emotion.

'Fuck he's going to get me like this...' Ilea thought as she followed the teleporting mage just a moment too late to deliver another attack. The lightning that coursed through her a testament to her failure. The man was

certainly dangerous. Without her Resistance skills she would've likely been dead for quite some time already.

'I need to grab him again...it's the only way for me to win...' she thought and blinked again. His lightning attacks continued to disturb the ash she still distributed after every teleport. He had some way to see or feel her, at least partially but considering he tried to get out of the ash most of the time she was sure it was troubling him at least somewhat.

Two blinks later she finally got her opportunity and grabbed his arm again. She noticed that the bone wasn't broken anymore and remedied that immediately. She was hit straight on by red lightning and the full force of his draining but simply smashed him into the ground again.

Instead of her previous actions, she used her legs to push her reversed hunter's recovery into the man while punching him with reversed destruction. His drain was certainly stronger than hers, and that by a large margin though her still powerful physical punches seemingly pushed his concentration enough to make his spell a lot less effective.

He punched at her as well while lightning bolts rained into her from above, both of them too caught up in the fight to stop at that point. Punch after punch landed on his face as bone cracked and the control on his magic waned. Ilea didn't look much better as she couldn't heal herself anymore with her reversed healing spell entering the man. More and more of her internal organs were being burnt up and she felt her control leave as well.

Just before she decided to jump away to save her life and heal herself, the man's attacks stopped. He lay there under her, unconscious and bleeding. His face was barely recognizable as Ilea's healing spell changed from destructive to constructive again.

‘She actually did it...’ Joseph thought and immediately ran towards the two to stop her from killing the man, if it weren’t already too late. He should’ve stopped them earlier but he had been too caught up in the fight to react. The sheer raw power of these combatants was blowing him away. It’s been a while since he had taught people that were this powerful right after they had joined.

Usually he had to deal with people who had some sort of trick to kill higher leveled monsters quickly. He assumed the boy and his metal was something similar though even he was much more advanced than many Joseph had taught before.

He reached the two and stopped himself from intervening as he watched the woman’s burnt flesh rebuild right before his eyes. Both her burns and the man’s wounds below her healed quickly as he stood there. ‘She either heals herself much more quickly or she uses more resources on herself right now...’ he thought as he watched her move to the side of the man, not stopping her touch.

“You heal with touch, no other way? And is this the fastest you can go?” he asked the woman. She didn’t look at him but answered nonetheless. Only a gargling noise came out, likely a cause of one of Trian’s attacks. She waited a moment and then answered.

“Only with touch, yes. And that’s the fastest I can heal others.” she said and continued in silence. The others were slowly advancing on the scene, a gust of wind pushed away the remaining ash and Joseph nodded towards Claire whose rune still hung in the air as she joined the group.

Ilea meditated as she healed the man in front of her, her own wounds had been taken care of more quickly. She had to admit that his damage output had been incredibly impressive. More so than anybody she had faced before lest perhaps the elves. Though she had an easier time dodging them and of course a team of the hand helping her out. With his vampyrism as he had called it, he had become much harder to take down than she had expected.

The damage she had inflicted slowly healed and his bones set again before he finally woke, gasping for air and quickly coughing. He lied down again and breathed out.

“I lost.” he said and then smiled. “How close did I get though?” he asked, turning his head to look at Ilea.

“Very close.” she simply said and held out her hand to help him up. He refused though and got up himself, brushing off his coat. It didn’t help a lot with the blood though but considering it was red and black it wasn’t much of a problem in the first place already.

“Well that was certainly an interesting fight. I’m sure I could take you though, knowing now of your abilities.” he said.

“That is often the case Mr. Aymie.” Joseph said to the man “You both have impressive levels of strength though and use your skills and resources very well. I’m afraid I won’t be able to teach you a lot. As most of these classes will consist of spars though, it won’t be a problem. You’ll advance your skills and will have to get creative with using them.” he finished.

“Who’s next?” he asked and looked towards the two women standing around.

Ilea walked to the side of the hall and checked her leather armor. It was singed in a lot of places but the lightning didn’t destroy it as fire would have. She checked the notifications she had gotten during the fight and was quite happy with them.

*‘ding’ ‘Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 7’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 9’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 1  
Rare foes will have the ability to drain your mana. Either for their own use*

*or simply to weaken you. Having encountered one such being, you have learned of its destructive effect. This skill will help you reduce the effect any mana draining abilities will have on you.'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'You have learned the General skill Health Drain Resistance – lvl 1 Some creatures have the ability to drain your health. You have been subjected to such a spell and have endured. This skill will help you endure more easily and turn the tables on your enemies.'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Ash Surge reaches lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 13'*

'Quite the result...' Ilea thought and smiled, mostly at her win though. It had been a good fight and as much as she had gotten used to it, she felt a little good about how nobody had to die this time around. She would be able to raise her skills here at least, no matter how the whole team thing would go in the end. Though if Trian didn't already plan on gutting her for insulting a noble or whatever, she was quite happy to have him at her back.

'He's certainly more than just talk...' she thought, looking over at the man at the other side of the hall. They locked eyes and she felt his glare to be more challenging than insulted. A good sign for now but her judgment of character had been wrong before. She would keep her guard up, as she tried to do at all times now anyway.

Kyrian joined her a couple meters away, leaning on the wall while looking at the ground. "Good fight, I..Ilea." he said after a while and she nodded.

“Thanks.” the two watched the women of their team face each other in the middle of the hall. Joseph motioned for them to start with a gesture and the two women went into motion.

Claire dropped a bunch of stones on the ground and started seemingly painting into the air before her, a shining rune appeared where her hand moved. Ilea heard the humming and started smiling widely as she finally found the person she had been looking for. Her head throbbed a little but Claire seemingly was a little more unprepared.

Their tactics teacher slumped down on the ground, seemingly unconscious as Eve giggled innocently. The tone of the hum laid in the air still, giving the giggle a much more sinister feeling than what it actually sounded like. ‘That’s pretty scary...’ Ilea thought and looked towards Joseph who was walking towards the downed Claire.

A splash of water magic to her face seemed to do the trick as she slowly opened her eyes and held her head. “Care to try again? Or do you lack the runes?” Joseph asked as he helped her stand up. Her eyes focused as she looked towards Eve again.

“Again, give me a moment to prepare please.” she said and Eve nodded happily.

“Sure! Tell me when to start then.” she said with a big smile. Ilea chuckled at the situation from the side but calmed down again quickly. A mind mage had just knocked out a rune mage and they would be members in her new adventurer team in a magical land filled with monsters and ruins.

‘Let’s see how the next try goes then...’ Ilea thought as she watched Claire draw several runes into the air. The shining manifestations stayed there and thrummed with power.

“You may start.” Claire said. The room quickly filled with sound again, pushing on everyone’s minds. Ilea thought herself to be the most resistant to the magic but she couldn’t be sure. None of the others showed a visible reaction to the magic either though she was sure the power of the spell was reduced by an incredibly margin compared to being targeted directly.



This time Claire didn't faint immediately but stood her ground. Her face was visibly strained as the runes in front of her started glowing brighter. Eve giggled again before she started walking towards Claire. Her body suddenly shifted and seven copies walked out of herself. The humming intensified and more runes appeared in front of Claire.

Contrary to the seemingly defensive ones from before, these runes started glowing and immediately Eve had to shield herself against the air that started blowing her way. The debris still cluttering the training hall rolled towards Eve and Ilea noticed with her sphere that some of the debris was a little different than mere stone and dust.

A sudden explosion racked through the hall and the Eves were thrown backwards, most of them vanishing immediately. The explosion took all of them while the real one caught herself, her leather armor cut in some places and blood leaking out.

"I give up. You win." the remaining Eve said while holding one wound in particular. Ilea immediately appeared next to the woman and started healing her. Her right lung had been pierced and she quickly stopped the bleeding. Ilea doubted heavily that her hunter recovery's second stage regarding healing a removed head would be applicable to other people. She certainly wouldn't be trying it out on these people.

Eve coughed and smiled at Ilea while mouthing a thank you. Joseph and the others had walked towards them when Ilea turned and started healing Claire. Recent mind attacks were a part of her range as well.

"Alright, so I'm assuming this one on one style against a prepared enemy isn't really your strength Eve." Joseph asked and waited for her nod though he seemed rather sure about his statement.

"We have another three hours today and I've seen all of you fight at least once so far. Now I'll suggest some ways for your abilities to improve and we'll fill the three hours with those. We'll have four hours of this every day for at least the next three months. After that, if none of you have died or decided to leave, you'll start to do jobs together." he explained and walked over to the side of the hall. The others followed behind in silence.

“First we’ll start the lessons with bouts. The first month only one against one, after that we’ll see, depending on your progress and my judgment. Eve I’m assuming you’re more about sneaking?” he finished with his question, looking towards the woman.

“Yes, I don’t see how I can hide around here though...” the woman said and Joseph nodded.

“Good, for your mind magic or whatever that noise is I think everyone would benefit from a Resistance to that. Do you know what the Resistance will be?” he asked.

“Mental Resistance.” Eve simply stated.

“Good. Who has the skill already and at what level?” he asked. Only Ilea and Trian lifted their hands. The noble looked at her and nodded.

“Level three.” Trian said and looked at Ilea.

“Nine.” she stated simply.

“Good good, then to focus on your mind magic Eve you will start with Ilea and you will use it on the others as well until they reach at least level five. If possible I’d like for all of you to reach the same level but that will likely not be possible.” Joseph explained. “Regarding the hiding, don’t worry about that. I’ll be able to modify the hall to remedy that. Your clones are a big help as well with that I assume. Can you quickly make one for me?” Eve nodded at the request and a clone appeared next to her.

“Now who can tell the difference between them. I can’t.” Joseph said and this time Ilea and Claire held up their hands.

“So you will train with Kyrian or Trian mostly. Though I’m sure it’s good to fight against somebody who can tell as well. Focus on the first two though.” he said and then looked towards Trian.

“I will ask all of you for suggestions after so please wait with that for now.” he said, glancing quickly at Eve. “Trian I’m assuming your spells just need to

be used to level up. I think something like the fight against Ilea today would be most beneficial for both of you. Though I suggest you decide on who's attacking and who's defending for each bout to not get a one sided result in skill growth. Try not to kill each other." he said "I'll ask for the whole team to be able to use the mobility training grounds. I'm sure all of you will benefit from that." he finished and moved on to Claire.

"Claire I'm not sure yet about your abilities. You will likely benefit from bouts and simply attacking or defending against different people." he said and she nodded.

"Kyrian I'll talk to you in depth later. For now You'll fight mostly against Ilea and Claire." he said and finally looked towards Ilea.

"You can take quite the abuse. I'm assuming your meditation is rather high? How's your pain tolerance?" he asked, getting a smirk from her.

"High enough for whatever you wanna do." she said.

"Perfect. Then after the one on one battles in the first month we'll have everyone attacking Ilea. First in turn and as time goes on or if it's manageable, in teams or all at once. This is for your defense and their attack skills only so don't dodge anything. For your offensive skills I'll have to decide. A part of it will be against Trian but I'll have to get a better feel for you all and then maybe I can find something." he finished and clapped, rubbing his hands together after.

"Let's start then. Ilea go to the left side of the hall please. Trian and Eve please go with her and level your skills against her defense." he said and dismissed them.

Ilea looked at Trian and Eve. One of them grinning and the other one smiling brightly. 'That's gonna be fun...' she thought but only in part sarcastic. She blinked to the boxes and looked through.

"What are you doing?" Trian asked in a condescending tone, though Ilea ignored it and got what she needed from the crate.

“Give me a minute to change.” she said and cast Ash Surge before removing her lightly singed leather armor to change into the provided leather armor from the guild. It looked a little more used and had definitely been repaired a couple times but she found it to be of a similarly high quality as her own.

She walked out of the ash and faced the two waiting members of her team. “I’m ready, go whenever. Eve first please, start slow and then go stronger. I’ll tell you when you’ve reached a manageable level.” she said and motioned to the woman who smiled and gave her a thumbs up.

The hum started and Ilea felt her lungs restrict and her breathing quicken as an urge to puke formed in her throat. She activated her shroud and the effect lessened considerably. Her eyes focused and she looked at the humming woman and realized that Trian had moved a step or two away from her.

‘This is gonna be a long day...’ she thought and decided not to activate the second stage of her Pain Tolerance. It was manageable and she had a feeling that it would help not just her Pain Tolerance to level but all the other resistances as well. ‘Plus I’ll understand what’s happening better if I perceive my body’s feedback...’ she thought.

“Stronger.” she said and the growing headache increased. Her Hunter’s Recovery kicked in and the damage done was healed in tune. “Stronger.” she said again and saw Eve strain her face. Sweat began to form on both of their brows and Ilea thought it to be a good place for each of them to improve.

“Trian, give me some sparkles.” she said, grinning at the man who grunted, obviously annoyed. The lightning hit her and made her gasp, though she ground her teeth together and powered through. The humming didn’t stop and neither did the lightning. Instead Trian increased the dosage continuously, before he added his mana and health drain abilities as well. She was a little surprised at how calm and controlled he was considering he had lost a fight to her earlier.

# Chapter 83 Team building exercises

## Chapter 83 Team building exercises

Joseph looked over and nodded at the three people already engaged in their training. Having a self healing tank would help them improve immensely. Especially without having to wait for any healers they had employed. Some tanks in other teams needed three of them at once and had to wait for their mana to recover in between attacking sessions. ‘We’ll still probably need one or two occasionally if the others fight against each other. Considering her rather slow healing speed...’ he thought and continued explaining his idea to the two people in front of him.

“So your metal manipulation skill only applies to metal you have claimed for yourself?” he asked to clarify and nodded at the confirming response. “You can change the trajectory of the needles though so we’ll work with that. Just try to manipulate them more and more as you attack Claire.” he said and switched to the woman.

“Your defensive runes can help out Ilea and the team immensely. Both of you try to work on your mobility and casting speed. You need to be able to maneuver around the battlefield. Kyrian try to make shields with your metal if at all possible to defend against Claire’s offensive runes and explosive magic. The resistances will help as well. Call for Ilea once the damage gets too extensive.” he finished and the two looked at each other and walked away to start their training.

Joseph himself claimed the other half of the hall and started to work.

Another strike of lightning completely broke through her defensive shroud and made her teeth clatter together. The pain was dull and manageable but would ever so slightly help with her Pain Tolerance skill though Ilea wasn't quite sure how much leveling that skill would benefit her in the future considering she could deactivate her pain perception already.

The headache had stayed the same as she healed her mind while the damage was being done. Hunter Recovery really showed it's power in the difference between healing her own body compared to others. All three people in their group were benefiting heavily from the training method until Joseph called for them again a little over an hour after they had started.

Ilea decided to check her notifications later as soon as she would be back in her apartment. "I hope the training was efficient for all of you. Now for suggestions from your side please wait for after the four hours." he said and motioned for the group to follow. The other side of the hall had changed quite significantly in the meantime.

The flat ground had changed into a nearly natural looking formation of rocks, hills and even small ponds filled with water. Cover against ranged attacks and trenches for covered advances had been added and all of it done by Joseph. Ilea determined it to be some sort of hobby for the man as a seemingly unnecessary amount of detail went into the creations. It certainly looked lovely, that much was easily admitted.

"Now for the next part Ilea and Trian, please continue to bout as at the start. One attacks and one defends, switch after twenty minutes or decide on your own time." he said and she looked towards Trian. He nodded her way and walked to the empty part of the hall. They would not need any cover to fight.

'Let's see if his boasting was justified...' Ilea thought and smiled. Her buffs came active as she walked behind the man.

“I attack first, ready?” he asked as he teleported away, now facing her. She answered with a gesture, telling him to start.

The loud lightning attacks started already twenty seconds after he had dismissed them, making Joseph happy about his new team’s drive. ‘Already miles ahead of the last one...’ he thought and looked towards the three members in front of him.

“Alright, you three will fight each other however you see fit inside the prepared area. Everything is allowed and I will be watching you. Start.” he said and was glad to see them quickly run towards cover.

“Does the ash actually disturb your vision? Because if not I’ll use it here...” Ilea said as she sidestepped another flash of red lightning. The ground splintered a little at the raw power of the impact, though the only noticeable thing to Ilea was the mana and health she lost through his vampyrism abilities.

‘Aren’t vampires supposed to be something a bit different than that?’ she asked herself as more and more lightning attacks were side stepped.

“It disturbs my vision though I can track your whereabouts vaguely with my draining abilities.” the man supplied her and continued attacking. This went on for quite some time until Ilea decided a switch was needed. She simply started using her Ash Surge ability and advanced on the man with her Blink skill. He quickly caught on and went on the defensive, still trying to get in the occasional attack just like when they had fought earlier.

Ilea was more and more convinced that the man was a similarly strong foe as the elves had been. ‘Though there is nobody here who can help me fight against swords and other weapons...’ she thought as she finally managed to catch the man again, landing a punch on his back.

The fight was stopped by Ilea twenty minutes later as she had run out of mana. Trian seemed annoyed but didn’t comment on it as she went into meditation, getting back her resources. Under ten minutes later they were back at it and continued. The attacking, dodging and teleporting fused into one as the two combatants synchronized more and more, each trying to find weaknesses in the other’s approach.

Three more pauses later, one of them initiated by Trian, they were stopped by Joseph. The four hours of team fighting were apparently over.

“Alright, I hope you got used to each other a little. You will continue with team tactics with Claire here. You are all rather promising and I hope to hear you all will be alive for many years to come. Now does anybody have suggestions for trainings?” he asked, looking to the group.

“I think Ilea can train with me for a while tomorrow. Kyrian and Eve can benefit a lot from facing each other in an environment as provided by you.” Claire said “I also think Trian should face Kyrian. The metal defenses he managed today should be quite formidable against lightning.” she said. Joseph looked around though nobody else seemed to have anything to add.

“Great, then I will see you all tomorrow. Would you prefer morning or noon?” Joseph asked.

“Noon.” Ilea said immediately.

“Same.” Eve said and Claire confirmed as well.

“That’s settled then. Good luck on the lesson.” Joseph said and left the hall.



The group stood a little forlorn in the middle of the hall after Joseph had left. They didn't really know each other other than what kind of general abilities they had. Though fighting against someone certainly formed a certain and very special bond, it didn't let one know about the food preferences of the other.

"What does he get out of it?" Ilea asked, looking towards where Joseph had left. She didn't really see a reason for someone at his level to teach them. Only question marks had shown themselves when she had identified him.

"He moves up the ladder. Being higher up in the guild will lead to more resources and influence. Without the added danger of getting them yourself." Claire explained helpfully while Trian chuckled.

"You're bloody uneducated for someone that strong." he said though it didn't provoke a reaction out of Ilea. She hadn't exactly hit the books since coming to Elos and even then felt like she knew quite a bit for the time she'd been there.

"Stop insulting people." Eve said and received a hard glare from the man.

"She at least can pull her weight. I admit that this group is miles ahead of the useless mutts from the first group presented to me but you really aren't the shining star here. If you feel like challenging me then we can do so right here right now." Trian said but Eve didn't relent to his glare. Ilea chuckled then and clapped.

"We're getting along then, that's great. I'm sorry noble boy but I think you'd babble on the ground pretty quickly when she starts humming." Ilea said, smirking at the man and winking towards Eve.

"Please, we have the next hour to discuss team tactics." Claire interjected rather quietly compared to the others who had been talking.

"You didn't tell me why you cried yet? Is it just because women do that sometimes?" Trian ignored Claire completely and looked towards Ilea again.

She smiled at him though her eyes were cold. “Can you show him Kyrian?” Ilea asked, still looking towards Trian.

“No...y...you are acting immature. Claire is going to talk about strategies so stop it, please.” Kyrian said, quickly taking the edge off Ilea. She felt a little embarrassed at the outburst but calmed down again quickly. Trian will learn soon enough.

“Well I for one will be skipping the team tactics instructions for the first couple weeks. I’ve been educated on the subject for years and likely know more about it than any of you. Teach them the basics so we can go into more advanced things later on will you.” Trian said to Claire and flashed his right hand, which was sporting a beautiful black ring.

His red and black coat that had been bloodied and lightly damaged was replaced with a clean one in a flash as he grinned at his teammates. “I’ll join at some point if this team proves to be worth it.” he said and walked to the door, leaving them behind.

“Arrogant ass...is he even allowed to do that?” Eve commented, obviously annoyed by the man’s behavior.

“The class is mandatory so we could report him. I don’t think that would be wise though.” Claire said.

“I agree. He does seem to be rather p..powerful, both in personal and political strength.” Kyrian said and nodded to Claire’s comment.

“You guys are afraid of him?” Eve said, with a perplexed expression. Claire looked away but Kyrian met her gaze.

“He might not be easy to deal with but he d..did not hinder our training.” he told her, but it didn’t quite seem to convince her.

“Nah, I hate the guy. And I won’t stand next to him when we’re facing any actual danger.” Eve said, crossing her arms in front of her.

“Give it some time.” Ilea interjected “At least let me exploit his strength for my training.” she said and smiled. The joking comment seemed to calm Eve a little as her expression softened.

“Ok, though I swear I’ll kill him if he goes too far.” Eve said without a hint of sarcasm. Ilea reminded herself that she was among the elite now. People who for one reason or the other got to the level of strength they possessed now.

“Don’t worry, I’ll have your back if he goes as far as endangering us.” Ilea said and shrugged, looking towards the teacher of their next class.

‘So I kind of did get my college education. Though I didn’t expect myself to be a sports student...’ she smiled and nodded to Claire.

The next hour passed in a flash. Claire was a good teacher and seemed really informed when it came to tactics and compositions of teams. She said she’d only cover some basics today and explained to them the fighting strategies most commonly used with adventurers, guards of cities or nobles and even some monsters.

It seemed to Ilea that both Eve and Kyrian were lacking in this department as well and all of them could benefit. She had some vague ideas about the whole setup of adventurer teams but a lot of it was new to her. Claire finished with the promise to go into their own team and their roles on the next day’s lesson.

“I think we’re out of time though and the monster knowledge class starts soon.” Claire said. “Any questions you might have please ask me tomorrow.”

The others thanked her for the lesson and followed her towards the next one. Claire seemed to be the only one informed about its location and the general time table of their days. Ilea was quite fine with that, something more she didn't have to worry about.

“Hey Eve...” Ilea looked over to the woman while they were ascending with the elevator. “Were you in my room recently?” her eyes were cold as she gazed at the woman though a light grin tugged on her lips. “And perhaps in the city...rescuing a girl from some men of questionable morality? Hmm?” Eve returned her gaze with a smile.

“I don't know what you're talking about Ilea.” she said and that was that. Ilea decided not to smash her into the moving walls next to them as a part of her mind was demanding her to do. Simply because she didn't want to antagonize a team member. ‘I'll probably have enough opportunity in the next training sessions...’ she thought, turning her gaze away from the woman. She wasn't a hundred percent sure it had been Eve but it was damn close. She knew her now though and her Hunter's Sight would likely pick up on it.

The four ascended another elevator after coming out in Viscera. Ilea quickly glanced at the wall with all the available classes and frowned. “Claire, am I too late to apply for any other classes?” she asked, a little annoyed at the possibility.

“What...” Claire said and looked towards Ilea “... sorry, I didn't hear you there.” Ilea repeated her question and got a reassuring answer. “No you can apply whenever. Some classes aren't visited often, I mean what swordsman at level 200 would take a swordsmanship I class? They will find a teacher though as long as you pay or if you have two other people, at least that's what I remember.” Claire explained.

“Great, gonna check them out later then. I can cancel too whenever I want right?” Claire nodded to her question and the group went back into silence, ascending with the elevator that didn't seem to have an end to its journey.

“What are you g... going to take?” Kyrian suddenly asked, right before the platform came to an abrupt stop. They walked out while Ilea answered his question.

“I’m not sure yet to be honest. Probably archery at some point, it seems fun. Are you going to take any?” Ilea said.

“Fun? I d... don’t understand.” Kyrian said, shaking his head slowly. “I will take classes related to my classes... my classes you know?” he explained and Ilea nodded, signaling her understanding.

‘Maybe I should do that too...though I don’t see how that would help much. There’s not a lot to understand here...I punch things and they die.’ she thought and shrugged, deciding to at least take a look at the possibilities. She could cancel them immediately if it wasn’t anything useful and with her money she was in the opposite position than a debt ridden student on earth would have been. At least in some countries.

They walked through stone hallways, decorated quite similarly as her apartment had been. It gave the whole place a very high class feeling, reminding Ilea again that she had joined quite the prestigious institution. One of the doors was chosen by Claire and the group entered.

There were tables and some chairs in the room and even a blackboard. ‘I’m trapped in an anime aren’t I...’ Ilea thought as she checked her hair, glad to find it had not changed into a bright blue or red.

“Are you our teacher again?” Eve asked Claire though the latter seemed to be as uninformed as the rest about the absence of their teacher.

“When does it start?” Ilea asked before she saw someone advance through her sphere. “Nevermind, someone’s coming.” she informed the others and moments later the door to the room opened. A man walked in and Ilea immediately locked eyes with him.

“Hey I know you!” she said and got a smirk in response. “Forgot your name though, you’re a teacher?” she asked.

“Indeed I am, name’s Liam. You’re the new girl from the bar...with the impressive drinking capabilities.” he told her and she smiled back at him.

“I have a fast metabolism.” she simply stated and sat down on one of the chairs. The others listened with varied interest while the man called Liam unpacked his bag.

“So I’m assuming you’re Ilea, the tank?” he asked and moved on, not getting a denying response. “Claire the tactician teacher, Kyrian the influencer and Eve the influencer. Got it right?” again there was no response.

“You seem like a quiet bunch. The noble didn’t chose to show up huh? Well it wouldn’t be the first time for their breed. You’re not gonna learn about them in this class though. Monster knowledge.” he stated and paused, turning around and writing the term onto the board.

“Everyone here is level 200 and above. Everyone here has a lot of fighting experience and has probably killed or has nearly been killed several times before. So why are you having this as a mandatory class? Any ideas?” he asked, sitting down on the table at the front of the room.

“Because we were probably lucky.” Ilea said, thinking back on the many encounters she’s had with different monsters and people. Had she encountered something with a shield like the Praetorian’s, she would probably not be sitting here in this classroom.

The man looked at her with an understanding gaze and nodded. “You’re right. Though to say it in a different way, there’s a high chance that each of you has found a dungeon or other place to kill something your abilities gave you an edge over. I myself have the ability to poison things, stumbled upon and poisoned one of the only water sources near the Isanna desert. At least near the village I lived. Only did it in the night and nearly nobody of the village died.” he got up and continued talking.

“Though many other things died and I got a massive boost at a rather young age. It gave me an edge and let me continue to use this tactic without having to face a single enemy.” he paused. “I’m not saying all of you are like that. Though out of the people coming here at level 200 there are many who share similar stories. People who legitimately and slowly worked their way up to 200 likely are too involved in their cities, countries or noblehouses to come here in the first place. Or they have a team already. For everyone else and

some outliers, there's the hand. I, am here to teach you about monsters you might not be able to poison."

# Chapter 84 Yield

## Chapter 84 Yield

Ilea's mind was swimming in the names of different beasts, insects and birds of prey when the class came to an end. She clutched the received encyclopedia of monsters, ready to compare some of the beasts to the ones mentioned in *Magical Creatures* which she had picked up in Salia.

She had certainly been lucky with receiving a healing skill so early on, and with how many beasts there were with some ability to paralyze, mind attack or poison you, she had lucked out with the Drakes. Though she also learned that someone like Eve would've had massive troubles against them as they're apparently rather resistant to mind magic.

Influencers, as Liam had called Eve and Kyrian at the start of the lesson were apparently people with skills to slow down or poison enemies. Ilea wasn't quite sure the word really fit but it was descriptive enough.

The class ended with Ilea asking about a Shredder, something the woman who had been seeking Liam a couple days ago in a bar in Viscera had talked about. Apparently it was a worm like creature with high abilities in wind magic, encircling the target and then attacking from all around with small wind blades to shred the target, as the name implied.

There was an entry in the encyclopedia which they looked through together. Liam asked them each about a general idea of their abilities and then made sure to explain a possible fight for each of them against the monster they



talked about. Additionally he went into possibilities of facing them as a team, where Claire mentioned some things as well usually.

“Alright then, time’s up. We’ll be continuing tomorrow at the same time. As a last thing before you go though, the book I gave you is filled with rather common monsters. There are many many more we do not know out there and variations of the ones we know that have different abilities and strengths. Don’t get cocky when you see a monster. Evaluate it and take it seriously, levels matter but abilities matter more. Most important of all have someone have your back. If you came this far alone then count yourself lucky, most don’t.” Liam finished and closed his own copy of the monster encyclopedia.

The others nodded at his finishing sentence and watched him leave the room before they too got up. “Sooo, do you guys want to eat together later?” Eve asked with a bright smile.

“I can’t, will have to prepare for tomorrow. Some other time perhaps?” Claire said as she got up and went for the door. “I’m happy about the team though, so see you all tomorrow.” everyone said their goodbyes before the woman left.

“Sure, we can eat together. Kyrian you up for it?” Ilea said and looked to the man who seemed a little conflicted.

“Maybe, t...though later I have to train and learn.” he said.

“Sundown then? So you have a couple hours.” Eve said and Ilea nodded. Kyrian seemed ok with the idea as well and left.

“Ilea I...I have to confess something...” Eve said to Ilea when they were alone, preparing to leave as well. Ilea perked up and looked at the woman.

“You made those men murder each other and you crept into my apartment?” she said and Eve scratched her head while looking downwards.

Though a second later she looked at Ilea and smiled, clapping her hands together.

“Yes! Exactly that. I hope you’re not mad.” she said and to Ilea’s surprise, she wasn’t.

“The men I don’t care about but why did you come into my apartment? If there’s no good reason I’ll need a bit more than a simple apology...” Ilea said and looked at her coldly.

“You will think it ridiculous...” Eve said but continued at Ilea’s unrelenting gaze “I really like the art above your bed...and I wanted to...you know, steal it. But you woke up so I ran. Haha.” Eve said and Ilea just looked at her a little confused.

“The painting? There’s a painting?” she certainly remembered the beautiful ceiling but the painting above her bed was a little hazy. “Why not ask, you can have it if you like.” she said, which made the woman smile brightly.

“Really?! Really? That’s so nice of you! Thank you, can I get it now?” Eve asked.

“Yes yes, get it whenever. Though Eve...” she said, making the already turning woman stop and look at her. “If I find you in my apartment again uninvited, it’s gonna be your defenses we’ll be leveling in the next training session.” she said with a smile and noticed the woman gulping.

“O...of course Ilea. Won’t happen again. I’ll get it now though, that’s ok?” Eve said and Ilea nodded, watching the giggling girl’s back as she ran away.

“Likes paintings I guess?...or did I unwittingly give away a priceless artifact...what ya think Aki?” she asked, finding herself the only person remaining in the room.

“I’m rather sure it’s just art. Then again there are many who would kill for art. You should be aware of that. She might be one of those people.” the dagger said, breaking his six hour silence.

Ilea grunted and walked towards the elevator. “What do you think of them?” she asked Aki as they descended towards Viscera.

“The noble is strong and experienced. As much if not more than you are in both. The rune mage has a lot of potential and will be invaluable for your team. The other two are interesting and certainly have as much if not more potential than you but they need time and training for their skills. But in time and if you manage not to kill each other, you might become quite the deadly group.” Aki analyzed and finished right when the elevator came to a stop.

“I feel the same...now what additional classes should I take...” Ilea asked as she walked towards the wall with the classes. Archery was there of course and she asked the person who seemed to be the attendant how to join a class. Apparently the first archery class had zero people attending and a teacher would have to be found first. The price depended on the teacher but it would likely not extend five to ten silvers per hour.

“I’ll join then, find me a teacher.” she said to the attendant before walking back to the wall. “Oh and class should be after the monster knowledge lesson I have every day.”

“Of course Miss Ilea.” the woman answered from the side, writing some things down.

“A lot of these seem interesting...hey woman, put me down for advanced healing and hand to hand combat five as well.” both were the highest available classes related to her abilities.

“Will do, both will need teachers as well but we should be able to find some until next week. After Archery class?” she asked and Ilea nodded. Some other people were walking up to the wall while she talked to the woman.

‘There’s nothing on other planes...lots of classes on summoning but I’m not sure that will help me in any way...’ she thought and decided to first seek out the library and perhaps an expert on the subject before randomly joining classes.

Ilea turned around and walked back to her apartment in Viscera, before jumping into bed and throwing Aki to the ceiling. The wall above her bed seemed a little bare, the painting that had decorated it was gone. “What other class should I take you think?” she asked the dagger.

“Hmm” Aki paused “You seem to like eating a lot.”

“An eating class, I’m not sure that exists.” she answered, her leather armor vanishing as she crawled under her blanket.

“You know very well what I mean.” the dagger replied.

“I don’t think they have cooking classes here.” she said.

“Go to Ravenhall then. Plenty of cooks who would be willing to teach for the right price. They way you spend money it doesn’t seem to bother you. How much do you have stored away anyway?” Aki asked.

“I’ll check it out maybe...though eating seems more fun than cooking. And I have enough...otherwise I’ll just sell you to Balduur.” that seemed to satisfy the dagger as no further reply came from the piece of metal.

“Let’s see how much the training today did already...” Ilea said and checked her notices she had ignored all day.

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Hunter Sphere reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20’*

*‘ding’ ‘Hunter’s Sight reaches lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Perception reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13’*

*‘ding’ ‘Shroud of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Shroud of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Surge reaches lvl 11’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Surge reaches lvl 13’*

*'ding' 'Body Heat Manipulation reaches lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Mental Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

...

*'ding' 'Mental Resistance reaches lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

...

*'ding' 'Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches lvl 3'*

...

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches lvl 3'*

...

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches lvl 5'*

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 0*

*Unspent 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 201*

*- Active: Destruction – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*

*- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*

*- Active: State of Azarinth – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*

*- Active: Blink – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1*

*- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*

*- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14*

*- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*

*- Passive: Hunter's Sight – lvl 3*

- *Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13*
- *Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 17*

*Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 194*

- *Active: Shroud of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4*
- *Active: Form of Ember – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11*
- *Active: Ash Surge – lvl 13*
- *Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 2*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 16*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – lvl 13*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 18*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 18*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 13*

*General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 5*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> 14*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4*
- *Mental Resistance – lvl 13*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Lightning Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Ice Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – lvl 4*

- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 5*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 575*

*Endurance: 285*

*Strength 211*

*Dexterity 350*

*Intelligence 500*

*Wisdom 305*

*Health: 5750/5750*

*Stamina: 2842/2850*

*Mana: 3047/3050*

‘One hell of a yield. And luckily no level up for Ash Wielder yet. I hope I can get the skills high enough for the lvl 200 change to be good... if there even is one. Another question for the library...’ she thought and decided it was a good time to eat. Summoning her leather armor again, she left the apartment for Ravenhall and then found her spot outside the city again.

“Didn’t you plan to eat with the others?” Aki asked while she was chewing on the bread and meat she had summoned. The suns were still up, illuminating the city of Ravenhall a couple kilometers away.

“This is pre eating Aki. And yes I’ll meet them to eat later... Wait, we didn’t specify a place.” she said and laughed. “Sadly Claire couldn’t come, I’m sure she wouldn’t have forgotten.”

Ilea finished her meal and enjoyed the sight before she sprouted her wings and decided to fly around the mountains for a while. It didn’t seem like a bad idea to familiarize herself with the surroundings of the city she’d be staying in for a couple months at least.

The higher parts, including Ravenhall were covered in snow, of course this time of the year that was even the case in the plains below. Dawntree, Salia and Riverwatch had been covered as well. Ilea quickly found that as with the wilderness outside Riverwatch, there were awfully few people out here.

Not a single soul could be seen a couple kilometers away from Riverwatch. She landed on a cliff side overlooking the sea and enjoying the view and quiet when she heard silent steps behind her. They were still quite far away but she turned to find a tiger like creature advancing on her. Upon its discovery, the creature lifted itself from its crouched position and growled at her, showing long teeth.

Ilea checked its level and found it to be quite a lot below her own.

*[Swordmouth Tiger – lvl 143]*

Liam's words still rang freshly in her mind as she prepared to face the beast. Though she doubted it had any capacity of hurting her seriously. There was enough space to fight on the platform. If she would come to any danger, she'd simply blink or fly away.

“Do you really want to do this?” she asked the tiger, who only growled at her more. “I'm gonna stay here and enjoy the view. Go back to your cave.” she said, looking behind the beast to find an opening in the mountain side. Ilea turned around to face the sea, though as expected the tiger took it as its opportunity to strike.

The cat rushed her and pounced at an incredibly high speed. Not yet at Ilea's level with all her buffs but certainly close enough. She whirled around and moved her torso while blocking the beast's paw with her arm. The claws bounced off the suddenly appearing black armor and Ilea grabbed the hind leg of the creature before throwing it back towards the cave.

It bounced a couple times, one of the bounces was accompanied by a crack that Ilea only picked up with her enhanced hearing. Both her Sphere and State of Azarinth told her of the creature's injury before it had even landed.



She looked at the creature as it slowly got up again and slipped on an obviously broken leg. “Stop it.” she said but the cat advanced again, this time it seemed a little unsure though and circled her slowly. Another pounce and Ilea stopped the monster in its tracks, grabbing both its outstretched paws with her hands before headbutting it on its snout.

No skills were used with the attack and the monster was thrown back again. Ilea watched it through her sphere as she summoned her encyclopedia to look for the beast. ‘Swordmouth tiger...here you are.’ she thought and turned the page to the beast’s entry.

*...usually resides in a cave or somewhere else dark and shaded. Avoids conflict at all cost and even allows trespassers. Ignore but do not show your back to it. It’s high speed can be dangerous to even higher leveled adventurers..... warning, do not get close if you see any kittens, highly aggressive when nursing....*

‘Interesting...so maybe there are baby cats somewhere...’ Ilea thought and smirked at the beast. “Are you hiding snacks from me?” she asked and advanced towards the growling and still disoriented monster.

She walked right past it and towards the cave. Entering, she found what she had been looking for rather quickly. There were four sleeping kittens and Ilea couldn’t help but aww as she saw them with her own eyes. They were beautiful, sporting the same striped white fur as their mother, who had apparently found her orientation again, advancing at the highest speed possible towards Ilea.

She simply stood there before turning around and stopping the cat again. “Compared to the Basilisk, you haven’t killed any of the people I was traveling with...” she whispered as her healing mana flowed into the creature, mending its broken bone and bruised head. The beast stared at her angrily before Ilea threw her towards her kittens, soft enough for the cat to land safely between Ilea and its young.

It growled at her again before she slowly walked out of the cave, stopping again on the platform overlooking the sea. It was a nice place. The cliff side was rocky and several hundred meters high, below were rocky edges

sprouting from the waves. With her sphere she saw the frozen ponds reached deep into the ground below.

The suns were slowly setting on the horizon as Ilea turned around to look at the tiger who was standing defiantly at the edge of its cave. Ilea smiled and waved at it before her wings sprouted again and she flew backwards, looking at the rather sizable ledge on the cliff and the small cave where it met the mountain. 'I like this place...' she thought before she landed again.

On a whim Ilea activated Blink's 3<sup>rd</sup> tier ability. Perhaps not the most thought out action but she had to try it at some point. She liked the view, it was far enough from any settlement she could find to not be bothered, except someone was specifically looking for her. And finally, it reminded her of a now seemingly far away place and the many vacations that had led her there. A place on earth and near the sea. Though this time she felt much more safe so close to the water, with her wings and teleportation ability. She breathed out and touched the ground before her, the magic instinctively leaving her body.

*'You have set the destination for Blink. You may change the destination again in six months.'*

Ilea got up again from her crouched position and smiled towards the tiger still looking at her. 'Just need some nice tables and a mini fridge.' she thought before she flew away again.

# Chapter 85 A fine Establishment

## Chapter 85 A fine Establishment

“Come on, we have to continue.” Roland quietly said to Lily, waking her from her slumber with a gentle brush to her cheek. Most of the others were already up, preparing their packs and checking the surroundings for any danger. They had left Salia behind nearly a week ago. Ilea and the Hand had given them a chance at survival and Roland wouldn't throw that away.

“Already? But I'm so tired dad...” the girl told him in a sleepy voice. For many of the lower leveled people it had been a very difficult week. They had lived inside the city, protected by its walls and guards for all their life. They didn't have any skills that let them forgo sleep or let them walk for hours on end without tiring.

If he had to be honest, Roland would've likely left them behind to make his own way with Lily a while ago already but Valery held them together. She was the reason he had stayed and with her they might even survive an elven attack, should worst come to worst.

“I'm sorry alright, I'll carry you for the first hour or so, ok?” he said to Lily and lifted her up on his shoulder. The weight was nothing to him and he joined the group of waiting people, only to hear their bickering again.

“We have to leave them behind if we want to survive, don't you see that?” a man said to Valerie who seemed rather full of him. Some people in the group seemed to agree while others looked at the man with tired and hateful eyes. The waiting group consisted mostly of adventurers, or guards who had a

certain amount of strength to them. Nothing compared to a member of the hand or even Roland or Valery but enough to maybe survive in the wild.

“We’ve come this far, we won’t stop now. As soon as we reach a safe city you can go wherever you want to.” Valery said in a tired voice, shutting the man down. Roland didn’t know exactly where she planned to go, though east seemed to be the way for now. They had heard from the Hand that many of the independent cities had been destroyed similarly to their own so it wouldn’t be a quick journey, especially lacking any horses and wagons.

They had enough gold to live like nobles wherever they got to, they only had to survive getting there and keeping the gold when they arrived. Some places had already been ruled out because of that and their journey would take at least another two or three weeks at this speed to reach any reasonable city in Kroll or Nipha, the westernmost human countries.

‘They won’t leave...’ Roland thought, looking at the man grinding his teeth. They were too afraid of any dangers in the night. Even Nazarks would be their doom if it weren’t for some select members of their group. An elf might be the end of them all but by staying, they might at least have a chance. Roland just didn’t know if that chance would be at fighting or at flight.

He looked up towards the shrouded suns, hidden behind cloud formations and sighed. The breath turning into white mist. “Papa, you’re hurting me...” Lily said. His eyes focused again as he loosened his grip on her legs.

“I’m sorry.” he said and looked back to the preparing group of survivors. ‘I’ll find a way to avenge them...’ he thought, but his chest felt hollow and the fire that had burned his house and their corpses was nowhere to be found within him.

‘She forgot to give me the bow...’ Lorcan was standing on the wall of Dawntree, looking up to see the elves hovering in the distance. Around him were members of the guard, the adventurer guild, the noble houses of Dawntree and even a squad of the Shadow’s Hand. The city’s defenses had held true and though some of the elves had broken through one way or the other, Dawntree stood strong.

With four more people at level 200 they now were nearly equal to the number of elves he could see on the horizon, let alone the amount of defensive weapons and mages they had. It annoyed him. The waiting annoyed him. He wanted to go out and meet them and not wait here for them to taunt the humans. Days passed and all he could do was wait and watch their game of magic while the city fired at them from a distance.

The elves must know that the city wouldn’t starve or thirst. Certainly crime and the respective violent guard response rose heavily through the attack but what were they planning to achieve? Lorcan shook his head and sat down again on the edge of the wall, ignoring the flashes of magic and conversations around him.

‘She left the city I think...’ he looked around and again noticed someone looking at him a little too intently. It wasn’t a secret anymore that one of the Forkspear daughters had disappeared and with her the healer that had been seen with her. At least in the circles Lorcan resided it was known and he couldn’t help but be happy about it. Smiling below his helmet, he pictured the reaction of whoever was hunting her when the level 100 healer they were expecting turns out to be not quite so defenseless.

‘Why even care about something like this while the city is under attack...’ he looked down at his hands. Lorcan Agor had never been one for politics, though right now the elves were doing more for the nobles in the city than for themselves. At least for the winning side of the nobles.

“Are you annoyed at their taunting?” someone said behind him, his annoyance rising a little more at being talked to.

“May I sit?” Lorcan turned to see a masked member of the Hand standing a meter away from him. Lorcan simply nodded lightly and looked back out

towards the white landscape below.

The man sat down and sighed. “If only we could lure one of them.” he said and Lorcan found himself agreeing.

“Why are they here?” he found himself asking the man next to him, looking at the wisps of shadow moving away from the armor. The mask turned towards him at the question and then back towards the elves.

“I do not know. They have attacked many of the independent cities, decimating the population in many of them. This might be the last one standing.” the man said.

“I heard of that, so you were the ones bringing those news?” Lorcan said and chuckled “The leaders of the city will never move out to attack with that, so thanks.”

The man didn't say anything for a while before answering. “It is the wise choice. Though you thirst for battle it would likely bring death.” he paused and watched Lorcan's reaction. “The elves will bore soon, I have rarely seen them stay so long in one place. Either that or they will attack. You will be free again to follow or you will be fighting.” he finished.

Lorcan just nodded once and touched the bracelet on his arm thoughtfully. “If I may ask, as soon as this is over. Would you join me on my way to Ravenhall? And perhaps join the Shadow's Hand?” the man asked him which brought a laugh out of Lorcan.

“No. Apologies Elder but you will found me cast out already.” Lorcan said after he had stopped laughing. He prepared to fight but it seemed the man only sighed again.

“A shame then. I am no Elder of the Hand and I hold no grudges against cast out members. I do hope you will find your way, do not give up.” the man said and got up, leaving Lorcan to his thoughts.

Flying towards the city again, Ilea felt a little melancholic, nostalgic even. The vacation home her family had owned near the sea was something very close to her, for many different reasons. Choosing the place for her blink ability felt right to her and she wouldn't leave the barren ledge as it was. There was enough space to make something, build something. A place to rest and to recover, should that time ever come again.

Ilea reached Ravenhall half an hour later, flying up and through the mountain chain at her top speed. The suns had nearly set already when she reached the entrance to the Shadow's Hand.

'Now let's see how useful the skill really is...' she thought as she concentrated on Hunter's Sight. Immediately Ilea focused on a specific smell. She was sure it was his and quickly she followed its trail. It seemed obvious to her where the smell had been lingering longer. The trail led her out to Ravenhall and even out of it towards the forest she had walked through on her first arrival.

Deeper and deeper she went until she finally found him. Kyrian was standing in the middle of a pulsing circle of magic. Trees had been cut down and the snow below his feet was disturbed, intricate patterns were drawn into it and magic pulsed from it in a sickly green light. Sweat covered his brow and she watched as the light got brighter and brighter before with a flash, it vanished.

Kyrian was thrown back a little and wobbled on his legs before he held his head. "Nice show, need a healer?" Ilea commented from the side, startling him immediately.

"I thought you were a beast deciding on attacking." he said after he registered the voice.

"Best moment to blow your magic and cripple yourself then smartass." she said as she walked closer. Stepping into the circle, she stopped and walked back again, the smile on her face vanishing.

“I know...though the effects should linger for a while.” he said, looking at her for the first time. “Are you ok?” he asked, the effects of the curse vanished instantly after he quickly closed his eyes.

“I don’t n... need healing.” he said and walked closer to her, leaving the circle behind. “We wanted to get food right?”

Ilea looked at him and nodded. ‘I can’t space out like that whenever I get cursed...’ she thought and answered his question.

“Yea, let’s look for Eve. I have a feeling she’s somewhere in Ravenhall and not Viscera.” she said, turning around. Her buffs came active and she blinked away, her heart beat first accelerating and then slowing down because of her buffs.

“What the hell, you dipshit!!” Ilea shouted as the reason for her sudden teleport started giggling and then outright laughing.

“Got you!” Eve said, after she had stopped laughing.

“You’re sent a clone after me?” Ilea asked as she walked closer to the two. Kyrian’s reaction had been much more subdued though Ilea had missed it in her flight.

“They’re illusions. And no, this is me.” Eve said and smirked.

“I can’t perceive you...” Ilea said, trying to see the woman with her sphere. There was nothing there, no matter and no smell. She didn’t even hear her.

Eve grinned as she locked eyes with Ilea. “I think I figured your skill out...” she said and giggled again.

“I swear if I find you in my room again...” Ilea said and continued to focus on the place where her eyes told her the woman was standing. Slowly she realized something. Though her skill couldn’t see her directly, she noticed the air flow was different around her. There was weight pressing down on the snow below Eve’s feet and where there was the smell of trees and snow around her, there was nothing where Eve stood.



‘God, now I have to focus on things like that too...’ Ilea thought and sighed, before shaking her head.

Eve’s smile turned into a frown. “You found a way to see me?” she asked and Ilea shook her head.

“It’s more that I can see the absence of you if that explains it. Maybe you should try to blend in better. Invisible yet not leaving a void. Like a chameleon.” Ilea explained, asking herself why she helped the woman hide even better.

“What’s a c...chameleon?” Kyrian asked from the side but Eve seemed to have understood the meaning.

“I’ll try though I think it’s gonna take me a while...perception skills like you have are pretty rare though, as is mental resistance.” she said, smiling at Ilea.

“Let’s go eat.” Ilea said, tired of being cursed and sneaked upon.

“I suggest Ravenhall itself and I have some restaurants I like already but I’m open for suggestions. Haven’t tried nearly all of them yet.” Ilea explained as the three walked back out of the forest and towards the city.

“How long have you been here? I have a really nice place in mind!” Eve said, lifting her arms to signal her good idea. At least that was what Ilea thought it meant.

“I... might n...not be able to pay that.” Kyrian said from the side and Ilea frowned.

“First off, I’ve been here a couple days so it’s only reasonable that I haven’t tried all the restaurants Eve. And Kyrian, how the fuck do you not have money for food? You’re level 204, you probably get paid more for a single day’s work than most of the people in the city get for a year...” Ilea said. She knew he likely couldn’t pay the Hand and was now in debt but it was food they were talking about.

“It’s more a saving strategy. I’d rather not waste money on luxuries and be done with paying my debt earlier.” Kyrian explained and Ilea nodded, seeing some sort of sense in his actions. She for one would never try to save on food, though remembering her solo days on earth without the financial support of her family made her question her thinking.

“I’ll invite you then and I won’t accept a no.” she said and the man looked at her briefly. “I said N O.” Ilea said and he closed his mouth again, continuing in silence.

“So how’d you guys get here?? Why join the hand and how’d you get to level 200?!” Eve asked as they approached the city gate. Ilea handed the guard a couple silver coins before they were let in, getting a look from Kyrian.

“Let’s wait with the socializing until I have food in front of me, ok?” Ilea asked a minute later, walking behind the woman as she led them to her restaurant of choice. It turned out to be an incredibly high class place. The building itself was already decorated and styled quite more intricately than most buildings in Ravenhall.

The inside didn’t disappoint either though Ilea wasn’t sure if she arrived in a restaurant or an art gallery. There were paintings on all walls and even some structures behind barriers. Magical ones at that.

“I really really like that piece...” Eve commented on the abstract looking piece Ilea was staring at. To Ilea it looked like several miniature beams of metal were melted into some sort of star or sea mine.

“I don’t get art.” she said and looked back towards Eve. She wondered how the woman hadn’t stolen everything in this place yet. Looking back at the piece Ilea wondered how the art looked modern, at least what would likely be considered modern on earth. ‘I’m glad they haven’t discovered guns yet...’ she thought, wondering if her speed and reflexes would allow her to dodge a bullet from a modern rifle already and how much damage it would do to her skin or armor. It was hard to tell how much the previously encountered Taleen machinery differed.

“...depends on the caliber...” she mumbled when an attendant walked towards the standing group.

“Aaah, miss Aillan. I am glad to see you back and you’ve brought... company.” the last word was obviously meant as an insult though as Ilea looked at the man she was convinced he didn’t mean it to attack them. It was a simple fact to him that Ilea and Kyrian were lesser beings.

‘Maybe he’s a demon of art...’ Ilea thought and smiled at the man.

“Filemon my dear. I apologize terribly for their attire though it couldn’t be helped. I’ve joined the Hand today and they were assigned to me. I will do my utmost to teach them, do not be concerned.” Eve said while walking around the man and winking at her two waiting team members.

Filemon seemed to be torn between pity and sadness as he looked at the guests. “Alright, alright. Follow me please. Your usual space?” he asked and Eve confirmed with a gesture.

“He’s very sensitive.” she whispered to Ilea and Kyrian.

The group was led upstairs and then towards a corner of the room. Their table was set a little higher than the middle of the room which was a opened up, though Ilea wasn’t sure for what. A dance floor perhaps. At least they could see the whole room and all of the art spaced around it and on its walls.

Ilea had to agree that it looked nice. “How is the food though?” she asked, looking towards Eve who was whispering and giggling with Filemon.

“The food is exquisite my dear warrior.” Filemon turned and said to her, bowing slightly.

“I’d like to start with something you would suggest then. To get a taste.” Ilea said.

“With the refreshments then?” he asked towards the whole group.

“Yes please, some wine and ale as well if you would.” Eve said and Filemon nodded to her.

Ilea found the place to be a little empty, only a couple tables even occupied any customers. “How do they stay afloat?” Ilea asked, a little confused at an establishment like this placed in a rather rough city up in the snowy mountains.

“The hand houses some very rich members and the few who appreciate service and art like this finance the place themselves.” Eve explained, relaxing in her chair.

# Chapter 86 Dinner

## Chapter 86 Dinner

“You’re one of them then?” Ilea asked.

“Well I’d like to but I’m also indebted to the Hand now. I have enough saved up to indulge here and there but certainly not enough to finance the place. Though I hear Wallace Urn frequents it as well so there’s nothing to worry about.” Eve said and smiled.

“Who’s that?” Ilea asked and Kyrian seemed to have the same question on his mind.

“Wow, you don’t even know the elders of the Shadow’s Hand? Well he’s one of them, then there’s Adam Strand, Verena Quil and two more whom’s names I don’t know.” she explained but quickly realized the others weren’t really listening.

“I know you don’t have food yet but back to my questions! I want to get to know you guys.” Eve said, rejoicing when Filemon came up to the table to serve drinks. He carefully placed a ridiculously large plate with a small amount of food in the middle before Ilea.

‘What is that supposed to be...gourmet food?’ Ilea thought and looked at the artistically pleasing potato gratin with a crust of cheese on top and several herbs placed in a likely highly time consuming fashion. She took a fork and ate half of it in one bite. All eyes were on her when she closed her eyes and a low moan escaped her. She swallowed and slumped back in her chair before

shivering a little. “Oh my god this is heaven. What did you do to this food?” Ilea asked the proud looking Filemon.

“We have a rather high level cook. Something that needs to be nurtured greatly and is incredibly rare.” he explained before Ilea finished the plate of food.

“What can I bring you? The card first I assume?” the waiter asked and Ilea shook her head.

“No, no not at all. I’d like to order everything. Twice.” she said and seemed to have burnt his circuits. A reboot of his brain later, he blinked and nodded.

“You are aware that an order like this will cost two gold and fifty two silver.” he said. Ilea quickly got her pouch from her backpack and handed over three gold coins.

“Yes please, and I’ll pay for the others as well. Drinks to be refilled whenever of course.” she said and the man nodded and took the money.

“As you wish my lady.” he said and left them, taking the empty plate with him.

“Well now we know who’s swimming in money! Are you a noble? Or perhaps you’re a robber trying to hide in the Shadow’s Hand? Hmm?” Eve asked.

Ilea looked at her and burped slightly, taking a sip from her glass of ale. Yes, actual glass. “Nah, I’m from a healing order from far away. Sold materials mostly to get my funds and some books actually. How have you not gotten a hundred gold yet? Especially you Kyrian? I sold a bunch of old books from my order and got thirty gold for that as far as I remember.” she asked.

“You’re from a healing order...from far away? Hah, liar. Though I’ll pry it out of you at some point.” Eve said and started to drink her wine.

“Equipment is expensive.” was Kyrian’s answer, making Ilea think he was hiding as much as she was. Or more.

“And you probably lack the funds because you frequent places like this...” Ilea said to Eve “... though I can’t imagine someone like you would have difficulties just stealing it.”

“I only steal from the ones that deserve it.” Eve said and continued her drinking.

“What about you Kyrian? Where are you from?” Eve asked after her cup was empty.

“I’m from Asila.” he answered.

“Uuuuh, that’s pretty far north. It’s near the sea right? Are you a noble, why join the hand?” she asked. Ilea doubted she’d get a lot out of the man but couldn’t deny her own curiosity. They would be her teammates after all.

“It is, near the sea... I’m n..not a noble. I reached level 200 quite quickly I hear and people told me I could learn and g...get to join a t..team in the Hand...” he said “...with other freaks...” the last part was whispered so silently that Ilea only caught it with her sphere and enhanced hearing, though she couldn’t quite understand why any of them would be called freaks. Perhaps out of fear for their power.

“Well that’s the common story then...how’d you reach lvl 200, found something you could use your curses on without retaliation?” Eve asked and filled her glass with wine again. Ilea didn’t plan to get even a little drunk that night and had Hunter Recovery on a small burn at all times. She did like the taste of the ale though.

“I joined an adventurer team and when we explored a new dungeon we discovered there was a second part to it...I was...I stayed...alone and, there were magical slimes only reacting to movement or the source of attacks...at least w...what I think. Using needles I threw first behind them and then towards them I managed to kill some of them. Though the first one took me eighteen hours to kill....” he explained.

“What was the level difference?” Ilea asked out of curiosity.

“M...me fifty, they a hundred and eighty...” he said. “I stayed there for months, leveling up though my s..skills leveled slower than my classes. It is good though as I now have the fighting classes.” he said and seemed genuinely happy about the classes.

‘Guess some had it easier than fighting drakes and Taleen guardians...bloody slimes?’ Ilea thought but didn’t say anything as she had learned in the monster class that some rather weak seeming monsters had some nasty abilities.

“How were they called?” Ilea asked, thinking on checking her encyclopedia at a later time.

“Dream slimes...” Eve cracked her glass at the name and spilled her wine.

“Ah shit.” she exclaimed, using a towel to dry her clothes and the table.

“It’s good then that you can level your skills here. Was the thing in the forest for leveling too?” Ilea asked, ignoring Eve’s reaction.

“Yes. But it’s hard to do on snow...lots of work on anything else though.” he explained.

“Speaking of his curses, what’s the story behind your reaction today Ilea? I don’t want to pry but there’s a story here.” Eve asked as Filemon joined their table again.

“Miss Eve and Mr, the standard seven course menu? The order of the mistress is nearly ready and I’d like to serve at the same time.” the waiter explained.

“Yes, that is alright. Thank you.” Eve said and focused back on Ilea.

“I was cursed in a fight and nearly died. Nothing more to say. At least for now.” Ilea said and was glad that Eve simply nodded and continued to drink wine. She noticed that Kyrian hadn’t touched neither ale nor wine.

“You don’t drink?” she asked and the man shook his head. “I can heal it’s effects...” Ilea said but Kyrian seemed skeptical. “Here, look.” Ilea said



smirking and touched Eve's food below the table, using her Hunter Recovery to remove the effects of the poisonous beverage in her body.

“WHAT!?! What the hell are you doing? Stop that!” Eve exclaimed and skidded back with her chair. “Great, now the buzz is gone. Fantastic job healer girl. Wow.” she clapped sarcastically and Ilea decided not to get up and bow to the woman for her fantastic use of her abilities.

“See, it's alright.” Ilea said but Kyrian still shook his head. Ilea looked at him and then dropped the subject, likely another reason for the man.

“What about you Eve? Where are you from, why are you here and how did you reach level 200, answer me or you die.” Ilea said to the woman who was filling up her glass again, still grumpy at the loss of her intoxication.

“You dare try and I'll smash you through the table.” Eve answered but continued “I'm from a village in Lys actually been doing adventuring and other jobs here and there until lo and behold I reached level 200. I didn't like any of the other possibilities then and the normal adventuring guild is super annoying when you're level 200. Though I now owe money the Hand is much more easy to deal with.” she drank her whole cup in a single motion and filled it again. That one was emptied as well before she continued talking.

“As to how I reached the level, well as mentioned before many things don't have mental resistance or a good enough perception skill to find me. As simple as that.” she said and smiled.

‘She said things...’ Ilea thought and smiled back though her eyes were cold, as were Eve's. Nothing else was said as the food arrived then. Similarly huge plates again for all three. Ilea asked for some water or juice for Kyrian which he seemed grateful for, not someone keen on talking to waiters.

Eve and Kyrian talked about this and that but Ilea couldn't help but be completely mesmerized by the dishes that came and went. Exotic dishes with tastes she had never experienced and seemingly ordinary things that had a twist to them she didn't expect. She ate and ate until finally she found herself sitting again in front of the potato gratin.

“I’m done. That was the whole card. Once.” she said, looking up to the other two, Kyrian seemingly talking about preparing a fish to cook while Eve looked too drunk to really comprehend anything he was talking about.

“Welcome back I...Ilea.” Kyrian said and smiled a little, looking at her.

“Oh this is only temporary...I’ll be gone again soon. Are you done eating already?” she asked though he shook his head.

“I think we’re at four out of seven dishes. It really is an experience to eat here. I would like to talk to the chef later.” he said.

“Oh I’ll join you there... have to kiss that man, or woman.” Ilea said as she focused on her plate again.

Two hours later the table looked exactly the same. All of them had finished their meals and the only noticeable difference was Eve passed out on the table, though Ilea thought she looked rather cute, even the drool that came out of her mouth. She quickly patted it down with a napkin before taking a sip of her ale.

“Sure, I’ll join the attack sessions soon and you can level your curse resistance. I can remove it at will so you’ll just have to tell me when it’s t... too much.” Kyrian answered her previous question.

“I see you’re done. How was the food.” Filemon stood next to their table, looking at Eve with something akin to a fatherly look.

“Absolutely bloody amazing. Best I’ve ever eaten I think. Though the portion sizes are questionable.” Ilea answered his question.

“I’m glad to hear that. Though the portions aren’t negotiable.” the waiter answered.

“We’d like to meet the chef if possible. I want to thank them personally.” Ilea said though Filemon shook his head.

“I’m afraid that is not possible. She is very busy at the moment.” Filemon said though Ilea could perceive the light gulp he took and was even more determined to see the chef, a woman apparently.

“Of course, I understand.” Ilea said and sat back.

“You don’t seem disappointed...” Kyrian said after the waiter had left again.

“Oh, that’s because I’m going to meet her anyway.” Ilea said and smiled at the man before she vanished, appearing above the restaurant in the empty apartment that resided there. She blinked around and tried to find the kitchen with her sphere. Three telepots later she found it and inside, something peculiar. ‘Interesting...’ she thought and blinked right into the kitchen.

“Hello there.” she said and took in the view of the startled chef who raised a knife, aiming at Ilea.

“Wow you look cool, like a dragon or something.” the woman was covered in scales and had reptile like eyes that stared at Ilea. The knife came flying and was caught by the blade. Ilea found her to be a level 162 cook, something apparently rather rare. Considering it probably wasn’t a fighting class it seemed hard to level up such a class depending on the second class of course.

“Some of our kind would’ve killed you for that statement.” the woman said.

“Well you did throw a knife my way. Sorry for insulting you, first time I see one of your kind.” Ilea shrugged and put the knife on a nearby table. “More importantly though, you were the one preparing the meals? The two menus.”

“You mean you’re the one who ordered the whole card, twice...” the woman responded, though Ilea wasn’t sure how she felt about that order.

“Yes exactly, absolutely amazing. You’re a magician, an artist. I think I love you but I’d rather watch you make food and eat it than do you. You know

what I mean?” Ilea said which got a laugh out of the cook.

“You’re a peculiar one for this establishment. Not that I dislike that. Name’s Kayla.” the cook replied.

“Keyla then, what would it cost me for you to prepare those meals. Specifically the potato gratin, the fish on wine sauce, the one with the green fruits and red meat, and of course the hummus like paste with the spicy yet sweet flavor. I would like for you to prepare bigger quantities though, more than those small plates. Is that a possibility?” Ilea asked, her words flowing out of her mouth as fast as she could think them up.

“Sure, my contract doesn’t prohibit something like that. Though they do try to keep me hidden away I think. For good reason.” Keyla said.

“Great. Make as much as you can of all that then. I’ll come daily before sundown to pick it up, how does that sound. Make more than I can eat.” Ilea said.

The woman chuckled “It would be sad for the food to go to waste.” she said but Ilea simply summoned a plate of food from one of the restaurants she had visited the days prior. It was hot and steamy still, nothing inside was overcooked.

“It’s fresh...a storage device then. I get it. Ok we can do something like that. It’s gonna cost you though. Less than the restaurant asks but the ingredients are rather cumbersome to get and my time invested plus the experience and my level raise the price as well of course.” Keyla explained.

Ilea summoned five gold coins and put them on the table. “Don’t worry, I’ll inform you when money becomes an issue. This is as an advance and show of trust.” Ilea said seriously “This is important to me, do not disappoint me Keyla.” she said and the woman nodded slowly, probably asking herself if this was a good idea.

Ilea blinked away and watched Keyla lean back on the counter she was working on before shaking her head and getting the money. ‘Got her...’ Ilea

thought and smirked. She appeared next to Kyrian again and sat down, taking a sip of her ale with a winning smile.

“You met her?” Kyrian asked and she just looked at him.

“Do you know where Eve lives?” Ilea asked him but he shook his head. “Should we just leave her like this?” Ilea asked but decided to use her healing spell to at least prevent a headache for Eve the next morning. She waved towards Filemon who promptly walked towards them.

“I’m assuming this isn’t the first time she did this?” Ilea asked while healing Eve’s intoxicated body. “Where do you take her usually?”

“Don’t worry about her, I’ll take care of it. She has a room above.” he said. Ilea didn’t respond and finished her healing before sitting back, emptying her glass of ale.

“That was nice, should we go then?” she asked Kyrian who nodded.

The two bid farewell to Filemon and walked out into the cold city, the snow crunching below their boots. “I’m gonna check on her. Take care and see you tomorrow.” she said to Kyrian, locking eyes with him quickly.

“Thank you for the food. And y... yes, see you tomorrow.” he said and walked off towards the Shadow’s Hand. Ilea smiled as she watched his lips twitch upwards several times before he left her sphere of perception. She wasn’t sure if it was because of her specifically, or for some other reason. Like a sinister plan that seemed to be going well. Ilea stopped the strain of thoughts and looked upwards, before blinking twice and landing in the attic of the house.

The apartment below held two rooms with beds in them and she didn’t have to wait long until she perceived Filemon entering the apartment, carrying Eve to one of the beds. He put her down on the soft mattress and went to get a wet towel to cool her head. He tucked her in before kissing her on the forehead.

Ilea sighed and smiled. ‘Trust, but verify...’ she thought and watched him quietly close the room before she blinked away into the night, running

towards the Shadow's Hand and her new home.

# Chapter 87 A Knowing Trade

## Chapter 87 A Knowing Trade

Ilea couldn't sleep quite as long as she wanted that night, too much to think about from the past couple days. She was lying in bed smiling though, glad to have found a place to stay and perhaps some people she could stay with for a while.

"I think I like them Aki." Ilea said to the dagger stuck in the ceiling.

"I think you liked the food the most." he replied.

"Ah yes, that as well, what a magnificent cook. You know about their race?" she asked.

"No, I have not seen anything like it before."

"Interesting. I'll definitely ask the others to do some more training after the classes though. If feel like at least Kyrian would be up for that. Maybe even that noble, he seemed to enjoy the bouts." she said.

"I think he tried to kill you." Aki answered.

"Even better, means there's actual danger. I didn't necessarily try to kill the man but I did punch him into unconsciousness in the first fight." Ilea said, grinning.

“So this is the fabled battle maniac...I have certainly heard of your kind but none of my wielders so far was quite the same.” Aki commented.

“Really? Not a single one? I would assume elves would be exactly that, considering the ones I’ve fought so far.”

“I would assume you have fought young elves, impulsive, uncontrolled and angry. It usually changes over time though looking from a human moral standpoint they don’t necessarily become better.” Aki explained.

“Perhaps, yes. Though humans are shit too, greedy and evil. I honestly don’t think we’re much better but I know little of what elves actually do except for genocide. Which again is not something only they do. Humans are exceptional at it as well.” Ilea said, getting up from her bed.

“True, though I have seen only very rare occasions of elves treating someone or something weaker with anything but disregard. There are some humans who are different. At least from what I’ve seen.” Aki said and continued as Ilea got him out of the ceiling. “Where are we going? It’s hours until noon.

“I’m not tired and I can’t go train. Maybe some music?” Ilea asked.

“Whatever you like.” Aki answered, though Ilea just held the dagger up to her face.

“What do You like Aki?” she asked and waited for a response.

“You’re asking your dagger what it likes?” the piece of metal replied.

“Yes I am. Done weirder things since I’m in Elos, so what is it?”

“Since you’re in Elos? What do you mean?” the question wasn’t surprising. The dagger certainly picked up on things quickly and Ilea was prone to let something slip at some point.

“I’ll come to that at a later time, ok? So what do you want to do?” Ilea didn’t mind much that Aki now had an idea that she was from somewhere other than this continent. He probably had assumed as much already.



“How about books?” Aki said after being quiet for half a minute.

“Like reading, or stabbing them?” Ilea joked and walked towards the door.

“You know the answer girl...” the reply came while she opened the door. She of course knew that Aki wanted nothing more than to stab a good book.

Viscera felt alive even this late into the night. Of course the magical lights above never wavered and with the rich adventurers the influx of new musicians and other artists and salespeople never stopped. Though Ilea was sure there was a certain rotation with Ravenhall going on. It was doubtful someone would travel through the mountains just to play or sell in Viscera.

Seeing some of the wares and people thought, Ilea doubted her thinking a little. Perhaps it was just that profitable.

This time the person manning the reception seemed to be fighting off sleep. It was night outside and Ilea was glad again that she needed less and less sleep to stay functioning. “Hey, anybody there?” she asked the woman who blinked her eyes open in shock.

Ilea touched her arm and started to heal her in an attempt to wake her up but realized that the warm feeling might not be what the woman needed right now. “Y...Yes, what can I do for you.” she finally said.

“Where’s the library.” Ilea asked and the woman pointed towards Viscera.

“Down and then the right most elevator up.” she said and continued to blink her eyes.

‘These positions with a chance to become a member are really looked for... or maybe she just parties too much.’ Ilea thought and walked back to the town. Ready to find some new questions and perhaps some answers as well.

“Ilea Spears. Yes, quite an impressive evaluation you had and yesterday were your first classes?” the man sitting in front of her said. “You are a paid member so you will have full access to the base level of the library. Any specialized information will cost you.” the man explained.

“Oh don’t worry about that...” Ilea said, walking around the room, thinking that Eve would like it here quite a lot. It was dark in the room, quite unlike the white stone most of Viscera seemed to be built with. The stone was nearly black and there were structures in the room made from the same material. A multitude of angled blue tinted windows let some of the magical light inside from the great cave that was Viscera.

Though traveling with the elevator had put Ilea quite a bit above the ground level of the city, at least the level of the last staircase.

“I am not talking about gold, miss Ilea.” the man said, his gaze hovering a little above his spectacles. “I am talking about knowledge.” he finished.

“I assume any kind of knowledge, though an oral testimony won’t be enough I assume?” Ilea asked, getting a slight smile from the man.

“No, quite so.” he said, putting down the pen he was writing with, leaning back in his massive chair. Ilea could see the leather and wood strain, keeping his weight at bay. She smiled, knowing that she wasn’t talking with the average librarian. The question marks upon her identification underlined that thought.

“And what about the knowledge I get? How do I trust that you’re not gonna tell other people what I might ask?” Ilea said, walking closer to the table again.

“That is knowledge as well my dear. And for the right price, one might acquire it. Though depending on what you have to share I can ensure you will get a one year period where your questions will stay locked. For anyone but me.” the way he talked Ilea was sure there was no way to haggle with the man, his word was final.

“Interesting. Well for now I’m here to say hello. You already have my name, what will yours cost?” Ilea said, smirking at the man. She was quite happy to find he repeated the gesture.

“That, is free. I am Dagon Keywire. Humble, librarian of this fine guild. Head librarian I might add, though it does not matter. We are in the pursuit of knowledge and such titles hold little meaning. I am happy to welcome you in the guild.” Ilea stared at him before turning around and walking towards the windows.

“I quite like these windows Head librarian Keywire. Where might I find the maker?” Ilea asked, touching the glass.

“Dagon is quite alright. Another free piece of advice Miss Spears. In Viscera, asking for a name is no issue... usually. Though be careful with members of the hand you encounter in the wild. They might take, offense. An outdated and unreasonable tradition they hold on, though many enjoy the reverie they are viewed in. An image, nothing more.” the man explained “The maker of this glass I would have to search, what piece of knowledge or artifact will you trade for a name and location, should the being still exist?”

“I was told that before...doesn’t seem to be an issue though. You take artifacts as well then, is that the reason why you welcome me so warmly?” Ilea said and walked back to the man.

“That is another piece of knowledge, yet I have yet to receive any compensation Miss Spears.”

“Ilea is quite fine on my side as well Dagon. Now how much is the knowledge worth that I own a storage item?” Ilea said and the man perked up.

“Not a lot.” he paused and looked at her in an evaluating way. “You are in Viscera now. There’s a high chance some others have the same. Though it is a piece of information I have yet to see proof.” he said.

Ilea checked with her Sphere but found nobody else to be in her range. She quickly summoned the damaged Legate Guardian helmet she still held in her necklace. It appeared in her hand and she placed it on the table. “It holds little use for me anymore but it is an artifact. One likely over a thousand years old. And you have proof of my necklace. I intend to have the year period of silence about it’s existence as well.” Ilea said.

The man extended his rather big hands and grabbed the helmet from its place on the table. Dagon examined the piece of armor and then grunted approvingly. “Yes, it’s real. Quite a find. I’ve only ever heard of the rank Legate, though to have found a piece of armor. Quite exceptional. The Taleen are still rather shrouded, and I find it infuriating how little of the hoarded knowledge is shared with the guild.” he said and continued, the helmet vanishing from his hand.

“The silence is of course guaranteed, for a year. Nothing longer than that can be bought. Not from me at least. The maker of the glass lives in Ravenhall, quite a nice glass mage and artist. Elvon Isar. I am an opportunist and yes, the chance of you finding knowledge is a big part of why I welcome you. Though I am not here to deceive you. I trade knowledge for knowledge, as simple as that.” Dagon said.

“The artifact you gave is of rare quality but its historical value far exceeds its quality as a piece of equipment. You may still ask some questions. The year of silence is guaranteed for anything you may ask. The answer might cost more.” the librarian finished.

“May I come back with those questions? I have more things to share with you as well of course.” Ilea asked. Dagon closed his eyes and nodded lightly. “For one that you’re quite a bit more heavy than you seem. And I assume you move a bit faster as you seem as well.” Ilea said and smirked. Dagon smiled back at her as she left the room.

“I will look forward to it.” he said after her.

“Do you think I can trust him? To stand to his word?” Ilea asked while descending the elevator.

“Every man has a price. Though he seems to be very open with his. The question is if the year of silence is anything to trust.” Aki said and continued. “Though who would want to know about your secrets? What will you want to ask him?”

Ilea stayed quiet for a while but ultimately answered. “There’s a low chance of anybody caring. Or of anybody being a danger to me that finds out but I tend to overshare and trust too easily. I at least want to ask around a little before I ask some of the riskier questions to a shady librarian working for a guild of shadowed adventurers.”

“They’re mercenaries. You, are a mercenary.” Aki said.

“It’s basically the same.” Ilea answered and exited the elevator. ‘Who should I ask though, there’s nobody here I really trust...’ she thought and walked upwards towards Ravenhall. ‘Next best thing then...’ her Hunter’s Sight came in handy again and a couple minutes later she stood in front of an office and knocked.

“Come in.” the man said, Ilea blinking inside immediately. “Oh, the new initiate. What is it?” William asked, looking up from the paper he was writing on.

“I was wondering about Dagon Keywire and his knowledge trading.” Ilea said.

“You’re rather upfront. You don’t trust the man? I assure you the guild is no exception to his year of silence. Though the knowledge not protected by his dubious vow is open to us. I have not yet seen any exception being made but you have nothing more than my word.” he immediately understood and

answered Ilea's question. She couldn't find any obvious tells of him lying but then again it all could be a ploy.

She sighed and looked towards the ceiling. "This is annoying." she exclaimed. The chuckling coming from William surprised her as he didn't seem the type of person to do that, ever.

"Well, being at your level of strength will bring knowledge and questions that will put yourself or others in danger. Trust me everybody here shares the sentiment. It's for you to evaluate what is safe to share and what risk is worth taking." he explained.

"Why did you answer? And why chuckle?" Ilea asked as she focused on the man again.

"The answer is because you seem genuine. I am with the guild and every member can expect a measure of support from me. For the second question, that is not something I'd share with you or Dagon for that matter." he said, his face serious again.

"Aight, thanks anyway." she said and the man motioned for her to leave.

'One more I guess...' Ilea thought and walked around the entrance hall before she finally decided on someone.

"Yea, he's fine. Never heard of anybody getting anything out of him that is under his year of silence. Not for a lack of trying. One noble woman even offered him a storage ring and access to their whole library for some piece of knowledge. Heard she left angrily. Nobody's heard of her since then. Some say she came back to force it out of Dagon but I've yet to hear anything more than rumors. All I know he takes his vows seriously." Liam said, taking a sip of the mead Ilea had brought the man.

He had been sitting alone on a table in one of the pubs, listening to the live music. “What do you want to ask him?”

“I’m looking for someone. Heard the name is pretty influential. Just trying to keep somewhat of a low profile.” Ilea said, making him choke on his drink. “What?”

“Hahaha, well and you tell me that? Oh well as long as you don’t tell me the name too!” he put the mug down. “What’s the name?” he whispered.

“Fuck off.” she waved the obviously drunk man off and drank from her own mug, leaning back onto the bench and enjoying the singing voices. ‘Quite different than what’s played in earthen pubs...’ she thought but didn’t dislike the change.

“You like this bar and the music?” she asked, half listening to the response.

“It’s peaceful. Yes.” Liam said. Ilea quickly looked at his eyes, unfocused from the alcohol but intently locked on the musicians.

“Thanks for the help.” she said, smiling at him and got up. Looking at him woke a certain urge in Ilea though she didn’t plan on engaging with anybody for now. If only she had a way to get to the Root and find that waitress again. ‘Now to help myself...’ she thought and went back to her apartment.

The door closed behind her and both her clothes and Aki vanished into her necklace. The next hour was quite relaxing though she did miss the convenience of batteries. ‘Maybe there’s a literal magic wand for that...’ she thought, panting in her bed after she had finally reached her climax. The last ten minutes felt more like work than anything else.

Ilea’s clothes came back on as did the sentient dagger fill its sheath again as she got up from her bed.

“I know what you did.” Aki said.

“Don’t tell me you have a libido. Should I ram you into the wall repeatedly?”

“Hah.” Aki’s answer didn’t quite resolve the mystery but Ilea had other questions to ask. And not to her magical dagger. She thought about leaving him in her necklace while she spoke to Dagon but in the end didn’t think it necessary. He had not revealed himself among all the people she’d been with so far and had been providing her with advice and answers, while being a dry sarcastic little shit. Of course for Ilea that wasn’t a negative.

“So she returns. Did you find me trustworthy after all?” Dagon asked, looking over his glasses at the entering woman.

“Well I seem to be the only one around here so I’m not so sure anymore.” Ilea commented as she entered the room.

“It’s been a slow week. I presume it has to do with the elven attacks. Many are out there fighting. Nearly all who remain are new members of the guild and Viscera has draws that many deem more engaging than a library or the trade of knowledge.” Dagon explained.

“Yes, those. Well I have some questions then. I assume people can’t listen in, at least with known skills.”

“Not anymore.” Dagon said and Ilea was immediately on alert as her Sphere cut off on the edges of the room.

“So you too? A very valuable skill to have thought I cannot discern it’s exact powers with that reaction alone.” Dagon commented. Ilea was a little annoyed that he had seen her reaction but it wasn’t a common thing for her Sphere to be cut off. So far only the library wall in Salia managed it and of course Eve.



# Chapter 88 Questions

## Chapter 88 Questions

“Alright, to the questions then. I assume I don’t get anything for you knowing about my ability?” she asked but his slight smile gave her enough of an answer. A no, that is.

“I’m looking for Edwin Redleaf. I want to know everything you have on him. There’s more where that helmet came from.” Ilea said. She decided that Edwin would be the first thing she’d ask about, both to find out how much she could get with her artifacts but also to see how much Dagon could actually help her out.

“Yes, very interesting. That is certainly a good reason to verify my trustworthiness. Well for one, you’re not the first one to come looking here for him. It’s been a couple years though so you’re late. The information I have is definitely outdated.” Dagon said.

“So you know him. Well I might have some newer information on him as well but I’ll decide on what to share after you tell me some more. Also about his sister, Felicia Redleaf. Start with their family and where they come from.” Ilea carefully studied the man’s reaction but couldn’t discern anything abnormal.

“Now I really want to know why you’re looking for him if you don’t even know that much.” he said and took off his spectacles. “The Redleafs are a noble house from Lys, the empire you’re standing in. Not a small one at that, I’d estimate their influence to be at least in the top four or five houses. In Lys

at least. Edwin is one of the sons of the current head which makes Felicia his sister.”

“So he’s in line to take over?” Ilea asked.

“No, not at all. Direct ascendancy doesn’t matter for the Redleafs, as long as it’s anybody in the family. I’m afraid not even I know exactly how they chose their new heads. It’s been sixty four years since Arthur Redleaf took over as head, Edwin’s father. His grandfather was not the head before, which is why I draw the conclusion.” he said.

“Where do they reside?”

“The capital, Virilya. As do all other big noble houses. Though they have many strongholds throughout Lys so you might find it difficult to find him there. Especially since he’s vanished around eight years ago. As did his sister. The Redleafs have been looking for him ever since, with more and less concealed measures. They never mentioned any reason but my theory is that he simply left the house on bad terms for one reason or the other. Now of course he holds a lot of their secrets and is a liability. Enough for them to track him down. The same could be said about his sister but all the requests and information gathering by the house has focused on him, so I assume it’s him that is the rogue part.” he paused and let Ilea process the information.

“It is mere speculation by me of course and I won’t be able to help you in finding him. Neither do I have any information on his abilities or level at the time.” Dagon finished.

“Helpful, but not quite as helpful as I had hoped for. Do you have information about the people that asked for him before?” Ilea said.

“I do have some.” he said and started writing on a sheet of paper that had appeared in his hand. “Names and locations, some even requested anybody looking for him to contact them. Information about his whereabouts are paid rather well I might add. This is what you get for the helmet. There are no more names to add to the list and I have nothing else on him, except you’re interested in his history.”

“If it doesn’t answer why he left the house then no, not particularly interested. Nothing on Felicia either?” Ilea took the paper, quickly looked it over and made it vanish.

“I’m afraid not. The high nobles of Lys can be incredibly secretive. And few of them travel to the Hand. Fewer even share any knowledge with me.” he said and Ilea thought to hear disappointment in his tone.

“I’ll look for these people then. At least something helpful.” Ilea said and summoned the rest of the damaged Legate Guardian armor.

“The whole set! Marvelous.” Dagon commented and quickly made the whole thing vanish before the woman could change her mind.

“I would like to know about other realms. Worlds here but not here. I have talked to a man who claimed to be from a different land, where magic was nonexistent, no levels or stats were known to him and machines and technology ruled everything. It was intriguing to me but when I looked for him the next day he had vanished. I am good at finding people but he was gone. The thought of traveling through realms has never left me since.” she finished, rather proud of her made up narrative, perhaps he would see through it but perhaps he wouldn’t either.

Dagon scratched the short beard on his chin, looking deeply into her eyes. “There are stories. A lot of stories. There is likely a demon realm, they have to come from somewhere after all but scholars debate about its existence still. Additionally there is talk of the realm of the dead. It depends on the religion you look at there. A realm of the gods and even one of the dragons. None of it is based on any proof I have. I know that demons exist, and the undead. I have yet to see a dragon and hope to never encounter one but I am certain they exist. Gods I am not sure about either.” he was still scratching his beard.

“The world you speak of is something else. Levels and magic is ingrained in all of existence, or so I thought. It’s a completely abstract idea but certainly interesting. I can see how the topic didn’t leave you. There are non magical ways to power machines but they are inefficient compared to mana. The

equality in a society without magic would be astounding though.” he said but then shook his head.

“No, better armor and gold would simply become much more influential when personal power is equalized. Though without magic and levels...yes I can see how it could work. I will look through historical and fictional literature to see if anything comes up. I’ll have you inform if I find anything.” Dagon finished. Ilea was quite glad that the man seemed immediately invested in her pursuit, if only for his personal interest.

“Do that. Now I have questions about classes. How much will the armor cover still?” Ilea asked.

“If I find out anything substantial about this realm you speak of, then I will inform you about the cost. You may still continue to ask.”

“All of this is under this year of silence vow of yours?” Ilea wanted to make sure.

“Yes.”

“Alright, and so will be the next questions. I want to know about the Ash Wielder class and possible advancements at level 200.” she said.

“Ash Wielder. Yes, that would fit you. The last reported Ash Wielder joined the hand three hundred and thirty years ago.”

“Luckily for you the man traded some of his class information in. Now the armor you have provided is certainly enough for me to give you the information but not for the year guarantee. So should anybody care enough, they would find out that you asked about the class.” Dagon explained.

“Can I hear it and then decide if I want to get your vow or not?” the man nodded to her question.

“Certainly.” The man said and smiled, giving Ilea the idea that this must be a good way for him to get the highly guarded information. Desperate customers accept worse prices after all. Ilea motioned for him to continue, she had

enough things in her storage device that were likely valuable enough for the man. And having someone know her class wouldn't be the worst of all possible outcomes.

'They'll probably know one way or the other with all the people who have seen me fight so far. Not the exact name though perhaps...' she thought.

"There are three advancement options at level 200 that I know of. Be aware that I have no hard proof for this but all three classes have been confirmed by three people in the past eight hundred years." Dagon said, getting back her attention. "The first one is Ashen Warrior and likely the easiest one to get. The sources didn't go into specifics on the requirements here but told me if you had the Ash Wielder class, you'd have this one pretty much guaranteed."

"It's a simple advancement of the skills Ash Wielder already provides. Now I believe the last Ash Wielder I talked to was a mage and not like you a warrior. So I think the class he chose finally would not be very beneficial to you. The name was Embered Hand of Sarin. I do not know of Sarin and not for a lack of looking. It wasn't something related to the man I believe as I have documentation on another Ash Wielder receiving the class. A god or demon perhaps or maybe even a place. If you choose the class, I'd be more than willing to trade for any information on it." the man paused, likely to show how important that piece of information would be to him.

"As they told me the class skills turn into a long range style and it's primarily a support class for a main mage class, enhancing whatever magic one was using primarily. The way you look I don't think you would be choosing that one, although it was supposed to be superior to the others."

"Now the third and last class possibility I know of was called Ashen Mist and as far as I was informed it mostly changed all skills to a more rogue like style. I have asked all Ash Wielders I've talked to about the specific requirements for each class but they wouldn't share. I believe you will have one or the other available as long as you have used your skills often enough. Perhaps some specific deeds would unlock more possibilities but I'm afraid I do not know." Dagon finished.

‘That is surprisingly unhelpful... he did provide information on possible advancements but the latter two don’t seem very useful to me and the first one is a simple advancement. It’s even called the same as the passive skill... very underwhelming.’ Ilea thought and scratched the side of her head. ‘Well I guess I’ll get something and leveling the skills as high as possible can’t do anything but help me.’ she looked at the ceiling and decided not to give the man any more information or artifacts. Should anybody care enough to ask, they’d know she was an Ash Wielder.

‘As soon as they see me fight that secret is out anyway. The price seems too high. Although I do have a lot of dwarven weapons left that I probably won’t need anytime soon. Especially with Balduur working on some specialized gear...’

“You said you’ve met several of the Ash Wielders, how old exactly are you?” Ilea asked, suddenly curious as to the nature of the man. Perhaps he was no man at all.

“That is a piece of information that costs quite a lot. And a lot more than what you’d get out of it. A personal price perhaps but even I have my secrets.” Dagon said.

‘That’s literally all you have...’ she thought and asked the next question that came up during his explanations of the class possibilities.

“You mentioned Sarin or something. I’ve killed some things with specialized class names like that, what do they mean? People can be simple warriors but how do the names come to be?” Ilea’s question of course stemmed heavily from her own knowledge of the Azarinth classes. An order of healers influencing the world enough to become its own class?

“Yes, the higher level one attains, the higher the chance of a class being more specialized. The more influential or powerful a group of people or even single person is, the higher the chance of bringing a new class into the world. I hear the empress of Lys has guards with classes unique to them, mere speculation and whispers of course but history will likely tell of them in decades to come.” Dagon said before a cup with a steamy liquid inside suddenly appeared before him. Taking a sip he continued.

“There have been many a group of people becoming influential enough for their own classes to be born. Said classes come up again today from time to time even though the group has been extinct for millenia.” Dagon explained, looking at her with a smirk and a questioning look in his eyes.

‘You’re not getting that one old man.’ Ilea thought and trained her poker face. No new skill appeared though.

“Certainly interesting. Will this suffice as payment.” she said and summoned three Taleen swords of high quality. Dagon nodded, satisfied and made the weapons vanish.

“You have brought me some interesting items. What else have you found in the Taleen Dungeon you were in?” the man asked and leaned forward “I’m sure to pay you well.” he finished and stared into her eyes.

“Perhaps if I find more questions to ask. Or perhaps there are some questions I should be asking?” Ilea said. Dagon took a quick sip of his tea, identified by its scent.

“Those you will have to find yourself.” he said but Ilea was sure that he would’ve helped her out if he thought any information vital to her. Somebody looking for her for example or something dangerous about her teammates or classes.

“Then I’m sure we’ll meet again, Dagon.”

“Ilea.” he said and continued to drink his tea while she made her way back towards the elevator.

“This place does yield a lot.” Ilea said to Aki, lying in her bed. Not the one provided to her but the one she had specifically bought. It had been placed in the middle of her room. The Drake feathers were incredibly comfortable but

Ilea questioned the quality difference compared to something much much more affordable.

She couldn't say the same thing about the gourmet food Keyla managed to whip up but maybe there was no level 160 bedmaker out there. "How long until the next team fighting class starts?" she asked and her dagger answered. Ilea still wasn't sure if the times were made up or if the dagger somehow had an ability to know the exact time. The provided frames so far felt accurate enough to her so she decided to trust him.

"This other realm you spoke of. Is that where you're from?" Aki asked suddenly and Ilea was glad her eyes had been closed when the question came. She simply summoned her encyclopedia of monsters and started reading, completely ignoring the dagger's question.

The hours passed as Ilea first worked herself through a part of the monster encyclopedia and then read a part of a novel she had from Salia and to finish it off a book about natural wonders in Elos. Many of them seemed worth a trip at least and Ilea marked them as accurately as she could on her map. The book seemed old and the descriptions were scarce. The artists who had worked on it at least knew what they were doing, providing most of the reasons Ilea wanted to visit the sites. The bowls and plates of empty food next to Ilea's Drake bed spoke for themselves and were quickly put back into her necklace as soon as her time alone was coming to an end.

The bed followed and finally Aki was put into his sheath. The two walked out of her apartment and soon found themselves descending down towards the training area of Viscera. At least where the team fighting exercise of team 34 was supposed to be held.

Ilea walked through the corridor and quickly blinked inside the training hall they had been using the day before. "Heyo!" she shouted towards the people



already present. Everyone except Eve. Ilea wondered if the woman was perhaps still sleeping off the alcohol from the day before.

Kyrian nodded towards her, as did Claire. Trian didn't as much as turn towards her but Ilea was sure he was thrilled to see her. His outfit today was smashing again, putting everybody else to shame with their plain armor. This time it was white and red. Kyrian had the same armor on that he did the day before. Light black leather that looked easy to move in.

Claire had a mix of robes and armor. It looked heavier than what both Trian and Kyrian were wearing. Ilea wasn't sure this was their best equipment. With Trian at least she thought he had better gear stashed away. 'He does have a storage device...one of the few things we seem to have in common.' she thought as she joined the others.

Joseph was nowhere to be seen and the three people already present seemed to be unsure of how to proceed. "Should we start already? Me and Trian, Kyrian and Claire? Until the others join us?"

"Perfect, as much as you're irritating you at least get to the point." Trian said and teleported away, appearing and activating his skills. Ilea waved to the other two who seemed a little overwhelmed and blinked away as well, State of Azarinth and Form of Ember coming to life before a shroud of ash ensnared her.

Continuing where they left off, Ilea was the one attacking, ash surging in all directions around her as she tried to disturb his vision. The first bolts of red lightning landed around her as she ran through the mist of ash, a big grin on her face, her black hair pushed away by the explosions of stone around her.

# Chapter 89 Shields and Explosions

## Chapter 89 Shields and Explosions

It only took the span of ten minutes for both Joseph and Eve to arrive but Ilea was already so immersed in the fight, she only noticed them as potential dangers through her Sphere. Lightning roared on, piercing the ash surrounding the fighters, both of them vanishing and appearing, clashing and disengaging.

Joseph just let them fight and would include them in the plans for today's classes as soon as they would reach their first mana exhaustion. 'It's not them that I have to teach much either...' he thought and walked towards the fighting Kyrian and Claire, a much less explosive encounter. Dangerous mages nonetheless but he felt they were lacking the edge Ilea and Trian already possessed.

"You two, incorporate Eve in your fighting while I build today's training ground. Try to get moving a little more. Getting injured is fine, we have a healer." he exclaimed to the two, Eve joining them quickly.

His mana surged as he started molding the ground and walls of the training area, adding flair wherever he deemed necessary. Though nothing comparable to his work in Eregar's Haven.

Fifteen minutes later he was done and checked on the team. Ilea and Trian had apparently stopped and the woman was taking care of Eve who had been badly hit by an explosion. Though it was nothing life threatening. Not with a healer around.

“Alright people, same drill as yesterday. Today we’ll do Eve and Trian attacking Ilea for the first hour. Kyrian and Claire to me.”

So the first hour passed. Both Eve and Trian enhanced their attacking power while Ilea improved her ability to defend and resist said attacks. Kyrian and Claire worked together to figure out more efficient and tactical ways to use their abilities as Joseph felt their control was more important at the moment compared to raw power. Both Ilea and Trian had excellent control of their powers and were using them in efficient ways already. They also seemed like they could incorporate a new way of fighting while they were facing an opponent.

Eve on the other hand was the best by far when it came to using her skills. Joseph thought that while her brute force was low, the skill she showed in using her abilities was much higher than anybody else in the team. Higher even than his own but he knew little about mind magic. The girl had a calculative way and he didn’t dare face her if life was on the line. Not on a battlefield that was anything more complex than a simple field.

The second hour was spent with bouts. This time Trian learned that Kyrian’s metal wasn’t just that and though nobody seemed to notice but he didn’t taunt Ilea about her crying anymore. Ilea enjoyed watching the fight and already saw massive improvements in Kyrian’s fighting. The spheres of metal expanded into disks that would block incoming attacks.

Lightning strikes were deflected to the ground and walls around the hall as Trian grew frustrated with the efficient defense. Additionally he only had his agility to dodge the incoming projectiles that resembled a storm more than anything else at that point. It was inevitable that he would get hit at some point and while his draining abilities were useful, curses were something else entirely.

Trian was slowed down soon as more and more of his body was filled with the cold sensation of the curse. His abilities failed him as time went on and

Joseph quickly stopped the fight when Trian looked hungrily at Kyrian, knowing that what would've followed might've been difficult to heal. No matter who would have been at the receiving end.

Ilea pictured Trian teleporting into Kyrian's range and lightning expanding from his body while the spheres of metal expanded into the form of a morning star's end. Not a beautiful sight and likely not one Ilea could remedy with her healing ability. She was curious though and a small part of her urged the two to try, just to find out if she could still heal them. Hunter Recovery mentioned only her own body being healed from fatal wounds like that but perhaps there was a chance.

Ilea thought about the possibility of trying the ability in Riverwatch but the thought got her in a sour mood. A mood that would be helped by fighting against Claire. The second bout was called out by Joseph after he had talked to both Kyrian and Trian about their fight, possible changes in their skill usage and ways to improve. The man didn't seem like a dangerous warrior or mage to Ilea but if anything he was experienced.

What impressed Ilea the most was his ability to explain shortcomings in a way that not even the noble Trian was offended, though more and more Ilea felt the man was less the noble stereotype than he pretended to be.

"Now Ilea and Claire. Please don't use your full power from the start Ilea. Try to break through with reasonable power but let Claire use her skills as well. This is more about her than you. Do try to blink inside any barriers to test their making. Claire for you, try to hit her while defending. Use everything you have and good luck." Joseph finished and stepped aside.

Ilea felt a little bad about his portrayal of Claire's abilities but then again she did feel rather sure about winning, more so than against any of the other members of their team. Claire just seemed nonthreatening to her. She looked at Joseph who was watching from the side and perceived the smallest smirk on his lips. It clicked then and Ilea smiled as well.

'This is about Claire, not me...' she thought and moved into a much less aggressive stance. "Come on Claire. I'm gonna give you three free shots, not

like you can hurt me anyway.” Ilea said while imitating a yawn. The woman didn’t show much of a reaction so Ilea simply waited.

Claire looked to Joseph and the others for help but none of them reacted in any way. She looked towards Ilea with an unsure expression on her face before she threw a rune inscribed rock towards her. It landed a meter away from Ilea and exploded in a flash of fire and force.

The dust settled and Ilea hadn’t even moved a single step away. Her training armor was singed at the side and her face was reddened but after her healing was activated, it quickly returned to normal. She hadn’t even used her Shroud of Ash to reduce the damage.

“Claire.” Ilea started and paused, looking directly into the woman’s eyes. “This is child’s play. Have you reached level 200 with attacks like that? Attack me! You’ve seen me fight Trian, I can take it.”

Claire nodded and her expression turned serious. This time four stones landed next to Ilea and the woman in front of her started drawing runes into the air before her. More and more formed before they were moved together. A pulse of force reached Ilea and the four stones closed in on her, exploding when they reached her armor. Ilea activated her Shroud of Ash in the last moment which took the brunt of the attack.

Ilea stood and the blood dripping from her arm quickly came to a stop as the light burns were healed. Impressive power, especially considering her Heat Resistance. The force of the explosion had likely done the most damage though.

“Not bad, not bad. Not enough though. Claire you’re not a paid member?” Ilea asked and seeing no reaction continued. “Well if you manage to take more than fifty percent of my health with the last attack I’ll pay your share, how about that?” Ilea finished. The woman’s reaction was something quite different than what Ilea had anticipated.

Joseph watched from the side as Claire's jaw clenched upon hearing Ilea's suggestion. Her eyes turned cold as she advanced on the only present healer while throwing stones around her. They landed precisely where the rune mage wanted them and Joseph grew a little wary. 'Something's different...' he thought but didn't dare interfere. With the shown attacks there was no way Ilea would be hurt seriously.

"Don't patronize me." Claire's words were cold and calculated, different from her previous demeanor. Runes came to life in front of her as a dome of light formed around Ilea. Two seconds later the runes before Claire aligned and a pulse of mana reached the dome. The following explosion rattled the ground as the inside of the dome turned into fire.

Brighter and stronger than anything Claire had shown before, the explosion was followed by another one and then another. Five consecutive blasts followed, each of them stronger than the one before. Joseph only caught glimpses of a silhouette inside the dome, the only proof there was anything left inside. He doubted anybody else in the room could survive the attack but if anybody, then the tank. Otherwise this team's endeavors would end even earlier than his last.

He looked on as Claire's face turned from a cold mask to a horrified expression, her arms lifted up to her face as she realized what she'd done. She watched on as the fire continued to rage inside the dome, a tear running down her face as she mumbled something that Joseph couldn't hear.

A long minute passed as the storm of fire and light came to an end. The inside of the dome was still shrouded when a laugh suddenly filled the otherwise quiet hall. A hoarse and inhuman laugh but every passing second it turned more and more into a voice they recognized until finally, thirty seconds later it was obviously Ilea's laugh. She had survived.

"That's what I'm talking about!!" the shout came and then a dull slam made the shield dome quiver. Two more and the dome was cracking. Claire took two steps back and had to catch herself from falling down, tears now flowing down her face. Joseph wasn't sure anymore if they were out of terror or happiness.

The shield broke and Ilea stepped from the released steam, seemingly completely unharmed. Her armor was gone, the woman completely naked and with a big smile on her face. "That was good. You nearly killed me there Claire." Ilea said as she appeared next to the woman. "Warn me next time." she said and punched into Claire's stomach. Joseph saw no mana was used with the attack as the air left Claire's mouth and she sunk to the ground coughing.

Ilea stood there and put a hand on Claire's shoulder. "Eve would you be so kind to bring me some clothes? Trian is creeping me out." Ilea said without looking at any of them. Kyrian had been looking away but Trian was glaring at Ilea. Not with lust, Joseph thought but with intrigue perhaps?

Eve ran to the chests in the room and got Ilea some new clothes, running back to the bare woman.

'That was close...' Ilea thought as she received her new clothing from Eve. She was glad that likely nobody in the team had a perception ability like her own. At least she thought that was the case. She wasn't sure about Eve and Claire but the latter would likely not be in the same state had she an ability like that. Something about her remark for paying Claire's debt had unhinged the woman. Not in a bad way at all but more an unexpected one.

The power in her attack had been something completely different. Stronger even than Trian's lightning, condensed inside the sphere and ongoing for over thirty seconds. Ilea's perception had slowed down, triggering the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of Azarinth Perception for the first time in a while. She had summoned her Juggernaut armor and had crouched down with all her defensive skills at the maximum.

The explosion still took over fifty percent of her health. A testament to the armor's quality but also to the attack's power, considering it would've taken

75% or more of her health according to the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of Azarinth Perception. She had gained *Blast Resistance* in the process as well and leveled it to four already. A nice addition. Hunter Recovery proved invaluable as well as it healed her whole body in moments while the steam around her was still hot enough to boil anything inside alive. Heat Resistance had leveled as well.

“Remind me not to talk about money with you.” Ilea whispered to the still crouched and coughing Claire. She wouldn’t heal her. Nothing should be able to taunt one enough to suddenly go for a sure killing blow on a team mate. Although she had to cut Claire some slack, Ilea was definitely asking for it. She got what she wanted and she was still alive. It proved to her again that her power wasn’t adequate. She needed this team and the training with them if she planned to face enemies at their level or higher. Unexpected attacks were the norm in the wild after all.

“I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!” Claire got up as soon as the coughing stopped and jumped Ilea, hugging the woman tightly. Ilea patted her on her back and then firmly removed her from her own person.

“Let me get some clothes on first.” she said as she put on the clothes and leather armor she had gotten from Eve. She had decided not to reveal her storage item just yet and the reactions from both Kyrian and Trian were certainly worth it. Though again it seemed the noble was less interested in the obvious. Kyrian was plain cute though and she couldn’t help but wonder if he had ever seen a woman naked.

“Impressive, I accept you as the group’s tank.” Trian was surprisingly the first to talk after the whole ordeal.

“That would’ve killed me three times over...” Eve said from the side and then hugged Ilea tightly.

‘What’s with the hugging today...’ Ilea thought and just let it happen. The women both felt nice at least but she wasn’t quite in the mood after that fight.

“I think that concludes the bouts for today. Ilea and Trian, you can go on of course. The rest will be inside the prepared area again. Claire, that was impressive. Do warn your teammates before though. I’ve seen level 200



tanks die to less powerful attacks.” he said and looked at Ilea a little intrigued.

“I’ll be on the offensive.” Ilea stated to Trian who just nodded and started attacking her again, resuming their bout. They were already at a point where either noticed the other one improving ever so slightly.

Claire paused for a while but joined Eve and Kyrian’s fighting a while later, each of them trying new ways to get to the others. Joseph looked on from the side and allowed himself to smile a little. ‘I got lucky...’

Before the team tactics lesson started, Ilea asked Trian to continue their training later in the day. The man just chuckled at her though.

“You already crave me so much you want to see me after the classes? Oh honey. I’m afraid that won’t happen though. I have important meetings to attend you see.” he stated and shook his head.

Ilea wasn’t convinced though. The man seemed more sincere when he was actually fighting. It looked to her like he was acting and saying recited lines his noble status brought with it. Perhaps it was only a small hope inside of her, telling her that he wasn’t as bad as he seemed. The feeling was definitely cause by their fights and a weird connection she was forming with him through that. Nothing she had experienced ever before. Then again she has never trained with someone using fatal attacks.

Even while kick-boxing she mostly just trained alone and used it more as a way to let off some steam. All she could say was that she was glad that they were training together, or rather against each other. The intent to kill was still there even though they stopped themselves in the last moments, at least so far.

Trian left soon after Joseph had ended the lesson, leaving the four of them to the team tactics lesson with Claire. She was still a little shaken from her nearly murder of Ilea but still managed to give the rest of the team some valuable information. The class still only consisted of theory but today she went into more detail for the different roles people could have in a team and how they applied to their team's members.

All of them weren't as one sided as lower leveled guards or military squads for example. Adventurers were usually more creative with their skill usage as they had to fight stronger or specialized monsters more often. The members of team 34 all survived so far, most of them alone and all had the capacity to kill and maim while sporting an impressive defense or evading ability. Of course Ilea could tank more direct damage than Eve but she was certainly good at vanishing from her enemy's sight.

The conclusion of Claire was that with their team they could maneuver more freely and could implement tactics according to the enemy's abilities and numbers. A more traditional approach with Ilea tanking damage while Kyrian and Claire would be supporting, leaving Eve and Trian to destroy the opponents was certainly a possibility and sometimes even the favorable approach but with their diversity of abilities many more constellations were possible.

They went to the monster knowledge class with newfound confidence in their team and started learning about unknown dangers waiting for them in the wild of Elos.

# Chapter 90 Picnic

## Chapter 90 Picnic

*The Tremorling is a dangerous foe. Their earth magic combined with excellent perception lets them set up traps to lure and catch any wandering adventurer. The low level is deceiving as they are proven to chose the lowest leveled and youngest members of their tribe to lure any prey towards their traps. Usually Tremorlings reside inside caves or near mountains but rare occasions have been reported of them appearing in forests as well, using the trees and bushes as extensions of their devious traps.*

The picture of the beast looked incredibly cute to Ilea, ignoring their hands instead of paws. ‘Like a small puppy but with thumbs.’ she thought as she listened to Liam talk about the beast and possible ways to approach them. The first suggestions was not to. They were found to kill beings and monsters a hundred or more levels above them. A collapsing tunnel was quite deadly to a mage after all, no matter how strong their ice powers were.

Ilea smiles as none of the monsters so far seemed to pose a massive threat to her. She would likely be able to get away from nearly all of them. Killing the monsters was a completely different story though as many of them had specialized abilities to deal with her sort of attacks. Her high level would help of course but then again they were talking about common and known monsters, not about the ones that would be able to easily kill a level 200 human.

They covered only two monsters in the hour long class but Ilea tried to internalize the knowledge as best as possible. She found herself very interested in the topic which helped tremendously. Eve seemed to be half asleep and Kyrian had a hard time remembering the names and abilities when they quickly recapped the monsters from yesterday's class.

Claire of course knew a lot about them already and could answer all questions even for the new monsters they were discussing. Being the team tactics teacher and likely the one calling the shots when the team would actually face one of the enemies, Ilea found it comforting.

The class ended soon and Liam excused himself quickly, leaving in a hurry. As everyone was getting up, Ilea proposed the same thing she had tried to convince Trian of.

“Would any of you like to continue the training, bouts and attacks you can try on me? I don't need a lot of sleep and while I'm here it seems like a good way to spend the time.”

Kyrian nodded “I'm t...training in the wood where you found me yesterday for most of the time. You can join if you like.” he told her.

“Maybe but I'm rather busy. I'll come join you sometimes I guess.” Eve said. Both Kyrian and Ilea looked towards Claire then.

“I... I've been training alone usually...” she scratched the back of her head and looked to the floor.

“Perfect, I assume you won't argue about the efficiency. Except of course you were killing things to level up?” Ilea asked. Claire shook her head though and then looked at Ilea, her eyes brightening.

“Maybe we can get an area in Eregar's Haven...but we'd need the whole team for that I think. We're the lowest ranked after all.” she said and put her

hand to her chin.

“What the hell’s Eregar’s Haven? And what do you mean lowest ranked? What would the impact of that be?” Ilea asked.

“It’s a place below Viscera. I’ve not been there but I hear it’s massive. A magically constructed landscape all the elders and many members of the Hand have been working on for centuries. Eregar was one of the first Elders of the order and expanded the cave system to start the whole thing. Beasts were brought down and whole ecosystems grew. I assume we’ll be seeing some of the monsters in our monster knowledge class at some point.” Claire explained while everyone else listened.

“People are not just let down there. We need to have permission from the team fighting teacher and with our low rank we also have to go there as a whole team. I think top 20 can go inside with two people and top ten can go in individually, though I don’t know how helpful that might be.” she explained.

“What stops someone from just killing everything down there? The monsters I mean.” Eve asked.

“Well they are all lower than level 200. It wouldn’t be worth anyone’s time. I have a theory that the level 200 requirement is there in big part because of Eregar’s Haven. The Elders really want to keep it the way it is.” Claire explained.

“What’s the benefit though, we can just train outside can’t we?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t know to be honest. The tournaments are down there at least.” Claire said.

“Maybe it’s just very beautiful?” Eve asked.

“T..tournaments?” Kyrian interjected.

“Yes, it’s a part of the rankings. Finished jobs and the power of killed beings is the biggest part but bouts against other teams and their members help as

well. It can get very messy though that's why they're only held every three months or so. Many teams aren't even there and even fewer participate but it is a good way to see people on our level fight. All teams that are in Viscera come to see the fights at least." Claire went on. "Usually the new teams don't join because they have to show off their abilities, not something easily shared. Killings among the hand have been relatively rare though, that's why the tournaments are still there."

"Oh and of course you can challenge anybody in the Haven at all times. It has no impact on the rankings and everybody can refuse but it's an easy way to fight people on your level without them killing you. At least that isn't allowed." Claire finished.

"So that's the middle elevator?" Ilea asked and Claire nodded.

"Yes, exactly. Though as I said new teams aren't allowed to go down there except all members are present. And don't look at me like that, don't break that rule. We'd be expelled. Do you really want to lose a hundred gold coins just to go where you could go anyway? We just have to convince Trian to join us." Claire said.

"Alright alright, I won't go. If Eve promises the same..." Ilea said and looked at the woman. A smile was on her face but she sighed theatrically.

"Oooookay, I won't sneak in either. Maybe I have already though..." she said but Ilea was sure she hadn't. Eve likely wouldn't have been able to not say anything about its beauty. No matter how nice it actually looked.

"Forest today then? I'll ask Trian about the Haven tomorrow. And we need permission from Joseph." Ilea said and the others nodded.

"When should we meet there?" Kyrian asked.

"Now? Let's get some food first though, I'm starving." Ilea said.

"I'll join later as mentioned." Eve said. "But I know where you are so it's fine. See ya." she said and vanished from Ilea's Sphere. She saw Eve smile at her as Ilea struggled to perceive the woman. There was still a weird

distortion in her perception but it was less noticeable than it had been the day before.

‘You little shit...’ she thought but couldn’t help smile. That would be the woman sneaking into enemy strongholds and unknown monster infested places for the team after all.

“Let’s go then.” Ilea said to the two others who followed in silence. She would wait with revealing either her storage necklace or Aki to them for a while. It wasn’t easy for Ilea to try and not trust them already. Her life on earth had schooled her that most people were somewhat trustworthy, as long as they weren’t salespeople. Of course there would be gossip and possible bullying but there was nobody trying to kill her because she owned a new computer or was looking for someone. At least not in her circles. Life in Elos was different and Ilea slowly learned that if she wanted to stay alive, she had to be more careful about what she shared with people.

The three found themselves in the forest just thirty minutes later, with a basket of hot food and drinks. Both kept at the perfect temperature thanks to some of Claire’s runes. ‘She really is helpful for a nice pick nick.’ Ilea thought as she unpacked the food and sat down on the snowy ground. The others followed suit, sitting down as well.

“We should bring chairs or at least a blanket next time.” Claire commented, getting an approving grunt from Ilea. Kyrian didn’t seem to care either way and started eating his food happily. Claire had insisted on paying her own part but Ilea decided not to talk about it. It seemed like a rather delicate topic to the woman.

“So you two have been training alone the past days? What else do you do in your spare time?” she asked and started eating as well. “I read mostly and

find new places to eat at.” she said after the others had stayed quiet for a while.

“I...c...I like cooking.” Kyrian said quietly, looking down at his food.

“That’s cool, do you wanna cook for us at some point? I can get you the ingredients.” Ilea said and looked away when the man stared at her and she saw fresh life come to his gray eyes. ‘Careful Ilea, don’t fall for the guy just yet...’ she thought.

“I would love to, y...yes.” Kyrian said. Claire didn’t comment on anything and neither shared any of her spare time activities with the others but Ilea didn’t mind. The two were rather quiet and she liked that. It didn’t feel like a chore to stay with them. They started their training a while later, having eaten their fill.

“How do you want to do it?” Kyrian asked, looking at Ilea with a bit of a worried expression. She wanted him to curse her. To try and face her fear of his ability. It was the obvious step for her and the first one she wanted to work on with the two.

“You had a field of runes or something last time I came here... can you do that? I can step in and out at my own consideration.” Ilea explained and Kyrian nodded. Both Claire and Ilea watched him work then, using a wooden stick to draw in the snow and dirt below. A beautiful runic formation that even Claire seemed impressed by.

“Can you do that as well?” Ilea asked the other woman while watching Kyrian move his stick around with skillful motions.

“No, curse runes elude me. I’m sure I’d manage at some point but I don’t see it being worth the effort. Understanding and using a rune is much more difficult than simply being able to draw it. Ones mana has to resonate at least to an extent and only rare rune mages can use something as exotic as curses while still being able to use fire or barrier runes.” Claire answered.

“I’m glad I don’t have to think that much about my abilities...” Ilea said and clenched her fist, getting a chuckle from the woman next to her.



“You seem more the type, yes, I have to say though that your instincts and speed at which you use your skills is very impressive. Stats help of course but you’re born for your classes.” Claire said, making Ilea smile.

“Thank you.” she said when Kyrian stopped his drawing and Ilea’s stomach dropped as an eerie feeling filled their surroundings. His mana flowed into the rune on the ground and he looked up to the others with sweat on his brow.

“Step in and out. I made it so the effect gets stronger the closer t... to the center. Tell me if I have to stop the effects.” he said and then nodded to Clarie as Ilea gulped. “We can do the same as earlier today, ok?” he asked and Claire nodded happily, walking far enough away with him so they wouldn’t disturb his drawn runes.

‘Alright, here goes nothing...’ Ilea thought and took a step into the circle. Immediately the cold and familiar feeling filled her stomach as her body started to feel wrong. Everything started to feel wrong and she found herself clenching her teeth and hands enough to break the skin with her nails. Ilea persevered and closed her eyes, steadying her breathing. It was hard, one of the hardest things Ilea had ever done.

It was harder than killing her first drake, harder than the first date she went to and harder even than killing her first human. The weird pain and coldness throbbed through her in waves and it didn’t get any easier as time went on. Only the sudden notice in her head made the ordeal a little easier.

*‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches lvl 5’*

She had decided not to use her shroud to intensify the curse’s effect on her. With the level up she took an ever so slight step further into the circle to get to the same level of intensity she had been before. To distract herself she used Ash Surge and tried to manipulate the ash around her. The curse certainly didn’t help but she found that concentrating on the ash made it easier to bear.

Ilea became one with the curse and ash as a slight whirl of the gray and black particles around her started to form. Time passed and only a sudden absence of wrongness got Ilea out of her reverie. “W...what..” she exclaimed and

found herself looking straight into Kyrian's worried eyes. The ash around her fell down in that moment, tainting the snow in a dark gray color.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Too close..." Ilea pushed him away a little and breathed out. She looked down at her hands and found them bleeding. The ground was soaked in her blood that had formed a trail from the outer part of the circle up to nearly halfway towards the center. "I'm fine." she said.

"Alright, we wanted to switch it up for a while. It's been three hours you know?" Kyrian asked.

"Three...oh well. Yea, what did you have in mind?" Ilea asked.

"Eve joined a couple minutes ago so we'll figure something out. Maybe C... Claire has an idea or two." he said and held out his hand to her.

"I said I'm fine." Ilea said and walked by him, stopping next to the man. "Thanks for the circle. I'll need that again tomorrow."

"Sure." Kyrian said, watching her back. "It helps me too you know." he said quietly and followed.

Claire was already discussing possible trainings for them with Eve when the others joined and immediately included Ilea in the discussion.

"So seeing as we're in a forest I thought we should work on our perception skills. In the training sessions and if you guys want to after, we can work enough on using our attack and defense skills but as you all know we need more than just that to survive in the wild. At least when we encounter things that could easily kill or maim us." she explained and Ilea sat down on a tree trunk that was lying nearby, wringing her already healed hands while listening.

"What I had in mind was somebody plays the hunter and the rest hide and try to make themselves invisible. Eve will probably be the best at that anyway

but the rest of us have to get to some level as well. Does anybody not have any hiding skills?"

Ilea wanted to answer but her Body Heat Manipulation skill was a sort of hiding skill but she certainly preferred fleeing if at all possible. She was certainly better at that.

"So everyone has something at least. Good. Now the trickier question thing, who is good at locating people?" Eve immediately looked towards Ilea and smiled as soon as Claire asked the question, giving the rune mage her answer.

"She can see me completely concealed. Nothing easy to accomplish." Eve said.

"I'm good at finding people. So I'll play the huntress." Ilea said and couldn't help but smirk a little at the prospect.

"Good, then let's do that for now. We'll hide while you wait here. Seeing your speed I think the forest seems like a good area limitation. Can you find people with tracks or smell as well? Otherwise it might be better to just hide in a hundred meter radius." Claire said and looked towards Ilea with a questioning look on her face.

"The forest is fine. I can fly as well so that's good. And I won't reveal my skills so easily." Ilea said and smiled, while she motioned for them to start. "I'll count to one hundred. One... two... three..." she started and closed her eyes, seeing the others through her sphere which she refused to deactivate. Knowing the first thirty meters wouldn't help much and monsters would cheat as well. She smiled while counting, remembering her youth. Memories flashed through her and the desire to visit her designated Blink destination made itself noticeable.

'Soon.' she thought and opened her eyes, the blue shine in her eyes playful yet calculating. Hunter's Sight activated as she looked around and took in her surroundings with all her enhanced senses.

"one hundred... enhanced human magical hide and seek... Here I come!"

# Chapter 91 Hide and Seek

## Chapter 91 Hide and Seek

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ Ilea thought as she ran through the forest, following the obvious tracks in the snow and smelling the air around her. Her eyes let her follow the trail much faster than the smell did but she wanted to have at least another reassurance that she was on the right track. Her buffs were all active except for her shroud and she continuously tried to manipulate the ash around her from the occasionally used Ash Surge.

With her speed it was pretty hard to keep anything with her but Ilea’s control has certainly improved over the past couple days. ‘Some dedicated skill training was certainly necessary...’ she thought but didn’t really blame herself as her ridiculous leveling speed was sort of pushed on her by circumstance. The opportunities she had in the Taleen Dungeon would’ve been wasted if she went away to train her skills, even though it might’ve meant a better class advancement.

Levels were still levels and she still had a couple levels to go until she would reach the threshold for Ash Wielder at level 200. Ilea suddenly stopped as the tracks had come to an end and looked up. ‘At least he’s thinking a little bit...’ she thought and jumped up the tree Kyrian had obviously used to continue on his way.

Ilea’s speed slowed down a little as she had to identify Kyrian’s impact on the trees he had used to travel. Several other trees were marked by his metal attacks but her Hunter’s Sight could tell the difference. Surprisingly easy too.

‘Years and years of training to become a tracker were simply gifted to me as soon as I received this skill...’ she thought and shook her head to focus on the imminent.

“Hey.” she exclaimed, appearing on the tree next to Kyrrian. He tensed up a little but relaxed quickly upon seeing her.

“Already...it’s been like two minutes...” he said, obviously disappointed.

“You left tracks in the snow. A child could follow that. Distort them or make other ones like you did with the tree branches. The best way would be to fly. No actual concealment skills?” Ilea asked.

“I have some ideas. Thanks for the tips. I’ll wait at the start.” Ilea nodded to his answer and flew back to the beginning, picking up another scent. There was a third one around that definitely belonged to Eve but it didn’t lead anywhere.

‘Easy one’s first, then they can train together...’ she thought and followed the trail of Claire. Two hundred meters into her search, she held her nose together suddenly and reduced her sense of smell as much as possible through the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage of her Sphere.

‘Clever...’ she thought and saw the runes carved into the trees and ground around her. Somehow Claire had created an area where scents were overwhelming Ilea. There were so many and they were so strong Ilea thought herself to be a dog trapped in the perfume department of a shopping mall.

‘I won’t destroy the runes. Let’s try another way then...’ she thought. There were no tracks in the snow or on the trees so Claire had used some form of flight or teleportation. Nothing she had used in their trainings before for sure. ‘She does have some control over wind magic at least...’

Ilea walked around the area and five minutes later found something peculiar in her sphere. It looked similar to when Eve had vanished. There was a spherical part of the world missing. And of course instead of a mini black hole, it was Claire. Curled up and surrounded by runes covering the tree and ground where she crouched, Ilea walked up to her.

“The smell distortion was great. I think most not so intelligent monsters with a keen sense of smell will fall for that. And were it not for my perception, the hideout would’ve been perfect. I mean if you were invisible to the eye as well.” Ilea said as the runes stopped their work and Claire got up.

“It’s the best I can do without the magic of the runes becoming too much to feel. A good balance is difficult. Congratulations on finding me, you’re the first actually.” Claire said and Ilea felt there was a bit of pride in the compliment.

“Having such a capable tracker in our team will be invaluable.” Claire looked around “Anybody else found already?”

“Kyrian is waiting at the beginning. I’ll go find Eve, don’t wait on us.” Ilea said and flew back to the start.

“Back already, found Claire then?” Kyrian asked and was answered with a confirming nod.

“She’ll be back soon...now...” Ilea said and concentrated on her surroundings.

‘The smell just...stops existing...’ she tried to find the exact place where the smell stopped. There were no tracks in the snow nor on the trees. Everything looked completely undisturbed. She would swear there were four people here and one vanished with some sort of teleportation skill.

‘She really is amazing...’ Ilea thought and focused on the smell or more the absence of it. Eve had some sort of ability to change the world around her, to make scent appear where there was none but she wasn’t perfect. Ilea’s Hunter skill was incredibly advanced and could detect even the smallest differences in the scents around her. Something felt off about the smell of wood in one specific direction so Ilea followed that.

Five steps later though she lost it again. ‘I have no idea where she is.’ she thought and checked around the starting area for the next thirty minutes. Her Hunter’s Sight advanced a couple times during that so she was sure she was doing, well something but at that point Eve never existed, at least that was

what Ilea's senses were telling her. Claire and Kyrian had started a movement exercise where they tried to tag each other. Really all playground games would be represented in their training, or so Ilea thought at least.

"I think this is enough." the sudden and close voice of Eve ripped Ilea out of her concentration. The girl stepped out from her hiding spot on a tree. Only Ilea's eyes and ears let her believe she was there.

"You're invisible." she said in both amazement and respect. Someone like that could sneak up on her, even with all her spells active.

"Not quite, look again." Eve said and jumped down from the tree, landing and walking towards Ilea. The familiar disturbance of the air and scents around Eve were recognizable to Ilea instantly. It was still hard to see but there was something, something disturbing their surrounding.

"You see it don't you. I simply cannot control everything around me while I move. There is too much change going on. The pressure on the snow and ground, the airflow around me, my scent mixing with the surrounding scent. I was lucky you didn't just look up to me." Eve said but it certainly wasn't an efficient way to look considering there were thousands of trees in the surrounding forest. She couldn't have known Eve was so close.

"You're incredibly good though. Is there a way for you to turn invisible to the eye as well?" Ilea asked but Eve shook her head.

"Not yet at least but the mirages certainly help." she answered.

"The leveling was good, not for you?" Ilea asked.

"Oh no it's phenomenal, the concentration and combinations of skills I have to use to hide from you are great for getting the skills higher. I simply ran out of mana up there. You would've noticed me in the next five minutes." she said and Ilea counted that as a win.

"What about meditation? I can keep the rest up with the skill activated if I don't move too fast." Ilea asked.

“I did keep it up.” she smiled and Ilea realized just how much mana the hiding skills of Eve demanded. The sweat on her face and her stressed breathing didn’t help either. At least it looked like that to Ilea as she was still hiding from her Sphere.

‘She’s beautiful...’ the random thought came to her head as she looked at the reddened cheeks of Eve and her brown eyes that held a tinge of green. ‘I’ll find out at some point...’ Ilea thought and looked to Kyrian and Claire.

“What do you want to do? I don’t think I’d be much of a help if we do the same as them.” Eve commented and Ilea had to agree. As well as Eve could hide, she was no match for Ilea’s speed and maneuverability.

“I don’t know. Mental Resistance?” Ilea asked.

“Sure, give me a couple minutes to get my mana back and we can start.” she answered.

“Can you turn it down Eve? We’re done and wanted to try something else.” Claire commented on the humming coming from the mind mage. Eve stopped immediately and looked towards Claire, both her own face and Ilea’s softening at the released strain.

“Ilea can we just join her and attack you? I wanted to try some things.” Claire asked and looked down on the ground, likely because of her earlier near murder of her teammate.

“Sure. I’ll stay here.” Ilea said and nodded to Kyrian as well who looked at her with a question on his face. Her Shroud of Ash came alive as her three teammates distanced themselves from each other to not get into one another’s ways. The humming started again and cursed needles soon joined the attack. Kyrian seemed to try and move them in the air. He was already progressing quite a bit from just the last day.



Ilea used her Ash Surge again and made the particles move around her. Whenever an attack from either Kyrian or Claire disturbed it, new ash would be produced. All of them seemed to work on their manipulation and clever usage of skills and not on pure power alone. This and the lack of movement made it possible for all of them to use Meditation while they trained and made pauses obsolete. At least for a while.

“How long do you guys need to sleep?” Ilea asked after a couple hours of this.

“Three or four hours is enough for me. I have ways to ignore it for a couple d... days if necessary.” Kyrian said.

“Around two hours. Every four days or so I need more, around six or seven.” Claire said. They looked towards Eve but she didn’t answer and just continued her humming. Ilea looked towards Claire and shook her head before shrugging.

“So we’re all fine to continue then. Want to grab some food soon?” she asked, looking at the setting sun. “Of course everyone should just leave if they don’t want to continue.”

“I’ll join you for dinner then but afterwards I’ll be off.” Eve said, breaking her previous silence.

“Sure. Same place as yesterday?” Ilea asked.

“M...maybe something c...cheaper.” Kyrian said and looked at her with intense eyes.

“Wh...ah...yes, sure. Anything you have in mind?” Ilea asked the man who nodded, glad she had understood.

“Y...yes, I do. It’s nice.” Kyrian said.

“As long as there’s food of any kind I’m fine. Wanna go now?” Ilea asked.

“Sure.” Claire said and the others seemed alright with the idea as well.

Eve excused herself right after finishing her meal. Ilea noticed that she had already consumed a high amount of alcohol before leaving but decided not to pry.

“I’ll have to do some things as well, do you want to meet up again later so we can train some more?” Claire asked, in a careful but excited tone.

“That’s perfect for me. An hour or two?” Ilea said.

“One is fine for me, how about you?” Claire answered.

Ilea nodded and looked towards Kyrian. “I’ll be waiting in the forest. Same place.” he said. The three paid for their food and left the small restaurant behind, going their separate ways while seeing each other off.

“That’s impressive. Thanks again for the deal.” Ilea said and made the prepared food vanish.

“I honestly wasn’t sure if you’d come today. Would’ve been a bloody waste of food.” Keyla said while drying her hands with a towel.

“Why’d you think that, and what do I owe you?” Ilea asked.

“Dunno, you seem like the kind of woman who suddenly vanishes for a month after making a weird deal with a cook. That’s two gold coins worth. Not sure about the advance you already paid though.” Keyla said.

“Keep it, here you go.” Ilea said and summoned two gold coins. “If that ever happens give the food away, it’s too delicious to waste.” she said it in a serious tone and got a nod from the cook, not one to antagonize a crazed warrior with an unknown level.

“I’ll be back tomorrow then if that’s alright?” Ilea asked.

“Sure, the place is pretty slow most of the time.” Keyla said. Ilea smiled and waved towards the woman before blinking away with her treasure safely stored away in her necklace.

Blinking upwards again, Ilea found herself on top of the restaurant favored by Eve and finally checked the notifications she had gotten during the day’s trainings.

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Perception reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14’*

*‘ding’ ‘Mental Resistance reaches lvl 14’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Mental Resistance reaches lvl 16’*

*‘ding’ ‘Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 13’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 15’*

*‘ding’ ‘Heat Resistance reaches lvl 18’*

*‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches lvl 6’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches lvl 8’*

*‘ding’ ‘Shroud of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5’*

*‘ding’ ‘Shroud of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6’*

*‘ding’ ‘Form of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Surge reaches lvl 15’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Surge reaches lvl 18’*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches lvl 17'*

...

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches lvl 4'*

...

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Ash Wielder has reached level 195, 5 Stat points awarded.'*

*'ding' 'You have learned the General skill Blast Resistance – lvl 1 Explosions can be an unpredictable and chaotic thing. You have survived quite an impressive one to get this skill. It will help you negate the damage ever so slightly for the next time you chose to stand in one.'*

*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches lvl 2'*

...

*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches lvl 4'*

It impressed Ilea again how fruitful a single dedicated day of training could be if she had people to work with. At least speaking for her defensive capabilities. 'I'm probably the one profiting the most as well, seeing how two to four people usually focus their attacks on me. More resistances and skills to train for me there...' she thought. 'I'll have to find someone to train my offensive abilities on as well though.'

Ilea didn't go for her room or towards the forest then but decided to fly out of the city and a little around the mountain. Some overzealous guards tried to shoot arrows at her but she simply ignored it. None of their attacks even managed to reach her after all. Clouds had taken over the evening sky and a light snowfall started to cover again what had been revealed by the sun or sentient activity throughout the day.

Ilea found a spot between some high rocks and checked her surroundings for a couple minutes. ‘Let’s see what happens then...’ she thought and mentally activated the 3<sup>rd</sup> stage of Blink. Ilea gasped as the mana started flowing out of her. She knew instinctively that she could stop the skill at any time but decided to go for it. Steadily her mana left her as the blue runes on her body intensified with light, shining even partially through the clothes not covered by her leather armor. Compared to the quick escape she had hoped for, the spell took a total of thirty minutes to activate. Ilea vanished just like when she blinked normally and appeared on the cliff above the ocean, exactly where she had set her 3<sup>rd</sup> stage marker.

“Awesome...” she whispered and touched the ground below her. A growl could be heard from near the cave entrance but the tiger quickly quieted down again once it realized who the visitor was. ‘So I can come here from wherever? And it takes half an hour and over half my mana... including mana regenerated. I should use Meditation next time while the spell channels.’

The view comforted her as it did before. The suns were nowhere to be seen but without the high amount of light pollution she was used to on earth, the stars illuminated the ocean in a spectacle of nature. She walked towards the ocean and sat down with her legs hanging over the cliff side. It felt like her whole being was calming down slowly.

‘I could just stay here and live off the gold I’ve already found...’ she thought and smiled. It wasn’t the idea that came to her mind but the simple fact that she was free to choose what to do that garnered that reaction. Ilea liked the new team of mercenaries she had found herself in and she enjoyed the trainings as well, including the change of pace they brought with them. It wasn’t as exciting as exploring the Taleen Dungeon had been but they would get to that again soon enough.

For now Ilea was content to level her skills and specifically her survivability before advancing in level again and exploring the world. Finding Keyla had been a blessing as well and she summoned one of the meals prepared by the woman to enjoy it combined with the marvelous view, thankful that she had stumbled upon the Azarinth temple what felt like so long ago.

# Chapter 92 Vampire?

## Chapter 92 Vampire?

Ilea flew back and landed in the forest again after the hour of pause had come to an end. Kyrian had already been waiting and practicing his curse runes.

“Can you draw those wherever you want? Or does it have to be on the ground?” Ilea asked after she landed, her wings disintegrating next to her back, coloring the snow on the ground a light gray.

“Doesn’t matter where but for the big one I need a... a somewhat flat surface, otherwise it doesn’t work.” the man responded.

The two decided to work on both movement and Ilea’s defense as Kyrian tried to attack her while she tried to catch him. With his defenses up it wasn’t easy for her to simply approach the man but she still held back a little on her speed. He wasn’t quite as fast as she and Trian.

Claire arrived around ten minutes later and joined in. They decided on doing the same as Ilea had been doing with Kyrian, just with Claire joining the man’s team. It got much harder for Ilea to stay on the offensive but with her blinking and Sphere she managed to avoid most attacks while getting behind and around the two people.

The training was fruitful and both Ilea and the others got better at battling the other. She found them to be adequate at defense but didn’t know how they would deal with Trian for example. One could say what one wanted about

the man but he certainly had power to his lightning and the mobility to get around enemies.

The three trained deep into the night and only stopped if someone was out of mana or needed to eat or relieve themselves. With them being three people there was somebody fighting at most times. They did decide to eat together.

When the sun began rising Claire and Kyrian decided to go back and catch some sleep. They needed a little more than Ilea but it was still something quite unnatural to the earthen born woman who was used to get a solid twelve hours of sleep.

A couple hours of sleep later and a quick assessment of their training by Aki, Ilea found herself back in the training hall and ready to smash some vampire. Her wish was granted of course and the training resumed as it had the past two days before.

This time after the monster knowledge lesson Ilea decided to go find Trian and ask him about joining them to enter Eregar's Haven.

"You think you can find him?" Claire asked, seemingly a little unsure.

"Yea, he's very confident in his abilities so I doubt he will conceal himself a lot. Let's see what important meetings he has to attend to." Ilea said and waved to the others before blinking out of the room.

Going back to the training hall she activated Hunter's Sight and checked around. His smell was easy enough to identify and she quickly followed the trail. It led out of Viscera and into Ravenhall. Ilea quickly found herself in what she identified as the noble section of the city and her trail led towards one of the bigger houses.

Apparently the city didn't allow the nobles to get a lot of space as the luxurious looking stone structures were still placed in close proximity to each other. Ilea blinked inside the one Trian's trail led to and found herself inside a beautifully furnished room. Comparable to the Forkspear estate in Dawntree, there were paintings on the walls and a hearth burning near one of the walls.

Parts of the room were colored in red and contrary to the stony exterior, everything inside was covered in wood. The smell was especially nice to Ilea's enhanced senses as she took everything in. Someone was approaching the door to the room so Ilea blinked below. Her sphere told her little and so she blinked deeper, there seemed to be an extensive amount of levels going into the ground.

Soon she found a trail again but it was isolated and weak. 'He probably teleported down here as well...' she thought, finding it to be the only explanation for the sudden disappearance of his smell.

A couple levels further down she finally found what she had been looking for. And it was certainly not an important noble meeting. Admittedly it wasn't an orgy or blood sacrifice either, something one would expect from a noble man being somewhat of a vampire.

No, it was something quite simple and something Ilea had somewhat expected as well. Trian was working on his skills. In an expensive and very noble way. Ilea whiled above the room he was in and through her Sphere perceived him and his assistants.

Trian was standing in the middle of the room and drained ten people around him, occasionally pausing for them to be healed. Considering the pain on their faces Ilea thought he was alternating between mana and health draining. 'Quite efficient, quite evil as well.' she thought but decided to keep watching for a while. Judging too fast can lead to misunderstandings. So far nobody had died at least. And it wasn't like Ilea really knew any of the people there. What if it were simply a job someone could take. She doubted it of course but attacking one of her to be teammates wasn't something easily done.



Especially not considering his abilities. The session continued for quite a while until one of the people collapsed on the ground. It wasn't one of the people being drained but one of the healers.

"Is she alright?" Trian immediately asked as another healer went to check the woman.

"Yea, just needs a while to recover some mana. She'll be fine." the man who checked on her said.

"Good, bring her to a bed and then we'll continue. A couple minutes pause." Trian said, using a towel that appeared in his hand to brush away the sweat on his brow.

Ilea decided it was a good time to go and say hello and blinked downwards.

"Hello there." she exclaimed and everyone in the room tensed up as magic flared and weapons were drawn. The only one who stayed calm was Trian himself and he quickly motioned for everybody to calm down.

"Ilea. Well I did kind of except for somebody to invade my privacy at one point or another. Didn't think it would be you. Missed my amazing looks so much?" he said and smirked towards her.

"No, you're the opposite of my type Trian I'm really sorry." Ilea said and started walking around the room. The other people were focused on her but seemed to have calmed down at them apparently knowing each other.

"It's just that you have a perfectly fine tank ready to level her Resistances and you chose to stay in your basement with your slaves..." Ilea said, checking everyone's reactions but most of them just looked to Trian. Some few seemed angry at her exclamation.

"They aren't slaves. The resistances and available healers aren't something easily gotten and you're not the only one looking for them. Everyone please give us some privacy." he gestured for them to leave and so they did.

“So employees?” Ilea asked, walking around the room and picking up a staff from a weapon rack.

“They’re people employed by my house. Not cheap but it’s efficient. Having more than one target is better for the specific skills. That’s why I’m doing this and not you.” Ilea was aware of the innuendo but decided to ignore it while she twirled around her newfound staff.

“Don’t tell me you would’ve actually attacked me if they were slaves?” he asked and interpreted her silence as a yes.

“Hahahahaha. Well look at you. A righteous hero aren’t we. Are you going to declare war on at least three human kingdoms then? Last I heard they allow slavery... at least to an extent.” Ilea knew he was just provoking her.

“Trian I’m aware that I’m not going to change anything big. People are people but if I stumble upon a vampiristic ritual where slaves are being sacrificed I’m gonna at least slap somebody. Hard.” she said and smiled at him.

Trian scoffed and shook his head. “Well that’s at least somewhat more reasonable then. So if you’re not here for my beauty or to save lives then what are you still doing here?” he asked, obviously annoyed at her presence. She wasn’t sure if it was simply for the interruption or because he truly didn’t want to see her face.

“We wanted to go to Eregar’s Haven to train. Most of us don’t need a lot of sleep and we’ve been working together to improve our skills. We need a full team to do that. I can see how this kind of training is efficient for you but that’s what? Two skills? I doubt they can take a full on attack from you or have the ability to match your speed.” Ilea smirked at the lack of an answer. None of the other people who had been in the room were higher than level 120. She had him.

“Alright. Where?” Trian said after a minute of silence.

“Follow me sparky.” she said and blinked upwards. Trian first teleported to a side room and informed the people about his plans, reassuring them that

they will still get paid for the whole session. He quickly appeared next to Ilea and looked at her.

“That wasn’t cheap. Go on.” he said, grinding his teeth as Ilea smiled and blinked upwards until they were standing on top of the house in Ravenhall. The weather was nice, few clouds dotted the horizon and a cool winter breeze flowed through their hair.

“Can you fly?” Ilea asked. Trian jumped off the house as red lightning came out of his back and somehow kept him in the air. She activated her own wings and followed.

“I’m jealous. Those look fancy.” she said as she hovered next to the man.

“They’re too bright but it’s what I have. Not good for sneaking up on anything.” he said.

“I don’t think sneaking fits you in any way noble boy.” Ilea said and accelerated towards the forest where the others would be training already. The wind blew through her hair as she smiled at the joy of flying, laughing in the process as Trian tried hard to keep up. He didn’t seem to be quite as fast in the air as on the ground where he matched her well enough.

“Huh, she actually did it.” Eve said, walking up to the approaching Ilea and Trian. They landed and their wings disintegrated.

“Hey Eve, where are the others?” Ilea asked, looking around.

“Follow me. They started discussing about runes and it got a little boring for me. So we’re going to the Haven?” Eve asked.

“We plan to, yes. As I remember we need the ok from Joseph to enter.” Eve nodded lightly at Ilea’s remark and led them to the two people sitting over a bunch of papers and scribbling down runes with their pens.

“Mr. Alymie.” Claire said without looking up “I see you have joined us, I assume we’re going to visit the Haven then?” she didn’t look up from her drawing and Kyrian seemed fascinated by the contents on the paper.

Ilea looked as well but couldn’t make much sense of the sketches. It looked somewhat similar to her own runes but then again so did all runes she’d seen so far. ‘Another language...’ she thought and knew that languages weren’t quite her best skill. If she hadn’t gotten Elos Standard Language when she had come here she would’ve probably been killed by some adventurer who took her silence as an attack.

“Yes we are.” Eve interjected as Ilea didn’t answer “We need to find Joseph first.”

“Oh don’t worry I’ve already talked to him. Here is the signed allowance.” Claire said and took out a piece of paper from a delicate looking section in her pack. Eve looked at Ilea and both just shrugged.

“Great, let’s go then. Can you continue later or do you need some more time?” Ilea asked.

“Give us fifteen minutes or so alright?” Claire asked. Ilea shrugged and looked back at Kyrian while activating her buffs.

“Come then, no reason to waste time.” she said, getting a smirk from the man.

“You’re alright for a common wench...” Trian said, following behind her and activating his skills as well.

“You don’t have to pretend to be a noble ass with me you know.” Ilea said, not in the least bit offended. The whole concept of nobles looking down on her because of her bloodline was so far removed for Ilea she couldn’t take it as more than a child’s teasing. Especially because of the power she held. Still she would likely break at least some bones if it had been anybody else but her teammate, whom she thought to be mostly pretending. The slight twitch on his face at her remark only undermined that thought.

‘Well some bones are alright...’ she thought and smiled before the two clashed, her on the offensive.

Thirty minutes and a dozen destroyed trees later, Kyrian and Claire were done. Trian was spitting blood before Ilea healed him, signaling an end to their bout. Trian as usual got more hits in but Ilea’s counted for more. He definitely hit harder but with her defense and healing power compared to his vampyrism this was the result.

“When is one of you going to die from this?” Eve asked and Claire seemed to agree.

“You both are very enthusiastic about fighting I can’t help but worry a little as well.” she said.

“Nah, I don’t want to kill the guy. At least not anymore than other cocky shits like him. And I’m just too good of a skill grind for him to kill me.” Ilea said, saying the last part in an overly erotic fashion.

“Don’t embarrass him, I’ve seen nobles kill for less.” Eve said dryly.

“Well you’re upbeat today. Don’t worry I don’t think all nobles are the same. Prince Charles doesn’t seem like he’d do something like that.” Ilea commented as they started walking towards Ravenhall.

“Who is this prince Charles? Is he from Salia?” Claire asked.

“He’s from further away I think. Hey who of you can fly? We’re faster if we fly.” Ilea asked suddenly, trying to change the subject. Especially because Eve seemed to be tensing up the longer it went on.

“Trian and me obviously can, Eve?” she asked.

The only response was a slight shake of her head. “Me neither sadly but I’m sure I’ll figure out some rune usage at some point.” Claire commented “I’m actually pretty close but it’s not really flying yet.”

“That’s cool, will be good to have more people capable of flying at some point. Kyrian?” Ilea answered.

“N... no, I have ideas like Claire b... but nothing yet.” the man said to her question.

“Alright, well let’s add a new formation to the team tactics training then. Eve come hug me.” Ilea said.

“Ilea I don’t know if this is the right moment for something like this.” Eve said.

“I only have two hands and I doubt your ability to hold on to my legs.” Ilea said, her wings spreading behind her and her arms unfolding, ready to embrace the beautiful girl’s hug. Both efficient and accompanying her selfish wishes. ‘If only my armor was broken as well...’ Ilea thought as Eve understood and held on to her front.

It might’ve been possible to hold on to her back as well but Ilea didn’t feel like putting that idea into the room at the moment. She started flapping her wings and found Eve’s weight to be nothing more than what she’d consider a small backpack. A little more uneven yes but with her skills and Dexterity it wouldn’t be much of an issue.

Ilea hovered and held out both her hands. “Come on, hang on guys.” she said. Claire and Kyrian looked at each other with skepticism but in the end each held on to one of Ilea’s arms. She grabbed them and started to ascend. It was much easier than she had expected. A human shouldn’t be able to fly at all, let alone carry three people with a wingspan of less than four meters.

‘I like this magic business...’ Ilea thought as she nodded to Trian who had been waiting with his electric wings singeing snow and wood around him. He looked at her with a blank expression on his face before he shook his head lightly and started towards the city of Ravenhall. Ilea followed and had to concentrate to keep her balance but after just a minute she smiled at Trian who had to work hard to stay ahead.

‘Investing in Strength wasn’t useless after all...’ she thought as they reached the few blocks before the Hand’s headquarters. Ilea landed and let go of the two people next to her. Eve was right in front of her face and smiled brightly before she kissed Ilea on the cheek.

“That was SO fun!!” she exclaimed and Ilea used her Body Heat Manipulation to keep the red color from her face, unsure if it worked at all. Kyrian and Claire were smiling as well and would surely be more invested in finding a way to fly themselves after this experience. At least Ilea thought so, seeing her own enthusiasm for the skill.

“Anybody wants to get something before we go below?” Claire asked  
“Traders aren’t allowed down there and I doubt another member would give us a fair price.” she said.

“Drinks?” Eve asked.

“And food...” Ilea commented, they still didn’t know about her storage necklace after all.

“I have both.” Trian said, flashing his ring at them. “You’ll pay me of course.”

“Eh, not really. Eve let’s go shop then?” Ilea said and was already walking away when Trian sighed.

“Alriiiight. Only this time though, come on. We’ve wasted enough time as it is.” he said and grumbled something about people not being paid by his house.

# Chapter 93 Workaholics

## Chapter 93 Workaholics

The members of team 34 walked up to the middle elevator and Claire showed the guard there the document signed by Joseph. The man nodded and motioned them through, scratching a 34 into the stone tabled that was lying on a table next to the entrance.

Magical lights lined the corridor that led towards the elevator and after a two minute descent the group came up to a hall that held another five elevators, likely there to better distribute the people and goods being transported. The blueish light in the hall gave Ilea the feeling of a club or late night bathroom lighting.

The brief thought on the existence of heroin in Elos was swept away a couple minutes later as the side of the elevator opened up to reveal something beautiful. A massively diverse and vast landscape illuminated by what seemed to be an artificial sun covered in runes spread before them, sporting mountains, trees, lakes and even a small desert in the distance.

The roof of the place was covered in magical lights and crystals that added to the illusion of a sky above. They were speechless as they descended for another five minutes, the ground coming closer and closer, the height change letting them grasp just how vast this place was.

The sound of the platform landing and the kinetic force associated with the action jump-started Ilea's brain again and made her walk forward and out of the half opened elevator shaft. The smell of different vegetation and the



blinding sun above made her hold up her hand to her eyes. Birds sang in the distance and there was no question in her mind that Spring had come around.

Through her Sphere she saw everyone else wander about just as aimlessly though likely focused on different things. Ilea closed her eyes and breathed in and out several times before her wings spread behind her and she quickly ascended again. The view changed as she flew up and the vast landscape spread out before her again.

There was a forest to the west, with lakes and even a marsh in between. Two mountains could be seen in the distance, with their size they wouldn't have to hide behind the very mountains they were residing in. 'This isn't possible...' Ilea thought as she descended again, her mind rejecting the truth of this place. The sci fi side of her thought of some sort of pocket dimension, perhaps something like her storage device. She hadn't noticed anything when descending with the elevator though.

"This is marvelous..." Claire exclaimed, making the group focus on her.

"Is this real? No illusions?" Eve asked.

"I believe there are some illusions at play in the distance but I think what you see is real." Claire answered.

"Impressive." even Trian commented on it.

"The metal is singing to me...." Kyrian said and showed a rare smile. "There is so much of it here, below the ground. The runes carved inside are strong and... old..." he said and walked in a circle.

"Good place for vacation in the winter..." Ilea said and got a chuckle from Eve.

"Oh you say it..." the woman commented before picking up a rock from the ground. "This is all real..." she said after a while.

"Eregar's quite a guy huh?" Ilea said.

“Well he didn’t build all of this himself... there were hundreds if not thousands of mages involved and they worked on this for over a thousand years. Still they expand it today.” Claire explained.

“But why?” Trian asked, looking into the distance.

“Why what? Build it? I’m not sure. There are plenty of theories around but likely only the elders know, if at all.” Claire said and shrugged.

“I’m just glad they added forests and natural light compared to the Taleen green this is quite the improvement.” Ilea said and got a side glance from Trian.

“You’ve been inside a Taleen dungeon?” he asked.

“Yea, how I leveled up so quickly.” Ilea answered and started walking up a nearby slope covered in healthy grass.

“Against Taleen Guardians? Well there’s certainly easier ways to level up. They’re pretty much the most dangerous things we know of at level two hundred, at least when it comes to monsters without specializations.” Trian said and there was a hint of admiration in his voice.

“You know they’re not monsters right? They were made by the Taleen Dwarfs, at least that’s what I assume.” Ilea said and looked around. “Just like this was made by humans...”

“True, well let’s hope there are not Guardians here then. And let’s train. Where should we go?” Claire asked, joining Ilea’s side on the slope overlooking the proximity. They were standing in a field of grass, interspersed by hills and the occasional tree.

“We don’t know how everything looks like yet. I think something near the mountains would suit us best but let’s move around a little...” Ilea said and started walking, seeing with her Sphere that the others followed. Eve and Trian close behind followed by Claire and Kyrian.

After the grassy hills came a section of forest with some low leveled creatures inhabiting it. None of them chose to attack and neither did anybody of their team feel the need to lash out. Ilea was quite surprised there hadn't been anybody just killing the monsters for fun. Perhaps there were ways to prevent it or maybe there were rules against that.

Claire explained upon her question. There apparently were rules in place and the possible repercussions weren't usually worth whatever sadistic tendencies the person would satisfy. There was a whole world filled with monsters out there after all.

After around an hour's travel at running speed, the section of forest opened up to reveal a small lake, reflecting the artificial sun's light coming from above. Ilea saw fish inside of the lake and breathing in she found nothing in the air indicating them to be inside of the biggest cave she'd ever seen. 'If we really are in a cave...' she thought, repressing the upcoming thoughts on the whole nature of Elos. There was nothing these thoughts would give her except for uncertainty.

Elos was real and so were the people in it, including herself. The group ran around the lake on one of its shorelines, entering a rocky terrain covered in cave entrances and rocks that would be useful as cover. "Something like this?" Claire shouted from her position at the back of the group.

"Yea why not." Eve said, tired of running but likely not actually exhausted.

"This will do well as a training ground. Just bouts?" Trian asked, looking towards Claire who seemed surprised that he would consult her.

"We can start with bouts, yes. I want to continue with Kyrian and his runes for a while anyway. Eve just join the others and train your magic on both of them." Claire finished, shooing them away before getting out her notes from her pack again.

"With pleasure." Eve said with a smile and a glint of malice in her eyes as she looked towards Trian.

The terrain made it quite a bit more interesting than the simple training hall Ilea and Trian had fought in before. Of course the earlier bout in the forest had already been an improvement but the trees were simply smashed away. Rock and small caves weren't as easily destroyed.

Ilea certainly had the power to smash through a rock wall but the several meters thick ground made it a little more difficult. Her Sphere showed its overwhelming power in this terrain as Trian didn't know from where she would come from, trying to find places that gave him enough space to react. He was pushed onto the defensive for the whole training session while trying to avoid Eve however possible.

It turned out that her mental attacks only worked when she actually saw her target which made the session into a bout between Ilea and Trian who in turn tried to avoid Eve as best as possible. Eve found that sneaking up on the two worked much better than trying to keep up. She would use her attacks to distract either of the two in vital moments of their fight to simulate an actual mind mage intervening in the conflict.

Ilea was much better at dealing with Eve which pushed her advantage even further. It was mostly due to her higher resistance and Trian would catch up in time.

In one of the pauses where all of them consulted together they decided to do resistance training for every member. The impact Eve's mind magic had on Trian was nothing short of fatal. She could've simply taken him out at any time if she had chosen to do so. Ilea couldn't stay the only one ready for a diversity of attacks.

Claire joined the bout soon after and laid traps all over the caves while moving strategically through the terrain, keeping herself as safe as possible behind her shield runes. Ilea still managed to surprise her often enough and again demonstrated the advantages of her perception skill.

Kyrian focused on his manipulation skills as he sometimes joined the fight to attack Claire who was the least mobile target. Nobody interfered with him as

his sole focus was the movement of his metal.

Nearly eight hours later the group finally decided it was time to move back up. Ilea was glad that even Eve chose to stay for this long. Likely the group pressure of having to stay with the whole team or perhaps even the enthusiasm everyone showed in training convinced the woman not to leave early as she had the day prior.

Ilea said her goodbyes to the others as the group dispersed in Viscera. She went straight for her apartment and lied down on her bed, sleep taking her in a matter of minutes. It had been a good day.

Aki watched his wielder sleep who had forgotten to move him inside the storage device she wore on her neck. Her name was Ilea and more and more he was glad that she was the one to find him inside that lost dungeon of the dwarfs. The team she had joined would prove to be useful as well, if only to strengthen his wielder.

Today alone she had progressed further than some of his previous holders did in weeks or months. She was young, ready to improve and adapt and most importantly having fun with it. Her enjoyment of fighting alone wasn't what Aki determined to be important in itself but it would push her to take risks that others would disregard. It would push her to challenge monsters that would improve her instead of fleeing from them.

Still he thought she was experienced enough not to die against an unbeatable foe. At least he hoped so. It was a thin line between those who chose their

fights wisely and improved and those who died with the odds stacked against them. The thin line that distinguished the elite from the elite who lay dead.

The woman woke just an hour later, ready to face the next day after such a short rest. Aki knew she would compare to even the most promising of the elven youth but the fewer people who knew that the better. Even Ilea herself. Her newfound team members had similar potentials. Perhaps in time, one of them would find a way. And what else did he have but time?

The next days flowed into one as Ilea slept quickly, ate the delicious food from Keyla and most importantly trained. She trained like she had never before. Even her time trapped inside the Azarinth temple didn't compare to the intensity of her newfound routine. She was afraid her team members would not be able to keep up but contrary to her expectations they each spurred each other onwards.

Ilea was left with little distractions as the others demanded her to be there. Kyrian and Claire gave their all to reach the other's levels, their control and cunning improving by the hour. Eve was dragged along and seemed happier and more in control of herself as time went on. Ilea wasn't sure what exactly caused that change but she never pried and was simply happy for her team mate.

The only small issue they faced was the difference in needed sleep. Both Trian and Ilea needed one to three hours less than Kyrian and Claire. Eve still refused to comment on it.

Trian went to deal with his family business in those times. There wasn't much but he still had some obligations as a noble living in a city in Lys.

Ilea herself used those hours to look for craftsmen and women to build some things for her. After a week she finally got to participate in the classes she

had signed up for. The three hours were enough for all of them but she had to stop any other activities, at least for the first day.

The classes on both healing and hand to hand combat were a complete waste of time for her. Both Ilea's healing and fighting skill gave her the knowledge to use them efficiently. She even had some experience in both fields at least interest wise from her time on earth.

Everything left for her to get was experience at using both and she certainly was getting more of that from her training sessions compared to the classes. The theory on fighting wasn't too shabby but Ilea already knew the basics from her time in kick-boxing. The skills she had gained and the fights she's been part of have formed these basics into something fearsome.

She was sure that she hadn't veered off enough for her fighting to be inefficient, quite the contrary actually. The teacher on the other hand was obviously coming from a different style and didn't seem to comprehend that there is more than a single approach to fighting hand to hand. Instead of arguing with the man Ilea decided to fight him without using any active skills.

She won five times out of five. Granted the man was only level one hundred and fifty but she felt superior in technique, strength and speed. He grudgingly admitted that he could not teach her anything if she didn't chose to change her path which was quite fine for Ilea. She would find strong fighters one way or the other and would implement what she would learn whenever the time came. Sadly nothing the man did in their bouts was helpful for her.

The healing class was somehow even more disappointing. Her modern knowledge of the human body combined with the immediate knowledge she gained whenever she touched somebody with Hunter's Recovery activated gave her an advantage in healing that her teacher didn't seem to be able to bridge. Even with her being a pure healer.

It was certainly interesting to listen to the woman but Ilea was a little shocked at how much her teacher seemed to trust in her spell instead of actually understanding what was happening to the body.

Ilea decided not to quit on the first day already. Another input on her skills would certainly be helpful in some way. So she told the teachers that it would be a weekly thing. Additionally she informed the person managing the classes that she'd like another teacher in each of the two courses.

“Do you want the classes to be at another time or do you want both teachers to give their class at the same time?” the clerk gave Ilea a good idea with her question. It would be more like a discussion and perhaps she could gain more out of it if the teachers had to argue against each other as well. Or she would realize that it just wasn't worth it.

“At the same time would be perfect actually. If at all possible get me somebody that is as different from the first teachers as possible...” Ilea said and walked away while the clerk nodded and wrote Ilea's wishes down. It was time for her third and last class. Archery.

“Hello, you must be Ilea Spears. You can call me Martha. I'll be your archery teacher, nice to meet you!” The level 183 ranger smiled brightly at Ilea who walked into the otherwise nearly empty hall. Only a couple of targets could be seen distributed throughout the open space. And of course her teacher, the red haired, thin and beautiful Martha.

“Nice to meet you too Martha. So where do we start.” Ilea asked, ready to shoot some arrows.

“First please tell me how high your archery related skills are and what class level you have. I assume your second one is related to it. Or do you have archery skills in your warrior class?” Martha asked, obviously expecting something quite different than what she got.

“Ehm, no. Well I don't have any skills related to archery at all. It just seemed fun and maybe it's a good way to attack from a distance.” Ilea said. Martha's smile vanished and she just blankly stared at her pupil to be.



“I’ll get a new bow next week though! A big one probably so I can rely more on strength and pure impact compared to related skills.” Ilea tried to revive the woman.

Slowly Martha looked up to meet her eyes. “So you want to learn to use a bow... from scratch? With no supporting skills... how’s your Dexterity and Strength?” Martha asked.

“Exactly, do you think you could teach me that? I don’t have to be amazing at it but it would be quite a helpful skill to have. And I heard you can gain skills even without having a related class, isn’t that the case?” Ilea said, it was mostly the fun of using a bow that drew her to the class but she felt like she was already walking on a thin line with Martha. “Oh and I have 300 Dexterity and 200 Strength.” she added, underplaying her stats just a little.

“At least the numbers aren’t abysmal. You’re a warrior though at 200? That seems rather low to be honest. Well whatever. Yes you can learn the archery skill this way but it’s going to take quite a lot more work than any class related skills. And it’s going to be weaker than any specialized skills, at least for the first... well a hundred years or so I assume.” Martha explained, waving her hand at the estimate. Ilea just nodded happily, accepting the odds.

“Do you have a bow at least?”

“No.” Ilea said, not wanting to reveal the bow she had found in the Taleen dungeon. “But I’ll get one next week. Can you lend me one for now?” she asked, smiling at the teacher.

# Chapter 94 Rarities

## Chapter 94 Rarities

The hour of archery passed in a flash and Ilea left the hall with a big grin on her face. In a world where skills gave one immediate knowledge of at least some aspects of whatever one decided to learn, going the normal route was quite refreshing. The stance and drawing came somewhat easy to Ilea because of her enhanced body and reflexes. She decided not to use any of her body enhancement skills in the first lesson and to just trust the rest of her stats.

She missed and missed again. With the steady supply of arrows and the constant feedback from her teacher, Ilea progressed incredibly fast. At least she thought so. Martha wasn't quite as convinced but agreed to continue and help Ilea out with her endeavor of learning archery, while getting paid of course.

The three teachers together cost quite a bit but it was still nothing Ilea would scoff at. At least healing and hand to hand would become a weekly thing from now on. Archery alone was certainly worth the ten silver she paid the woman for the hour. Ilea was a little confused why someone at her level would decide to teach for that meager amount of coins when you could go out and hunt beasts, selling their hide and bones at a much higher price.

She decided not to pry or judge though and was simply glad that she had a teacher who knew what she was doing. And so the rest of the week came and went, filled with training, gourmet food and archery. The group sometimes

explored more parts of Eregar's Haven but found the cave system to be the best part for their current training sessions. Additionally there didn't seem to be any other teams residing in those parts. Generally it seemed weird to Ilea how few other teams visited the Haven. They only saw four other groups in the span of a week. Nobody in the team wanted to challenge the other as they still had enough to work on themselves.

Ilea managed to get quite an assortment of decorations and other items together while even finding the glass mage and artist the librarian had mentioned. He was happy to sell some windows to her. All that was left was to find someone who knew how to build a house. That would come after her visit to Balduur. At this point the smith should've been done with her weapons.

It was exactly two weeks after Ilea had ordered the weapons from Balduur and again she found herself flying towards the small village of Indur. Having already eaten enough for a group of four, she decided not to visit the inn and made directly towards the smith. Ilea didn't pay the entry fee but saw none of the guards coming for her. Either they knew the woman already or they were too lazy to fetch her for the coins.

She blinked inside the house and then down to the smithy where she saw Balduur working on something. Iana was there as well, looking over her father's shoulder.

"Hey all. Your favorite customer has returned." Ilea exclaimed, immediately getting a smile from Iana who ran towards her. Balduur didn't show any reaction to her sudden appearance and simply continued to work. Ilea threw Aki the dagger towards Iana and watched her running off while giggling.

"Thanks! You'll have him back soon!" Iana exclaimed while Aki stayed quiet, making Ilea unsure of how her companion felt about this arrangement.

‘He should learn more about his own nature through this...’ she thought and walked up to Balduur. The man was completely focused on a small strap of leather. Ilea watched him and after a minute of silence the man looked up to her.

“Ah, it’s you. Ilea eh?” he said and walked away from the workbench, motioning for her to follow. “Your gauntlets are done, easier than I expected and to be frank moving the ingots was the hardest part, hahaha.” he laughed and stopped in front of the forge where they had placed the ingots on two weeks prior. His cheerful behavior was a little confusing to Ilea but it certainly was preferable to a grumpy smith.

“I’m glad to hear they’re done. The bow as well?” Ilea asked, excited to see what the smith had produced.

“Yes, the bow as well. And I made some custom arrows as well, quite a fun idea I have to say. Usually this stuff is only used in city defense or big monster hunts but it’s usually too expensive for them to do anything this unique.” he explained and motioned for Ilea to come closer and behind the workbench he was standing.

“Down here are the black obsidian gauntlets. I’d be surprised if you could even lift one of them but give it a try. It’s what you wanted after all.” he finished and chuckled at her already. Ilea didn’t pretend and activated all her buffs before grabbing one of the massive black gauntlets with both her arms. And then she lifted.

The gauntlet first moved and was then lifted from its place. Ilea grunted but managed to place the heavy piece of equipment on top of the workbench. It took thirty seconds but she did manage it to Balduur’s surprise. The second gauntlet followed quickly after and was placed with a heavy thump on top of the workbench.

“You’ve improved your strength I see. Or were you just fooling with me last time?” the smith asked, looking at her sceptically.

“No.” Ilea said, wiping away some sweat from her forehead. “I’ve been working like a madwoman the past two weeks and plan to be able to wield

these bastards in a couple months.” she said and touched the weapons. They were made from the same black and matte metal that was still in the form of ingots just two weeks ago.

The form was simple gauntlets that would fit her arms perfectly. ‘He only held my arms once last time and this is what he achieved...’ she was impressed with the smith’s work to say the least. The fingers wouldn’t be movable she noticed and were in the form of a fist but that was perfectly fine for her. There was no reason to bend a hammer either. She touched the gauntlets and identified them.

*[Heavy Obsidian Gauntlets – Rare Quality]*

Storing them inside her necklace used up four units. Two for each of them. Considering a whole bed only used one, the gauntlets were no joke when it came to weight.

“They seem nice, rare quality as well. No special name though I see. Or are heavy obsidian gauntlets special?” Ilea commented, getting a sigh from the smith.

“They’re very special. Most weapons and armor get their name not from the smith or where they’re made but from what they’ve been through and survived. A rare sword used by the king’s guard of Kroll might turn into *Kroll’s guardian sword* or something. Give it time and maybe they’ll become quite a bit more special.” the smith explained.

“Will they get abilities as well from that?” Ilea asked, making the gauntlets appear on her arms. Both immediately clanged onto the workbench before her, leaving her no choice but to store them again.

“That’s a very rare thing to happen, a possibility but most often it’s just a name and perhaps a small increase in the durability of the item or its sharpness.” Balduur said, not offended by her ignorance.

“I like them. Thank you.” Ilea said, making them appear again and trying to lift them up. Balduur in the meantime went to get the other gauntlets that looked a lot less stiff than the obsidian ones.

“It was fun to make them, I just hope you do reach a level of Strength at some point where you can wield them efficiently. These here are blue steel gauntlets.” Balduur said and placed the pair of gauntlets in front of Ilea who again made the obsidian ones disappear.

The blue steel weapons looked a lot more usable as actual gauntlets. She grabbed them and got them on, finding them more comfortable than expected. The fingers could be moved as well but she found it not quite necessary. The main part of the gauntlets were of course the blue and silver blades coming out from each of them.

Ilea lifted her right arm to see the forty centimeters blue blade a little better. It came out of the gauntlets as if it were a growth, part of the item itself and not simply attached to it. Balduur must have formed the gauntlet around the blade and not the other way around. It looked sharp and most importantly durable. The blade curved downwards and ended at a level with Ilea’s outstretched fingers, just around thirty centimeters in front of it.

The sharp side of the blade looked towards the gauntlet it was attached to and faced the same way Ilea’s palm did. “They’re great as well. Nice work Balduur. Did you make the blade first and then the gauntlets?” she asked while she identified the weapons.

*[Blue Steel Gauntlets – Rare]*

Again the actual name didn’t promise anything too special but Ilea decided to trust Balduur and she would see the result at one point or another anyway.

“I formed each at the same time. I have quite a lot of experience working with blue steel but have never made actual gauntlets out of it. I think they should be viable though. Do report your findings to me.” Balduur commented.

“I will, I will. Now I’ve joined an archery class and boy do I hope you got me something cool to show the teacher.” Ilea said.

“You’ve joined. An archery class? I thought you’d actually put this to use... oh well whatever you do with it. Come, it’s not here.” he said and Ilea

followed the smith again.

“What do you do if you’re not working for somebody?” Ilea asked and joined Balduur in a storage room to the side of the main forge hall.

“I try things out, try to improve my smithing. Just like you train your skills. It’s my passion.” he finished and Ilea nodded, understanding it completely.

“Seems safer than my hobby of fighting murderous monsters and machines.” she said.

“It’s dangerous as well, trust me. I have several resistances in the second stage already.” Balduur said, making Ilea appreciate his hard work and trial and error. She was one of the benefactors of his suffering after all. Perhaps he had Pain Tolerance in the second stage as well though which would make the whole thing a lot easier but Ilea decided not to ask.

“Here it is.” Balduur said and motioned towards an absurdly large bow hanging on one of the walls in the room.

“You’re kidding me right?” Ilea asked, a big smile spreading on her face as she walked up to the mobile artillery device which would be her new bow. The thing was made of some kind of dark metal and the string had a blue color to it. It looked strong. The nearly black sheen gave it an elegant look and Ilea found herself touching the weapon with a reverence she didn’t show towards the gauntlets.

“Of course she likes the bow the most...ah women.” Balduur mumbled from the side, getting a chuckle from Ilea.

“Well my fists are already my main weapons. I didn’t have a bow yet so it’s something new. Trust me I appreciate the gauntlets already and will come back to you with field reports. Completely new toys are usually more exciting.” she said, winking towards the man who just shook his head.

“Whatever, you owe me 26 gold coins. Check out the arrows too.” he said, leaning on the door frame.

*[Heavy Dark Steel Bow]*

‘More like Heavy Ballista...’ Ilea thought as she looked at the arrows placed below the bow. Grabbing one of them she found them to be rather light, looking more akin to spears than arrows.

“Those are the normal ones. They shouldn’t break but you can get more made by any smith you find. I used a strong and light alloy so as long as you don’t fire them into pure steel you should be fine reusing them. There’s thirty of those, each ten silver. So three more gold if you want them all.” he said as Ilea moved on to the next batch of arrows.

“Runes engraved for lightning, explosion, fire and ice. More exotic ones can be prepared upon your request. Each arrow twenty silver. Ten of them each for two gold coins. So eight gold coins for all of them.” he explained.

“Twice what the bow itself cost?” Ilea asked a little doubtful “Can they be reused as well?” she asked.

“It’s the quantity that makes them expensive. And yes, as long as the runes don’t get destroyed.”

“Great.” Ilea said and handed over thirty seven gold coins, paying for everything.

“Where the hell did you get so much money to spend...” Balduur said but took the coins nonetheless.

“None of your damn business. Can you make me a hundred more normal arrows? For eight gold.” Ilea asked.

“Sure, I’ll need a couple hours though. Maybe go check on your dagger until then.” Balduur said. Ilea would miss the start of her archery session but Martha had mentioned before that she’d be there as long as she was paid. And considering the new bow that was nearly as big as Ilea herself, she was sure Martha wouldn’t mind.



Stashing the bow and arrows in her necklace, Ilea left Balduur to make her arrows. She had a feeling that a lot of them would break in her training sessions. Walking to Iana she found the woman completely absorbed standing over a workbench with her eyes glowing a bright blue.

Aki had been placed on the workbench and it looked like several different magics were being used on the dagger. “How are you doing buddy?” Ilea asked, standing opposite of Iana and looking towards her companion.

“I am lying here. Have I mentioned before that I’m glad you’re not an enchanter?” Aki asked.

“Why, does it hurt?” Ilea asked back.

“No, it’s just very boring.” came the response. Apparently the dagger was quite fond of Ilea’s lifestyle.

“Mhm. Iana how’s it going? Found out anything interesting in the two weeks and now?” the girl’s face gave Ilea an idea about the progression already. It would probably take a while for anything substantial to be discovered. Iana’s answer confirmed the warrior’s suspicion.

“Honestly? No, nothing. At first I thought I could work down the layers and unlock each of them but this is something I’ve never seen before, not remotely. I’ve worked for a full two weeks and can’t even grasp the first levels. The runes I know, at least some of them but the connections...” Iana looked completely lost.

“I can bring him around more often if you like? Would that be alright with you Aki?” Ilea looked at the dagger on the table.

“As long as it’s not more than a day a week or so...” Aki said. He obviously found it very boring with Iana.

“Can’t you just meditate or something while you’re here?” Ilea thought of the idea, he had been in a dungeon for a thousand years after all.

“Iana says it distorts the image. It’s not a possibility.” the explanation made sense.

“Anything you would like for your time then? I’m just gonna get free enchantments from Iana...” Ilea said, winking at the woman who was still focused on the dagger.

“It should benefit me in time so it’s fine. I can’t think of anything I’d want right now.” Ilea nodded to the dagger.

“Alright, then I’ll bring him over once every week for a day or so. He can stay until tomorrow. Iana do you have a couple minutes for enchantment questions? Maybe a distraction for a while isn’t the worst idea. You’ll have a whole day afterwards.” the girl looked at her as the light in her eyes faded to a normal degree.

“Sure!” the enchantress smiled and removed the gloves she was wearing. “I saw your weapons are done, do you want anything on them?”

“Well the question is what can you do? I have a storage item but I really liked the way Agor’s sword could be summoned from his bracelet. An increase in damage or weight would be good as well. Maybe for the bow that the arrows fly faster, is any of that possible?” Ilea asked, her lack of knowledge about enchanting was quite obvious.

“I’m good with space enchantments so I could certainly get all your weapons into some kind of bracelets or ear rings. Or rings of course but considering you fight with your hands it might not be the best idea. Wind enchantments are rather common to make bows stronger but you won’t be able to shoot as stealthily. I’m not sure if that’s a possibility with that size of a bow anyway. The arrows would have to be enchanted themselves but you already have a couple of those, my work actually.” Iana explained.

“That’s perfect for the bow if you don’t have any other ideas. I’m not sure about the limitations of enchanting. Can you make the gauntlets heavier?” Ilea asked, summoning the gauntlets onto the table before her.

“I’m afraid not. I could make them more durable though. I can make the blades on your other gauntlets sharper while making everything more durable as well. I think that would be the best approach compared to more exotic things.” Iana said.

“You’re the enchantress so I’ll trust you. Can they be removed again and can others be added? And can you both do the bracelet enchantment and the durability and sharpness ones?” Ilea summoned both her bow and the blue steel gauntlets onto the table.

“With the quality of these, yes. I can remove and add different enchantments. At some point dad will have to work on them again before I can continue though. And to your second question yes, the runes are different enough so that they won’t overlap. I can add all of them. Do you want to bring the items at a later time or should I work on them immediately? I’ll need around four days for everything.” Iana offered.

“Work on them now, I’ll get them in a week then and bring over Aki again. It’s not very far if I fly at top speed.” Ilea said. She could always leave the training sessions a little early to visit Balduur and Iana. The enchantress agreed and put away the bow and blue steel gauntlets. The black obsidian ones had to stay on the table as she was unable to move them.

# Chapter 95 Negotiations

## Chapter 95 Negotiations

Ilea continued to talk about enchantments with Iana for a while and found the possibilities to be much less amazing than what she thought possible. The difference of an enchanted armor would be able to save one's life in certain situations but it wouldn't make the difference between being completely overwhelmed by an enemy and winning against the same foe.

Balduur was still working on her new arrows and a glance towards the man revealed that he was already done with a sizable amount of them. Ilea looked to Iana and switched her leather armor with her elven juggernaut armor, getting a quick gasp out of the girl.

“W...what is That??” the girl said and immediately closed in on Ilea before touching the armor. “This is amazing... brilliant workmanship... the layers are beautifully done... Ilea this is elven! High quality elven, not what the elves who attack our cities wear. Where did you find this?” the reaction was a little more extreme than Ilea had expected but the armor certainly was impressive.

“Found it in a dungeon. It's Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor.” Ilea explained.

“Now that is a beautiful set of armor.” Balduur saw the change and had approached in the meantime. “Elven and it's actually made to last. I was sure they were holding back on the equipment they give to the ones attacking at the front lines. Probably so that we can't equip our own people with their gear.

Can I see?" the man asked and Ilea just nodded, switching back to her leather armor and placing the Juggernaut armor on a nearby workbench.

"Knock yourselves out. I'm going to take it with me as soon as you're done with the arrows though." Ilea said, quite sure she could handle the two should they get any ideas with her equipment. Not that she really expected anything considering they ignored her storage necklace completely.

"It's good." Balduur said after five minutes. "As good if not better than the best armors I've worked on. I'm unfamiliar with the metal but it seems to be an alloy of black mithril, drakken ore and something else. Impressive to say the least and expensive. You're wearing a suit of gold Ilea." the smith commented and held up a bracer.

"The enchantments are pure durability. Several layers and beautifully intertwined. I've rarely seen anything this indestructible that can actually be worn. With the metal combination I think it's mostly good against physical damage, right Balduur?" Iana commented on the enchantments.

"You're right. So the wearer better have elemental resistances. Something tells me this lassie here does." Balduur said and put the armor down, walking back to his workbench. His suspicion was mostly based on the grin Ilea sported through the whole conversation, especially intensifying at the part about resistances.

"So no way for you two to make it any better?" Balduur simply ignored the question and Iana shook her head. The armor was stored again inside her necklace and Ilea was left with a good feeling about her equipment. At least at the moment it seemed to be the best thing available to her.

"Sure you don't want to have another look at the armor. It didn't seem like there are a lot of comparable sets out there." Ilea asked the smith.

“It’s just rare but to be honest elves were never very famous for smithing. I applaud their skill but it’s nothing world changing. Confirms that they’re not sending their elite to attack us. The question remains as to why. It’s good to know that they’re not out to destroy humanity, not yet at least.” the smith explained his theories before Ilea handed over the rest of her debt. Another eight gold for the arrows, of which she now had a hundred and thirty.

‘Can’t wait to try these bad boys out...’ Ilea thought. She still had to wait another four days for Iana to be done with the enchantments but she was ready to plunge herself back into training.

“I’ll see you in a couple days then. Make sure the bracelets aren’t destructible either.” Ilea said to the two people and waved.

“Don’t die out there.” Balduur said and walked back down to his smithy.

“Sure you don’t want another bracelet or ear rings?” Iana asked but Ilea wanted nothing else but tight fitting bracelets to store her weapons in. She did decide to pay the girl at least a part of the work, even though she had found an easy way to exploit her with her dagger.

“Bracelets are fine.” Ilea said and summoned ten gold coins before handing them to the girl.

“I’ll make them extra nice.” she said smiling and waved towards Ilea who smiled back and blinked out into the winter morning air. She was late already for her last class and activated all her buffs before her wings spread behind her. A second later she was on her way back to Ravenhall and to an angry archery teacher waiting for her only pupil.

The next four days were spent again with training but on the third, Ilea finally found what she had been looking for. The two people in front of her looked at

each other with skepticism, unsure of the proposal they had received.

“And you will fly us there?” the woman, a level 85 mage asked to confirm. Ilea nodded, activating her wings that spread behind her.

“I’m really not sure about this Lars.” the woman said, looking at her colleague.

“I can wait outside if you want to discuss.” Ilea said but she seemed to have somewhat convinced the man already.

“Our rate is ten silvers per hour. I’ll consider the job for twice that.” Lars said, obviously annoying the woman by not communicating with her beforehand. Ilea didn’t miss the chance though and interjected.

“I’ll make it twenty per hour. We can only work on it for two hours every day but we can do the planning here of course.” Ilea said and now even the woman seemed to be considering the proposal.

“We’ll have to see the place first. And you’ll only take me while leaving a deposit of two gold coins here.” the man said.

“Lars are you really sure about this?” the woman asked.

“Alina it’s alright.” he closed in on her and continued in a whisper “If this works out for us this is gonna secure our shop for the next two years. I’m sure she’ll want some extravagant things as well...” he finished and Alina seemed to be intrigued.

“I’ll leave five gold coins as a deposit and we leave right now. You can take a look and then we’ll be back in two hours. If I break my word the gold is yours.” Ilea said and placed five gold coins on a nearby table.

“If I’m happy with the finished job I’ll pay you including the deposit.” she finished, quite tired of the debating. They were the only capable architects willing to even see her though. The way from Morhill to the cliff she would build on was reasonable enough. Sadly all of the people capable of building

houses in Ravenhall were employed by the city and quite unwilling to help her build.

She could of course force somebody or pay outrageous prices but Ilea believed the end result would suffer from such actions.

“Alright, let me get ready and I’ll be with you in five minutes.” Lars said, obviously trying not to stare at the gold placed on the table. Even Alina’s doubts were washed away by the shine of the small coins.

‘The power of gold...’ Ilea thought and repressed the smile she wanted to show, knowing that it could be interpreted as something quite different. The man was ready in two minutes, dressed in leather armor and a heavy coat that would protect him from the cold weather outside, something Ilea had stopped to consider because of her resistances and high stats.

“Ready then?” she asked and watched the man bind a thick piece of cloth around his head, covering his eyes. It had been one of the requirements for the job. Ilea knew that they could probably guess the location of her cliff side but having them cover their eyes on the way would at least help somewhat with keeping it secret.

Ilea let the two builders say their goodbyes and then grabbed the man below his shoulders as her wings spread out behind her. “Just tell me when I have to stop. I’ll heal you on the way so you should be fine.” Ilea said and started rising up. The man tensed up and didn’t calm down through the whole trip. He never asked for her to stop and neither did her healing skill tell her about any damage he was taking.

The two landed safely on the cliff side just under an hour later. Ilea would be late for her archery lesson again but that had already happened a couple times by now and Martha didn’t seem to be bothered, quite the contrary really her mood seemed to worsen whenever Ilea actually arrived to the scheduled lesson. The woman would get paid either way.

“We’re here.” Ilea said and let the man down. He stumbled a couple times on the stone and used both hands to get the coat closer to his body. His teeth were clattering together as Ilea removed the blind fold from his face. “You



alright?” she asked and the man nodded slowly before a low growl made him tense up again.

“S...ss....swordmouth...” he stuttered and fell backwards while Ilea walked up to the tiger, shushing it away while gesturing.

“Go back to your cave.” she said and the tiger listened. “Don’t worry about it, I’ll be here to protect you while you work.” the man slowly got up again while shaking his head.

“T...this is ridiculous...” he said as Ilea walked up to him.

“As I said I’ll be here. Trust me I can handle that little cat. What do you think of the place? We don’t have long before we have to leave again.” Ilea asked. She would probably take a day off from the training with the others to let them work on her project for longer.

Lars seemed to calm down a little and breathed in and out slowly with closed eyes. “Alright alright. So I’ll take measurements and check the stone. Then we’ll figure something out when we’re back in Morhill.

“Sure, knock yourself out.” Ilea said, taking some food from her pack and sitting down in front of the cave to not let the tiger out of her eyes and Sphere.

“That should be doable. We’ll figure out some concepts and I’ll draw up some plans for you. How long should we invest in the planning phase?” Lars asked and his partner nodded at the sketches he already produced.

“Until we find something I like. I’ll be back tomorrow to take Alina to the location as well like you suggested. After that you have a week to plan some things out, go a little crazy with the designs. I’ll pay 20 Silver per hour you two invest in this as discussed.” Ilea explained and placed the silver for the

time already invested for travel and evaluation on the table. The gold deposit was still there but she made no move to take it back.

“If you need help from somebody else or materials just inform me and I’ll try to get that for you.” Ilea said while getting up. She decided to skip the archery lesson today to finish up with the two builders.

“That’s very generous of you. We won’t disappoint, don’t you worry.” Lars said and Alina nodded from the side.

“Great, see you tomorrow then.” Ilea said before blinking out of their beautiful house in Morhill, one of the reasons she trusted the two with her own future home.

“We better not disappoint that one...” Lars said to his wife and colleague. The woman nodded and went to take the money left behind by their customer.

“Let’s get to drawing then. At least we know this one won’t bail on paying like the ones before.” Lars had a sad look on his face, remembering the debacle. It was one of the problems of working for people independent of any guilds or cities. This one too, the flying black haired warrior could simply leave as soon as her requests were fulfilled. Or kill them as soon as it’s done.

Lars and Alina didn’t come as far as having their own house and business in Morhill without having to deal with those kind of people. Background checks were already being paid for with the advance the woman had left behind.

“Are you sure that’s necessary? I don’t think she’ll try to screw us over or attack us.” the water in front of him started boiling as he activated the rune below the kettle. Alina really liked her tea when she was working. It got the mind running is what she usually said. Lars found himself agreeing as he

added the dried leaves into the boiling water, filling the room in a beautiful and fresh aroma, quite contrary to the bleak weather outside.

“She seemed nice. And honest. But you know just as well as I do that there are good actors out there.” Alina said, preparing their worktables and rolling out the paper. They would analyze their customers requirements and then discuss some basic ideas.

“She’s not a mage at least.” he commented as he got two cups from the nearby cupboard. Warriors tended to be easier to deal with, at least in Lars’ experience. Alina grunted to his comment and went to get their pencils.

“We have the requirements. Did she mention a budget?” Alina asked, hovering above the paper with her drawing utensil.

Lars would’ve liked to hug her but the rune below the boiling tea needed to be powered by his mana. “I mentioned some estimates and she just nodded. I don’t think there is an upper limit dear.”

“Then it shouldn’t be as hard to make something outstanding. How was the flight by the way?” the woman asked and started to draw.

“I think she flew slower than she normally does. She can heal as well and other than the cold it was quite comfortable. An efficient way to travel... to think we’d have to join a caravan for dozens of silvers to just get to the next city and this woman can just fly wherever she wants to.” he shook his head and let go of the rune. The tea would be left boiling for a little while until the aroma mixed perfectly with the water. Something he learned to do in the past five years while working with Alina.

“I’m sure she’s suffered enough to get those wings. You can go out there too and prove yourself.” Lars just grunted at her response and finally hugged her.

“What do you think her level is?” Alina asked with a smile as he hugged her.

“I don’t care.” Lars said and kissed the woman on her neck.

“That is quite troubling news Dagon...” Adam scratched the stubble on his chin as he thought about the new information Dagon had provided.

“It is. And we have to act if we intend to stop his greed filled intentions. Elder Urn is betraying the very bases this guild has been built on and if we let him gain more favor and influence it may soon be too late to stop the man.” Dagon was standing in his office, quite unhindered by his unnatural proportions.

“Dagon. If there is a single man I trust with the Hand’s legacy then it’s you. Do you believe a forceful removal is the only way we have left? I’m sure he has gotten quite a number of members to his side by now. It won’t be a quiet removal, even if the other elders agree.” Adam was aware of the severity of the situation but he couldn’t quite help his mind wander to his more personal projects. He was so close already. Perhaps...

“Verena will be persuaded easily enough. She cares about the guild as much as I do. The other two won’t even know what has happened until a couple months or years have passed. When was the last time they were even here?” Dagon’s concerns weren’t quite unfounded. Adam didn’t even know if the two missing Elders Pierce and Lucas were still alive.

Something told him they were and while someone like Wallace Urn was playing political games they were out there fighting monsters well beyond what the man had ever seen. ‘Not for long...’ Adam thought and stopped himself from forming a smile. His quite selfish goal would have a rather nice double edged result. If he dared combine it with this problem threatening the Hand. The conditions would be much better and the cost of human life would be washed away by the removal of Elder Urn and his greed.

“We need a team of members we can trust. Strong enough to deal deathblows to other members. Contact all your sources and get in all your favors. We will need to strike fast and remove this corruption from the Shadow’s Hand in a single and brutal strike. There is no room here for politics and

negotiation. Wallace has to be removed and so do his supporters.” Adam said, his eyes gazing into Dagon’s.

“How long. Will you be the distraction?” Dagon asked.

“I need around three months to prepare. Runes and ingredients to summon enough monsters for a massive distraction. The whole Hand will be busy while we take out his faction. In the meantime we send away the members who were simply paid on missions as far away as we can get them. They’ll return and find Urn removed.” Adam explained.

“Have you really advanced enough to prepare something on that scale? Your monsters will run rampant and without control.” Dagon’s concern wasn’t unfounded but even he will be quite surprised at what Adam is capable of.

“They will, and it will be a good opportunity for some newer members to taste blood, together.” he was glad that Dagon seemed to agree with his proposition.

“What about the returning traitors?” he asked.

“Don’t call them that. We are still mercenaries and we cannot weaken ourselves too much. They may do as they like but as long as we remove Urn as the root, they will fall in line. I am sure of it.” Dagon nodded at his explanation and prepared to leave.

“I will find them all. Prepare everything and do tell me when you’re ready. Send the names of any trustworthy soul capable of matching a full member to me and I will manage the rest.” Dagon whispered and bowed to Adam with a fierce fire in his eyes.

“Elder.” he said and left Adam’s office.

A deep sigh left Adam as soon as the door closed and the protective runes around his office activated again. He had fooled one of his oldest friends,

had used his desire to save the Hand to hide his own intentions. Yet still it was more important to him. And perhaps the Hand will prevail. Should they manage it, they would come out stronger than they had ever been before. There was doubt inside his heart but the same hope that had kept him going for the past twenty years burned not just for his love but for the Hand as well.

# Chapter 96 Survival

## Chapter 96 Survival

Snow was falling heavily now. Three months had passed since the elven attack on Dawntree had started and the land of Elos was covered in white. Sulivhaan stood on top of a mountain overlooking the city of Ravenhall. 'Hello old friend...' he thought as he looked upon the stone walls of what he considered to be home.

The defenders at Dawntree had managed to lure some of the elves inside the city and finished them off at great cost. Both property wise and with human life. None of the highest leveled people in Dawntree or his squad of the Hand had come to substantial damage but as soon as one trapped an elf inside of a human city, it will not fight honorably against the defenders.

Two weeks after his arrival the elves had turned back. Immediate discussions among the Dawntree nobles sprung up as to why the elves had come and gone but Sulivhaan didn't intend to find out the enemy's reasons. He had already wasted enough time of his life to figure that out and what he learned was sobering to say the least.

Whatever elf was sent to the front-lines was either a marvelous actor and liar or simply didn't know anything about the plans behind the attacks. After so many tortured creatures Sulivhaan had come to accept the latter. The elves would not easily be understood and their plans would not leave wherever they had their military bases. If such a thing even existed. Perhaps some of the theories were right and the species was simply fueled by bloodlust and simply lived for the fighting and killing.

The attacks were too coordinated though and with the decades of experience Sulivhaan had he just couldn't accept something like that. He was tired, tired of fighting an enemy that didn't seem to take humanity seriously. How could they? Whatever rabble they send to die in the human cities don't even know anything about their plans. The young sent to test themselves against a worm they didn't even consider worth fighting.

With the infighting and squabbles over land and policy that color the lands of humanity it didn't come as a surprise either. Sulivhaan was sure that most people would sell their neighbor to an elven torturer for a single coin of gold. 'These are dark thoughts.' Sulivhaan forced himself to smile. He was home and though many of the surviving elves had remained inside the human territories it would only be a matter of time until they were hunted down by elite forces of both the hand, the adventurer guild and the kingdoms and empires looking to improve their soldiers and standing.

Many had declared the destruction of the western cities as unprecedented but Sulivhaan had considered their colonization as risky at best. Many of the cities were built and left behind previously but just as much as an innkeeper doesn't care about the monsters lurking inside dungeons, a pioneer leaving an overcrowded human city doesn't care about the history behind his next home town. Living in ignorance and safety is something deeply ingrained inside humans and in times of peace this feeling got stronger. People look towards others for safety and find not their own strength and fire to be the one fighting back.

Sulivhaan hoped that through the thousands of dead some will find their own fire. To stand up and show Elos what humans were capable of.

"Getting teary?" Rock had finally climbed the last bit of the mountain and was now standing next to the squad leader. No answer was expected and Sulivhaan was glad that he had his squad to rely on. Even the new member who had been added to their team before they had left Ravenhall for their long mission had grown quite substantially. The rogue was standing quietly nearby, a quality she had learned from Navalis to be sure.

The ranger was nowhere to be seen but he knew she was close enough to fire an arrow should it be necessary. That was who she was and he accepted that.



Not one for people.

“Let’s go.” Sulivhaan said and started flying towards the city, the two members behind him following on the ground. ‘I hope you haven’t changed too much Viscera...’

“Do I h... have to?” the pleading eyes of his daughter didn’t dissuade him.

“This is part of getting strong Lily. I’m truly sorry that you have to do this so early but it’s the only way we will survive.” Roland was holding down the dying beast he had fought against for the past twenty minutes. It wasn’t usual to get a class before the age of sixteen but Roland had heard of enough cases to try. It was cruel he knew but he felt it the best way to prepare his last surviving daughter for her life in this cruel world.

Two months ago they had been let inside one of the outer cities in the Kroll kingdom. Luckily the refugees weren’t robbed immediately, mostly thanks to Valery and of course the hundreds of other refugees flooding the town. Salia hadn’t been the only city which was attacked and it wasn’t the only city that held survivors. Survivors who didn’t quite feel like staying inside the now monster infested fallen cities.

“Do it Lily, it’s a monster and it would do the same to you in a heartbeat if it could.” he appealed to the girl with logic and was glad to find she followed through. The blood colored her black dagger a deep crimson as the smell filled her senses. The beast continued to struggle but he didn’t let it slip from his hold. The cut had been thorough and the level 90 horned lion would bleed out in mere minutes.

Roland would find a safe place to sleep for the girl soon and he would hunt more of the lions. Neither him nor his daughter would ever stagnate again. Even if she didn’t get a class early he could teach her to hunt, to fight and to

survive. Killing was simply a part of it. Of course he wouldn't be so cruel as to have the girl fight a human or beast with a high level of intelligence but there was enough she could learn from him.

Staying inside a city filled by refugees with inflated prices for even the most basic of goods wasn't going to be very helpful for her. Roland slowly let down the dead monster and closed its eyes. Removing the dagger from its neck, he cleaned it on the beast's fur before handing it back to Lily. The girl was still staring at the dead animal with slightly teary eyes. An experience that would stay with her but a necessary one.

"You did well." he said and handed the clean knife back to her. A gift from Ilea. He wasn't sure if they would've died inside that hideout or if a stray elf would've hunted them down were it not for that squad of the Hand and Ilea herself who knew where they were hiding. He saw it as another chance. To make things better, to not live as carefree as he had before, traveling around with a family safe behind a city's walls.

A loud growl sounded too close to him and Roland's eyes blinked open, his hands on his axes and immediately on his feet when the beast was upon them. 'Couldn't hold back could you...' he thought as the monster pounced on him, his axes cutting into the beast's shoulders as its claws dug into his leather armor. The two fell down, the monster's weight resting on his axes and its claws ripped through his protection, drawing blood.

The beast suddenly jerked to the left, giving Roland enough control to rip out the right ax and smash it into the lion's head. Another two hits and the beast lay dead on top of him, bleeding onto his face. He received a couple messages from the fight but ignored the new information in his mind, using his full strength to push away the carcass. A frightened girl appeared behind the dead beast, getting closer to check on her injured father.

Roland reassured her that he was fine, checking his injuries himself. 'A day at most...' thinking on the time he would need to heal. Less if he found

anymore beasts to kill. He looked back to Lily, who was wishing her hand before her face with confusion apparent on her face.

“Good job, you saved me Lily.” Roland said and got up before he hugged the girl tightly.

“D...dad there is something here, there was a noise and now there are words I can read...” the girl said and he hugged her even tighter, smiling to himself. She would have a head start after all. He hoped dearly that this was the right decision, thinking on their portion of the Salia gold in his pack. A new life to build somewhere far away. First they had to improve, at least enough to fight back against the world.

*‘ding’ ‘Lightning Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’*

The message reverberated through Maria’s mind, ripping her out of her meditative state and reminding her that she was still alive. ‘Another one...been a while...’ she thought, opening her eyes and looking at the mage before her. Blood dripped down onto the cold stone ground below, lost in the permanently crimson colored cell floor.

Her face reacted automatically to the levels of power used in her tormentor’s attacks, distorted in a grimace of blood and pain. Only that there was no pain. She had reached the second stage of Pain Tolerance a long time ago and to her confusion and luck somehow not even the noble houses of Lys knew about what exactly it did. She repressed the smile threatening to show on her face as she did many thousands of times before and simply waited through the ordeal, her only solace being the resources lost in this endeavor.

Another hour or two and an interrogator would join her to ask the same questions she had denied knowing anything about four years ago already. They would learn nothing today either.

“You wanna go to Red’s later?” one of the mages in the room asked his colleague who was currently draining Maria’s steadily recovering Mana. She had become resistant enough that two mages with the ability to drain mana had to be placed in the room at all times. Not a questionable decision considering her abilities. Still she was surprised that nobody had come to finish her off. Four years and nothing. Either they were too scared of Edwin and wanted to have her as a bargaining piece or someone involved in her upbringing still pulled some strings.

Either way Maria was bored most of all. She swore long ago that if she ever got out she’d form a cult worshiping the Meditation skill. The only reason she hadn’t gone nuts in all this time.

“Nah, you know I’m married now Steve, I can’t do that shit anymore. Stop asking me, I’m sure some of the new guys will want to join.” the other mage responded a little delayed, sweat on his face from the constant use of his draining ability.

“Ah you bore...can we switch soon, I wanted to level my attack magic as well.” the first guard said and looked towards the lightning mage standing in front of Maria. He nodded and stopped his attack, motioning to the healer sitting nearby. The last person in the room.

The woman did her job silently as she had many times before with this prisoner and others. Well paid work after all. Maria knew there was more to the woman though, seeing the excited quivering of her lips under the brown hood.

“We can switch, sure. Don’t think you’re gonna be the one making her talk.” the lightning mage said and cleaned his blood stained hands. Some of the attacks had been a little more violent.

“I tell you she doesn’t feel pain anymore...” the first mage said and stepped up before Maria, grabbing her hair and pulling her head up to look into her eyes. “You’re not feeling anything anymore, are you? I tell you she’s been dead for a long time. Good gig to level, I’m gonna join the adventurer guild in another couple months.” the mage said, making another one in the room laugh.

“You’ve been saying that for years. Don’t fool yourself, you’re too much of a coward to actually go out there. Even if you get all your skills to the second stage down here.” the second mage said.

As predicted an interrogator joined Maria soon after. To her delight he was more into hitting her than talking to her. Some quiet after the previous group talking about their miserable lives, the only actual torture she had to go through in this hellhole. Luckily this one didn’t yet decide to rape her as many had done before. Every single one of their faces was engraved in her mind. Every healer, every torturer and every interrogator. And most of all the rare visits by someone better clothed than a beggar. They were the ones responsible for her situation and the ones that would pay dearly should she ever get out.

Just when she thought the interrogation had ended and she would finally be left alone for a couple hours due to staff shortage in the prison, two steps resounded behind her.

“What do you want?” the interrogator asked, wiping his big arms clean of all the blood, wincing back at an injury one of her teeth had caused. She had read him quickly enough and angled her head well enough to cause a bit of pain in return. One of the few upsides in her days.

The person in the room with them walked closer to the prisoner, ignoring the mage draining her mana and the healer standing nearby. “I have a certain interest in this woman.” Maria’s eyes shot open and she fought with her whole will to stop herself from tensing up. Luckily her hair was hanging in front of her face, not revealing the only visible reaction she had shown. Her heart started beating faster and she made it slow down. One of the many things she had learned to do inside the prison.

‘It’s him...’ she thought, waiting with her whole being in anticipation for the next words from the man.

“I’d like to have some...privacy. If you all understand...” he said and the sound of appearing coins could be heard. They were flung towards all the rooms occupants in painful slowness. Luckily the practice was known well enough and Maria had been on the receiving end of the bargain many times before, at least in the first two years.

“Have your fun noble. You know the dangers I hope, this one’s apparently above 200 and dangerous. Not that I’ve ever noticed any fight in her...” the man said, chuckling and moving her head around violently while grabbing her hair.

“How long do I have?” the man said and touched her back.

“Ten minutes max, the spell’s effects lessen after and we don’t want anybody injured.” the mage draining her mana said and stopped his spell, putting the coins into his pocket before leaving the room. The healer followed when the interrogator decided to punch her one last time, removing three of her teeth. Considering the healers they probably had a full room of her bones stored away already.

“Knock before you come in if you will.” the man said and turned, watching the interrogator leave.

As soon as the lock closed, the man walked around her, coming to a stop before her face. He grabbed her hair and hit her hard in the stomach. Maria coughed. Another hit and he closed in on her face.

“Can they listen?” the question came with a third hit and all of Maria’s tension broke. She quivered in her restraints and played her part.

“No, they only watch.” she whispered her reply.

“Foolish, I would’ve put you on watch every second of every day.” the man said. “Are you still in there?” he asked, slapping her hard, moving her hair out of the way. Their eyes locked as her head moved back and Maria’s lips strained to not move upwards.

“Same as the day you left Edwin.” she said.

“I expected nothing less. Someone I met on the road told me about the second stage of pain tolerance. How boring was it?” Edwin asked, testing the restraints around her and continuing to hit her occasionally to keep the image up.

“Like you wouldn’t believe. What’s the plan?” Maria asked, realizing the young man she had fallen in love with so long ago had grown not just in height but also in strength. Level 218 to be exact.

“No runic traps either, just like the sources confirmed... you go on my back and hold on as best as you can.” Edwin explained, making Maria a little annoyed at the fact that he didn’t involve her but considering the circumstances it was understandable. “I’m sorry...” Edwin said and Maria couldn’t stop her tears anymore.

“You will hit me for this. I was never meant to see you cry.” he said and tried to wipe away her tears. “Come, you’ve been bound long enough.” the man said as two swords appeared in his hands, the steel restraints holding her in place shattered in an instant and Maria found herself falling. The world stopped before she was caught. Looking up she was staring at the back of Edwin’s head. Her hands and legs moved around him to secure herself as best as she could. Every muscle in her body ached from being used again after such a long time. What irritated her the most was the smile on her face. It felt wrong but she couldn’t stop it as Edwin got up from his crouch, his swords brandished the man stepped towards the door, a red mist forming around his body.

# Chapter 97 Change

## Chapter 97 Change

The metal hold of the spear like arrow laid cold against Ilea's hand as she carefully pulled the string of her massive bow backwards, focusing on the moving targets set before her. The last bit of breath left Ilea's mouth and she let go, the wind enchantment of her bow coming to life in the last moment, giving her arrow just a bit more speed. She watched it fly and punch through three targets before the metal arrow buried itself inside the wall of the training hall.

A dull noise resounded and then silence came to the hall as Ilea breathed in her next breath.

"Passable, at best." came the harsh verdict from her teacher. Ilea smiled brightly as her bow vanished inside one of her bracelets and she went for a big hug. Martha's dodging skills weren't quite up to dealing with the agile Ilea and she quickly found herself caught in her pupil's embrace.

For the first time in three months Ilea had been deemed passable. She still sadly lacked any archery related skills but still it was a big achievement for the healer turned warrior standing inside one of the Hand's training halls, hugging her teacher.

"Thank you so much for teaching me!" Ilea exclaimed, finally letting go of the woman who was already gasping for air. It had been a fun time for Ilea. Next to her more serious and demanding training in all her other skills and learning about monsters living in Elos, she found archery to be a surprisingly



fun past time. Additionally it would add a somewhat dangerous ranged attack to her arsenal of skills, even though she didn't have any related skills to enhance it.

“Don't get so excited. You still lack any skills. Why do you even focus on this, it's a waste of bloody time.” the woman commented but Ilea was already not listening anymore, still happy about her previous comment. She left Martha to her negative blabbering to wait in another hall for her team fighting lesson. Tomorrow they would get their first mission after everybody had agreed, considering their skill growth. Kyrian had delayed the whole thing another week as he wanted to get his second class' skills just a little higher.

Not just her archery had improved in the past three months and Ilea quickly checked through her skills and stats as she sat waiting in the training hall where team 34 would soon join her for their daily lesson. She was ready to level her classes again and if she was honest she was itching to finally get some real action again. They all had a lot of close calls in their bouts but there was something exciting about the unknown that simply wasn't there anymore fighting against her team members.

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 0*

*Unspent 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 203*

- Active: Destruction – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*
- Active: Blink – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2*
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16*
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20*

- *Passive: Hunter's Sight* – lvl 18
- *Passive: Azarinth Perception* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16
- *Passive: Azarinth Reversal* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2

## *Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 199*

- *Active: Shroud of Ash* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10
- *Active: Form of Ember* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14
- *Active: Ash Surge* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4
- *Active: Body Heat Manipulation* – lvl 12
- *Active: Wave of Ember* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9
- *Passive: Ashen Wings* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12
- *Passive: Body of Ash* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4

## *General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language* - lvl 5
- *Identify* - lvl 7
- *Meditation* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15
- *Poison Resistance* – lvl 17
- *Heat Resistance* – lvl 19
- *Pain Tolerance* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4
- *Mental Resistance* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8
- *Fear Resistance* – lvl 1
- *Water Resistance* – lvl 6
- *Wind Resistance* – lvl 7
- *Lightning Resistance* – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5
- *Ice Resistance* – lvl 7
- *Crystal Resistance* – lvl 6

- *Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 12*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 575*

*Endurance: 285*

*Strength 246*

*Dexterity 350*

*Intelligence 500*

*Wisdom 305*

*Health: 5750/5750*

*Stamina: 2850/2850*

*Mana: 3050/3050*

The big changes were of course the new second stages for Azarinth Reversal and many of her Ash Wielder skills.

*Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2:*

*You have learned of Destruction and Reconstruction. Now you will learn of their Reversal.*

*Upon activation, Destruction will send a part of the struck enemy's mana into yourself. No mana will be released on impact, rendering Destruction's offensive potential to zero.*

*Upon activation, Hunter Recovery will send a destructive force of channeled mana into yourself or an enemy you touch, the healing aspects are reduced to zero.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: You may have both aspects activated at the same time.*

*Category: Body Enhancement*

Ilea had already tried this and it effectively meant that she could drain a small amount of mana with every attack using Destruction, nearly making it pay for itself. Additionally every prolonged touch would lead to destructive mana being forced into her opponents, without having to consider her ability to heal herself. The skill became something she started using in every single fight compared to the occasional surprise it had been for her enemies before.

*Active: Ash Surge – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4*

*Create a wave of ash and ember with you at its center. Distance, density and speed depend on skill level and mana invested (max 60 Mana).*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Focus the direction and density of the surge.*

*Category: Ashen Magic*

The second stage of Ash Surge added surprising diversity to the spell. Ilea could now summon ash in a controlled manner in front of her or to her side to manipulate it. Additionally she wouldn't blind her team mates whenever she used the skill. The density addition to the second stage made it usable as a distraction even in the last moment of an attack and there was little reason for Ilea to hold back on using the spell, except of course for the mana cost.

*Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9:*

*Your control over Ash and Ember increases dramatically. Bend it to your wishes and shroud the path before you.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Ash and Ember have become your ally. Your control increases greatly.*

*Category: Ashen magic*

Ash and Ember Manipulation was a little strange to define for Ilea. Even before it reached the second stage she wasn't sure if it was a viable skill to have. It had come from Fire Manipulation she had gotten with her Fire Mage class. With the second stage she was now much more in control of any ash she summoned through her Ash Surge or even through her wings. When Ilea found herself in front of a mirror and summoned her black elven armor while she controlled some ash around her, she was determined to never lose the skill. It simply looked too good and she had the feeling that it influenced all her other ashen skills.

It was only reasonable to assume that Fire Manipulation increased one's power of fire spells, why would this be any different?

*'Passive: Ashen Wings – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2*

*Your understanding of Ash Wielder allows you to form wings from ash and ember. Strike your enemies from above and close the distance to deliver your wrath.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Your wings become more dense and tangible, able to help you defend and attack.*

*Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic*

This one was perhaps Ilea's favorite change. She could now slap people with her wings. Considering her speed it was a force to be reckoned with as well. Not remotely comparable to her fists but certainly helpful. The defensive capability the wings added weren't too shabby either, making her able to block smaller projectiles without taking any damage, like Kyrian's small needles. The two wings were like an added layer of Shroud of Ash,

although much weaker in defense they weren't affected by at least curse attacks.

*Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12:*

*Increases your perception by 45.5% when fighting without a weapon [Effect after bonuses 182%].*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Effects apply with weapons as well. Opportunity calls, you notice possible critical weak points on enemies with more ease.*

*Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic*

*Passive: Body of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11:*

*Increases your reflexes and speed by 45% when fighting without a weapon [Effect after bonuses 180%].*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Effects apply with weapons as well. Your instincts sharpen and your ability to avoid damage to your vitals when dodging increases.*

*Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic*

Body of Ash and Eyes of Ash went hand in hand. With their second stages the focus on the hand was reduced by quite a bit but they added very noticeable additions to Ilea's fighting. She became more efficient, more fluent as soon as she had reached the second stage for either of the skills. Neither would she slow down anymore whenever she used her bow or gauntlets.

*Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4:*

*You are familiar with the fighting style of Ash. Damage inflicted with your own body and while shrouded in Ash is 61.5% higher [after bonuses 246%].*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Shroud your weapons in ash to produce various effects.*

*Shrouded weapons deal additional damage. Affected by Ash and Ember*

*Manipulation.*

*Category: Body Enhancement*

Ilea was a little hung up on Ashen Warrior's second stage. Azarinth Fighting had given her a reaction time bonus of 40% which was ridiculous. With time she learned to value the new addition to Ashen Warrior. With her higher and higher level of Ash and Ember Manipulation it was a simple matter to shroud any of her weapons in a dark mist of ash. Her hands luckily counted as weapons as well. Not her head or her knees sadly but her hands and feet were affected.

The part about various effects was great as well, letting Ilea produce small spikes to increase armor penetration or even blades similar to her Blue Steel Gauntlets, not close to as damaging but it was something. Most of all it looked impressive and Ilea couldn't stop herself from giggling as she combined her Ash and Ember Manipulation with the newly shrouded hands and elven armor to form quite the spectacle to look at.

The stats Ilea had gotten went straight into Strength, with the eventual goal to be able to use her heavy gauntlets but also because it was behind her other stats and she learned specifically when fighting against Claire that her normal skills were sometimes not as effective as pure physical force.

To round it all up, Ilea's Resistances were heightened as well. The main magic types used by her teammates at least, some of them even reaching the second stage. Contrary to Pain Tolerance, the other Resistances didn't completely nullify the damage taken but it still felt like a massive boost with all of them.

Mental Resistance now reflected a part of the damage done to the attacker, making it much harder to attack Ilea that way. Lightning Resistance now let her body harness a part of the energy used in the attacks to fuel her Mana and Stamina. This was especially useful when fighting against Trian. The pauses needed by each of the fighters was now close to even. As Trian's skills grew as well, the distance of sustainability wasn't quite closed though.

The last Resistance that had reached the second stage was Curse Resistance and it simply halved the duration of any curse's effect on her. The effect was much more noticeable than she had anticipated at first. Kyrian had explained to her that a curse's main strength came from its lasting effect. One of his classes' attacks was effectively half as effective on Ilea than before she reached the second stage of the Resistance.

All in all it made Ilea question why not more people leveled their Resistances. Either there were no healers available or people simply weren't willing to go through the agony of the process. Specifically Pain Tolerance wasn't easy but it was the one necessary to quite simply level the rest. As long as a healer was available of course.

The team didn't quite agree with Ilea pushing them to level their defenses as well but had found her and her Resistances to be perfect for their training. They did agree to go through some pain and had to fight each other constantly anyway but nothing was quite as efficient for skill training than to push all of your power into attacking someone who could take it. Apparently the training got much less efficient as soon as Ilea reached the respective second stages of her defenses, explaining why not all noble houses and cities simply used a high leveled tank type for everyone else to attack.

For the skill to grow there had to be damage done and each and everyone of team 34 found it increasingly hard to damage Ilea. The Resistance sessions were still continued of course but they became more willing to attack each other as well, to Ilea's delight. She had grown to like them over the past months, even Trian and it would be quite disappointing to see one of them die because of low resistances.

Ilea summoned one of Keyla's meals and started eating. Contrary to what she had feared, the food stayed as amazing as the first time she had tasted it. The cook explained that with her high level in the class, everything she prepared would hold a certain edge that others wouldn't have. The dishes didn't improve ones stats or skills but Ilea believed a happy belly was a happy and focused mind. And a focused mind won bouts.

She was halfway through her dish when the first of her team arrived in the hall. Kyrian, clad in his newly forged full plate spike armor that had



extensions and separable parts complimenting his growing control of metal. Both his defensive and offensive capabilities skyrocketed with the addition of the armor, made by Balduur, enchanted by Iana and paid for by Ilea. It took nearly a week for her to convince him that she would be paying and another week to convince Balduur to actually produce the armor.

Kyrian nodded lightly at the waving Ilea who still had a spoon in her face. One of Kyrian's conditions on letting Ilea pay was that a cape would be added to the armor. A cape weaved with metal. This had been the main reason Balduur was so hard to convince but Ilea was just glad that her mate got the armor in the end. Both armor and cape were made with a high quality alloy that sported both durability and penetrative power when used in attacks. The high weight of the armor was a detriment for Kyrian at first but his mobility wasn't one of his strengths either way.

It was a good way for him to train his body as well and considering his nature as a mage that had certainly been necessary. His gray eyes shone from the slit in his helmet, intensified by the otherwise dark and nearly black color of the armor.

"Nobody here yet?" he asked as Ilea put down her bowl and got up from her sitting position.

"Wanna start?" she asked, her wings forming behind her as she smirked at the man. Both Form of Ember and State of Azarinth came to life as a burst of ashen mist was released above Ilea, quickly twirling downwards and around the woman.

"Sure." Kyrian answered in a typical manner and walked towards the middle of the hall. The quiver like metal object strapped to his back moved a little as dozens of metal spheres came to life inside of it and flew out to circle the man. Four of the spheres splintered to become floating needles, thin enough to perform surgery.

Contrary to the earliest encounters Ilea had with the man, the needles flowed downwards and in a circle around him before they scratched into the stone floor, producing an orchestra of screeches. Ilea was wearing a Hand training

leather armor as she had for the past three months. Many hadn't survived their bouts and today's copy would struggle to hold up as well.

She flew upwards as the ash twirled around her, an additional and much denser shroud formed around her just when the screeching came to an end and a cold feeling filled the hall. A dull green light was emitted from the scratches in the floor around Kyrian for a second while mana flowed into one of Ilea's bracelets, making her bow appear with an arrow already placed in her hand.

From her position in the air she saw the beautiful work of scratched runes in the floor and drew back her bow, aiming for his head. The arrows were still stored in her necklace but she had the others believe they were inside of her bracelet as well. The spear like arrow reached her ear before she let it fly.

One of Kyrian's spheres flattened into a disc and intercepted the attack, deflecting the spear just enough for it to miss him. The sound of metal upon metal signaled the start of their training session while both of the contestants smiled with focused eyes and tense bodies.

# Chapter 98 Statistics

## Chapter 98 Statistics

Ilea blinked around Kyrian as usual and tried to find a gap in his defensive line of metal. More and more Ash was released to wards the somewhat stationary man, making it hard for him to see the moving target. Occasionally an arrow was loosed both towards Kyrian and the runes on the ground around him. Even with her high amount of Curse Resistance it was a massive detriment to enter his domain. Combined with the high amount of spheres still hovering around him it meant nothing else but death.

An important lesson that every member of their team had learned in the span of the past three months was that Ilea didn't quite fear death as much as she probably should. 'There it is...' she thought and blinked into the curse rune and close to her target. Ash whirled around her foot as her kick connected, the formed spike of ash cutting into the unprotected back of Kyrian's knee with added Wave of Ember and Destruction spells.

The spheres expanded and cut deep into Ilea's protections, drawing blood on both her face, leg and side. She ripped away from the metal and blinked backwards in the same time Kyrian buckled on his injured knee, catching himself with an arm on one of his spheres. A mist of needles followed Ilea's last position but she was already lost in the sea of dark air, heavy with ash.

Her wounds healed in seconds while the shroud of ash around her closed even quicker. Another arrow was loosed towards the man and this time the deflection led the spear directly into the runes on the ground below him.

Their effect wouldn't vanish immediately when the runes were disturbed but it would weaken over time. The curse's effect on Ilea was already waning as she circled in the air around her defensive opponent whose only attack was the hovering needles and spheres of metal traveling through the ash, trying to find something to connect with.

Azarith Hunter Sphere combined with Ilea's speed and perception were too much for such a tactic to bear any fruit. The flying metal was simply a small obstacle course for her to overcome with flying and blinking before she would inevitably arrive again to deliver her deadly payload of destructive mana and physical force. Kyrian had formed spheres around all his joints, making him both more protected but also more immobile.

A tactic he had used against Ilea with more and less success before. Her answer was simple arrows at first but as time went on so did Kyrian's perception and speed of both movement and manipulating the metal around himself increase. Her attacks would be deflected in the last moments, bringing the fight to a stalemate.

Even though his defensive spheres could take Ilea's fully powered punch, there was one thing they didn't quite manage to block. Ilea blinked in behind the man, spikes forming around the spheres closest to her as parts of his armor loosened to pierce her as well. Two spheres moved to intercept her and expanded into discs when a black obsidian gauntlet materialized on her moving fist before impacting on the defensive measures put in place.

A loud clang resounded through the hall as metal spikes impacted Ilea's shroud of ash, the needles coming from behind deflected by her wings. Some of the metal managed to pierce and draw blood while cursing the target but while Kyrian managed to partially pierce Ilea's defenses, the heavy fist crashed both metal disks together and landed them right on his back, putting all of her enhanced body's strength combined with the weight of black obsidian into one punch.

Kyrian remained standing, stabilizing himself on two metal spheres before Ilea vanished again. Seven more of the same encounters happened in the next thirty seconds, each of them ending in more damage to Kyrian while she simply healed the damage done to her. Not enough time was left for the metal

mage to orient himself against the assault. The last punch was too much for him and with an awkward angle, Kyrian couldn't stabilize himself against the force anymore.

The impact of the fist shot the man forward through his own field of metal spheres, one of them impacting his head and ending his flight rather quickly and with another impact on his back. Ilea knew how much he could take but this hit would be the end of their fight. He would still put up an impressive defense even while lying injured on the ground but it was only a matter of time for her to push through, she had proven that many a time before.

“Over?” she asked and got a painful groan in response, all metal clattering to the ground around her. Ilea concentrated and all the ash in the air around them slowly came downwards before the floor was covered in a dark gray carpet. She blinked to the man when his helmet vanished. Iana had added the feature but informed them that the whole armor sadly wasn't possible with her skills.

Blood came out of his mouth and he looked at her with pained eyes. She touched his face and pushed her healing mana inside of him.

“Well done.” Trian said from the side as everyone clapped for the two. “Another one for the healer.” he said with an added layer of mockery in his tone. Something Ilea gave up on removing, probably too ingrained with his being. She sat down on Kyrian's armor and finished healing him in the next minute or two. His back was severely injured and she doubted the man could even stand if he wanted to. He was ill suited to fight her but Ilea knew that it came down to her Ash Surge and Curse Resistance. Without either the fights would turn out quite differently.

No Ash Surge meant a more even field and Kyrian had even managed to win a couple of those fights against her. Against Trian it looked a little different, both for Ilea and for Kyrian. Ilea lost over half her fights against the noble but she was catching up slowly, especially since reaching the second tiers of her Ash Wielder skills and Lightning Resistance. Kyrian on the other hand won nearly every fight against Trian. The lightning was easily deflected and Trian had no way of countering the curse, even with his high mobility. Neither did he have a way to shroud Kyrian's vision as Ilea's Ash Surge did. And lastly he lost if he simply went for an attack like Ilea did. His

vampirism didn't quite counteract the damage Kyrian's metal managed to dish out.

"Nicely done Ilea. It's still impressive to see someone able to punch through Kyrian's defense. He might even be a more efficient tank than you are." Joseph said, nodding to both of them.

"Only until he gets hit." Eve said from the side and giggled, getting an annoyed grunt from Trian. The noble was likely annoyed at his inability to land exactly that first hit and that a simple punch of Ilea managed to land while his lightning did next to nothing.

"Those gauntlets of yours are still frightening to me..." Claire said. The woman had refused any help offered from Ilea regarding new specialized gear from Balduur. She had at least met with Iana to discuss enchanting and her runes but that was it. The woman usually sat behind her defensive domes while she summoned explosions around herself or tried to trap her opponents in a dome themselves. Everything about her had improved but considering everyone else didn't stand still either Ilea considered her the second weakest one on one fighter in their team.

Whenever they would split up and fight each other the team with Claire usually won though so there was that.

"Why didn't Kyrian get that metal?" Eve asked, helping the man up after he was completely healed by Ilea. Claire summoned a bunch of wind to clean the ash away while they talked.

"It's too heavy. The manipulation skill doesn't negate weight." Trian explained, an interjection he likely wouldn't have made three months ago. Ilea was glad he at least started interacting with them somewhat normally. "The only reason this brute is able to wield it is because of her storage bracelets." he said, getting a smile from Ilea.

"Aww, are you still mad that somebody else has storage items?" Ilea asked, making him lift his hand but put it down quickly after. He shook his head and visibly tried to calm down. 'At least he learns...' Ilea smirked and punched her fists together. "Who's next?"

“Actually I have some info on your job that starts tomorrow.” Joseph said, calming the mood down a bit.

“Yea I have some questions as well, most importantly we’ll be back for the tournament right?” Eve asked. The woman had been going on about it for the past four weeks already and the others were mostly ignoring it. Claire was the only one sharing the enthusiasm and talked about opportunities for new tactics and seeing other teams fight.

“About that, that’s the reason I’ve been somewhat absent from your trainings in the past two weeks but as you were training outside of the designated time anyway it’s no matter. It starts in two weeks so you should be fine. The job is a simple monster extermination in a silver mine north of the Isanna Desert. About three weeks travel eastwards with a caravan but I’m sure you’ll find a way to make it back in time.” Joseph explained, handing Claire a piece of paper.

“Is that all we have to go on?” she asked after looking the piece over and even checking the backside.

“That’s more than many usually work with. The Shadow’s Hand isn’t called for a weak or known enemy.” Joseph said, crossing his arms in front of himself.

“Four teams of adventurers already went in and nobody came back. One of the teams was twenty people strong, their leader at level 150.” Claire checked through the information again.

“How long you think we need there?” Eve whispered to Ilea, standing next to her.

“Half a day? Not sure, you’re pretty heavy.” Ilea whispered back and got a joking punch to her side, ignoring the whispered threat of murder.

“We’ll be careful and if we can’t handle it we can just leave again or get reinforcements. Pay happens after completion.” Kyrian commented and Joseph nodded.

“We never get swindled?” Ilea asked, smiling.

“Oh they try. We have a certain... reputation when it comes to that.” Joseph said and mirrored her expression, a rather rare sight on his face. Ilea nodded in understanding.

“When do we leave?” she asked.

“You can go tomorrow at dawn. This is also somewhat of a test, not that this is necessary for you but know that half of new teams lose at least one member on their first three missions together.” Joseph said, putting a bit of a lid on the excitement of Ilea.

‘Well 83.4% of statistics are made up...’ she thought and tapped her leather armor. She would wear her elven one tomorrow for sure but still wouldn’t reveal her storage necklace if not absolutely necessary. Thinking of armor she had another question for Joseph.

“Will we get the cool black mist armor everyone has? We’re going out after all aren’t we?” Ilea asked.

“An enchanter will take care of that tomorrow. The armor is your own and we will add the effect to it. Don’t worry any previous enchantments will be unaffected, there were zero cases so far where the enchantment caused any problems. Oh and we will have to dye your armor black. I hope nobody has a problem with that.” Joseph continued. The group looked at Trian who was already chewing on his lip.

“Don’t worry nobly, black plus the blood of our enemies equals one combination you wear every other day, right?” Ilea joked but it seemed to make something click in the man’s mind.

“You’re right. We’ll have to find something to kill quickly then. Wait no, I can just buy blood.” the noble said out loud, making Eve shake her head.

“You shouldn’t worry about style when it comes to actually dangerous situations.” Eve said with mockery in her voice.



“You wouldn’t understand.” came the immediate response but Claire managed to distract the two with another question.

“The runes we saw in Eregar’s Haven?” Kyrian and Eve strained their ears at that.

“I informed the responsible people and was told they were preparations for the tournament.” Joseph said “I didn’t get anything else and don’t look at me like that. I know what you said but even one of the elders is a summoner so he would know what he’s talking about. Perhaps it’s a new challenge for the contestants. There are new ones every other year after all.” Joseph finished, a little overwhelmed by Claire’s worry.

Ilea had asked Claire about it and the answer was simply that she had a bad feeling about the runes. Not quite enough to do anything substantial. Ilea was reminded of her corporate days in the fast food chain and how customer complaints were redirected up into the responsible office somewhere far away and likely straight from the printer into a shredder. A really nice shredder though so the customers would feel appreciated.

“The golden shredder...” Ilea mumbled and got a confused look from Eve.

“I hope there are no shredders...” the whispered response in turned confused Ilea. They hadn’t learned about a shredder in their monster knowledge classes yet after all.

The rest of the day went more or less just like the previous ones did. First the team fighting with Joseph which consisted mostly of bouts and resistance trainings between the members and then team tactics lessons which consisted of more bouts but somewhat more strategic ones. Trian had started joining them after the first month came to an end and his seamless integration into Claire’s planning and trainings left both of them in a positive light.

They had learned to move as a team, at least in practice. Some rare occasions for team fights had presented themselves inside Eregar's Haven but little had come of them. Every time the fights had to be stopped early because someone got heavily injured. Both in team 34 and the others. Ilea at least was never one of them, proving to be rather resilient even against people of similar destructive power to Trian.

Those encounters were rare as though there was a sizable amount of people in Viscera, the Haven was vast and most teams kept to themselves. With the tournament coming up that would surely change.

“So are you all going to join the tournament?” Liam asked between teaching them about the previously mentioned shredder after Eve had insisted Ilea learn about it. Ilea had to agree that the name fit the descriptions rather well. Little would be left to bury should one encounter such a mass of bladed fury.

“We don't plan to.” Claire answered the question. Though Eve had talked excessively about the tournament that happened every three to six months for members of the Shadow's Hand, the thought of joining never seemed to come up. Ilea already smiled as she saw Eve's eyes slowly open, an idea forming inside of her mind.

‘Wha if???’ Ilea thought and chuckled when Eve uttered those exact word a couple seconds later.

“What if we Do join?” it apparently seemed like a revolutionary idea to her and Ilea couldn't deny that she itched to fight some interesting classes. The only negative part was that she had to hold back. Not because she wanted to kill them but holding back was definitely harder than losing oneself in fury and blood. At least in her opinion. It did help her grow in skill in the past three months and she found some additional respect for Claire and Trian who had the firepower to end any other team member except for her in but moments.

At least that had been true two months ago. All of them had brushes with death but that was nothing new to any of them.

“You really want to join? I sure would like to show them what we’ve got.” Trian agreed with Eve for once. If anything got him to participate it was to show off. He probably even meant his shiny robes and not his skills. Definitely not the other members of his team.

“You won’t be the spotlight you know?” Ilea smirked, lounging in her seat but definitely amused by the situation.

“You don’t think so? At least everyone will be able to see me compared to your black dirt cloud.” he said nonchalantly, only a faint sound of mockery in his tone.

“Good, they’ll know to fear me.” Ilea said and felt like his immature behavior was rubbing off on her. She shook her head and decided not to contribute anything else to the conversation, lest her edge cut through the chair she was sitting on.

The others didn’t seem to take it as a joke. At least until Trian snorted. Eve clapped her hands together before he could retort though. “So it’s three to two! We’re joining the tournament.” she exclaimed.

“We can’t join the tournament.” Claire said, sighing at the whole ordeal. “We have to get permission from Joseph and we have to successfully finish a level three mission.”

“What the hell’s a level three mission?” Ilea asked, breaking her resolution not to say anything else in but half a minute.

“It’s a categorization and we’d never get a mission at that level for our first one.” Claire explained.

“How do they categorize it without knowing what the hell’s in that mine?” Ilea asked.

“It’s math, complex algorithms and complicated risk analysis put together with veterans evaluating the missions.” the explanation sounded like a heated poker player explaining to Ilea why the game had skill involved. Perhaps it did but what she knew after going into the Taleen dungeon’s throne room was that deep caverns in Elos were about as predictable as the success of crypto currencies.

# Chapter 99 Housing

## Chapter 99 Housing

“So they guess?” Ilea asked. Claire seemed actually annoyed, a very rare occurrence Ilea had found. “Alright, let’s say they don’t and it makes sense but can a mission’s classification change?”

“It can but you’ll have to bring proof and argue for the change. Not something that is easy to justify. And it’s going to be tough arguing for a level three on a level one mission.” Claire’s explanation just seemed like an excuse for the rating system to Ilea. Considering the members would likely get paid accordingly, it made sense.

“Then there better be a bloody shredder in there.” Ilea said and smiled, getting a chuckle from Eve.

“Let’s focus on the mission and if we can join after we will. Otherwise we’ll be able to learn a lot from the fights either way.” Kyrian finally interjected, his voice of reason acting like a relieving potion for Claire’s mind, if one went by her facial expression.

“Sounds good, I do of course like the idea of killing a shredder.” Trian said, getting a smile from Ilea alone.

“Alright, let’s get back to work. You can finish discussing that later, children.” Liam said but to his annoyance didn’t get much of a reaction from anybody, not even the noble. Ilea saw with her sphere that Trian’s eye twitched a little though which made her happy. Annoying the hypocritical

man with a fist of gold up his ass and an arrogance to rival an emperor gave her a fuzzy feeling deep down in her heart. Of course it wasn't her that caused it this time but his annoyance was there.

*The shredder has up to 738 blades of bone growing out of its flexible body. It's most common approach is the surrounding of a foe followed by furious movement. The resulting damage is likely one of the reasons for its name. The....*

“We should take the day off before the first mission.” it was Claire who suggested the day off, at least from everything except the classes. “I need time to prepare runes and provisions anyway.” Ilea was keeping back a smile, thinking of her necklace that simplified preparations a thousandfold. She couldn't imagine waiting at a gate for check in anymore after having used the magical device for the past months.

Food wasn't an issue, clothing wasn't an issue. Not even getting on the clothes was any effort anymore. She still sometimes practiced getting on and off her armor just in case she'd lose the item at some point or if it was stolen. It seemed like a rather slim possibility but nonetheless something to be prepared for. ‘For all the training and preparing we did in the past months we still know jack shit about what's in that mine we'll clear out tomorrow...’ she thought.

“I agree, I'll have some preparations to do as well.” Kyrian agreed with their unofficial team leader. Even Trian agreed as he had to prepare quite a bit considering he'd be gone from the city for a week or longer. Ilea felt the day off to be unnecessary. She had food and a bunch of stuff in her necklace, no further preparation would be needed. It really was easier as soon as one had a certain level and resistances to boast. She contemplated on how to spend the day without filling it with training. ‘Maybe I'll finally show him?’ she thought and smiled at the idea.

“We’ll meet tomorrow at dawn then. North gate of Ravenhall, alright? Don’t forget to visit the enchanter for your armor changes.” Claire informed them and got some confirming gestures in response. They quickly split up to do their own preparations for the mission, Ilea finishing up the only thing left to do in Viscera.

Her wings vanished, leaving some floating ash behind which Ilea floated quickly towards the cliff behind her with Ash manipulation. It would soon join the ocean in its vastness. The cliff side had changed drastically in the past three months, the two workers outdoing their promises. Of course Ilea had likely overpaid them but she really wanted a satisfying product.

Many sessions of discussing the drafts for the house had been held in the first two weeks after she had hired the Lars and Alina, the architects and builders from Morhill. Ilea gave the two some modern ideas from earth regarding architecture and certainly challenged them in more than one way. The two took the suggestions and added their own experience and expertise, creating the building before her.

First they had laid the foundations, many storage and training rooms going deep into the mountainside had been created at first, outlined with high quality steel inscribed with defensive runes, both for illusionary attacks, physical ones and even some elemental. It would defend the structure against low leveled magical attacks but mostly against rust, the salt and moisture from the ocean and generally nature’s workings.

The whole frame of the structure was made of the expensive steel Ilea had purchased and brought to the site by both carrying and with her storage device if the singular pieces were small enough. The now a little daring looking structure, overhanging the cliff side by several meters was rooted deeply into the mountain and wouldn’t budge, even against heavy winds. The ocean itself was too far below for any water to actually reach the house.

The actual walls and roof of the structure were wooden. A dark brown and heavy wood that gave the structure both weight and character against the stony and dark mountainside. Two lines of wood followed along the steel skeleton both inside and outside, at least with the part of the house visible from outside. The bigger part with nearly three thirds of the room was build deep into the stone below and was only clad with wood on the inside.

To fill out the space between the metal and wood above or stone below, the two architects mixed something they called Breathing Earth, a mud like substance to hold the structure together while providing protection against the cold winds outside. Of course the warmth would be kept inside rather well too.

The exposed part of the house had a lot of big windows, many of them made from the blue glass Ilea had admired in Viscera's library. "Are you ready for a house tour?" she said, having summoned Aki who she purposefully kept inside her necklace whenever she met with the architects or came to check on the progress.

"And here I thought you had an interesting secret. A bloody house?" Aki asked "How did you pay for this even...and why is it out here?" Ilea was a little annoyed at the negativity, maybe a second opinion would help balance it out.

Five minutes later and a lot of struggling and healing later, Ilea stood in front of the house with Aki sheathed in his usual place on her leather armor and a leash that was more rope in her right hand, ending around a defeated looking Swordmouth Tiger's neck. Ilea summoned a piece of meat and threw it in front of the creature which happily ate the gift.

"See, she likes it." Aki didn't comment on it anymore.

'And now we'll do the bloody tour.' Ilea thought. She could've brought her team but didn't quite feel comfortable enough for them to find this creation. It



wasn't exactly hidden away but it would need a lot of dumb luck to stumble upon it by accident. The dark wood didn't stand out too much against the cliff side and some light illusion runes were carved into the outer layer so one's eye wouldn't be drawn on it too much.

Additionally this was hers. Ilea's private house and she already used it occasionally to get some alone time to relax or read on the few occasions where she had an hour or two to spend between trainings.

The outside of the house looked modern, at least what Ilea considered to be modern. There were a lot of angles, not even the side walls going up completely straight. It looked a little like the top side of a small zeppelin or space ship with large windows and dark wood. Something that looked quite alien in this medieval like world Ilea had found herself in nearly a year ago. 'It certainly feels longer than that...' she thought as she led the now more agreeing tiger towards the entrance.

There was a patio facing the mountain side with a wooden swing bench attached to the roof covering it. The door itself was an artwork in itself and actually one of the more expensive parts of the house. Days of work even for an experienced wood mage. Ilea turned the old school key in the lock and opened the door, leading the animal and Aki inside.

A big open room with no carpets, clad in wood opened up before them. Magical lights came to life and lit the place in a warm and cozy light. The big windows opened up the room and counteracted the heavy wood, letting in more light from outside. There were chairs and a big table, a leather sofa and the leather chair she had gotten in Salia. Spaced out to create both a lounging area and a space to eat with others. Something that had only happened with Lars and Alina so far.

No unnecessary clutter could be found in the room, a space to breathe and take in the raw nature outside the house while protected by warmth and shelter.

"It's nice. I like the simplicity but it feels a little cold." Aki commented, a sentiment Ilea certainly shared. She liked it about this room though. It captured the feeling she had when she stood alone on the cliff side,

overlooking the ocean. There was a terrace as well, only separated by a sliding window one could open. The terrace hung several meters over the cliff side and gave Ilea similar feeling to flying when she stood out there, bracing against the strong ocean winds.

She led her two visitors towards a discrete looking wooden stairway separated with another wooden wall. It led upstairs and to Ilea's new favorite place to be. In the middle of the room was her drake feather bed and on both walls were lined shelves filled with books. Above her bed hung a massive five to three meter painting of a winged drake like creature. To her it was obviously a dragon but the artist had vehemently told her not to call it that. On the far wall from the stairs between the bookshelf and her bed was a wooden cabinet with different drawers and open spaces with inscribed runes. Some of them held beverages kept cold or food kept fresh. Most of them were actually filled with food she had gotten from Keyla who had worked nearly exclusively for Ilea in the past months. Even she couldn't eat as much as the excellent cook provided.

The open floor was covered in comfortable fur from creatures Ilea had never seen before. Considering most people died from monster attacks she didn't feel bad about keeping pelts there. A sentiment not quite translatable from the human dominated earth to the monster dominated Elos. At least not yet, perhaps an industrialization was on the way even here in this magical world.

Ilea's favorite feature of the room was the roof, completely made from glass and big enough to give her the feeling she was outside. With no light pollution the stars would shine into the room with their full brilliance. The glass was a specialty from a mage in Ravenhall and had runes inscribed that could darken the glass considerably upon activation, making the room dark against both the sun and stars.

The novel Ilea had started reading two weeks ago was still lying in the messy bed, in addition of several pillows and blankets covering the massive mattress. It was her little haven and she would hunt down anything that would disturb it. Considering the placement in the house it was strategically the least defended place but Ilea didn't mind. It could be rebuilt should anything happen, except for the books but she made it a goal to only store volumes in

the shelves that held little value or quality. The good ones were far below in one of the storage rooms and her personal library.

She had actually looked for a book lover in Ravenhall and luckily found a group of somewhat noble people willing to sort through her collection from Salia for a reasonable pay. Ilea simply didn't have the time to do so herself. She had shown all the books to Aki beforehand to make sure nothing was stolen and sold it to the dagger as a categorization effort. A little bit of threatening had gotten her back the books that were removed from her collection and she even saved on some of the pay with their disregard of the contract.

Apparently there were some rather rare and priced books in her collection and she would continue to add to it. The library was the most protected room inside her house after all. Also the biggest but most of the shelves were still empty, her collection from Salia only able to fill a tenth of the big space in addition to her room.

She slowly breathed out and found herself relaxing at just the view of the place. Somewhere she could likely stay forever if it weren't for that itch she had. The itch to explore and fight, something she didn't remember having on earth. Perhaps the explorers discovering the Americas had a similar feeling like she did regarding Elos. Instead of gold and natives she would find magic, ruins and artifacts.

Gold was certainly nice as well and really gave her the opportunity to build this house in the first place. It cost her a little over a hundred gold in total for all the wood work, enchantments, labor, art and furniture filling it out. Keyla's food had come up to nearly forty gold in the past three months and Ilea had informed the cook to stop for now. There were around four storage rooms full with her food and with the convenience of magic it would still be good to eat in a hundred years to come. Should nobody disturb it of course.

Turning around, Ilea led the tiger downstairs again and into the open space. It had tried to get to some of the food in the cabinets but a strong hand on its leash dissuaded it promptly.

“I must say it seems very cozy. Not sure how much my sentiment is influenced by your continued influx of mana.” Aki commented as they went for the stairway leading down into the floor below. Like above it was open and just as big as the ground level. Compared the room holding her bed was much smaller.

There was a kitchen and dozens of crates and cupboards on the floor, lit by a much colder light than above. A big workspace was separated from the kitchen itself and provided ample space to prepare meals, something Ilea hadn't gotten around to doing yet. A further stairway led downwards and into a vertically higher room than any of the others beforehand.

On the walls were stands and racks holding weapons Ilea still held from the Taleen dungeon. Enough to supply a village with gear but mostly a waste to keep inside of her necklace. She did keep a couple weapons but most of it had been placed here. Ilea even purchased a couple sets of armor to not have the stands completely empty.

There were no further stairways and the rest of the house only held storage rooms for food and possibly rarer gear and of course the library at the lowest part. A place Ilea considered her own, just as much as the room above the ground floor. She would've shown it to Aki but the presence of a certain cat complicated the blinking maneuver a little. Two floors of storage rooms were below and another three, opened in the middle were the library.

Ten times around four meters, thirty two meters of which went into the mountain side and deep underground. Something she assumed much harder to accomplish without the help of earth magic, Lars' expertise.

“There's still plenty of space to fill.” Ilea felt the same way and heard a little bit of anxiety in Aki's voice, an unprecedented occurrence.

“What is it?” she asked and unsheathed the dagger, making the tiger next to her a little jumpy.

“Will you leave me here?” the weapon asked Ilea, making her understand the reason for Aki's anxiety.

“Of course not.” she simply stated and sheathed the dagger again, walking back upstairs and out of the house again. The leash was removed from the patient tiger and more meat was dropped in front of the creature. It quickly ran off with its food towards the waiting kittens that had grown up considerably in the past three months. Ilea had wondered how the animal got food but the question was resolved one day when she was reading in her bed, hearing the cat move outside. The monster simply ran up the steep mountain side, bursts of magic left behind it climbed the rocky wall only to vanish at the very top a couple minutes later. Ilea had watched in wonder but quickly continued to read, thinking of the absurdity of climbing cats and winged humans.

# Chapter 100 Mission

## Chapter 100 Mission

After having released the tiger, Ilea went back to her reading spot and continued where she left off. For the first time in three months she had more than just an hour or two to invest in reading and to relax. It was incredible how much the team had progressed and tomorrow they would have to prove themselves against an actual threat. Ilea was definitely more excited than nervous which left her not quite in a state to relax and read.

In the end she decided to eat in bed and maybe visit Viscera at a later point to enjoy some live music. She did miss the existence of headphones or even a radio but couldn't find anything remotely capable of producing music that wasn't alive. 'Perhaps they have record players somewhere... maybe ask the librarian about it...' the thought was interrupted by her enjoyment of the food. One of the reasons she considered the past months to be some of the best in her life.

The training was effective but her skill growth had been slowing down steadily over the past couple weeks. She was ready for some adventures again and tomorrow would see a start to them.

A cold wind was flowing through Ilea's hair as she stood on top of the wall near the north gate of Ravenhall. The guards nearby seemed to avoid looking

at her, likely a cause of her black elven armor and more importantly the black wisps of shadow occasionally flowing from it. They had no effect other than visual and Ilea was informed by the enchanter that one could easily disable it so the movement wouldn't reveal one's hiding place.

Her head was covered fully by the black helmet and the metal horns protruded a little to the side and then towards the front. The armor was heavy but Ilea didn't notice much of a difference compared to the usual leather armor. She felt safe, safer than she had ever felt before when going out into the wild of Elos. When she calmed herself down with the knowledge that she could probably flee, she was now confident that she could at least give her team mates some time before they would have to retreat, even against something like the Basilisk.

Her level was of course nowhere near a monster like that and she had no illusions about killing one but her reflexes, her perception and resilience were nothing to be easily bypassed. Adding the rare juggernaut armor on top and Ilea made quite the convincing member of the Shadow's Hand. Something to be looked at in awe by most of the population. She remembered that Jirayu the fire mage had been an impressive sight, nothing comparable to any member of her new guild. The top of humanity, at least officially.

Ilea was sure there were secret societies and noble houses holding some quite impressive members themselves but this was the general pinnacle of humanity's strength and she had reached it. 'Now to go beyond...' she thought as a dark rogue with a black face mask landed softly next to her.

Eve had a smile painted on the mask in white and Ilea couldn't discern any holes or a slit for her eyes. The woman wore black leather armor with metal pieces guarding vital points but she was certainly geared much lighter than Ilea. Both had a small pack on their backs that had also been dyed black. The few resources they took with them was a testament to their enhanced bodies, needing little to no sustenance to work for days and weeks.

Claire and Kyrian walked up to the gate, the man looking downright scary with his spiked armor now completely black. Some of the guards veered back a little even with their high levels. The Hand went out there and into the

unknown. There was quite a difference between them and a high leveled guard.

Claire was wearing an armor Ilea hadn't seen her in before. It looked somewhat heavy and had a long armored skirt that went further than her knees. With her sphere Ilea could see a lot of hidden pockets for runed plates, disks and stones inside the skirt. Her pack was the biggest, likely holding similar items within. Claire's head was only covered by a hood and cloth, revealing only her eyes.

The last to arrive was Trian. He couldn't resist putting up a show again and flew high above the city with his bright red wings of lightning, only to land next to Ilea and Eve on the wall, bending down in an exaggerated pose that wasn't quite necessary considering the fall. Ilea knew that but the guards didn't. She heard them whisper about him being the leader of the team while wondering about who they were exactly.

The noble wore an impressive looking black full plate armor that seemed both light and sturdy. Perfect for his high mobility but more geared towards defense than Ilea had expected of him. His helmet was black as well and reminded Ilea of a Greek warrior. Wisps of black smoke came out of the slit for his eyes as he moved himself to an upright position. Ilea would've clapped and joked about his dramatic entrance but she had to admit that they looked pretty scary.

She couldn't help but be a little proud of the team as well. They had worked hard and today all their training will be tested. Considering it was labeled as a level one mission it likely wouldn't be too much trouble but Ilea had learned before that an overwhelming advantage could quickly turn into a downright massacre.

Ilea looked down on Trian and couldn't help but chuckle a little in the end. He had actually gone and put blood on his armor to get some red in there. 'We're not even on a mission yet...'

"I can smell you." she said to the noble, motioning to the blood. "I hope you wash that off as soon as there's nobody to see you anymore." she finished and looked towards Claire. "Where to?"



Trian looked down on himself while Claire and Kyrian walked up to Ilea. “West over the mountain chain until we come to the Isanna desert. As soon as we meet the next chain of mountains we’ll have to slow down to find the specific town. It should be about a third of the way across the first mountain chain.” her explanation was easy enough. Ilea knew more or less where to go, having studied her own and some other maps along the way.

“I hope you know not to fly too high.” Claire said and continued, not getting an answer from Ilea “The skies do not belong to us. Never forget that.” she finished and Ilea took the advice as fact, knowing that Claire wouldn’t warn her about something trivial.

“Let’s go then.” Trian said and started hovering.

“How’s your flight Kyrian?” Claire asked the man and in response four metal spheres hovered out of his quiver that hung next to his pack. Two of them formed disks which he stepped onto while two of them he grasped with his hands. Slowly he started flying as his magic control of the metal pushed him upwards.

Ilea wondered why he didn’t just control the metal in his armor, she knew it was metal he had bonded with as he called it. She shrugged internally and decided it had likely to do with stability or speed. The man quickly flew to where Trian was waiting and twirled around in a steady maneuver, showing his apparent expertise.

“Alright you two?” Ilea asked and extended her arms a little.

“This is so embarrassing...” Eve muttered as she came to a stop next to one of Ilea’s arms. Claire stopped next to the other and nodded to Ilea.

“Then try to get a flying skill. It’s actually pretty rare to have three people in a single team able to fly.” the explanation did nothing to quell the feeling of Eve as they both grabbed Ilea’s upper arms. Dark gray ashen wings with lines of red fire in between formed behind the woman and started moving quickly thereafter.

The three people ascended slowly as Ilea got used to the weight. She would be slower but not by much, as long as the two didn't move a lot. "Claire, hand your pack to Eve, I'm unbalanced." she said, having her orders followed quickly.

"Why don't you put everything into your ring?" Kyrian asked the noble hovering next to him but didn't get a response.

"I wouldn't want him to have my stuff..." Eve said as the three people carried by Ilea came to a stop next to their male teammates.

"Come." Ilea stated and started flying westwards, her speed increasing steadily. Five minutes of flying later she found the sweet spot and continued on as Trian flew next to her, nearly at his top speed. Kyrian didn't seem to have a problem keeping up but Ilea quickly noticed that any turns she did made him fall back a little. 'Good exercise for him..' she thought as she continued, concentrating on balancing the weight of the two people she was carrying.

The mountain chain both Ravenhall and Morhill were built on was left behind just two hours of traveling later, a rocky but much lower terrain opening up before them. Ilea followed Claire's notion and went down a little lower. The barren hills and rocks went on for another hour until they were slowly replaced by dirt and sand. Ilea could now see the supposed mountain chain in the distance but it would take a while to reach it.

The team was mostly quiet through the travel, either concentrating, excited, nervous or embarrassed. All of them had mostly fought alone up until this point and though they knew each other somewhat there was little actual trust. Especially towards Trian. Eve had outrightly despised the man and was now close to tolerating him. Ilea didn't know how exactly she felt about the others but was confident enough in her own abilities to escape should worse come to worst, hopefully while carrying some of them out with her.

Three hours later the team finally reached the first mountain and paused to quickly eat and drink something. Trian had still not cleaned himself of the blood and Eve didn't like that one bit.

“Fuck off, I'll clean it when we're there.” several illusions of Eve appeared after the remark was uttered, making some red lightning spark around Trian before the others intervened.

“Keep the heat for your actual enemies sparky.” Ilea said to the noble as her buffs flared up, the slit in her helmet shining with a subdued blue and red. Claire calmed down Eve in the meantime while Kyrian stood a little helplessly to the side.

“Let's just move on. Nobly I'm sure you have water with you, nobody in that mining town will even know your family so give it a break. The smell of blood on you is gonna be a problem and you know it.” Ilea said, reasoning with the man who slowly calmed down. Glass bottles of water were summoned by the man including a cloth to wash off the blood. ‘At least he was smart enough only to put it onto the metal parts...’ Ilea thought as she watched the blood flow down and into the sand below.

The heat had increased a lot in the small distance they had traveled. It wasn't an issue for any of them, heat resistance being one of the skills they had worked on at least a little but it was still noticeable. “The town is near the fourth mountain from here. We should be able to make it in half an hour or so.” Claire said, one of her hands resting on Eve's shoulder.

Ilea couldn't see below any of their helmets even with her sphere. A handy byproduct of the shadow enchantment but a little detrimental for her at the moment. At least there were no more comments for the rest of their journey but Ilea felt emotionally more drained than at any time in the past three

months. Any tension they had was easily resolved by fighting each other, something a little ill advised in their current situation.

‘At least we’ll get something to fight soon enough...’ she thought as she slowly landed, seeing the supposed town in the distance. It was located in the valley between two of the mountains, surrounded by rocks and sand. Barely any green was visible from the elevated position they had landed on.

“That the town?” Eve asked as she stretched her arms and legs after hanging on to Ilea for the flight.

“It should be. Let’s find out.” Claire said, jumping down the slope and speeding up into a run. The others followed quickly, forming a vague formation with Claire at the front. The walls of the city weren’t very high and looked flimsy compared to something like Ravenhall. The guards visible on top of the wall formed a line as more and more of them appeared while the group got closer to the town.

A couple hundred meters around the walls was nothing but sandy rock. Claire slowed down to a jog and stopped around fifty meters before the wall, all of them clearly visible to the guards on top of the wall.

“They’re a... afraid.” Kyian’s comment was a little unexpected. They weren’t close enough to the city for the guards to be able to identify them.

“Why? We’re here to help them.” Ilea’s question got a condescending chuckle from Trian.

“They don’t know that. I’ll go talk and you wait here. If anything happens wait for my signal to interfere.” Claire said and slowly walked towards the gate of the city.

“What’s the signal?” Ilea whispered to Eve next to her.

“An explosion and flying bodyparts I assume.” Eve answered her in a similar whisper while shrugging.

The four people watched as Claire approached the gate and came to a stop around ten meters in front of it.

“The captain will soon be here. Wait until then.” Ilea made out the words of one of the guards even from the high distance.

“What are they waiting for?” Trian asked, obviously impatient. “They should be happy to receive us for fuck’s sake.” Ilea tended to agree, especially because the town had sought help from them and should know about it. She remembered how Aaron, herself and the group of adventurers who were trapped inside the Calys mine had reacted to the group of the Hand they had encountered.

“They are but they also aren’t.” Kyrian said, getting a quick look from Trian.

“Stop talking in riddles.” The noble said with a calm voice.

“The Shadow’s Hand appearing anywhere near you means they’re needed there. It’s a bad fucking sign.” Ilea explained, making the man shut up and wait. Ilea had missed if any further communication had happened between Claire and the town because of her teammates.

Two minutes of waiting later a new armored man appeared on top of the walls and promptly jumped down, landing in front of the gate and walking up to Claire. He shook her hand and talked too quietly for Ilea to hear.

Claire nodded a couple times before they shook hands again. The captain walked back to the town again, a blue fire exploding below his feet, propelling him to the top of the wall while Claire ran back to her team.

“Another team of adventurers went in two days ago and they haven’t heard back anything. The mine is in that direction, half an hour and up the mountain. We just have to follow the rails.” Claire finished, motioning towards a mountain side. Ilea couldn’t see any rails nor any other signs that there was anything nearby but she nodded nonetheless. No questions were asked and the team started running towards the indicated spot.

Five minutes later they came up on an iron railway, likely used to transport metal with a mine cart or something similar. Dust and sand was shot up as the team ran up the mountain, following the metal tracks until they passed some high rocks followed by an opening in the mountain. The sun was high and burned down on the armored squad of mercenaries.

“Let’s get some shade...” Trian said and took the lead, walking into the mine.

“What is he doing?” Eve asked and shook her head.

“Trian let Eve scout ahead, you’re here to deliver lightning and death, not die by going in alone.” Claire said, impressing Ilea with the subtle manipulation by complimenting his skills. He did in fact stop and motioned to Eve.

The woman walked up to the entrance as several illusion copies of herself came to life around her. Quickly they ran into the mine one by one. The rest of the team closed in on the girl and strained their ears to hear anything inside. “Stop the shadow enchantment.” Claire said, becoming unusually talkative when she gave commands. She had never led the whole team before but Ilea found her instant reactions and instructions to be the main reason whatever team she was on had won most bouts.

The others knew that as well and though this was their first actual mission together they all knew that Claire was good at it.

“The cavern is huge... I haven’t encountered anything so far but the illusions had to split into three different tunnels. Not a single torch is lit... it’s cold inside. Very cold.” Eve commented as her illusions advanced through the tunnels, going deeper and deeper inside.

“Dead end on the left...” she said “... what?” suddenly there was silence as Eve shook her head. “There is a corpse. It’s facing towards the exit with a pained expression on his face. He is armored, no weapon to be seen. He’s curled up as if he was in pain. I’ll go further in...” she continued.

“Death...” Eve said and staggered back a little. “My illusions in the central tunnel have faded, a last impression of death came to me...”

“Explain.” Claire asked.

“My illusions were sighted and attacked by something that caused death. I have no idea what it means, I’ve never encountered this impression. It’s... odd.”

“Spirits.” Kyrian said from the side. Liam had talked about them before but little was known about the creatures, only that they had a strong mental attack and were sighted in seemingly random places.

“Let’s go then. I hope your attack is stronger than theirs.” Ilea said and put a hand on Eve’s shoulder, grinned and walked into the mine.

# Chapter 101 Inheritor

## Chapter 101 Inheritor

All of Ilea's buffs were running at the maximum as the group slowly advanced through the mine. Eve was carrying a lit torch, not needing her hands to fight. Their tank shrouded in ash was taking the front with Eve close behind, followed by a line of the other members with Claire in the middle.

Five minutes later they came up on the corpse Eve had talked about. It was a man who looked to be in his thirties, lying dead on the ground with a distorted face. The corpse was clad in leather armor but held not a single weapon on him.

"No blood..." Claire whispered as she turned the man around on the ground, checking for any obvious wounds.

"Good thing we all worked on mental resistance..." Ilea said and chuckled, failing to lighten the mood. It seemed not everybody shared her easy going approach when advancing through an apparently haunted mine. She shrugged and continued onwards to where the man had likely come from. The team followed her in the same formation as they had before, yet none too disturbed at the corpse.

Another tunnel later the group came into a natural looking cave system, Ilea rolling her eyes at the repetitive life she had found herself in. "We've got more corpses." Ilea could see a little further than the others with her Sphere, an advantage she still held even after all the training they went through. The comment left her mouth just when her head was pressured suddenly. A



headache came out of nowhere and with it blurred visions of death and murder.

Nothing was quite clear enough to Ilea to leave a lasting impression but a couple things became clear. They were most certainly under attack and the room was spinning, making her uneven on her feet, buckling down to one knee. Hunter's Recovery came to life as soon as the headache started and slowly pushed against the mental attack. It felt like something between the demon's and Eve's attacks and Ilea found herself thinking on different kinds of mental attacks and their flairs when a sudden slap made her focus.

Again a slap landed on her face and then another one. The third one she caught with her hand, still resting on one knee her surroundings became clearer and the room stopped spinning. A feeling amplified a hundredfold through the perception of her Sphere, maybe something to turn off once a mental attack had such an influence on her.

"That's for the next one..." Ilea said, breathing out and letting her resistances and healing power flow through her mind. The attack continued through but the slaps coming from the angry woman before her made her focus, the enemy had a flair to their mental attack and as soon as she found herself able to focus on it, it became easier to counteract.

"I didn't know you were into that Eve..." Ilea said, smiling at the woman and focusing on healing herself. Deactivating the Sphere helped a lot already but it felt wrong to her, the enhanced perception something she had gotten used to too much.

"Y...you're breaking..my....aaarm!" Eve said, sweat covering her face and concentration in her eyes. The comment interrupted her humming for a couple seconds.

"Oh..." Ilea said, looking down on the arm in her grasp that looked to be bent into a wrong direction. She softened her grip and focused some healing power into the cracked bone but was still a little disoriented. There was no enemy to be seen but her head was still pounding, less and less as she got used to the mental attack. Around Ilea were the other members of their team, lying on the ground and shaking. "Well." Ilea said as she stumbled up from

her kneeling position, a bad idea as it turned out. She decided to go back on all fours and moved to the others, grabbing them one after the other and moving them closer to Eve. “This is bad I think.” she mumbled as she finally had them all huddled together.

Touching them all at once, she started pumping out as much healing power as she could, including herself and Eve. She focused on the head and specifically brain as she had with Celene after the woman had summoned a demon. Slowly she felt each of them get better, especially herself and Eve. Her health had dropped a sizable amount in the short time, even with all her resistances. ‘Lucky we had a mind mage to train with...’ she thought and smiled under her helmet, concentrating on her healing spell and trying to ignore the eerie humming coming from their own metal spell caster.

“What the hell is that Eve?” she asked a couple minutes later, her teammates weren’t spasming anymore but still unconscious.

“Death Spirits is all I can see...below our level...they’re all around us Ilea...” Eve’s voice was strained, likely the girl was defending the group and counterattacking as best she could but time was of essence.

“Should we go out? How long can you hold?” Ilea asked, using her meditation skill to keep the mana cost for healing at a minimum.

“I can hold for a while...they’re evil and crude but...many. I’m getting better at dealing with them.” the response calmed Ilea down a little, they wouldn’t be overwhelmed immediately but the others had to get going. Nobody could know what else was lurking in this cave. The first to wake was Trian, his eyes shooting open as he was pushed down again by Ilea’s hand.

“Calm down there mate and wait till Claire wakes up...” Ilea said and found the man actually listen to her, closing his eyes again and calming his breathing. Claire came to a minute later but continued lying there.

“You’re awake. Good. Apparently we’re surrounded by Death Spirits, whatever they are. Strong mental attacks but as long as I keep healing your mind you seem to be mostly alright. Eve’s defending us too.” Claire put a hand to her face and then carefully sat up, removing the pack from her

shoulder and opening the whole thing up sideways. It looked more like a suitcase this way and held many different sections with strapped on stones and plates.

Claire chose a bunch of them and started throwing them around the room, some further some very close and in a circle around them. “I need a moment...” she said just when Kyrian came to as well. Another minute passed and Claire was now sitting up properly.

“A...” she started and coughed “Ilea you keep healing, Eve you keep defending, both of you inform me when you hit 20% of whatever resource you need to keep it up.” she held out her arms and closed her eyes “Kyrian curse needle storm in all directions around us, wait for my signal.” The man had barely any time to recover but all his metal spheres came out of his pack and started hovering around the room. A dome of light suddenly formed around them, the plates Claire had placed likely the source.

“Now.” Ilea watched the spheres split as she had many times before, the loud cracks filled the cave with noise and quickly after, a storm followed. Thousands of needles flowed through the room and impacted both the walls and the spherical shield around them. A sudden shriek of dozens of screaming voices flowed through the room as the stones placed by Claire started glowing and revealed creatures of pure shadow with no faces. They were screaming and what looked like their limbs were shaking, affected by the curse. “Trian give them hell.” the dome lowered at Claire’s command and a smile lit up on the lightning mage’s face as the room erupted in even more noise and red light.

*[Death Spirit – lvl 148]*

Ilea could identify the creatures as well at that point and watched their energy snuff out as they were hit by the potent magical blasts of vampire lightning. A terrifying light show that didn’t end for a whole minute as more and more of the dozens of creatures were destroyed. Ilea activated her Sphere again when only five of them remained and found only fluctuations in the space where she saw them with her eyes but the nausea didn’t get worse anymore, likely the attacks had stopped as soon as they started fighting back.

The last five were snuffed out as four more lighting bolts hit the earth above which they had hovered, followed by a battle shout from Trian. Ilea started laughing and Eve went to one knee. Kyrian had sat up and the metal in the room slowly formed back together into spheres.

*'bang' 'Your group has defeated [Death Spirit – lvl 148]*

*'bang' 'Your group has defeated [Death Spirit – lvl 152]*

...

The messages went on for quite a while and Ilea just skipped through to the end, finding a single level up to her Ash Wielder class. Her mental resistance had leveled once as well

*'ding' 'Ash Wielder has reached level 200, 5 Stat points awarded.'*

*'ding' 'You have reached level 200 in your secondary class. 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skills are now available.'*

*'ding' 'You have 1 skill point to bring a skill into the third tier.'*

Ilea quickly checked on the others and found them to be recovering, Kyrian seemed to be busy reading as well. 'Seems safe enough now...' she thought and started reading.

*'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Ash Wielder becomes Ashen Warrior. No current stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable –*

*You have fought and killed at least a hundred enemies while in the Form of Ember. Has Ashen Warrior in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage. Has the Ash Wielder class at*

*lvl 200 or higher.'*

*'The Ashen Warrior has embraced Ash and uses it to confuse and fight her enemies.'*

*'Would you like to evolve your class [Ash Wielder] to [Ashen Warrior]?''*

Ilea just skipped through the text, immediately uninterested at the low requirements and the actual name of the class. She had a skill with the same name, all in all it looked more like a downgrade to Ash Wielder.

*'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Ash Wielder becomes Bound Ash of Kroiin. No current stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable – You follow the path of Kroiin, the great calamity. Has Ashen Warrior, Form of Ember and Eyes of Ash in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage. Has the Ash Wielder class at lvl 200.'*

*'The Bound Ash of Kroiin is frenzied by battle, the path of death and destruction following them to all places. As the great father of Kroiin has foretold his sons and daughters will bring death to all living and return all to ash.'*

*'Would you like to evolve your class [Ash Wielder] to [Bound Ash of Kroiin]?''*

A strong vibe of wrongness immediately filled Ilea's gut and she decided not to choose that one whatever the other choices would be, even Ashen Warrior would be a more acceptable class. She couldn't quite explain why she felt that way but perhaps the mention of a great father and following someone gave her cult vibes. 'Not going there, even if it's just a class description...' Ilea thought '...I have one cult class already.'

*'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Ash Wielder becomes Inheritor of Eternal Ash. No current stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable – You have followed the path of Ash. Has Shroud of Ash and four other Ash Wielder skills in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage. Has fifteen or more Resistance skills, three or more of which in the 2<sup>nd</sup> stage. Has the Ash Wielder class at lvl 200.'*  
*'The Inheritor of Eternal Ash has chosen to shroud herself in the powerful and eternal ash. Many have tried to end her and just as many have failed. She marches onwards, stronger and calmer but the Ember deep down burns hotter than ever, waiting to break out of its protective shell.'*

*'Would you like to evolve your class [Ash Wielder] to [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]?'*

'There it is.' Ilea thought with a big grin on her face and accepted the last possible class for her. Neither of the two other classes she had heard about from Dagon were even available to her but she didn't care. Inheritor of Eternal Ash sounded right up her alley, especially with all those resistances. In her sphere she saw Kyrian similarly concentrated on something other than his surroundings. 'So I'm not the only one it seems...'

*‘Class change: Ash Wielder becomes Inheritor of Eternal Ash*

*Vitality +30*

*Strength + 10*

*Dexterity + 5*

*Intelligence +15*

*Wisdom +15*

*Body enhancement magic is improved by 200%*

*All fighting styles using hand to hand combat are more refined*

*Your control over ash is enhanced greatly*

*‘Skills changed by Inheritor of Eternal Ash:*

*‘[Shroud of Ash] becomes [Veil of Ash]’*

*‘Active: Veil of Ash – 2nd lvl 10*

*A thin mist of ash forms around you to both protect you and attack nearby enemies. You are in full control. The veil increases your resilience by 74.5% [Effect after bonuses 372.5%].*

*2nd stage: Your resistances also benefit from the Veil of Ash’s bonus.*

*Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic’*

The base level of the skill had gone up from fifty to sixty percent, which Ilea found to make just as much of a difference as the added one hundred percent to Body Enhancement magic. ‘So the higher I get the more the base of the skill will make a difference...’

*‘[Form of Ember] becomes [Form of Ash and Ember]’*

*‘Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 14:*

*Ember glows within you raising your resilience, speed, strength and dexterity by 51.5% [Effect after bonuses 257.5%].*

*2nd stage: The longer you fight while in the Form of Ash and Ember, the deeper it roots. Each minute of fighting adds 15% to the bonuses with a maximum of 150%.*

*Category: Aura – Body Enhancement’*

Ilea had to read through twice to realize that Strength had been added back into the mix. It would make a ridiculous difference and might bring the change to finally be able and use her heavy gauntlets.

*‘[Ash Surge] becomes [Ash Creation]’*

*‘Active: Ash Creation – 2nd lvl 4*

*Create ash in a certain radius around you. It can be used as a surge to blind or as a shroud to hide.*

*2nd stage: You can control the density of the ash to an extent.*

*Category: Ashen Magic’*

Ilea wasn't quite sure how versatile the skill would be now, combined with Ash and Ember Manipulation and the new notice in the class description but she certainly felt like trying it out. "Shall we continue then? I feel like we can handle them if an ambush like that happens again. Nearly no experience sadly..." Eve commented, taking Ilea out of her concentration on the messages. Claire looked around and Ilea found them all standing again, preparing to continue. Except for her and Kyrian.

"Class evolution?" Claire understood and checked on her runes that were still distributed around them. "We can wait a couple more minutes, no need to rush. Eve and I will prepare should anything come close again. It's a miracle nothing did after the noise caused by Trian." it was in no way an insult but the man still ground his teeth a little. Both Ilea and Kyrian nodded and continued.



*‘[Body Heat Manipulation] becomes [Embered Body Heat]’*

*Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 12*

*Regulate the heat in your body to protect yourself against harsh climates or even blend in your environment.*

*Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic*

Nothing had changed with the skill description, at least as far as Ilea remembered. She was pretty sure as well that the spell wasn't Ashen Magic before but it didn't matter much. It was one of the few skills she hadn't focused on heavily in her training, hoping it would be replaced in her class evolution.

Sadly though that skill didn't come. Not a single one was gained through her new class but Ilea just breathed out and focused on her surroundings again. Kyrian was still focused so she tried out the changes. The new Strength from Form of Ash and Ember combined with a high amount of her skills gaining another twenty five percent in power would be felt quite a bit upon activation.

Mana flowed through her veins and the blue light of State of Azarinth came to life below her heavy elven armor. She noticed that the red glow from Form of Ember seemed to be absent but upon further inspection of her hands, the glow was simply much more subdued compared to before. Trying out her new Ash Creation skill, she simply focused before her and a mist of dark gray matter formed with her expended mana.

She tried to move it and found the process easy, natural even. The mist of ash spun around her as if a familiar bound to their master, it expanded and then formed into a ball. Ilea tried to make it as dense as possible and found the mist that had expanded around two cubic meters to be pressed into a ball the size of a marble. It was hard, not quite as hard as rock but it was getting there. The ball was obviously tossed at Trian's head.

Lightning flared and destroyed the ball before it even hit and the man looked at her annoyed. "Stop fucking around, we're on a mission." the man said, finding Ilea both amused and a little embarrassed. He had of course been right and she knew as much but considering the gains she had just gotten it was hard to stay serious.

The throw showed her a little of her newfound strength and combined with all the other skills she definitely felt it. Not as huge of a change as when she had gotten Ash Wielder in the first place or even Azarinth First Hunter but she felt it. Ilea kept summoning and moving around ash before finally forming a spherical shield of it around her. It used up quite a bit of mana and time to summon the needed ash for a dense shield and she already deemed it impractical but perhaps it would be a viable defense in the future.

Attacking with the ash was a possibility as well but Ilea was more intrigued at tripping her enemies or having them walk into a newly formed wall behind them. Crouching to the ground, Ilea summoned her black obsidian gauntlets and found herself quite able to lift them. It was an ordeal to be sure but not an impossibility anymore. Moving with the Gauntlets proved difficult with the added weight to her body but slowly she got the hang of it as she swung the heavy weapons around, pulling her body with each swing. 'Fantastic...' she thought and smiled before the gauntlets vanished into their bracelets again.

# Chapter 102 Lost Wanderer

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Ilea was sure that after getting used to the new weight and her newfound strength, she'd be able to use the gauntlets like a heavy and slow troll would use their massive fists, good enough for the purpose they had to fulfill.

Checking the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill point Ilea found it only available for the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class and not for her Azarinth ones. After concentrating on it more she also found that none of the skills were ready for an upgrade, not a surprise as none were at 2<sup>nd</sup> level 20.

“How did you reveal them? I only felt their presence.” the conversation between Eve and Claire started after Ilea had stopped using her new skills. Probably a somewhat underwhelming display of newfound power when viewed externally. At least with the displayed skills.

“The runes reveal some hidden enemies. Only if they're wounded or damaged, hence the needle storm.” Claire explained and nodded towards Ilea who was approaching them again, having moved a couple meters away to test her changed skills.

“Ash Creation, not bad. Weird for a close combat fighter to gain the highest form of manipulation in an element.” she commented and looked towards Kyrian who was apparently still reading. “Trian was right by the way, try to focus on the mission alright?” Ilea was a little confused.

‘Did she really just scold me?’ she thought and smiled at the unexpected feedback. She didn’t retort initially, after all there were now four other lives connected to the levels of her shenanigans.

“Considering me and Eve just saved your asses you should be grateful.” the comment couldn’t quite be blocked by her filter but the tone was obviously in jest. Trian looked down while Claire nodded towards her.

“You did, thank you. That’s why we’re all here, together. Next time it will be somebody else with the deciding ability. As our tank and healer you hold two very important responsibilities, just make sure to remember that.” Claire thanked her but Ilea was still a little annoyed.

“Unclench Claire. I’m aware of the stakes.” and that was that. The rune mage nodded, having locked eyes with the cold gaze of Ilea. It was understandable that the team didn’t yet trust each other in an unknown situation. Both Claire and Ilea knew that but the tension still lingered in the air.

“Ah, relax you two. Trian don’t you want to collect the dust you made? It’s quite valuable I hear.” Eve suggested and continued “Kyrian are you sure you can read?” she walked up to the man and waved her hand before his face.

“Might as well get some quiet.” Trian mumbled and walked around the cave to collect the dust and likely alchemical pieces dropped by the Death Spirits with his storage ring. They still didn’t know about Ilea’s and she wasn’t about to show them when the noble boy was made to collect some dirt, the scene already well worth her secrecy.

Ilea tried out her new body heat spell as well, still waiting for Kyrian and Eve who were now joined by Claire. Apparently the man had some difficulties understanding parts of his new class evolution. Her body went cold the same way it had before, until she was indistinguishable from one of the corpses in the room, at least temperature wise. The other way went a little different as the heat in her body increased and increased further and further.

Ilea checked her health and found nothing wrong but the ground below her feet was sizzling a little a little even through her armored boots. ‘So it did

change...' she thought, having been unable to have such an impact on her surroundings with the skill. Possibly a help in some ways and it made the skill a little more viable. At least now she was actually curious about its second stage.

Kyrian nodded and Claire called out to Trian. Apparently they would continue at last. Ilea was annoyed that she had left her pack at the entrance of the mine and she wasn't about to reveal her storage necklace because she wanted to eat.

"Claire do you have anything edible with you per chance?" Claire shook her head to her disappointment, Trian joining them a minute later.

"So further in?" Eve asked, looking towards the only other exit to the cave they were in.

"Yes, there are only seven corpses in this room. Not enough to account for all the adventurers that went here." Claire explained and looked towards Ilea who shrugged and walked onwards, activating her new Veil of Ash. Compared to the more chaotic looking shroud, the veil looked a lot more thin and slower moving.

Walking onwards the team was on much higher alert, having nearly been wiped out by a group of enemies fifty or more levels below them. Ilea didn't care much and was just happy she had leveled up her class and could save the others but she surely would've been annoyed if she had been taken out by something like that. 'That's why I have all those resistances... one moment of bad luck or the lack of a healer and you're dead. Even against something that should be weaker...'

The problem was of course the sheer number of enemies the team had faced and the mind attack bypassing most of their defenses. Considering the team had a mind mage themselves it was no surprise so many adventurers had died in this death trap when even Ilea's team nearly lost.

"Stop..." Eve whispered behind her and Ilea stood still and crouched a little just shy of entering the next open cave. "Something's in there I can feel it..."

it's weird." Eve continued, adding nothing but confusion to Ilea who just wanted to walk in and find out.

"Explain. We have time." Claire said. Everyone looked towards Eve who was struggling with something.

"It's like there's hundreds of them in there... some sort of magical creature... I can feel some of their emotions, they're angry and scared. There's something else, it's not quite sentient but nothing like I've ever felt."

"Well that's all fascinating. Can we go in now?" Trian asked but Claire insisted on waiting for a moment longer. Eve calmed down a minute later.

"Are you alright? Can you send an illusion to check?" Claire asked and was happy to find Eve nodding back at her. Something had obviously overwhelmed the woman a little and Claire wouldn't ignore that. An illusion came to life next to the group and quickly vanished towards the open cave.

"It's a glowing stone of some sort... I believe it's the source of the weird feeling... there is something there... oh wow I'm not sure we can take that."

"Eve tell us what you see." Claire had a calm voice but Ilea was sure she was just as annoyed by the incomplete descriptions. The mind mage had to work on describing a scene, that was sure. Otherwise whatever they were looking for would be gone long before they even made it there.

"I can't use identify but it looks scary. And strong. Some sort of black and thin creature with a silver skull. It seems to be attacking a glowing spot on the ground but I can't make out what exactly." the explanation gave them a little more than before.

"So in we go, smash skeleton, save glowing thing and recover weird stone. Blast whatever else is in there." Ilea summarized and got some stares from the others.

"What she said." Claire confirmed, not wanting to waste anymore time with the skeleton having some sort of agenda.

All of Ilea's skills flared up and she felt magic surge behind her as well, even without the specific perception. The team followed her out into the cave beyond and the scene Eve had described played out in front of them. There was a bright blue crystalline stone shining out from its place in the wall, giving Ilea a headache when she looked at it. Close by was a massive and spindly creature with a silver skull resting on top of its black body that consisted of three black legs and four black arms. All of it looked more like branches of a black tree.

A black fire was being released by the monster towards a shining light on the ground. With her sphere Ilea could see some other guests in the room that seemed to avoid the conflict in the middle of it, gravitating more towards the shining blue stone.

"More Death Spirits I think." Ilea immediately said as Claire threw runes all around them and the room. Trian started glowing red as he powered up and dozens of needles flew through the room, creating circles of runes that came to life a moment later with a short green light. Illusions of Eve came into existence and flowed into the room as Ilea summoned a thick cluster of ash around her, ready for whatever would come.

The headaches started as screams of cursed Death spirits resounded, quickly made visible by Claire's runes the monsters advanced on them and were quickly dealt with by Trian's lightning. Less than in the cave before but still a sizable amount. The skeleton stopped its black fire attack and turned its head towards the apparent intruders as lighting flashed around the cave to end the spirits.

"Whhh...whh..whereeee?" the sinister voice resounded inside Ilea's head and she fought with all her power against the opponent's assault on her mind. A globe of light formed around the team as Eve's illusions were extinguished, Claire's shield forming a barrier against the powerful pressure.

*[Lost Wanderer of Elysium – lvl ??]*

"Anybody see it's level?" Claire asked but none of the team responded, Trian and Kyrian breathing heavily after the shield came up. The creature was advancing on them while Claire's shield shook under the mental assault.

“Do we have anything on it?” no reply either. Ilea was sure the name wasn’t mentioned in any of the monster books she had and Liam hadn’t talked about it either.

“It’s an unknown. Blast it with everything you have, Eve and Ilea try to distract it. If it hits for more than half your health Ilea we’re out of here.” Ilea smiled brightly as she nodded to Claire’s assessment.

“I’ll distract it alright.” she said as the beast slowly walked towards the shining dome of silvery light.

“Focus and move out as soon as the shield breaks. Everyone but Ilea with me.” Claire said and laid out a half circle of runed plates on the back of the sphere that was being assaulted. The team moved behind the line and Ilea stood in front of it, ready to blink away as soon as the shield was broken.

The wanderer stopped and lifted its four spindly black arms, mana forming a black pulsing sphere between them before a roaring dark fire was unleashed onto the dome. It broke in just under two seconds, the team of mercenaries jumping into action.

Ilea blinked above the creature and kicked its silver skull with her full force and all destructive spells activated. The mana left her leg on impact as a loud noise resounded, her bone colliding with the creature’s head. Neither gave in but one of the creature’s arms whipped out towards her, making her blink away. A loud crack resounded as a massive bolt of lightning impacted the creature from above while runes were formed with metal needles on the stony ground below it.

A moment later the runes came to life and the creature wailed out in pain as the curse took root. More and more lightning impacted it while Ilea blinked in and out to deliver her attacks. The mental pressure from the monster was weighing on her and she felt herself getting slower. The second stage of Form of Ash and Ember kicked in soon after and counteracted that.

Eve was standing between the others with outstretched arms and closed eyes as she protected the group from the pressure. Claire’s shield shuddered as she threw out runed stones towards the monster. Just when the creature used



its arms to cut through the runes on the ground, a massive explosion resounded as the ground below the wanderer was destroyed. Ilea narrowly avoided one of its arms with her next attack that she delivered as the monster fell into the hole below. The nearly three meter tall enemy sunk in nearly to half of its size.

“Ilea to me!” Claire shouted as more lightning was cast onto their foe. Blinking next to Claire, Ilea understood immediately and took the load of stones from Claire to blink back above the confused wanderer to drop the payload into the whole. A whipped arm brushed her leg and broke through her Veil, not able to penetrate her elven armor. Ilea landed as a massive explosion resounded behind her.

More lightning followed as Ilea moved all the ash she had created in the meantime towards the beast and surrounded it, forming small walls around the broken in part of the ground to make it even harder for the wanderer to escape. Wails resounded from it as the pressure lightened, lightning, explosions and cursed needles and spears rushing in to rob the monster of its life force.

Ilea stood back not to get caught in the now constant barrage of spells, choosing to summon her bow to shoot some ice arrows at the creature’s legs, hoping to make it even harder for it to move. She was flying above now, only seeing the wanderer through her sphere as a massive cloud of ash and fire was obstructing the view. Nobody relented, even when the beast started throwing black fireballs around the room.

When Claire’s shield went down, Ilea blinked in front of the group and formed walls of ash while trying to block the explosions of dark fire with her own body and wings. With her armor and shroud the damage was manageable and she stayed at full health thanks to Hunter Recovery. Claire shouted to her in the middle but Ilea just gave a thumbs up, letting the woman concentrate on her impressive explosion magic.

The rune mage made the wanderer fall deeper and deeper into the newly formed pit, being very accurate with her spells. Kyrian’s needles were constantly cutting into the creature as curse runes were formed and reformed around the walls of its prison. Ilea managed to quickly check on Eve in the

middle of the assault and shouted for Claire to activate her shield again. She healed Eve, removing a big part of the mental pressure she was under.

Two minutes later the woman nodded again and Ilea went back to her defensive role with the shield down again. The now controlled encounter went on for another six minutes until they finally received a message.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Lost Wanderer of Elysium – lvl 262]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own you receive bonus experience.*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 204. 5 Stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the skill General: Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1 You have stood against a being of true darkness. Its magic was not able to pierce your defenses and you stand to tell the tale. This skill will help you repeat such actions.’*

“Wow, only one level for that. What the hell.” Ilea uttered a little frustrated.

“Welcome to the two hundreds. I didn’t get a single one. Plus you’re in a group now, don’t forget that.” Trian said but he didn’t seem to be annoyed at the fact. He would’ve died that day were it not for the team he was with and Ilea knew he was aware of that fact.

‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash didn’t even level and I have no idea how much it will take for another one there...’ the thought was a little sobering but then again Ilea had progressed at an enormous speed in the past year and she was at a point where actual fighting experience meant more than the experience gained from killing enemies. The latter would come in time. Considering the massive gains she had gotten that day already Ilea was quite confident in her newfound power. ‘One drake at a time.’ she thought as she checked on the team.

Eve was the only one with more than a little damage done to her but it was nothing a bit of healing magic couldn't fix. Luckily her spell affected damage to the mind as well.

“What is that...oh my god...” the sudden exclaim by Eve made everybody look at her as she advanced on the still glowing spot on the floor. “Ilea come, we need your healing magic!” she shouted and the healer quickly blinked next to her, seeing the small figure on the ground before her. A shining silhouette of a winged creature.

*[Fae – lvl 83]*

“It's dying.” Ilea said and started pouring her magic into the creature. Her attempts were blocked by the shining light glowing around the misty Fae. It had six wings on its back and had a vague humanoid shape. The creature was shaking slightly but looked up a moment later and met Ilea's eyes.

The Fae's head was round and held no discernible features other than two white eyes on its pitch black head. Ilea felt a pull on her mind and smiled as the creature didn't recoil. It hadn't been an attack, otherwise her second stage of mental resistance would've produced a feedback. She smiled at the creature as she continued to try and reach it with her hands and healing magic. Suddenly the light opened up to let her through, reaching the Fae a moment later as she perceived its confusing physiology with her healing magic.

She didn't know what to heal or where the damage was but simply continued to pour in mana.

# Chapter 103 Mission accomplished

## Chapter 103 Mission accomplished

Claire quickly checked on the two as did Kyrian and Trian but all three continued to the silver skull still lying inside the still smoking hole in the ground. Nobody wanted to touch either the skull or the stone still shining from its corner in the cave. Eve was smiling so brightly Ilea was about to fall in love when the light around the Fae suddenly vanished and the creature flapped its wings. It quickly flew upwards and booped both Ilea and Eve on their noses, its eyes suggesting joy. Quickly thereafter the creature flew at nearly Ilea's top speed out of the cave.

"There it goes." Eve said in a wondrous tone.

"You let it go? Do you have any idea how much a living Fae could be sold at? I don't even know about a sighting in the past ten years!" Trian commented from the side, getting an angry glare from Eve.

"Why would you capture such a beautiful creature?!" Eve shouted at the man.

"Why are they worth so much?" Ilea asked. She had killed plenty of living beings but the Fae did look like it comprehended more than the Drakes had. It didn't attack her either so she had no reason to fight it. Of course some of her previous killings of animals could be argued to be morally wrong but it was mostly for survival purposes. Getting stronger in Elos was done mostly through killing and Ilea didn't plan to die because she emphasized with the wildlife.

Trian seemed perplexed by the question. “I have no idea. They’re rare?” he said, getting a laugh out of Ilea.

“I didn’t think you’d be the one worrying about money. Maybe we can sell the skull. Claire how do we distribute what we find on missions anyway?” Ilea asked and walked to the group standing above the crater. Eve was still glaring at Trian but soon sighed and joined them as well.

“It’s not even slightly damaged...” Kyrian said as he looked down onto the silver skull.

“Well let’s see what it is.” Ilea said and blinked down towards it.

“If she’s the one getting cursed...” Trian said and shrugged. Claire didn’t intervene as Ilea touched the skull. Ash came to life around her and shook as Ilea screamed and went down to her knees as she held on closely to the skull. Eve rushed towards her as Claire threw runes into the crater but Ilea’s shuddering quickly turned into laughter as she got up and waved towards the group with the skull.

“It’s alright, it’s just a spooky skull!” she held the thing in front of her face as Eve skidded to a halt in front of her, slapping the woman hard.

“Shit head!” she said and stomped out of the hole and towards the glowing stone, muttering about immature idiots.

“That was in poor taste.” Claire said as she slowly descended and collected her runes again.

“Welcome to Ilea’s wild ride.” she said and flipped around the skull in her hands, looking into its empty eye sockets.

*[Skull of the Wanderer – Rare Quality ‘A lost soul wails for salvation’]*

“Well that’s helpful.” Ilea said and threw the skull to Claire who caught it with both hands.

“Yea we can sell that. Or we can get info from Dagon. Can you store it Trian?” Claire asked and walked towards the man, handing him the skull

carefully.

“At least we can play ball now.” Ilea commented as she blinked out of the cave and towards Eve. “What is it?”

The woman just quickly looked at her and continued to focus on the stone. Ilea identified it as well with just a quick glance, not enough to get a headache.

*[Soulshard ore]*

“Soulshard ore. Well look at that, another thing I’ve never heard of.” Ilea said as she joined back with the others.

“My god can you shut up for fucking once.” Trian said in a tired voice, getting a smile from Ilea below her mask. She did feel a little bad, the man seemed at least somewhat on edge and she could read people enough to know that he wasn’t the only one with that opinion.

“Give me some food and I’ll shut up, I get cranky when I don’t get my snacks.” Ilea said and received a killing stare from the man who summoned an assortment of bread, meat and cheese and tossed it towards her. She caught it all with the help of some swirling ash before walking to the edge of the crater, sitting down and removing her helm. “Cheers.” she said and started eating.

“Do you think this will put the mission at level three?” Kyrian asked Claire who was staring at Eve.

“Perhaps. I’m not sure if the Wanderer qualifies as dangerous enough but I’ll start writing the report as soon as we’re back. To answer your previous question Ilea, whatever we sell is split through five. If we find anything that can help one of us that person gets it through voting. The others get nothing then, an effort for the team.”

Ilea just held up a thumb to the people behind her, the cheese was excellent. “Can you find a cart or something so we can bring the corpses to the city? Finish the food first.” Claire said and got another thumb in response.

“I’ll try to pull some strings as well to get the level three. Not like anybody would be against having us in the tournament. Joseph will put in a good word as well, I’m sure of it.” Trian said and summoned some food as well, teleporting to the other side of the crater and sitting down to eat as well.

“Got some more?” Claire asked.

“Not for you, just to shut up the kid. And as thanks, for getting us out of here alive.” he said, making Ilea choke on the meat she was chewing. He smiled at the coughing but stopped himself when she used her dagger to cut a hole into her throat, breathing a deep breath again. She poked around with the blade until she found the piece causing her so much trouble, removed the blade and healed the wound before putting the meat back in her mouth.

“You’re disgusting.” Trian said and she just winked at him. Claire sat down next to Ilea and happily received a piece of bread and cheese without asking, pulling down the hood and cloth on her face to eat. Kyrian went to join Eve at her inspection of the soulshard ore.

“That was pretty good teamwork today.” Claire commented and Ilea confirmed with a grunt. “Good job everyone.” the rune mage said before she put her pack behind her and lied down on it.

Ilea moved the last corpse they had found in the mine into the mine cart she had gotten from one of the other tunnels. No other enemies were in the mines. Eve had the theory that the soulshard ore was uncovered by the miners and drew in the spirits and ultimately the lost wanderer. Ilea closed the woman’s eyes before her and put a gray blanket over the cart before touching it for a moment.

Kyrian was watching in silence from a couple meters away until she opened her eyes again. “What did that mean?” the man asked her a minute later as they slowly pushed the cart towards the exit.

“A prayer to send them off.” Ilea said simply.

“The corpses? Send them off where?” the question sounded curious rather than insulting.

“I don’t know. Wherever their souls may go, if such a thing exists.”

“You don’t know yet you do it? Why?” he asked as they reached the entrance of the mine.

“My people used to do it. It’s a way to respect the dead. There are many ways to do it. Do you not have similar customs where you’re from?” Ilea asked as she rested the cart in a shaded part of the railway, the sun would increase the stench tenfold.

“I... I don’t know.” the simple answer was just fine for Ilea as the two walked back in silence. Claire and Eve had managed to remove the soulshard ore in the meantime and Trian stored it in his ring. The mine would be safe for any workers from now on. There was of course the question if more soulshard ore was to be found inside but that was not their worry.

The group walked back towards the town in the valley below as Ilea pushed the cart with the corpses. They walked mostly in silence but satisfied with their first finished job. It was certainly a warning but also proof of their strength. Ilea was happy with the team. Although leveling would be slower she now had a bunch of companions to talk to and fight with. Many strong foes she wouldn’t have been able to touch were now at least approachable.



It was fun as well. More so than she had anticipated. She could still fight with her full power. The explosions and lighting around her just added some nice special effects she could enjoy. And it would of course decrease the time needed to finish off a foe. Ilea wasn't sure where to go after they had finished their half year but right now she wasn't completely against staying with those people, or at least seeing them from time to time.

As the railroad ended, ash was summoned and formed new rails leading towards the city. A good way for Ilea to get more comfortable with her newfound level of ash manipulation. This time the gates to the town opened after they had shown the guards the inside of the cart. The city life seemed to grind to a halt around them as a group of guards escorted the group of mercenaries towards the nearest guard station. People looked at them as if they were aliens, many focused on the ashen rails created and broken down below the rather huge mine cart. Whispers filled the streets and more and more people came to look at the group but a couple minutes later they were behind another set of walls inside the guard station.

Claire went with the captain to discuss both payment and the circumstances of the mission. A group of guards took care of the mine cart and carefully laid out the corpses before covering them in thin cloth.

“What happens if the team of Shadow mercenaries don't come back out either?” Ilea asked as she looked at the process. She leaned on the side wall that was around two meters in height, removing her helmet.

“You're not supposed to reveal you face.” Kyrian said “I heard a member talk about it before.” the second part was added after her got a stare down from Ilea.

“Plenty of places where we don't come out either. Just considered lost. And if whatever's in there comes out the nearby town either gets demolished or is relocated. Or maybe it can be held off with whatever authority is willing to send an army.” Eve explained, looking at the scene just as solemnly.

“Enemies like that are rare.” Kyrian said, likely meaning the strong mental attacks that made it nearly impossible for anybody to flee in the first place. A quick reaction isn't enough against an instant shutdown of one's processor.

“How long do you think she’ll take?” Ilea had smelled interesting food on the way to the station and was positively starving. It was hard to maintain her secret storage necklace now more than ever.

“Feed the tank.” Trian grunted at Eve’s comment, obviously said towards him.

“We could also eat where the guards eat. Maybe have a drink as well. To c... celebrate.” Kyrian’s suggestion was met with a shrug from Eve and a smile and thumbs up from Ilea. Trian didn’t comment on it but followed Ilea none the less. She was quickly given directions by an intimidated guard but her revealed face probably helped a little in the process.

The four soon sat on a table outside of the guard canteen, shaded from the sun with some ale and food. Ilea was pretty sure the kitchen was closed at the moment but being part of the Shadow’s Hand brought some special privileges. Not like any of the station’s occupants looked to be very busy anyway.

Ilea was happy to get food and the others joined in as well, a happy and quiet dinner. “Hey Trian, have any cool noble house stories for us plebs?” Ilea asked while chewing some dried meat. She was happy to find the place had olives. It lacked some oil and garlic but she hadn’t seen olives in Elos before.

Trian was playing with the mug of ale in his hand. He moved his helmet up to take a sip and let it fall down again. Eve had removed her mask and even Kyrian made his helmet vanish.

“Did you attend balls? Any interesting marriage proposals?” Ilea tried to lighten the mood a little but didn’t expect to make the man choke with the question. “Oh so that’s a yes, do tell. Did she look horrible? Was it a guy?”

she leaned in and continued in her best conspiracy voice “You loved her but the house wasn’t powerful enough... your parents said no. Tragic, so now you’re here to gain strength so that you can follow your true love.” she finished proudly and sat back, finishing the piece of meat.

The man just stared at her through his helmet. “But she was captured and is held now by your father, the only way for her to be released is for you to marry someone else...” Eve joined in and grabbed a couple olives. One of the guards brought some cheese as well, getting a quick thanks from Ilea.

“I disliked the balls. You wouldn’t believe how many women there can’t dance. All of it is a political farce, one person trying to impress the other. It’s a game they play while there is a world out here to get strong in. Territory to win back from the terrors that now call it theirs.” the outburst was fueled by quite a bit of emotion and Ilea was quite impressed.

“You feel we should fight back against the elves? Take territory back?” the man finished his ale in a single long drink.

“Not the elves, fuck them. They can keep their forest. We have plenty here but all we do is sit in our walled off cities, living off of magically grown plants when we should be out there.”

“Most people prefer the safety of walls.” Eve said, flipping an olive upwards and catching it with her mouth. Ilea was impressed but quickly remembered that stats existed. She copied the move and was disappointed at how easy it was.

“Most nobles do as well. Killing captured animals to gain levels and classes at an early age. A disgrace. They...” he stopped then, looking around as if somebody was listening in. Eve and Ilea had started somewhat of a competition and the olives flew higher and higher.

“Well you’re doing a good job of being out there already. I’m sure a couple people that saw us will become adventurers soon.” Ilea commented, activating her buffs to catch the thrown olive.

“And die like those in that mine...” Eve said “Walls aren’t bad and most people don’t want to fight every day of their bloody life.” the conversation died again and so did their competition, the supply of olives having reached their end.

“What we do helps a lot I think. The mine is now back in the town’s possession.” Kyrian said and got a nod from Trian. Claire joined the group a moment later and took a seat on the table. The same guard that had brought the cheese put down another mug of ale for the woman.

“Thanks.” Claire said.

“No worries... my brother was in there you know. He died in that mine I mean. Thanks for killing whatever was in there.” the guard said and nodded to the group before he went back inside.

The group didn’t stay for long but decided to remain in the town for the night. It was getting dark and flying back at night wasn’t in Claire’s plan. “At the gate we entered, tomorrow midday.” the woman said and got up “Good job today, I’m glad to be in this team.”

“Same, good calls Claire.” Ilea said and everyone else nodded. It seemed they had settled a little, their personal differences pushed back by the need for professionalism. Anything else meant death and today proved as much again.

“You weren’t half bad either. No idea how I would’ve gotten those heavy guys out there without your help.” Eve said and smiled, getting a chuckle from Kyrian.

“The armor IS very heavy.” the man commented and fondled one of the spikes.

Ilea spent the remainder of the day and most of the night exploring the city. The others had joined her at first but left to do their own things or sleep one after the other. The last to leave was Eve. Ilea felt a little like stalking the woman but even though she wouldn't have gone through with it she quickly found that Eve had vanished. Impossible to find within the still rather active city. The climate was rather warm considering it was actually winter.

The proximity to the desert likely influenced the weather around the town but it still seemed a little weird to Ilea. It wasn't that far away from the snowy mountains to the east. She somehow ended up in a theater underground where a bunch of actors reenacted a tale involving bears and a princess. It had some surprising twists in it that Ilea quite enjoyed, combining that with the brutality and dark jokes that were added it was quite a spectacle to her and she tipped them quite a bit for the play.

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# Chapter 104 Another settlement needs our help

## Chapter 104 Another settlement needs our help

“What do you mean they didn’t give it level three? We nearly died!” Claire was a little lost at Eve’s outburst at the news. The woman had received the money from the guard captain, receiving a thanks for recovering the bodies. The discussion with the Guild had taken her only fifteen minutes but as Ilea heard with her Sphere, waiting outside the room the reason the mission’s level wasn’t risen was simply because the enemy mostly used mind magic.

A one dimensional threat, dangerous yes but nothing that would constitute raising the mission’s level. Ilea was pretty sure whoever rated the missions simply didn’t want anybody to question them but quite frankly she didn’t care that much. Eve was the one who really wanted to get the level three mission so that the team could join in the tournament.

“Don’t worry, we still have nearly the full two weeks to get a level three. Claire did you get us some more missions?” Ilea asked, patting Eve on the shoulder. More to keep her from going in there and murdering the person Claire had talked to than to console her.

“The mission was a success and we’re now all considered full fledged members of the Shadow’s Hand. I think we’ll get badges but Joseph will have to handle that. Honestly I didn’t think you’d want to get another mission

so quickly.” she checked the paperwork she had received and looked to all of them.

“Took us a day to finish that one, why not get some more? You guys need the money.” Ilea said, getting a chuckle from Trian but he didn’t seem to disagree.

“Sure, m... might even be better to fight together more before the tournament.” Kyrian said and Ilea shrugged, both looking towards Claire. Ilea wasn’t quite sure everyone thought of her as the team leader but she was definitely the team manager already.

‘Thank fuck for that...’ she thought, looking at the stack of paper Claire was carrying in her arms.

“We won’t be able to just get a level three mission. I can look for anything located in Lys that is level one or two. Maybe we’ll be able to get some missions.” Claire said, the papers nearly falling out of her hands when a metal disk hovered below the papers, expanding to hold them in place.

“Thanks.” the woman holding the papers said and glanced towards Kyrian.

“Get more than one mission, three to four then we don’t have to travel back every time.” Trian said and continued “More training before she’s done? Blasting spirits isn’t quite as satisfying as attacking humans.”

“Fucking psycho.” Ilea said in a mocking tone, only getting an eye roll from the man. It was getting harder to annoy him every day. Maybe he got a direct Resistance skill to her comments, or perhaps it was classified under Mental Resistance. A mystery that Ilea likely wouldn’t solve in the next months or years to come.

“Let’s go then. Same place as the last two weeks. Claire come get us when you’re done.” Eve said, still sounding a little annoyed at the whole situation but it was the only solution they had at the moment. “Why are these stupid requirements even in place?” she said as the group descended downwards. Ilea had managed to get some food from the street vendors in Viscera, some

of them knowing her already, running up to her with food already in their hands. She would buy, every single time.

“So that the casualties stay as low as possible.” Trian answered the question “I know of more than one fighting ring, some of them noble only. Trust me a requirement like that is good for all the participants.” he said and stared at the moving wall of the elevator shaft. Ilea looked at him but then shook her head.

“Makes sense...” Kyrian said “If they would just let us in we’d murder everybody.”

“Did you just make a joke?” Ilea asked and chuckled.

“I’m learning from the best.” this time Trian audibly groaned at Kyrian’s response, giving Ilea a big smile on her face. The day wasn’t lost after all.

Claire pointed at three specific parts on the map laid out in front of her. “These are the locations of the three missions I could get. I’m getting the feeling that we won’t be getting a lot of info on any of these. All of them are level one sadly.” she looked towards Eve who was grumbling under her breath. Ilea chuckled at one of the more original swear words.

“You still think the ratings make sense considering how little they actually know?” Ilea asked in Eve’s stead.

“Somewhat, yes. To raise the level there needs to be an identified threat. If a shadow’s hand team is sent and doesn’t come back it’s immediately level three. If it’s unidentified and in a territory not known to inhabit high level threats, it’s level one. Also why those missions are usually not very popular, even for the Hand.”



Claire continued as nobody else interrupted “The first one is a village nobody has heard from since three months ago. Some people and adventurers went to investigate but they haven’t returned either. Right here.” she pointed again to an indistinct part of the forest a couple hours of flying time north west of Ravenhall. “The second one is likely a Harpy Queen near Damwell. The adventurers who were sent did not manage to advance through the cliffs but reported the high pitches cries of the harpies, indicating a nearby queen. The empire apparently doesn’t want to waste resources so the city sent a request our way.” this time there was a small city painted on the map with the name Damwell underneath in neat handwriting.

The city was at the sea, so quite a while from the first mission’s location. Considering their ability to fly, it wouldn’t be as much of a travel nightmare than it would be for most people. “Last one is a newly discovered ruin close to the coast here...” the map didn’t show anything but water.

“In the water?” Ilea asked, her tone a little more serious than before.

“Possibly but there are massive rock formations going into the ocean. Likely caves, water might be an issue but I have some runes to deal with it. Trian should be quite a bit more effective too. Apparently there are a lot of traps inside, none of the adventurers who went in have managed to find even a single monster so far. Over twenty have died already. The adventurer guild has sent a request in to minimize further casualties.” Claire finished explaining and rolled up the map before putting it into her pack. “No time limits or anything but the sooner we leave the sooner we’re back.”

“Well let’s go then.” Eve said and shouldered her pack. They were all still in the same gear they had arrived in just two hours earlier. Well rested and itching for more.

“The village over there? Is that it?” Ilea asked, looking at the small dots of houses in the distance, surrounded by trees.

“Should be the contact the empire has listed. Or it’s the abandoned village already.” Claire said but as they got closer Ilea could see people moving about.

“Those don’t look like monsters.” Eve said, holding on to Ilea’s right arm.

‘They’re getting suspicious of me...’ Sally thought, spotting at least two people looking at her from the comfort of their homes. The village had treated her as an outsider from the first day of her arrival and it was bloody miserable. They wouldn’t sell her any of the good food and her lodgings were laughable compared to what she was used to in any town with more than a hundred inhabitants.

‘Sometimes this job bloody sucks...’ the woman thought, pulling her coat a little closer towards her chest and grabbing the mug of ale sitting on the table next to her. At least they had alcohol here and a somewhat steady supply of goods.

“How ya doin Sally?” the innkeeper came out into the cold air to talk to her as he had many a time before in the past weeks. “Still nothin? Aventures stopped comin eh?”

It had been six days since the last group of adventurers tried their luck but still nobody had returned. Neither she nor the empire made them stop trying. The pay got up after every failed attempt after all and if one of them managed, the empire wouldn’t have to pay themselves. The guild would. Sally couldn’t care less about who managed to find out what happened to that god forsaken village if only she could leave this place already.

The gold she constantly carried on herself didn't help in the least to make the uneasy feeling go away. The villagers likely wouldn't try something but she wouldn't be the first official to be murdered in their sleep. Why they stopped sending them out in teams was a complete puzzle to her but then again having one person murdered instead of two was a smaller loss. The woman sighed and finished her ale, handing the mug to the innkeeper whose name was still unknown to her. A testament to the level of trust these villagers showed towards an imperial official.

'The only reason these savages haven't looted me dry is my high level...' she thought and smirked at the thought of them trying something. It would be the first time she would be attacked by citizens of the empire but she mentally dared them to try, ready for anything.

In the next moment a group of armored adventurers landed in the middle of the square Sally was overlooking. Snow and earth was flattened as the people landed from their way too speedy descent and the woman was gulping as she looked at the team of high level mercenaries slowly rising from their crouched landing positions, checking the village while lightning crackled around one of them.

'Menacing...' she thought. This was actually the first time a group of the hand had shown up for a job assigned to her. So far it had been other mercenary groups, independent adventurers or even squads of empire soldiers.

"That's probably her, she's the highest level around." a hooded woman said while nodding towards Sally. She gulped again and slowly got up.

'They're like anybody else...' she thought, looking at the question marks above the people's heads and feeling the sweat build despite the cold wind flowing through her hair.

Ilea looked around the village and locked eyes with at least four people trying to get a glance at the group from their barred up windows. “Are they hiding?” Ilea asked, honestly confused. They likely hadn’t known about their group’s arrival which made the whole thing a little suspicious.

“Well apparently there’s something happening in the nearby village so it’s only reasonable for them to be on edge.” Eve said and started following Claire who was already advancing on the woman she had talked about before.

“We’ll find out soon enough. Come.” Ilea shrugged and followed Eve after the comment. Trian and Kyrian did the same, the noble’s lightning still crackling sometimes.

‘Is he trying to impress the people here or send a warning?’ Ilea thought but didn’t comment on it. As long as he wouldn’t outright murder random innocents he could do with his lightning whatever the hell he wanted to. The woman had gotten up but looked a little shaky on her legs, perhaps she was already drunk. Ilea looked at the mugs on the table next to her.

“Greetings. You must be the Lys official.” Claire held out her hand and shook the woman’s hand who answered the greeting.

“Greetings back. I didn’t expect a Shadow squad mistress.” she said and even bowed a little to Claire before continuing. “I am the official if you are here regarding the missing reports from the village to the west.” Ilea chuckled to herself at the downright glorification with which the official treated Claire. If she knew their team leader’s social capabilities she probably wouldn’t try that hard.

“You may call me Claire. I’m here with team 34 of the hand and yes, we’re here related to the village. Can we talk inside? And may I quickly see your badge for confirmation?” Claire stood there and followed the woman inside a moment later. Ilea wasn’t quite so sure about her judgment of Claire’s social skills anymore but shrugged and followed. She stopped next to the door and looked at the man who tried to make himself invisible, not quite as effectively as Eve used to do.

“You the innkeep? Do you have food and drink?” the man nodded and Ilea got a couple silver coins out of her pack before she handed them to the man. The others were already inside by that time. “For everybody if you would.” Ilea said before going inside as well.

The inn was illuminated in a warm light by the hearth on the left side of the room. There were only a couple tables but all of them made of good looking wood. Something Ilea still appreciated whenever she saw it even after a year in Elos. They didn’t really have anything else but it still looked very nice. Claire was already talking with the official about the circumstances of the village they were currently in and the one they had lost contact with. The wood creaked as Ilea walked to the table and finally sat down next to Kyrian.

Removing her helmet, she thanked the innkeeper as he put down a couple mugs of ale and some water. “We’re not going to be here for a long time you know?” Trian said but still grabbed a mug for himself.

“The half hour won’t make the difference anymore either. We’ve been bloody rigorously training for months now, let’s at least relax sometimes when we’re on missions.” Ilea said. Kyrian looked at her a little confused from the side.

“Shouldn’t it be the other way around?” he asked in a whisper before Trian waved his hand in front of the two.

“Listen to her, might be the difference between living and dying.” he said and looked back towards Claire.

“So you basically know nothing more than what we already have. No scouts went in to investigate and returned? No survivors coming back?” Ilea looked at Trian before she rolled her eyes.

‘Vital information...’ she thought as she took a deep drink from her mug. The innkeeper arrived with food then. Bread and a warm soup with potatoes and meat, likely bacon by the smell of it.

“Wonderful, thank you.” she said and smiled at the man who returned the gesture. Ilea noticed in her sphere that there were two villagers who had stopped near the walls and now listened in on the conversation. At least that

was the only logical explanation, maybe they were just lovers of stone walls or they found a rare insect.

“What about this village? It’s by far the closest other settlement. They must have at least known some of the people. Anything suspicious or interesting there? Did anybody from the other village come here?” Claire asked before Ilea blinked next to Trian, getting close to his ear.

“Look there. Exactly behind that wall. A guy listening in, get him and bring him inside. I’ll get the other one. On three...” Ilea whispered, only Eve looking at the two. Counting to three, Ilea appeared behind the villager who stood outside the wall.

*[Mage – lvl 72]*

‘Seems pretty high for a small village in the outskirts of an empire...’ she thought and moved in on the man who hadn’t noticed her thus far. Her hands reached around him before she put one of them before his mouth. He immediately tensed up and tried to look around as magic formed around him. Ilea just held him there.

“Think twice before you do something stupid.” she said in a quiet voice. The magic vanished again and with it the heat coming from the red orbs that slowly dissipated.

“Now why don’t we have a quick word inside.” she said “You try to run or shout I’ll smash your skull in, alright?” she asked and smiled at him as she let go of his mouth. He turned to look at her with fear in his eyes. They had seen the squad arrive and he probably knew the risks of spying on them. Ilea motioned for him to walk to the back of the building where another door was located. Trian walked around the other corner with a woman on his shoulder.

Ilea saw with her Sphere that the woman was still breathing. Quite an advantage of lightning magic and a testament to Trian’s control over his powers. The man didn’t just have high skill levels, he was naturally talented at it as well. Ilea had an idea what would happen should she hit someone’s skull to knock them out. Brain damage would be the least of her worries.

“Please open the door.” she said to the man in front of her who shot a glance towards Trian and gulped before opening the door.

“What are you doing??” Claire exclaimed. Their whole squad was standing and ready to fight but quickly calmed down as they saw Ilea and Trian bringing in two villagers. Ilea noticed the innkeeper swallowed but kept quiet otherwise. The official seemed confused first and foremost.

“These two were spying on us. I’d like to know why.” Ilea said as she pulled back a chair and sat down the man, getting back to her own and continuing her meal. All eyes were on her as she started slurping her soup. She stopped and looked up.

“What are you looking at me for. I found them, I suck at interrogating.” she continued to eat while checking the surroundings with her sphere and listening closely to everybody in the room.

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# Chapter 105 Don't fear the old blood

## Chapter 105 Don't fear the old blood

The whole group of armored combat veterans in the room looked forlorn towards their healer and tank who was happily eating the soup in front of herself. Glances were exchanged before Claire was left with the task to hold the interrogation, a burden of the team manager.

“So you’ve been listening to us?” she asked the man who looked at the scene with big eyes. These people were a squad of the legendary Shadow’s Hand. They had come to his village and now he was caught spying on them. One misstep could cost him his life.

“I have...we...we’re sort of the guardians of the village...me and a couple o... others...” he managed to stutter out, not looking at any of them. Trian placed the unconscious woman on a nearby table.

“Why spy on us then, we’re here to find out what happened in the village nearby, not attack you.” Claire’s question was asked with much more confidence than the first one, seemingly committed to the interrogator role she was pushed into.

“H... high level adv... mercenaries like you c... can be a threat...” he was sweating by now, answering the question. Ilea looked at the man and thought him to be younger than even herself.



“Why would we be a threat to a village in the empire?” Claire asked, leaning towards the man.

Ilea had finished her soup and held up the empty plate to the innkeeper who was watching on with focused eyes. He noticed her and nodded before he came and got the plate.

“Th... there are rumors... about the h... hand I mean.” the man said, shaking a little by now.

“We’re not going to hurt you if you just tell us why you were spying on us?” Eve interjected in an annoyed tone.

“I... I s... said already...” the man covered down, trying to protect himself with his hands against the masked mage next to him.

“Oh man this is bloody useless.” Eve said, getting up and walking towards the door. Ilea blinked to Eve and whispered to her.

“Can’t you fuck with his mind or something?” the woman asked but Eve just stared at her with anger in her eyes. She quickly calmed down again and shook her head.

“You obviously don’t know better but no. It’s unreliable and destroys the brain most of the time. People have tried. People still try and it’s fucking disgusting. I swear whenever I hear somebody say it works they just destroyed so much whoever they’re interrogating just isn’t there anymore. No.” she turned around and opened the door but Ilea blinked in front of her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know about that.” she said and locked eyes with Eve. “I know I can be a bit dense sometimes...” she said, mostly meaning her lack of common knowledge about Elos. She had five hundred intelligence points and believed her humor to be on point, either of those things must at least mean something.

“It’s...” Eve started but then shook her head. She lifted her hand to put it on Ilea’s shoulder but stopped half way there when Ilea just hugged her. Eve’s hands were hovering behind Ilea before she embraced her too.

“What is this, did you two realize you came from the same gutter?” Trian asked as he walked up to the two. “Don’t look at me like I pissed in your drinks.” he switched to a whisper as he got closer “This feels wrong, something’s wrong here. What do your guts tell you?” he asked and Ilea definitely agreed.

“The hand has a reputation but I’ve never heard of it having a bad one. High level people can certainly be problematic, I have to agree there. Maybe they’re just a suspicious bunch?” Eve suggested but Ilea didn’t quite feel the same way.

“Maybe but the way they were staring out of their windows after we landed. Plus they could’ve just come into the inn, declaring that they would have an eye on us. No reason to be shady.” she explained. “The guy is needlessly afraid. We’ve not been hostile towards him and our strength alone doesn’t warrant that reaction... at least not in most cases... I think. He has something to hide.”

“I agree, Eve don’t you think so?” Trian asked catching the woman a little off guard.

“Maybe, let’s find out then.” two clones of her emerged and ran out of the door.

“I’ll check around too, back in fifteen minutes or so.” Ilea said and nodded to Eve who walked out of the door with her.

“I’ll stay, shout if you need something blown up.” the lightning mage said and walked back to his seat. They had no intention of torturing the two people they had caught but there was no reason not to check the village quickly before they went to their actual target.

Eve was out of sight rather quickly and Ilea didn’t invest any concentration on tracking the woman any further. She simply looked and felt her surroundings. Both Hunter’s Sight and her Sphere let her perceive irregularities, hidden traps and pathways but nothing had come up after the hidden library sector in Salia when she had actually gotten the skills.

The village consisted of less than twenty buildings, all of them mostly wooden. Most of them were covered in snow at least to an extent. Ilea walked through the muddy streets while the inhabitants went their usual business, her plate boots squashing into the wet ground. The woman was wearing her helmet again, no reason not to wear it now that she wasn't eating anymore.

Everyone that came across her path tried very hard not to stare at her. They would turn their heads or glance at her whenever they thought she would not be able to spot them. Ilea did see them however and she tried to read their expressions and what they meant.

After walking around for twenty minutes, Ilea had checked every single house but none of them showed anything different than what one might expect from a home in a village like this. Hearths, food and beds mostly. Tools for farming and fighting with some rare books and staves. Neither did Ilea's senses alarm her of any hidden pathways but she wasn't very sure about how that part of the skill really worked.

Hunter's Sight at least was amazing at finding people, not particularly good at finding something unknown. Either that or there simply wasn't anything here. There was of course a possibility that the man had told the truth and they were simply worried about the squad coming to the village. Ilea shrugged and made her way back to the inn to check with the others. The suns pushed through and made the winter day rather splendid to look at.

'I wonder how this whole season stuff makes sense with two suns...' she thought. Winter was slowly coming to an end and while it had been rather long it was nothing extraordinary compared to the ones she had experienced on Earth. She took in a deep breath of fresh air and thought about spring. It would mark the first full cycle she had been in Elos while not trapped inside of a temple basement.

Ilea reached the inn a moment later and blinked inside to find everybody else sitting on the same table. The two people they had caught sneaking around weren't anywhere to be seen anymore. Kyrian looked towards Ilea and nodded.

“So everybody's back then. Did you find anything Ilea?” Claire asked but received a shaking head from the approaching woman.

“Same as everybody then. Well we're already wasting time and let's be honest, we would've gone to the other village one way or the other.” their team manager said and got up. Ilea noticed that the innkeeper wasn't in the inn. A shame for the lack of food but probably instigated by one of her team mates. The Official couldn't be seen either.

“Some more information would've been helpful.” Trian said and sighed, getting up in the process “But you're right, let's go then.”

“Eve you'll scout it out with your clones. Let's take some time to make sure we're not walking into a trap.” Claire said, the group prepared to leave and stored their packs at the inn. At least everybody but Claire, who was quite reliant on the prepared runes in hers.

Ilea couldn't see anybody near the windows and the villagers walking around were trying hard not to look at the group. “Let's go on foot, it should be that road.” Claire said and nodded towards one of the dirt roads leaving the village, quickly covered by snow again. The others followed as they walked and then ran along the road. The slowest members with Claire and Kyrian ran on the road itself while the others hid themselves a little in the forest next to it.

Fifteen minutes of sprinting later they could make out houses in the distance. Claire stopped them with a gesture and went to the side of the road as well. At this point the road was so small the trees above touched, even with the snow weighing them down.

“Ilea take us up, we'll get an aerial view first. Eve send in some of your clones. Try to turn every stone you can.” Two copies of Eve appeared when Claire had stopped talking and started making their way through the forest

and towards the village. The actual team flew upwards and out of the trees to get a better look at their target.

Coming out, the suns painted a rather clear picture of the small village that consisted of five houses only. One of them was rather big and built mostly with stone instead of wood. "Is such a size even sustainable?" Kyrian asked and Ilea thought about it.

"As long as they get necessities from the other village or further out, they're fine. Not like these forests are very dangerous." Eve explained.

"I thought any forest is dangerous..." Ilea mumbled and got a look from Eve.

"Well if the villagers go out alone and unprotected, then maybe. Most monsters around here wouldn't invade a human settlement. The meter of stone wall around the village is deterrent enough." the explanation of Eve made sense but considering they were here because no info came from the village it probably wasn't as safe as Eve made it sound.

"I'm entering the village now. The wall is similar to the one in the other village. Houses are barred and I can't slip in anywhere." Eve commented what she saw with her clones.

"Can't you try to open the doors?" Trian asked.

"No, I can't go through solid objects and I can't interact with them either. The door of the main building is a little open, I think I can get through the slit..." she paused for a couple seconds before continuing. Ilea tried to spot what was happening in the village but it seemed the door of the stone building in the middle wasn't visible from this angle.

"Alright I'm in... there are corpses there. One... two... five or six. Shredded apart, I would say a clawed beast of some kind but then again aren't most?" Ilea stared at the woman that was holding onto her arm and then looked back towards the village. What had she seen that she can talk about a scene like that so calmly? Of course Ilea had seen her fair share as well since coming to this world but Eve seemed downright resistant.

‘Maybe Mental Resistance has something to do with it?’ she thought when Eve continued.

“Found a somewhat hidden pathway in the cellar. All doors were open. Pure stone at this point and a lot of runes on the entrance. I assume the... they’re activating. The runes are glowing red. I think I triggered something.” just then the air around the stone building started fluctuating a little.

“What’s that?” Ilea asked.

“A barrier of some kind.” Claire answered. “Is the clone still there?”

“They are, I’ll go further in to see. The other clone is hiding upstairs, maybe I can find out more if whatever is in there comes up. The barrier seems to be around the full building.”

Trian flew a little closer as his eyes started glowing red. “That’s bloodmagic.” Ilea looked around at the different reactions but didn’t really know what that entailed.

“Explain.” she said and Trian turned back around.

“Well it’s magic fueled by mana, blood and life energy. Generally frowned upon but somewhat common in the noble circles. Why it’s not completely outlawed. You can use your own blood but you can also use other’s to fuel some spells and rituals. Less effective but if you have enough corpses...” the man explained.

“It’s going in pretty deep, that’s not just a hidden cellar or anything. There are several levels. Oh that’s disgusting...” Eve chimed in again between Trian’s explanation “Yea someone’s been rather liberal with their sacrifices.” her voice turned cold, something Ilea hadn’t heard from the woman before.

“Animals and people, at least a dozen in total. Still no enemy in sight. There are cages but all of them open and empty.”

“Down another level...oh here we are...ok that’s one clone gone. Some sort of wolf and human abomination. Can’t use identify with them so that’s all I got. They’re fast but it took a while for them to notice me even though there

was only one way to go and they were looking at me directly. Wait...yea they're already in the main room upstairs. Furry, around two meters tall, long arms with clawed hands. They're trying to sniff me out. Good luck with that."

"Scouting done then." Claire said. "Let's go and find out what else is in there." The others nodded and the group flew right into the village, landing in front of the house.

"They heard us and went down again. Wait let me check..." Eve said as the group approached the barrier around the house.

"How do we crack that open?" Ilea asked, trying to touch the barrier.

"I wouldn't do that, we have no idea how it will react." Claire said and unslung her pack before she looked through her runed plates. "This one maybe..." she thought but then put the thing down again. "Blood magic..." she took a bunch of plates and handed them to Ilea. "Distribute those evenly around the house please. First one of those and then at the same place but further away from the barrier these." she showed her the different plates and Ilea nodded, taking them and blinking around the building to place the runed plates as instructed.

Coming back to the group a mere ten seconds later Trian gave her a look. "Gotten faster? From the mine yesterday?"

"Yea, hit 200 on my second class. You're gonna be fucked in our next spar." she said and smirked below her helmet as ash came into existence around her, forming a sinister whirling cloud around her.

"Congratulations, then I won't have to hold back anymore." the man said but Ilea was quite sure he hadn't been doing that, except maybe for some spells that he thought would've endangered her.

"Make yourself believe that sparky..." she said as another barrier thrummed to life around the house. This one golden, nearly white in color. One of Claire's defensive barriers to be sure.

“We have to get in you know, not make it even harder...” Ilea said jokingly, smiling at what was to come. A dull thrum resounded from between the two barriers as the space was filled with fire. Another one followed and another.

“How do you know yours won’t break but the blood magic one will?” Kyrian asked, looking towards their rune mage.

“I have preparations for different magics. My own explosion magic I know the best, thus my barriers for that are the best.” Kyrian nodded at the answer.

“Yea, remember that one time she nearly fried me?” Ilea asked and saw Claire gulp. “I told you it’s fine. That was an impressive barrier, at least against your own explosions.” the thrums didn’t stop until a louder sizzling noise could be heard.

“It’s down, let’s go and find out if we can take them. I’ll keep the barrier ready and if they overwhelm us we go out and close it.” Claire said as Ilea walked to the door, kicking it open with one smooth movement. All her buffs were at the max and her Veil of Ash formed around her.

The stench immediately hit her and the downright shredded people were not a pleasant sight. She stopped for a second and gulped down before walking onwards, her eyes glowing an icy blue below her helmet and the smirk vanishing from her face. She could perceive the way down into the cellar perfectly and made her way there, the team following in formation. One step on the now white stone staircase followed the next before she came out into a room painted in red.

She didn’t have time to really take the view in as two massive werewolves immediately were upon her. Ilea stood still before in the last moment she blinked in between the creatures to grab their arms, stopping their movement and knocking them together in the now empty space where she had stood. Trian teleported further into the room while the others spread out as well. Ilea started pumping destructive mana into the beasts, making them howl.

*[Wolfbeast – lvl 183]*



She didn't let go of the animals even when they started clawing at her with their free arms. Two spikes of metal entered their chests then before lightning came down on the creatures, quickly ending their lives. Ilea wasn't phased by any of the attacks, only the lightning damaging her slightly. She let the creatures fall down as the fight messages came to her mind. No level ups to any skills or classes as expected. More importantly Ilea perceived something else in the room.

"Someone survived." she said and blinked towards a pile of flesh and corpses. The stench was disgusting but Ilea ignored it, grabbing a corpse and throwing it to the side.

# Chapter 106 Cleanup Crew

## Chapter 106 Cleanup Crew

The team watched on as Ilea threw around corpses of animals and humans before she got something out of the pile. A shivering human, its eyes locking with Ilea's under her black helmet. The woman removed it to not scare the child any further. No status showed when she identified the kid and she moved her hand get the hair out of its face.

“They must've not smelled it under there.” Eve commented.

“She, it's a she.” Ilea said as Trian walked up to them with a flask of water and cloth he used to wordlessly clean the child's face from the blood and grime. Ilea thought her to be around six or seven years old, black hair and black eyes.

“Can you make her sleep?” Ilea asked to nobody in particular. Eve walked up to them and started humming a slow and quiet tune, making the girl sleep in less than fifteen seconds.

“We should've at least tried to ask some questions.” Trian said.

“You insensitive asshole.” Eve said and punched the man. He let the punch hit and looked at the woman afterwards.

“I'm quite aware of her mental state. But our survival is more important than this random child we found. Perhaps some of what she could've shared would...” Ilea interrupted the two.

“Shut the hell up, she’s sleeping.” she said with an icy tone before walking upstairs and out of the building, bringing the girl to one of the nearby houses and putting her in one of the beds before tucking her in. “We’ll be back.” she said and blinked back to the others. The whole thing had taken her less than three minutes and the others were still waiting for her, now in silence.

“Let’s go.” Ilea simply said and continued further down into the underground complex. The room where Eve’s first clone had vanished was now empty, with a staircase leading further down. Ilea walked a couple meters in front of the others in case of traps. Sure enough she saw spikes and hidden crossbows in the walls of the staircase. She simply punched into the stone with her bare hands to rip out the weapons, tossing them to the ground, not stopping in the process.

At last they came into a round hall with runes painted in blood on the ground. There were corpses here as well, one of them being worked on in that moment. A pale man in his thirties turned around to look at Ilea, his eyes blood red and his body cut in dozens of places.

“Aaaaaah, more have arrived. Come in come in, you are ready for the feast. All my children, come and join your father!” he said, in a completely normal tone which to Ilea was somehow even more unnerving.

*[Mage – lvl 202]*

‘See, that’s why I didn’t chose the weird cult class...’ she thought and looked at the man.

“You will die.” she said and prepared to blink towards him. Blood swirled around him but fell down to the ground a moment later. Ilea looked on confused when Eve’s head poked out from behind the man. A dagger was stabbed deep into his neck. He convulsed and closed and opened his mouth as blood came out of it. Eve got another dagger and held the man’s head. Black veins formed around the first dagger’s wound as he tried to reach her with his arms. The blood on the ground slowly levitated again when Eve stabbed him with the second dagger, one, two and three times. His blood joined the pool on the ground as with a last stab and cut his head came loose. His body hit the ground when Eve tossed the head to the side, bending down

to collect her second dagger. Her eyes quickly locked with Ilea's when she looked up.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [John Gilligan – Follower of Blood lvl 202 / Beast Summoner lvl 192]*

Nobody said a word as they spread out in the room to investigate. Claire started painting runes on the ground and walls as Eve walked up to Ilea. "Where's the girl?" she asked and Ilea looked at her again before telling her which house she had put the girl in. Perhaps Eve was even angrier than her. Ilea hadn't seen her vanish in the room. She had leveled some of her skills to the second stage just as most of their group had in the past months. One of them allowed her to blend into her surroundings. Not quite invisible but combined with the rest of her skills she was Very hard to make out. That hadn't exactly worked against the Death Spirits but against the blood mage in this cellar it had worked wonders.

"There's a hidden shelf here. Claire, wanna check for runes?" Ilea said, looking at the wall before her. The woman stopped her drawing and walked up to her.

"Are you using blood for your runes now?" Ilea asked and Claire checked the wall before checking her pack.

"I'm sure they would've liked to be used for that one last time." she said and activated her magic, the compartment in the wall springing open. Ilea saw the needles flying out and shoved herself between them and Claire, all of it harmlessly blocked by her veil. She picked them up and looked closely.

"Coated in something." she said and Claire grabbed the needle out of her hand.

"Thank you, but don't even think about it." she tossed the needles back to the ground before inspecting the shelf. There was gold in it, three books and some letters. Claire took all of it and handed them out to the group who was now waiting in the middle of the room. "Read through it and then we discuss the contents." she said and continued to draw runes on the walls and the ground.

Ten minutes later Claire told them to move a floor up and continued to draw there. Now using one of Kyrian's created spikes to scratch the runes.

"The letters are from two different noble families, both of them from Lys. Apparently they were asking for some experiments to be performed here. Quite a normal practice if I might add, though these were rather gruesome." he finished and made the letters vanish.

"This book is about rituals for summoning, blood magic generally using corpses and life energy to create some sort of abominations." Ilea commented on her book while flipping through it. She threw it to Trian who looked through as well and then made it vanish.

"What did you get Kyrian?" Ilea asked, the man still concentrated on reading.

"I think it's a diary." he said after a couple seconds.

"You think? Is it a different language or can't you read?" Trian asked.

"I'm n... not very good at it yet." he answered which made Trian chuckle a little. Ilea was next to him the next instant as her fully powered fist hit his side, making the noble fly and crash into the wall of the room.

"Don't worry about it, you'll get there soon enough. Can I see?" Ilea said to Kyrian, smiling under his helmet as the man looked at the noble now inhabiting the wall before handing her the book.

Trian coughed from the side before peeling himself out of the stone. "Guess I deserved that one. You really have gotten stronger. Want to bout?" he asked, a big grin on his face.

"Later sparky, later." Ilea said as she started to read out loud.

*"Day forty seven. The village elders have finally agreed to the deal. It seems the gold was too tempting to reject. Dorothy even asked if we could do more experiments for more gold. I'm glad that woman is part of the elders. Truly a visionary like myself..."*

*“Day one hundred and three. I have gained another twelve levels and my skills are skyrocketing. Two of the experiments have been complete successes, I have to push on. Get more people. Maybe the villagers in this small part of the world won’t be missed. Who would care about such a small place anyway... soon enough I’ll be too strong to stop...”*

“Too strong to stop, the guy wasn’t even at two hundred.” Ilea commented as she closed the book and handed it to Claire who stopped scratching. “Please read through so we can find out who is responsible. I’m sure you’re the most... thorough of us.” Claire nodded and put the book on the ground, continuing to carve runes.

“Well we don’t know at what level he started. Blood mages, necromancers, witches and similar classes can advance quite quickly when they have enough resources to sacrifice and work on.” Trian explained as he dusted himself off. “What are you even doing Claire?” he asked and looked around the room “Ah, I understand. Well I’ll go out, the stench in here is disgusting. Get me when you’re done.” he said and walked out.

Ilea went to grab the diary again and opened it before walking to Kyrian and grabbing the man on his spiked armor before sitting down on the half destroyed staircase. “Alright, read to me. I’ll explain the words you don’t know.”

“Ilea I don’t think...” the man started but she put a finger on his helmet.

“It’s alright, I just want to help. Tell me if you really feel uncomfortable with it and I’ll stop.” she said and looked at him. The metal and curse mage equipped in full plate armor that was bloodied in parts looked away before focusing on the book before him.

“D...day f... fifty?” Ilea nodded and he continued.

They emerged out of the stone building half an hour later when Claire was done with everything. Ilea led them to the building where Eve and the girl would be waiting and also found Trian inside, sitting in a chair in the corner of the room, his helmet off while Eve was sitting next to the bed. The young girl was still asleep, even snoring rather loudly.

Claire sat down on the table in the living room and started reading the diary, taking notes here and there. Ilea blinked outside and to the roof of the building, removing her helmet and breathing in the cool air. She closed her eyes and thought about what she had seen inside that stone building. It would haunt her for quite some time she was sure. She summoned some of Keyla's food but found it bland and tasteless, leaving it on the roof next to her.

Trian found her a couple minutes later and teleported next to her. He looked at her and then towards the sky. "You know a bout is usually quite helpful in these situations." he said and Ilea turned to the side, groaning.

"Leave me alone lightning mage." she said and looked at the snow covered roof before her.

"So you do have a storage item... I definitely had my suspicions." her eyes opened up a little wider but she couldn't bring herself to care too much at him finding out.

"No I don't."

"Ilea the food is steaming. As much as you like food I doubt you're a cook that good." he grabbed the food and smelled it. "This is amazing. You don't want it?" he asked and started eating without waiting for even a second.

"It's poisoned." Ilea said.

"No it's not. I wondered why you only had that small pack with you when I assumed you would need three times that in food. I get that you kept it hidden though. Now that I know there's really no reason for the others not to know either." Ilea didn't comment on any of that.

‘So he does deem himself the least trustworthy, or he at least knows that I trust him the least.’ she sighed and turned towards the man. “Alright, let’s have that bout but be warned, I’m angry.”

He kept quiet and continued to eat her food before he threw the empty bowl down into the woods. His helmet appeared and lightning wings spread while red sparks crackled around him. “What makes you think I’m not?”

The wall of ash was burst through by a strike of red lightning as Ilea blinked towards the man who quickly teleported away. Her fist broke through the tree that had been standing behind the man as a flash of lightning advanced on her. Another blink and she was gone again, creating and spreading ash around as best as she could. Without a limitation to their training ground the mage simply ran further away to not be caught in the mist of black.

Ilea was definitely much faster and hit harder than before. He knew that as well and was on the defensive through most of the bout. Some attacks still connected but Ilea definitely found it simpler to catch the elusive man. He would try to teleport away earlier, relying on his movement much more than his attacks. Trian focused on his draining spells more than his lightning ones but Ilea had improved too much for him to completely evade her as would’ve been possible before her class evolution.

She appeared at the same time as him and grabbed his arm, signaling the end of the bout which at this point was more a game of catch than anything. His lightning cursed through her as she smashed her other fist into his chest, distributing destructive mana into the man. Her punch was about as effective as it had been before, simply because of his added enchanted armor that she had only faced at the earlier training session the same day, which had been more about team fighting than one versus one.



She didn't stop and her self healing combined with defense would overwhelm the man in time so he lifted his arms and stopped his attacks. Ilea calmed down and threw the man at the next best tree, which he hit hard.

"That actually was helpful, thanks." she said as he got up and dusted himself off.

"You're quite a bit stronger. Good fight." he said and she nodded, walking back to the village with him joining her side. They had fought for around twenty minutes but a big chunk of the forest was showing small fires and destroyed trees. Ash was covering big parts of the ground, interspersed with snow. Ilea was surprised the man could hold on for so long. 'If it weren't for my defense against his draining and lightning...'

"Those hits would have broken my rib cage without the armor. Did you get a Strength enhancement?"

"One of my body enhancement skills now also enhances Strength." Ilea explained and he nodded.

"Figured. So you can use those gauntlets now?"

Ilea summoned them and lifted them up slowly. "Yes, but I'm much slower with the weight." Trian looked towards her and kept walking. They were silent until they reached the village again and entered the house. Kyrian was sitting on the ground in the living room with closed eyes. Claire had a bunch of notes on some paper next to the diary, already nearly done with the whole book. Granted it wasn't huge but Ilea was a much slower reader, even with her enhanced senses.

"She's awake." Ilea noticed and looked at the closed door of the room Eve was in with the girl. The two were talking but Ilea decided not to listen too closely. With her skills she could've made out the conversation through the wooden door. She sat down on the ground next to Kyrian and summoned two of Keyla's meals, handing one of them to the man next to her.

"You...?" he said but then just nodded and took the bowl. Claire looked towards them and smiled but continued to scribble on her notes. None of

them were wearing their helmets, something Ilea quite enjoyed. The team of Sulivhaan had never taken theirs off but perhaps that was simply because Ilea had been there. She didn't know how they interacted when nobody was around.

"I was wondering," she started. "The guy Eve murdered. I didn't get a single level up even though he was as high as me. Granted his second class wasn't at two hundred yet..."

"It slows down a lot after two hundred. You ever fought any elves?" Trian asked and smiled when she nodded. "Well didn't you ever wonder how they weren't a much higher level than what they are?"

"I don't think those are the strongest elves out there." she answered.

"Oh I'm sure they're not, as are we not the strongest humans. Still with decades ahead wouldn't you think they'd be much higher compared to you for example? You're what? Twenty? Thirty?" Trian commented as he leaned on a nearby wall.

"Don't assume a woman's age." she said but found herself agreeing with the man. "So it just slows down a lot after two hundred. Weird." she thought but continued eating, satisfied with the explanation. The village house was dark and cold, only a small flame burned over some runes Claire had placed on the table to make reading a simpler task. She stopped writing and sat back in the chair around ten minutes later, her armored skirt producing a metallic rustling at the movement.

Eve joined them a moment later, closing the door quietly behind her.

"How is she?" Kyrian asked and Eve made a wavy motion with her hand.

"As well as she could be considering the circumstances. Claire how does it look?" Eve looked towards the woman with cold eyes.

"It looks like we will have more than just money to collect in that village."

# Chapter 107 Everyday Life

## Chapter 107 Everyday Life

Sally had watched the squad of the hand leave the village and felt the gazes upon her heavily. For once it didn't seem the people watching her were after the money she hid in her heavy coats. 'I hope they come back alive...' she thought as she turned to grab her drink that had been untouched for a while. She had left the mercenaries to interrogate the two people they had found spying on them and returned to the inn as soon as they were done.

The innkeeper was acting a little tense now after the squad was through but if it weren't for the constant bad feeling she had inside of this village, she would've attributed that to simply being in contact with a shadow squad. 'I need to get the hell out of here...' she thought and finished the drink.

A couple hours later a group of villagers burst into the inn, some of them looking at her but they didn't seem too concerned by the woman. She was a couple dozen levels higher than anybody in the room but if they would gang up on her it would prove to be a difficult fight. She read the mood and respectfully left towards the top floor and her room, mostly to not end up in a fight.

What the group downstairs didn't know was that Sally had exceptional hearing, coming from her second more stealthy class. Standing still near the stairway, she strained her ears and listened in, if only to be able to flee should the need arise.

“...they have entered the main hall.” one of the men said in a hushed but aggravated voice, clearly not handling the stress as well as he should be.

“So? Many have done the same and so far nobody has returned. Trust in the Father.” Sally found herself a little surprised at the innkeeper’s words. Except for a little tension she hadn’t felt anything from him. A good actor. She wasn’t quite sure who this father was supposed to be but it was quite clear that this village was the reason for all the missing adventurers who went to investigate the other village.

Sally wondered how the empire had even been notified about the missing people in the first place but shelved that thought for now. She was in danger for sure and the only reason the people likely hadn’t looked for her already was the bigger threat of the shadow squad.

“Yes we know but nobody has entered the same way... they broke the barrier Hollum!” the last part would’ve even been heard by someone without enhanced hearing. It was the same man speaking but more voices skipped over each other now, trying to get their opinions in.

“It was a mistake, a big mistake... I’m gonna leave. You do whatever you want.” one of them said and stormed towards the door but was stopped by one of his fellows.

“Don’t get cold feet now, we’ve been in this together Karl.” somebody else said but then the room fell quiet as Sally heard the door open and someone step in. A quiet step. She could feel shivers form on her back and her skills activated as she waited on the top of the staircase.

“Welcome back. So have you found the...” the innkeeper started but was interrupted by the sound of someone humming. Sally stepped back one step and then two as she listened to the eerie tune, the sound of a blade cutting through flesh and blood dripping on the ground was quickly added, finally followed by the presumably falling corpses that hit the floor. Not a single word was uttered by any of the people downstairs until the humming stopped. Sally had her hand on the handle of her sword when the same humming voice came from below.

“No need to be afraid officer.” it was one of the mercenaries and Sally found herself unable to let go of her sword. Concentrating on it she finally released her tense hand and released the buffs she had cast upon herself. ‘No stupid moves now or you’re dead...’ the thought came to her mind as she steeled herself and walked downstairs slowly.

All seven people including the innkeeper were laying on the floor of the building, dead and bleeding, coloring the brown wood in a dark shade of red. One of the mercenaries was standing in the middle of the room, clad in her dark armor, her face covered in a mask that showed a white smile. The woman was staring towards the ceiling and turned towards Sally as soon as she set foot into the room. She readied all her resolve and all her skills to react in an instant should the mercenary find a reason to attack her.

“Relax.” came the word from the door as another one of them entered. The woman who had presumably found the spies and was constantly eating. It didn’t look as silly anymore now that Sally faced her, clad in black full plate armor with a horned helmet and covered in blood. “We found and killed the responsible. Turns out most of them were from this village. You got all of them?” she asked towards the masked mercenary.

“Seven. There should be five more.” she said and walked towards the door, vanishing before Sally’s eyes.

“Good hunt.” the other woman said and looked at the scene before her, the look on her face unreadable below her helmet. She then walked to each corpse and closed their eyes, a weird gesture. Sally’s eyebrows lifted as the first corpse vanished and then the second one. All of them vanished before the woman walked out the back door. No other words had been spoken and Sally found her curiosity win over as she followed behind the woman.

A couple dozen meters behind the inn, right at the start of a field the mercenary stopped and started digging with the shovel she had gotten from god knows where. ‘Graves...’ Sally thought as she watched the woman dig seven graves for the people who were killed.

“Here you are.” a new voice joined the solemn scene as the mercenary team leader walked up to Sally who turned to look at her. “Would you please come

with me to discuss the report.” the woman said and Sally found herself nodding along, following behind as the sound of shoveling continued behind her.

Ilea finished the last grave and summoned the corpses from her necklace to fill the spaces. She felt a slight disturbance in her sphere but continued. “You think they deserve that?” Eve asked as she appeared a couple meters away from her. “After what they’ve done.”

“Maybe not, but we don’t have to become them.” Ilea answered, getting a slight chuckle from Eve.

“I have murdered them all in cold blood. And you would have done the same had I not asked for it.” Ilea stayed quiet, knowing that there was some truth to what her team mate said. Still she refused to give in completely. Foolish maybe but something inside of her didn’t want to let go. Eve scoffed but didn’t leave, instead watching the woman work as she closed up the graves with earth. Three metal spheres hovered into her sphere and expanded into plates, closing the last four graves in one move. A gesture one could interpret in different ways but Ilea knew Kyrian meant well.

“You stopped something before it got dangerous then. Thank you.” the official said and got a pouch from her coat.

“It was plenty dangerous for everybody who died already.” Eve said in a cold voice.

“O... of course, I’m sorry... I meant for the empire itself.” the official tried to salvage her comments but Ilea was quite sure Eve was having none of that. She was enjoying a meal from Keyla and looked on as Claire counted the gold. Eve had simply handed Ilea her pack when she realized that she had a storage item, grumbling about unnecessary weight she had been carrying all this time.

Claire took a while to finish up with the official and Ilea had managed to try most of the different beverages stored in the inn and its cellar. Luckily there was no further blood magic related finds in said cellar. There would be an investigator sent by the empire to determine the involvement of the village in the killings but the shadow squad had already cleaned up rather well. The evidence combined with some last minute confessions made for a compelling argument though Ilea still had some qualms about being the vigilante murderer she had become.

It didn't bother her nearly as much anymore as the first time she had killed and it would bother her less and less, she was sure of it. 'I'll have to visit a priest or something...' she thought as she emptied the last bit of the best mead she could find in the cellar.

“Ilea we're leaving!” Eve shouted from above and a blink later the squad was back together, ready to go onto their third mission together. It had taken a total of five hours to finish up everything in the village and they left in a rather solemn atmosphere. The girl turned out to be related to some of the people in the village who had believed her to be missing in the nearby forest. Eve made quite sure to mention that she would check in on them and if any harm would come to the girl the whole village would be razed.

Ilea believed her when she heard the woman talk, painting a rather different picture of the mage than she had of her before. Then again it wasn't that surprising. They all were at a certain level of strength and Ilea started to form a theory on how Eve had gotten there.

The team was flying eastwards soon thereafter, towards Damwell, one of Lys' cities by the sea. Hopefully this job would be a little less emotionally draining but Ilea tried to prepare for everything as she flew through the empire's lands, carrying two of her team mates next to her.

It took another three hours to reach the city and the suns of Elos were slowly moving downwards on the horizon. Ilea thought of dinner as the group landed near the city gates and soon joined the few travelers nearby, most of which were adventurers or merchants protected by such.

They did get a few looks but considerably fewer than on their first mission. This changed quickly upon entering the city itself where most people weren't part of one or the other adventurer guild, making the group of armored mercenaries quite a scene to behold. One of the city guards escorted the group towards the responsible station where they would be further instructed on the job.

After the initial mention of a queen harpy no other adventurer had even tried to enter the cliffs, the monster too dangerous a prospect. Claire finished up with the city official rather quickly as the team waited outside. Ilea was getting a little sick of the constant attention they got due to the black wisps and heavy armor. 'I could just switch to my leather one... but the others are still here... eh.' she thought and summoned her monster encyclopedia, looking for the Queen Harpy entry. Ilea was sure that at least Claire had looked it up beforehand when they were still in Viscera.

*A queen harpy appears in a harpy nest around every other decade. Usually the monsters fly towards a high mountain or an isolated cliff side to build their new nest. When a queen appears the harpies grow more defensive and ultimately aggressive towards the neighboring species. The monster itself usually reaches a level slightly above two hundred. No notable capabilities besides the purely physical have been reported.*

She read the text out loud to the loitering team members also waiting for Claire's return.

“So we go there and kill the birds...” Kyrian said.



“They're like half human right?” Ilea asked as she looked at the picture of the monster before the book vanished from her hand.

“Since when do you care, the last job involved killing actual people.” Trian said from the side, looking around at the guards sometimes glancing at the group. Ilea shrugged at the question and thought about it. It seemed comparable to not eating meat on earth but then again if a wolf pack attacked the livestock of a farm they would probably be hunted down as well.

“We can focus on the queen, less work for us and we're done quicker.” Trian said.

“Me and Ilea sneak in while the rest makes a lot of noise at the entrance?” Eve suggested and Kyrian nodded.

“The close quarters might not be beneficial for us if there are a lot of them in there.” he said but Ilea wasn't quite so sure about that. They would probably do fine either way and splitting up didn't seem like the best idea.

“Let's ask Claire about it once she's done.” Ilea said and ended the conversation there. The rune mage came back a couple minutes later, and quickly briefed the group on any new information she might've received. There wasn't a lot, other than an increasing amount of harpy attacks near the southern parts of the city. Fishermen and adventurers were avoiding big parts of their usual hunting grounds because of it.

They didn't have to stay in the city for any longer and quickly left towards the south, where the location of the supposed queen harpy was. Claire was ok with the plan of splitting up as long as Eve first scouted out the cliffs to find the queen. Ilea would go in with her to ensure they could actually take the beast down. Eve wasn't sure she could kill the beast quickly enough in addition to escaping without getting hurt.

The group landed twenty minutes later on an empty beach, the stormy waves of the ocean hitting the sand and rocks with cold water. Ilea breathed in the salty winds and looked around. There were many openings in the cliff side and Eve's illusions went towards them at a quick running pace. Sadly her clones didn't have the same chameleon like ability she could manifest herself.

Ilea and Eve went to hide near a rock formation while the others prominently made their stand on the beach itself. Runes were carved and placed by Claire and Kyrian while Trian hovered above, his lightning ready to strike.

“Got it...” Eve said around ten minutes later. One of her illusions had found the location of the queen harpy, apparently inside of an open cave with plenty of water and sunlight inside. She motioned to Claire who was just finishing up carving into the cliff side with Kyrian carrying her up and down the formations. She nodded to Eve as the two landed back inside their defensive rune formations below Trian.

The lightning mage nodded as well before blue lightning formed around his hands and impacted the cliff side. Claire added a couple smaller explosions to the mix and they got the intended response. Loud and angry bird noises came from the caves before the first of them burst out. To Ilea they looked quite a bit different than the ones she had seen before, perhaps a different species but most notable was the look in their eyes.

“They seem crazed or something...” she whispered to Eve who started to assume her surrounding's colors, becoming nearly invisible in mere seconds.

“Come.” the woman said as more and more birds poured out of the tunnels to attack the apparent intruders. Eve started running, masking herself so well Ilea had difficulties making out the woman, even with her perception skills. She tried hiding as best she could with her Embered Body Heat. She also quickly switched her elven armor out with a leather one to make a little less noise while walking.

The explosions resounded through the caves as the two women sneaked deeper into the cave systems while more harpies flew out above them. 'That's quite a number...' Ilea thought, a little more convinced of their chosen method. The beasts were between level seventy and one hundred and thirty so Claire and the others would be fine for quite some time. Maybe the whole colony would be wiped out already when Ilea and Eve exited the caves again but the First Hunter doubted that.

Luckily nearly no harpy was on the ground and all of them were too crazed to notice the two women below. They still had to hide sometimes as they went

around corners and deeper into the caves. After a while there were non crazed harpies standing guard to any tunnels that would lead further in but combined with Eve's near invisibility and Ilea's blinking ability the two moved through undiscovered until they finally came into the main cave where the queen harpy resided.

The monster looked a little taller than the rest with horns on its head but Ilea couldn't quite make out any other differences.

*[Queen Harpy – lvl 205]*

'Just as in the monster book.' Ilea smiled and looked towards Eve. They had decided on an approach beforehand and now executed it. Ilea waited in the small hiding spot between rocks and looked towards the beast which was standing at an elevated position in the cave. Ilea activated all her buffs a moment later when the beast's eyes went wide and blood spurted from its neck that had been sliced.

She blinked twice as ash formed around her, staining the ground black and gray and filling the air with a mist of the magically created substance. It twirled around her as her wings came alive and carried her the last ten or so meters. The harpy was gurgling and screaming with all her power as it tried to remove the dagger from her neck, black veins slowly forming near the blade. It hit around herself but Ilea knew that Eve was already quite a distance away, waiting. Ilea impacted the beast and gripped the blade before pushing it in further, ignoring the claws that scratched against her Veil of ash.

# Chapter 108 Tactical Defusing

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More and more black ash formed around her as she started punching the beast's head, focusing on its eyes and beak first to further disorient it. The cries still came out even though most of its throat had been cut through and Ilea heard any nearby harpy cry out in turn to create a deafening concert of voices. She turned down her hearing before she would get hurt and simply continued her attacks, more and more mana flowing into the beast and destroying it from the inside.

It would only be a matter of time before the beast fell. Combined with the black veins coming from Eve's dagger Ilea estimated it to be a rather quick thing too, still she summoned her elven armor in case of resistance. The queen's cries slowly softened, its head a swollen mess of blood and broken bone as Ilea's fists continued to rain into the beast. The first harpies started to arrive then and clawed at her veil of ash but the Azarinth hunter had formed a thick mist of ash around her, making it hard for the birds to find her.

In their haste to help their queen they even managed to injure her further with their sharp talons. Ilea just clung to the monster's chest and continued her relentless assault while ignoring the damage she herself sustained. Some claws from the now numerous harpies around her managed to get through the veil but none had actually drawn blood so far, unable to breach the elven armor.

Some damage was of course still being done but Ilea's healing skill was easily countering that and with her newfound strength it was quite simple for her to hang onto her target while delivering more and more blows. A sickening crunch resounded through the whole cave when Ilea managed to break the queen's beak, finally killing her.

Silence swept through the cave and Ilea saw all the harpies around her slow down and look around confused. 'They must have lost their frenzy with the queen's death...' Ilea thought and dodged a clawed foot going for her back. Sneaking back, she stored both the dead queen and Eve's dagger in her necklace and made her way towards the exit. Eve should've been long gone to avoid entering a skirmish like the one Ilea had just been a part of.

With her full speed and blink's capability, Ilea ran out of the cave. Dozens of bewildered harpies were strewn around the tunnels, trying to find the intruders. To Ilea's surprise some of the harpies even started attacking each other, apparently lost without their deceased leader. As Ilea got further out, the harpies seemed to follow the same goal as they simply ran or flew next to her, croaking loudly into her ears.

The run continued as Ilea sometimes dodged one or the other attack coming her way with a blink or quick movement, most of them didn't seem to be intentional and simply a circumstance of the small space they had found themselves in. With a burst of speed and three quick successive blinks, Ilea appeared outside of the cliff side and around thirty meters above the beach they had started on. Her wings spread as she twirled and dived downwards, avoiding any escaping harpy on the way until she landed with a thump on the sand, digging deep into the ground before another blink brought her behind some nearby rocks to hide from the swarm above.

The croaking was all that filled her ears by now as she danced across the rocky landscape. Luckily the beasts were too occupied with each other to notice Ilea or perhaps they simply felt her strength and avoided her thus. The reason didn't quite matter to the woman who was still moving through the rocks until she saw the rest of her team, standing under a nearly white shield, conjured by Claire while curse runes were placed in circles a couple meters away from the shield. Trian was standing inside as well, the air around him crackling with red lightning. There were dozens of dead harpies spread

around them but with the queen's death it seemed that the rest now completely avoided the trio, and with that a sure way to die.

Ilea walked closer until she felt the curse take effect on her, quite a bit weaker than when she had set food into one of Kyrian's runes before. Not as weak as she expected either, must've come with his class upgrade as well. She didn't want to know the effects without any resistance to the magic. The dome of light came down as the curse' effect weakened and then vanished, marking the end of the mage's runes.

Ilea figuratively knocked on the dissolving dome of light as she checked through the messages that started appearing in her mind midway through her walk on the beach. Truly a vacation in a foreign land.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Queen Harpy – lvl 205]'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

'It's gonna be less and less if I don't go and attack masses of higher leveled beasts alone isn't it?' she thought as Claire greeted her. Eve wasn't yet outside it seemed or she chose to stay hidden for some reason. 'Maybe masses of higher leveled beasts with this group?' she mused the thought when a couple dozen meters away Eve slowly came into view. Ilea summoned the woman's dagger and threw it towards her, the piece of metal easily being caught.

“So you did it? Is that why they're so bloody disoriented?” Trian asked as he looked at the two women.

“Yea, have the body stored away. You wanna go back to the city?” Ilea asked.

“It's barely been two hours... did you find the location of the harpy?” the guard captain asked, a grizzly old man. A ranger at level 130 as Ilea identified. Claire motioned outside where they had left the carcass and the man was quickly cursing with delight as he exited his office.

“You damn motherfuckers. Great job, you cost a damn lot but it's damn worth it.” he went and touched the body with glee in his eyes. “Damn monster that one. Over two hundred?” Claire nodded to his question as he let go of the corpse.

“Well come then, we'll pay you and you can be on your way. Of course if you want to stay in the city? I'm sure a lot of adventurers would gladly thank you for the service.” he grinned at that but no reaction could be gleamed from the shadow squad, stoic as their reputation. Under the facemasks and helmets the reactions were rather different of course but the man likely didn't know that.

“Two done, one to go. And we're still on the same day.” Kyrian said as the group waited for Claire again. This time it didn't take quite as long, likely because no execution of a blood magic cult had taken place in this mission. Hopefully this would stay the same for the last one.

'Should've taken those water fighting lessons...!' Ilea thought a little worried as the group flew over open water near the coastline, Eve and Claire holding on to Ilea. 'I wonder if Aki is bored...!' she thought as Eve started humming and then singing a song. Ilea didn't know it but it had a bit of a happier tone to it than her usual musical additions, maybe she was excited at the prospect of exploring a newly discovered ruin or perhaps it was because the group might be able to join the tournament if they performed well on some missions before the two weeks were over.

Nonetheless it was nice to have something else than the waves in her ears, a constant reminder of the unending depths below, just waiting to swallow her. She gulped and concentrated on the song.

“I think that's it. See those formations over there... they fit the description.” Claire said as the group was hovering over the hundreds of rocks creeping out of the water a couple hundred meters away from the shoreline. No city or village was anywhere near close by.

“You mean those gray rocky ones?” Ilea asked excitedly. Claire nodded slightly, the sarcasm shooting right over her head. “Claire I have no idea where, please just guide me...” Ilea said and started flying, following the hand gestures of her team mate holding on to her left arm.

“I can see movement...” Eve said as they got closer to rocks that looked quite the same as everything else Ilea had in her vision. Soon enough she saw it too, a bunch of people moving about a platform of rock, supplies and tents all around them. There was neither a fire nor any boats which made the place a little harder to find. The group landed a couple dozen meters away and made their way towards the adventurer camp.

It seemed in good shape and at least some of the people there had noticed the approaching group, shouting to get the attention of the rest. A quick line was formed as buffs came to life.

“They know who we are don't they?” Kyrian asked towards Claire who was walking closer while the rest of the team stayed back. It was the general approach they had settled on, the rest of the team too socially inept to make first contact with a giddy group of dangerous warriors.

“We're a bunch of people in black armor, could be anyone really. Dunno if they know about a hired squad of the Hand making an appearance.” Ilea



commented and spun Aki around to make sure he wouldn't suddenly snore off. She wasn't sure the guy was even with her most of the time in the past days but he did like it whenever there was action.

With raised arms Claire walked closer to the adventurers until there was only a couple meters of water between them. Ilea noticed that a lot of the adventurers were relaxing already, some even leaving the formation.

“Shadow's Hand, we've been hired to help with the exploration.” there were still some doubtful faces but Claire calmly moved her backpack to the front before she got out a piece of paper with the guild seal on it. An additional document they had gotten when receiving the mission. Even the last of the people seemed more relaxed now upon viewing the document and Claire soon waved the group over as she herself jumped onto the plateau of rock where the camp was made. Compared to the stares they had gotten in Damwell, Ilea noticed a lot more respectful nods their way in addition to some smiles and relieved faces.

It seemed that the exploration was going just as well as described by the guild which was confirmed by one of the rangers in the group of adventurers. “Yea we lost two more since the request went out. Didn't know there would be a shadow squad hired but the report we sent to the guild was quite detailed. I assume you read it?” the woman asked.

“I did, poison, arrows, rusty spike traps. No monsters discovered so far.” Claire summarized. She had talked a little more about the report on their flight here but to Ilea it didn't seem as dangerous.

“So how will you go about it?” the woman asked and Claire just motioned to Ilea.

“Are you sure about this?” Claire asked.

“Oh yes, I'm the trap buster 3000.” Ilea said in a completely serious tone before a veil of ash formed around her. She then unceremoniously put her pack down and got a piece of paper and her pen out to draw out a map. Eve smiled and Claire shrugged as Trian sat down on a stone nearby.

“Don't take too long, and get us if you find anything interesting. Don't touch anything.” Trian said to her which made Ilea grin from ear to ear.

“I'll touch everything mate...all of the things...” she giggled and vanished into the cave.

“Y... you sure she'll be alright?” the ranger asked Claire, obviously not intimidated by the prospect of a shadow squad. Not surprising with her level being at one hundred and sixty herself.

“She's quite... durable.” Claire said and got out some documents from her backpack, ready to start writing the report for this mission. She liked to be ahead when it came to documentation. Her mood was high though as they had already made a substantial amount of money in just one day. The jobs given to the Hand were certainly profitable. Looking around at the icy rocks, the rune mage smiled. She might have paid back her debt to the Guild sooner than expected.

“Are you serious...” Ilea asked as a bunch of poison darts flew her way, interrupted in their short flight by the ash flowing around her. She kept herself over the water with both her wings and by simply grabbing onto the rock. The traps were well hidden and without her sphere Ilea would've been quite surprised at some of them. Even then none would've likely managed to injure her in any major way. Most of her time was spent drawing out the ruin, at this point mostly a cave with hints of symmetrical influences.

A sudden rock slide above her made some pieces tumble towards her that would've pushed her onto the spikes hiding in the water below but with a well timed blink Ilea simply stood on top of the traps. 'Compared to the Taleen this seems like amateur hour...' she thought but considering the traps here were based mostly on mechanical finesse and less runic, it was certainly impressive. Ilea saw the spikes below enter even the stone itself,

speaking for the quality of the metal used. 'And that for a lousy trap...' she thought as she continued onwards.

An hour of trap deactivation turned into two as Ilea chose more often to simply let the mechanisms spring instead of trying to dismantle them. The caves ran rather deep and Ilea was glad she could blink through water as many sections were flooded or even held traps of such nature. Finally Ilea came up on a massive stone door with runes carved into it. Still there was no sign of any life inside the ruins but Ilea had a feeling this would be quite different after entering whatever the stone door was protecting.

She couldn't see through with her Sphere and neither could she blink inside. The attempt even released some poison darts straight from the door which did manage to pierce her veil of ash. An impressive feat to say the least.

*'ding' 'You have been poisoned by ??? -100 HP/s -100 Stamina/s'*

'Yea I can see this dungeon being deadly to people without healers or poison resistances...' she thought, smiling and activating Hunter Recovery. It didn't even say how long the poison would last and the Stamina part made her a little anxious. Ilea quickly ran back and found a space between a couple rocks to hide and wait out the poison in case something came up while she was healing and out of stamina.

The poison took a total of ten minutes to completely wear off. Sixty thousand health in total were lost and regained as Ilea waited, nearly paralyzed by the lack of stamina, a state she rarely reached through conventional training and fighting. The idea of getting a stamina drain resistance and perhaps a drowning resistance became quite important to her as she struggled to not fall onto the ground which was at least half a meter deep in water.

With the combined effort of Meditation, Poison Resistance, Hunter Recovery and Veil of Ash which doubled the resistance again, the poison was fought off and removed from her body. Ilea thought that not even Trian would've likely survived that one, not even with her help. 'What the hell... some bloody poison darts killing a literal thunder vampire...' it just seemed wrong to her. 'Maybe we should get a full time healer in the group just to make sure something like this doesn't happen.'

She slowly got up and out of her hiding spot, stretching every limb of her body until she felt capable again to fight off some poison darts. A feat now probably close to her survival of fighting the Taleen Praetorians. 'Maybe this ruin isn't quite so far away from the dungeon..' she thought and chuckled as she touched the round stone door. Trying to blink inside again didn't release any more darts but still wasn't possible for her. She didn't want to force her way in as that would likely cause some other problems, problems that now weren't just her own anymore.

Ilea checked around the room for any hidden traps she might have missed and only found two more dart traps that she destroyed without issue. Having no way to safely continue she made her way back to the adventurer camp with the map she had been adding to continuously. There were a lot of side tunnels as well but all of them ended in traps. Whoever built this place definitely didn't want anybody to find a place of safe rest, at least not until the traps had been activated.

Coming out of the cave Ilea sped up, hearing the sound of magic and explosions. She came out to her team and most of the adventurers being engaged with some kind of stone creature.

*[Stone Guardian of Karul – lvl ??]*

“Oh shit...” she exclaimed and activated all her buffs, jumping into combat with a smile.

# Chapter 109 Dangerous Leeching

## Chapter 109 Dangerous Leeching

Ilea blinked into the magic laden air and grabbed onto the guardian, a creature made entirely of stone but much more durable considering the magic that was continuously rained into it. With a couple punches Ilea noticed quite quickly that neither of her mana intrusion abilities worked on the creature. Her fist even bounced back as Wave of Ember and Destruction tried to damage the creature. She didn't take any damage herself but was quite sure the golem didn't even notice her.

Ilea found herself to be the only one actually on the creature, all the other adventurers had formed lines of defense with mages behind, attacking the creature from a distance. It would sometimes shoot a lance of stone towards them which the first line tried to block or deflect. A couple adventurers had been hurt but nobody was killed so far, at least as far as Ilea could see from her vantage position.

They had one or two healers with them as well so she felt her abilities more usable on the offensive. The creature was riddled with Kyrian's needles which barely managed to pierce its shell, if there even was something else than stone inside. It was slow and under constant bombardment so Ilea decided to try and get its attention away from the mages and towards the fly that was crawling on its face. Arrows and bursts of fire and lightning hit close to her as she blinked towards the monster's head, summoning her black obsidian gauntlets in the process.

It was much too slow to do anything as Ilea's fist connected with her full force and all her buffs behind her, adding an inhuman amount of power into the already heavy gauntlets. Pure physical force smashed into the Guardian's head but its reaction was only a small bob to the other side. The head was chipped a little but it didn't seem like any substantial damage had been done. 'Not the head then...' Ilea thought and blinked downwards as another barrage of magic hit the creature. She was now standing below its massive legs, several meters in length and over one meter thick.

Its arms and legs tried to smash her now as more stone lances were released from its head and body to attack the adventurers around her. Ilea's speed was reduced by the weight but the slow movements of her enemy allowed her to easily dodge nonetheless. Some of the other adventurers who saw her display joined in and danced around the monster's legs as well, attacking it with physical damage while the mages worked on its torso.

Some of the spears were soon shot towards the annoying people attacking the monster's legs as well. One of them would've taken an ax wielding warrior right in the chest were it not for Ilea who appeared in front of him, deflecting the spear enough with her hand that it glanced her shoulder and then entered the water a dozen meters behind them. She continued her assault, appearing and disappearing, chipping away at the enemy's legs, hoping to topple the creature.

Nearly all of Kyrian's metal had dug into the creature by that point and combined with the many other mages near the ruin and their spells, the enemy was slowed down to a crawl. Still its spears were dangerous and if any of its limbs hit you, the force was considerable. Without a perception of pain or time the monster raged on but the group of warriors and mages had come into a routine, resting and fighting in groups, healing the injured and meditating back their resources at a safe distance.

“How long do you think that thing will hold up?” Ilea asked Trian who was standing next to her, getting back the mana they had used up when fighting the creature.

“You touched something didn't you?” he smiled as he said it and panted, sitting down on a rock behind him.

“You know it baby. I'm not sure it was me though. There was a massive door that nearly poisoned me to death. Maybe me interacting with it made the thing appear.” she said and he grunted in response.

“Ready?” he asked and Ilea's gauntlets appeared again, grinning below her helmet and blinking back into combat. A couple minutes later the creature suddenly stopped shooting spears and retracted its attacking arms back to its side. Most of the close combat adventurers pulled back while the magic attacks continued. Ilea watched as the outer shell of the creature crumbled and fell down, creating dust and a loud noise. Some of the stone fell on her head but she simply ignored it, continuing her assault. This time her fist seemed to have a much bigger impact as the now much thinner leg of the creature nearly buckled.

She felt the heat rise as she looked up, her eyes opening quickly as she looked at the supposed core of the creature glowing a deep red below its cracked stone mantle. 'Not again...' she thought and blinked on top of the monster, shouting to the people around her.

“Into the water! It's gonna explode!” it only reached some but the news spread quickly. The first of the adventurers were already spreading out to either jump into the water or run along the stone platforms to shield themselves with stone. The Guardian's arms and legs started moving again as it moved at a much quicker pace than before towards the biggest group of people still standing and attacking, two of the healers taking care of the previously injured.

“Nah mate...” Ilea said as she appeared right before the monster's chest and punched with her full force and heavy gauntlets. It slowed the creature down considerably as the adventurers got up and fled. With the fifth punch the monster tried to grab her, the heat still increasing around her but Ilea blinked behind one of its legs and punched where its knee would be. Another two punches and the leg buckled, the monster now on one knee. Ilea blinked to the other leg and continued her work while she avoided its arms.

She saw with her sphere that Claire was running around her position, distributing runed plates while Trian flew above, mana and lightning gathering around him in droves. Four big spikes of metal entered the

monster's legs as Ilea delivered a last punch not onto the creature but onto the spikes, driving them further into the ground. Looking at Trian she disappeared and appeared right next to Claire, watching the light show around Trian gather into his hands.

She saw how the lightning burned his hands right before the massive amount of magical power was released and hit the creature right in its core. The last of the attack entered the creature as a bright yellowish shield formed around it, closing barely a meter above its head. A moment later Ilea tackled down Claire and formed as much ash to shield them as possible. A blinding light followed and a dull explosion resounded as the core of the creature burst.

The rune shield gave out and a wave of heat and fire burned over the ash above Ilea and Claire. The fire managed to reach Ilea's veil but no further. An eerie quiet came over the area as slowly the sound of waves came back to Ilea's ears. She coughed and got up, moving away the ash with her creation skill. Claire got up as well and the two looked at the crater the guardian managed to form. Some mages were returning from the water or rock formations a little bit further away to put out the flames currently raging in their camp.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Stone Guardian of Karul – lvl 334]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and thirty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 201 – 5 stat point are awarded.'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

“Now that was a bomb.” Ilea said and thought back to the Centurions she had faced. Although this one's level was a bit higher, it was still a substantially stronger blast. At least that was Ilea's thought as she looked at the crater. “Wasn't that shield specifically against explosions?” Clarie just gulped as



she checked the runed plates that looked completely destroyed. Trian landed nearby and both Kyrian and Eve joined as well.

“Well done.” Kyrian said as they all walked to the crater to check it out. There was nothing left behind by the creature. It was doubtful to have ever existed, looking at the remains. The fires were now more or less under control and only a couple small flames had to be extinguished by the mages who continued their work. Some of the others walked closer to the shadow squad before one of them shouted, a cry of joy and victory. Many others joined in, mainly warriors but none of the black armored mercenaries felt the need to rejoice.

Ilea felt chills going down her back at the emotions displayed by the adventurers. They might've saved some lives here. The thought of that slowly sunk in as a smile formed on her lips. 'Lilith's legend grows!' she thought and looked to Claire.

“I have the map and found a door. Probably why that thing appeared.” she said and Claire nodded, walking towards the camp's center. The adventurers parted to let the group through and many followed to hear what was to come. A lot of them had likely gained a level or ten considering the level disparity between the group, only held together by the common goal of the ruin exploration.

Ilea got the map out of her pack and put it onto the table. “Traps on the way should all be dismantled and I checked the main room here three times to make sure. There was strong poison here... I can't see beyond the door and can't teleport through either. All side tunnels were checked as well, traps marked and deactivated.” she finished her report that was more akin to a speech considering the amount of people listening in.

“We need rune mages and alchemists or any other people versed in poisons.” Claire said and looked around.

“If the cave is safe, we'll move the camp in there. The cold out here is very demanding...” the ranger from before said which was the first time Ilea saw some of the people around her shiver, coming straight out of the icy water they had fled to for safety.

*[Warrior – lvl 102]*

*[Warrior – lvl 120]*

*[Mage – lvl 105]*

*[Warrior – lvl 87]*

*[Mage – lvl 93]*

'I'm not sure if they're up for that. The Taleen dungeon had lower level enemies than that guardian and the people were all at least near one fifty..'  
Ilea thought and looked to Claire.

“You think it's safe for a camp?” Claire asked and Ilea nodded.

“As safe as it gets and you can have fires there as well if someone manages the air. As mentioned I have no idea what lurks behind those doors. I doubt it's any weaker than that stone guardian...” she said and looked at the reactions around her. It was clear that most of the adventurers weren't ready to face a monster like that, be it a simple lack of strength or resolve. Some looked downright defeated while others smiled behind their hoods and helmets. Ilea saw it all.

'Only five people left..'  
Ilea thought as she walked through the now rather dense crowd inside the chamber with the circular door. A group of four people were looking at the poison darts that had nearly killed her, discussing the substance still clinging to the needles. Claire was talking with three adventurers and what looked like two scholars near the round gate, not daring to touch any of the runes yet.

Ilea stood near an old pillar and leaned onto the stone, eating a sandwich she had summoned outside when nobody was looking. Fires were burning in the half hall half cave as mages monitored the flames and created fumes. Water and food was handed around as people talked. One bard went so far as to play a tune on his lute.

“Quite happy considering the deaths in the past weeks...” a man said as he walked up to Ilea. A warrior slightly above level one hundred, a massive ax strapped to his back. Only light leather armor covered him as he leaned on a pillar two meters away from Ilea. She looked at him and continued eating her sandwich.

“It's unusual to have one of you show your face. First time I've seen it happen.” he said as she chewed and took another bite. “You saved me today you know. That stone monster would've smashed me to bits.”

Ilea swallowed and didn't take another bite. “Why are you still here then? You think there's nothing just as dangerous down there?”

The warrior was quiet for a while before answering, the smell of freshly grilled meat reached Ilea's nose. “I gained four levels from that fight and I'm not the only one. We spent the last couple weeks trying to get further into this ruin while keeping it as secret as possible. Nobody's leaving when there's more to get... with you here that doesn't seem very implausible anymore.” he said and chuckled.

“You're pretty honest about your intentions. What if you slip up and nobody's there to save you?”

“Then I die. But today I live, thanks to you.” he said and she snorted.

“You're alright. Lilith's the name.” she said and chuckled, remembering her own misadventures with some rather high leveled companions compared to her own. This time the group of adventurers would serve the shadow squad as distractions at least. Maybe the healers could help as well or some of the scholars. More minds to solve problems. Maybe what they needed was more muscle but flight remained an option.

“Nice to meet you Lilith, an honor to have a Shadow's Hand member tell me their name.” Ilea smirked at that and continued to eat. He offered his own name and then excused himself, reading Ilea enough to know she wasn't up for a casual conversation.

“Lilith eh?” Eve appeared right next to her and tried to grab the sandwich, which made Ilea blink half a meter to the side and letting the hand miss.

“Don't touch my food if you know what's good for yourself...” Ilea said and continued eating.

“Scary scary. Made a friend?” Eve asked, taking up the leaning position Ilea had previously occupied. She didn't get an answer from the woman who got another sandwich from her pack.

“How much food do you have stored away...” Eve asked in a whisper but again was left without answer. She left a moment later, walking towards the music and obviously bored by her team mate.

Ilea finished the sandwich and breathed out. ‘A bit too crowded...’ she thought before exiting the cave system again, taking a breath of fresh air outside.

“So you cracked it?” Eve asked, looking at Claire with a likely annoyed expression behind her mask. The fires had died down and many of the adventurers were sleeping in the somewhat warm hall which had become the new encampment for the impromptu expedition.

“I think so, at least I'm pretty sure I can open it up. The problem is I'm pretty sure there are more traps in there. With all the people here now...” Ilea leaned her head back when Trian grunted.

“They know the risks. We're not here to take care of them. We're here to explore the ruin.” he summoned a small spark in his hand to illuminate his surroundings. “I won't endanger myself for any of them, just as little as they would do the same.”

“You don't have to. Just think of how it would reflect on our team's reputation if nearly thirty guild members die in our fourth mission.” Trian

snuffed out the spark after Claire's comment and just shook his head.

"Why care about the reputation? We're a team of the Hand and can't be held responsible for these peoples' actions." Kyrian commented, a rather cold view Ilea thought but she didn't completely disagree. The guild had hired them specifically because so many people had died already, she doubted they'd get paid if all of their members died.

"You guys wanted into the tournament and this is how we're gonna get in." Claire said with finality in her voice. Trian shut up and Kyrian nodded. They would have to put up with the lower leveled adventurers which Ilea didn't see as much of a problem.

"Are you guys done? Can we go in then, Claire?" Eve walked closer to the door. Some of the adventurers looked towards the team as they approached the round entrance. Most of them had stayed as far away from it as possible, which wasn't very far considering the size of the hall.

Nodding, Claire walked up to the door and started scratching into the stone with a small and thin knife. It took ten minutes of waiting as the shadow squad stood before the entrance, ready and poised for whatever might come. The rest of the expedition gathered a little further back, waking up the sleeping members in the process.

"Brace." Claire said as mana was released from her hand, touching the middle of the door. A pulse of energy rippled through the stone out towards the runes scratched into it before a complicated symbol appeared, shining a dull white. A moment later and it was gone.

"Did it work?" Eve asked.

"Yes." Ilea answered, now able to see through the stone, small cracks forming in the door before it started to crumble.

"Eve scout." Claire said and two of the woman's illusions appeared, running into the still crumbling door. "Ilea traps..." ash appeared around Ilea as she smiled below her helmet, walking into the room and following the illusions.

# Chapter 110 Barriers

## Chapter 110 Barriers

Nothing happened as Ilea walked into the corridor. The ruin looked a lot less like a cave and more like a place to live in at that point. Ilea kept walking, looking around to see magical lights placed on the stone corridor's wall. The way led deeper into the ground before another door blocked the way. Eve's illusions were standing in front of it and vanished as they saw Ilea approach. The squad followed after them while the rest of the adventurers waited in the hall, looking into the corridor and ready to join in should there be something reasonable to fight, something they could attack safely from a distance.

"I can't see inside the room beyond..." Ilea said as she touched the stone door, blocking the way further in.

"Open up then." Trian said and gestured for her to take action. Ilea obliged and punched through the door, only to find her fist stopped completely after breaking through the stone.

"Hmm, weird..." Ilea said and punched another couple times before she simply ripped the rest of the stone out from its place on the wall. A golden shimmering light appeared beyond, likely the thing blocking Ilea's fist. She touched it and found her hand unhurt but stopped nonetheless.

"A barrier..." Clarie commented and walked next to Ilea, touching the barrier herself. "This is nothing ordinary..."

“Yea, it’s a golden barrier inside a ruin. Probably not that ordinary.” Ilea said. “Should I punch it?” she asked, expecting a groan but Claire just shrugged.

“Sure, go for it. This is not based on runes that much I can tell you. I’d try something similar as with the blood magic one yesterday but with the small surface area we can access, your attacks are probably a better bet. The heavy gauntlets are probably the best way, barriers tend to focus more on energy and magical attacks.” she finished and stepped aside.

“I’ll try first...” Trian said as magic gathered around him. Ilea blinked a couple meters away to join the others waiting and watched the man unleash an attack similar to the one used against the stone guardian. Contrary to his expectations, the lightning was reflected right back towards him upon impact and he teleported away to let the energy flow into the stone wall further back. The explosion rattled the walls as chunks of stone fell down, blocking the entrance to the hall they were in.

“Good job mate.” Ilea gave Trian a thumbs up and smiled. The man shrugged and motioned for her to continue.

“Knock yourself out dustgirl.” he said which made Ilea look at him confused.

‘Did he just give me a nickname. Dustgirl, I like it. Impressive, his growth is comparable to the hamster I never had.’ she thought and walked to the barrier. “Alright, let’s see if my arm gets ripped off from this. Step back folks if you don’t want a red shower.” she grinned below her helmet as the heavy obsidian gauntlets appeared around her hands. A pale blue and red glow illuminated the inside of her helmet and armor as her fist impacted with the comparable power of an iron junk thrown by a cave troll. The impact flowed through her body and made her clench her jaw as she looked at the slight flicker in the barrier.

Another three punches had the exact same result. ‘Maybe without...’ she thought and stored her gauntlets back inside of the bracelets made for them. The next punch was fueled with Destruction and Wave of Ember, her fists surrounded by ash which she tried to form into a spike. The kinetic impact and spike of ash didn’t seem to do much but something was different this

time. The destructive mana flowed into the barrier and was visibly disturbing the golden glow from the inside. “Huh..” Ilea said and continued.

More and more of her mana was sizzling inside the barrier until a small hole was opened up. “Hey guys this is working. Should I blink inside?” she asked and continued her attacks.

“Don’t, we better go in there together. Whatever or whomever is causing this might not be taken down by you alone.” Claire said and Ilea saw Kyrian nod at the comment.

“Alright.” she said and punched again, only to find no resistance at all to her arm that moved through the now open doorway. No golden shimmer could be seen anymore as Ilea’s momentum took her further into the room, now past the door frame. Her mind sent the signal to blink backwards as Ilea came up on something blocking her way. A dull pain came from her legs below as she failed to land on her legs. Looking down and around, she found that both her legs had been cut off at the knee and blood started to flow. Behind her the golden barrier was back as if it had been there forever, blocking her attempted escape.

Her team jumped into motion, Kyrian shooting his metal spikes into the barrier and Eve using her enchanted daggers to cut through it. Ilea was falling down and caught herself with her hands, before healing mana circled through her body, immediately stopping the bleeding. She came up on the floor when a sudden golden light appeared mere centimeters away from her neck, only visible to her thanks to the Sphere that was now cut off at the door but could now also penetrate further into the structure.

More importantly at the moment though, Ilea appeared behind the golden line that had come to be next to her neck and focused on reforming the parts of her legs that were now lying behind the barrier, including the parts of elven armor below her knees. Her senses were working on overdrive, trying to prepare for the next and inevitable attack as the golden line from before shot through the air where she had been before. Her legs were reforming quickly as more and more golden lines appeared around her, never closer than five centimeters but always in positions that would normally be invisible to her and ready to cut a spot where her armor wasn’t covering her.



Her elven gear was pretty good at the coverage but it seemed whomever was attacking her had a similar skill to her Sphere at least. The golden lines went straight forward so far and with her blinks, Ilea managed to dodge them in time. After two blinks, the room filled with lines of golden shimmering light and she aligned her body in a way that her armor would block the hits she wasn't able to dodge. The golden light hit her in several places at once, luckily only scratching her armor before she was flung around by the force of the magic. 'It cuts through the Veil like it's butter...' she thought as the room continued to shine in magical golden light.

The others were still working on the barrier but found most of their attacks to be ineffective. Claire was calmly laying out plates in front of the barrier and scratching around the door frame to prepare her intrusion while Eve and Kyrian continued their assault. Trian stayed out of it to avoid hurting himself or anybody else with the likely reflection of his magic.

'Can't get out...' Ilea thought as the shock of several impacts went through her body. Her armor was showing some rather worrisome cuts by now, something that hadn't happened before. One of the golden lines managed to cut through an unarmored part near her elbow joint, drawing blood and nearly severing her arm. It healed quickly as Ilea continued to dodge, this time going further into the structure, towards the center of the barrier. Her perceptive Sphere was cut off in a way that made it easy for her to determine its center. Another room was behind the first one and just like before there was a door Ilea couldn't see through. 'Alright, here we go.' she thought and appeared next to the door with a fully powered spin kick, driving the full momentum through the rock. Her leg hit another barrier but this time she had expected it as mana started flowing into it from all her destructive skills. Even the offensive capabilities of her ash creation, veil of ash and her wings came to bear onto the barrier.

More and more golden lights focused on the area around the door which made it hard for Ilea to approach it but then again there was no reason to attack the barrier where the door was. Ilea smashed through the walls around her, appearing and disappearing all over the place while ash surged around her from thin air, forming into spiked ghostly arms that shattered against the golden light. More and more of the walls were punched through and the

golden barrier was now riddled with Ilea's destructive mana sizzling inside of the golden light. Right before she managed to form a small hole again the enemy's attacks stopped.

"Stop please, or we will all be buried by stone." a male voice said from behind her, a hazy form in her sphere as she turned around to look at him. "I'm sure you would survive it and so will I but I'm not so sure about the others, especially the ones waiting further above." Ilea stopped her attacks and started meditating, recovering parts of the mana and stamina she had lost during the ordeal.

*[Mage – lvl ??]*

"You're the one controlling the barriers? And the light?" she asked, mostly to stall for time to have her team break through. She wasn't so sure she wanted that, considering his offensive potential. Eve and Kyrian would likely be torn to shreds in mere moments. The barrier she had been attacking vanished as the man walked past her.

"Yes, that would be me. You're with the shadow's hand I presume, seeing that armor. It looks elvish in aesthetics so you're not part of any random squad... never heard of someone with your abilities in the Hand though. Perhaps my records are lacking." he said, completely without tension.

"It was only a matter of time until the guild would seek help. I'm glad it was the Hand after all. Luckily I'm mostly done here, only a couple books I'd like to keep." he said, vanishing and appearing in the next room. Ilea blinked in front of him and quickly locked eyes with his nearly golden eyes. He looked to be around fifty but something told her the man was much older, if he was human at all.

"Who are you? Are you responsible for killing all those adventurers?" Ilea asked as he looked away and grabbed a book from a shelf next to him. It vanished as did another dozen or so in the span of two seconds.

"You may call me Albert. This place was not built by me so I take no responsibility in any of the killings, though I must say it is useful and I regret losing it." he said and continued with his book eating through the room, the

blue coat he was wearing slid on the stone floor as he continued his work. Ilea was pretty sure the man wasn't a danger to her anymore, simply concerned for his possessions. She was wary as well, continuing her mana recovery and thinking of a way of attack should the need arise. The life of her team and the adventurers was more important than attacking the man at the moment and a fight would certainly cause at least a partial cave in.

"You will not fight for this place? Why attack me then?" she asked and started copying his actions, walking around the room parallel to him and touching books to make them vanish. He glanced at her quickly and furrowed his brows but didn't react further.

"This place was discovered and should you fail to kill me, others will come. I cannot hold off the combined effort of all the guilds and mercenaries nor do I wish to do so. You pushed through my barrier more quickly than I had anticipated. Intruding mana, a rather rare ability, especially for someone at level two hundred. Thus my attack, I need to collect the essentials first. If you let me finish in peace, I will leave and you may do with this place as you wish." he said and continued collecting books and papers.

"You may be careful who you show these to, most cults and religions will think you a heretic or demon. Same for some governments." he said and finally dusted off his mantle.

"A shame, what a great place to work in and I'll miss her." the man turned around to Ilea and his golden eyes locked again with her own blue ones. "Do take care of her, she's been through a lot." he said as golden light started to form around him. Ilea was torn for a second between interfering with whatever he was doing and simply letting him but as the moment passed, he had vanished.

Nowhere in her Sphere could she see any trace of the man but other things had appeared, Trian being one of them right next to her, lighting sparkling around him. The rest followed quickly after and checked around the room.

"Are you alright?" Eve said as she appeared next to Ilea before the later was caught in a tight hug. The armor made it a little awkward for Eve to get a good grip but the small woman was stronger than she looked, which to be

fair applied to most adventurers, especially members of the Shadow's Hand. Ilea pat her back in response.

"I'm alright I'm alright. There was a man here who controlled the barriers and attacked me but he vanished. I think it's at least mid range teleportation because I can't sense him anymore." she said and Claire nodded, immediately walking towards the exit.

"No more danger then?" she asked, looking back at the still entangled Ilea who shook her head lightly.

"Not that I know of. There are other things here but I don't think dangerous." she said.

"Other things? Well whatever. I'll go and stop the others from coming in immediately, loot this place to its bones." Claire said before she walked out, leaving not only Ilea a little perplexed.

"What, did she really just say that?" she asked and locked eyes with Trian.

"Well she is supposed to be the team leader isn't she?" he asked and started to collect everything he could find with his ring. Ilea tapped Eve on her shoulder before she pushed her away a little.

"Thanks for caring so much." she said and smiled to the woman in front of her whose mask smiled back.

"I like you guys, don't die on me." Eve said and looked around the room at an embarrassed Kyrian and an indifferent Trian. It sounded more like a command than anything else but Ilea did find it rather endearing.

'Like a murder ninja ready to protect me, gets me all warm and fuzzy...' she thought before she sighed. "Kyrian, collect everything in the middle of the room, I'll swipe it up after if Trian doesn't have enough space. Eve please come with me, your girl whispering skills are needed again."

"Don't tell me..." Eve answered and removed her mask slowly, revealing slightly red eyes.

“Yep, we found another kid in a place where they don’t belong.” Ilea answered and slowly walked further into the structure. ‘Interesting...’ she thought and knocked on the stone door. The child didn’t react, too entranced in their actions it seemed. After another knock, Ilea removed her helmet and opened the door before the two women walked inside.

“She’s drawing...” Ilea said. This time the girl reacted to the voice and looked towards the two before she smiled.

“Hello. Are you Albert’s friends?” she asked, her blue eyes concentrating on the intruders.

“I know him. Is he your dad?” Ilea asked as she slowly walked closer to the girl, unable to not stare at the complicated painting on the wall which held a beauty to it that she couldn’t quite attribute to a child’s abilities. It reminded her of runes but less bound by their systematic nature.

“No. Do you know where dad is?” the girl asked which brought Ilea back to face her. She knelt down a little and saw Eve approach not the girl but the painting.

“I’m afraid I don’t know, but maybe I can help you find him. How about that?” Ilea said and smiled brightly which seemed to make the girl a little less anxious.

“Yes! Albert said he couldn’t help me yet...” the girl said.

“Did you paint this?” Eve said with an astonished voice. “It’s beautiful... the emotion I feel within this image are overwhelming.” the girl looked downwards, obviously a little embarrassed.

“Yes.” she managed to say and Eve continued to look at the picture, not the same help she had been with the other girl they had found.

“My name is Ilea. What’s your name little artist? And where are you from?” Ilea asked, seeing in it the best chance to find any relatives the girl might have. Finding her inside of this place didn’t make her very hopeful but it was

a start. Perhaps Albert had abducted her. Then again the way he talked about the girl didn't seem to indicate that.

“Nice to meet you Ilea, my name is Cless and I'm from London.” Ilea's mind blanked out for a full five seconds as her brain quickly rebooted and then went into overdrive.

# Chapter 111 Useless Ruins

## Chapter 111 Useless Ruins

“London?? In En...” Ilea started but stopped herself in the last moment, looking at Eve with a panicked expression on her face. The woman seemed completely lost in the painting, now even closer to the wall than before. “Eve...” Ilea said and waited but there was no reaction. She wasn’t sure if it was played but the woman didn’t know about the importance of the slip up which made Ilea question the possible reason for feigned ignorance.

‘She’ll confront me about it if she heard it which is fine. Not like me being from another planet or dimension practically changes anything...’ Ilea thought and calmed herself down, something only possible due to her meditation skill, high stats and skills that enhanced her body and mind.

“Where are you from?” Cless asked, bringing Ilea back into the moment. This was the first insight that could be gained to her appearance in Elos, all the random thoughts she had about it came back to her and with them the attached feelings.

‘No reason not to gain some info about it...’ she thought and continued her talk with the girl.

“I’m from far away, just like you. I’ve never heard about this London you speak of. How was it there?” Ilea’s question was more centered around the slight possibility of a shape shifting memory stealer but the added confirmation of the story would be helpful as well. Might just be a different

London after all, who would put it past the British Empire to have their colonial interests even here.

“I like it. We have a house. Do you think I will have to go to school again? I’ve not been there for so long...” the girl said.

“Do you know how long?” the girl shook her head lightly at the question, with tears coming to her eyes.

“Do you know where mommy is?” Cless asked and Ilea just went for the hug, feeling a little bad about her own interests and the fact that there was a little girl in front of her that had lost their family and life. Of course she kept her buffs up just in case the girl decided to turn into a demon or something. She didn’t though and simply sat there, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“It’s gonna be ok Cless, alright? You can come with us and we’ll find a school for you.” Ilea said and released her hug, looking at the girl. “One with magic and mages. Did your mom read you things like that?”

Cless frowned at the question and crossed her arms in front of her “I can read myself!” she stated “And I am a wizard already!!” suddenly the top of her index finger started to glow as she drew a rune in front of her. A pulse of mana left the girl as a shimmering barrier appeared around her. A big smile was on her face, the home sickness completely forgotten. Sparkling eyes looked at Ilea who smiled back.

*[Mage – lvl 6]*

“Indeed you are, which house would you belong to then?” Ilea asked, guessing at the girl’s thoughts.

“That’s a secret!” Cless exclaimed as the shield was released.

“Girl where did you see that?” Eve suddenly interjected and looked at the girl while pointing at the painting next to her.

“Albert showed me, it was in the books. He has a looooooot of books.” she smiled.



“Albert? The guy you saw Ilea? Is he your dad?” Eve asked, finally looking at the girl. Ilea wasn’t sure what the painting was but Eve seemed more apprehensive than earlier with the other girl.

“No, Albert is not my father. He’s nice.” Cless answered, getting up from her chair. “Is he there? It’s nearly time for dinner.” she said as Ilea got up from her crouched position as well.

“I’m afraid he might have left, an important mission but that’s why he got us here. He told us to take care of you.” Ilea said as she took the girl’s hand and led her outside.

“Oh, he is busy like dad...” Cless said a little sadly.

“What did you dad do, do you know?” Ilea said, refraining from trying an Austrian accent.

“A doctor.” the short answer came quickly as the two walked out into the bigger main room where Trian and Kyrian were working on collecting everything. Both shot a quick glance at the two but didn’t stop what they were doing.

“I’m somewhat of a doctor too...” Ilea said and let some healing mana pulse over to Cless who giggled at the pleasant feeling.

“A wizard doctor!” the girl said and hugged Ilea’s side.

“Exactly. Hey Cless, we’ve been called by Albert but he didn’t tell us a lot about this place. Do you want to show us around?”

“It’s not very big... not here. There are tunnels below, I don’t want to go there...” Ilea immediately stroked her hair, hearing the frightened voice.

“Were you in there alone?” Ilea asked and felt the girl nod weakly. “Were there monsters?” another nod but this time Ilea hugged her again. “It’s alright now, we’ll make sure you don’t have to face any monsters again for a long time. Never if you don’t want to...” she said and the girl hugged her back then.

“Did you get here with Albert or did he find you here?” Ilea asked, still more inquisitive than she’d liked to be but she was more than just a little curious at how a girl from London got here.

“No he found me. And I could leave after so long. It was scary...”

“I’m sure it was and I’m glad the man found you. Do you remember how you got here in the first place?” Ilea finally asked.

“Hmm...” the girl concentrated for a while before she looked up to Ilea. “I was playing in the woods and then it was dark... like in a movie.”

‘Yea I don’t think there are movies in Elos... hopefully people won’t think her stories too weird. I’ll definitely keep an eye on her here and then...’

“As soon as we go up it’s not gonna be dark at all, there’s a whole continent there with magic, animals and people. Would you like to see it?” Ilea asked and the girl nodded, obviously excited. She ignored her team mates working around her as she walked up and towards Claire, with Cless in tow. The way out was still blocked as the team leader was standing in front of it, waiting for the adventurers to break through. It wasn’t a matter of difficulty but more a matter of bravery. They didn’t know what could’ve happened to the people inside after all.

“You’ve found another one... a mage, one of the youngest I’ve seen.” Claire said in a worried tone, looking at the girl and then Ilea. “She must’ve been down here for a while... what did you find out?”

“I’m not sure yet about her circumstances but she must’ve been stuck down here for a while. The others are finishing up but apparently there’s more further down. A dungeon perhaps. I’ll quickly bring her to the Hand before I come back.” Ilea said, hoping that Claire wouldn’t question her too much.

“We could wait here or let the adventurers take care of her. You seem adamant about this, just make sure you tell me why at a later time. We’ll start exploring. Get back quickly if you want a piece of the pie.” the woman said and smiled at her from below her hood.

“I will. Now Cless, did you ever fly before?” Ilea asked, starting to remove the massive stones from the hallway.

It took a couple hours for her to fly back to Ravenhall with Cless and while the flight was certainly exciting for the girl, Ilea grew more and more frustrated at the lack of knowledge she had about her circumstances. Not that she knew any more but hearing the girl was from Earth had sparked a hope in her, to at least find out something. All the girl yielded was the knowledge that there were others out there. Others who just like her, appeared in Elos without knowing anything about how or why it had happened.

For enough gold the Hand took Cless in with welcoming arms. William himself vouched for the girl’s future education and training. He mentioned again how rare it was that someone so young had gotten a class. Apparently a rare one at that as well. Ilea mentioned that she had been in contact with a strong mage above level two hundred, a researcher it seemed so most of her comments related to Earth would probably be attributed to that. Or fiction. She would check in on Cless from time to time, telling the girl that she just like Albert would have to go on missions. Ilea wasn’t very good with kids but the girl seemed brave and very adaptive to new situations, remembering back she probably would’ve cried for her mom or dad until she would’ve attracted some wolves that would’ve eaten her promptly.

Back in the ruin, she found that Eve was waiting for her return already. The adventurers were still waiting in the same hall they had been in before. “Back I see, come on then. We need a tank.” Eve said, motioning for the woman to follow. She explained more as they walked, getting glances from worried adventurers behind. “So I scouted in and most of the clones were

destroyed before I could find anything. The first three floors or so only house insignificant critters but further below the ruin continues.

She started running as Ilea followed. “Rooms riddled with traps and golems. It’s a little difficult to navigate and attack without destroying the whole place. It’s a bit fragile and I’m sure it’s somewhat intentional...” the woman explained when they came up on a less natural looking entrance.

“Fucking finally, did you really have to take care of that girl for so long? Could’ve just left her there.” Trian complained as he got up from his lunging position. “In you go then, you hold it down and we blast it. Claire and Trian will make sure that the room doesn’t collapse.” Ilea followed him into the room, glad to be able to dodge any further questions about Cless with the help of Trian’s impatience.

“The golem there? I can see traps around... what do they do?”

“They spill acid into the room. No we can’t drain it, it just keeps coming. Feeling up for it?” he asked, sparks coming to life around him. The golem’s eyes started glowing a dark blue as its stone body came to life.

‘Aren’t they supposed to be clay?’ Ilea thought as she blinked in and immediately stood opposite the stone guardian.

*[Stone Guardian – lvl ??]*

“Let’s hope this one doesn’t explode. Claire you better prepare...” she said as the fist of the golem slammed into her defenses, making her skid backwards a couple meters. Her veil didn’t break, nor did the bones in her arms used for blocking. The name already suggested an inferior version of the Guardian they had faced above but she would continue to be careful. The way out of the room looked closed, covered by stone and more traps she saw with her Sphere.

Another fist rocked through her and this time she felt herself shake from the power. “You can start now you know?” she shouted backwards to her team, blinking around the next punch and landing one of her own. Her mana didn’t seem to do a lot here either so she quickly put on her gauntlets, continuing the

somewhat slow dance around the golem. It was faster than the bigger one above, but still miles away from the speed of a Taleen Guardian.

Lightning hit the golem sporadically as Ilea's heavy gauntlets chipped away at its health and body. She would get hit sometimes but it was manageable. The monster relied on its pure strength, something Ilea could match with technique and equipment. As the fight continued, the room slowly filled with an acidic broth, steaming as it exited from the dozens of holes in the wall. Why Kyrian didn't just plug them with metal was beyond her but they must've tried at least some things before she had arrived. The others were flowing further back, Claire and Eve carried by metal plates controlled by Kyrian while all of them concentrated on their tasks.

Eve was the only one without a defined one but she would continue to scout ahead once they had navigated through this room. The acid didn't even manage to get through her armored boots, the ones she had lost against Albert. It would likely help her level up her Corrosion Resistance in time but she didn't plan to bathe in it. Not today at least.

Another boom resounded through the room as her fist connected with the side of the golem's chest, its arm outstretched past Ilea, open for her attacks. Another two booms and a bolt of lightning landed on it before the light in its eyes went out.

*'ding' Your group has defeated [Stone Guardian – lvl 231]. For defeating an enemy twenty levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

The acid didn't stop pouring and was already up to Ilea's knees when they finally downed the tanky monster, its only redeeming quality. 'Stall people with the golem while the acid wears them down...' she thought as she walked through the not quite water and stood in front of the doorway covered in stone. Seeing behind it, the way continued only two meters further in. "At least this one didn't explode..." she thought and punched into the wall with her gauntlets. The structure shook and the rest of the team quickly made their way towards Ilea.

“Let me do that...” Claire said and motioned for Kyrian to float her closer to the doorway. Ten runes later and a shield summoned to support the room’s structure a controlled set of explosions dug deep into the doorway. Another summoned explosion, this one not conjured by runes broke through the rest of the way, the team ready to advance.

Magical light filled the halls beyond, much bigger than any room they were in before. ‘Another humongous ruin with magical guardians...’ Ilea thought, trying not to figuratively yawn. The slight tingle she felt in her back where the scythe had pierced through made her concentrate. Even with all the advancements she had made since then it wasn’t quite on her immediate to do list to face the Praetorians.

“What do you think this is?” she asked into the room.

*‘ding’ ‘You have entered the Karul dungeon’*

“Well that doesn’t answer anything...” she said and heard the nearly inaudible groan coming from a certain vampyr.

“We have incoming...” Eve said as the group got into formation. Four sets of glowing blue eyes could be seen in the dusty hall. The loud steps resounded as everybody prepared their spells.

“This one’s going to be a little more chaotic...” Ilea exclaimed, a smile spreading below her helmet.

The fight definitely was less controlled than the previous one but the room allowed for them all to use their flying abilities making the whole thing much more trivial than expected. The golems were the same thing as the one Ilea had stood against in the acid room, only a matter of time until the team dealt with them. The four of them netted Ilea a single level up in both of her

classes. The points were distributed among all Stats except for Strength and Dexterity.

Out of all the skills she had used in the fight, only Ashen Wings leveled up by one. She was still checking through the messages when a loud rumble resounded through the hall, dust falling from every little crack in the room. “Guys check this out! I think we should leave...” Trian shouted from one end of the room as more and more rumbling made even walking an unstable thing.

Ilea flew towards his voice and saw the words engraved in a massive stone plate before them. Most of it was too worn down to be readable but some parts were still plain to make out.

*....the last stand of the Karul... here we rest undisturbed... shall be buried with us...*

“Alright, that’s our call...” Ilea said, made out Eve and Claire in the room before she blinked to the first one, grabbing her and jumping to the second. The two women in tow, her buffs flared and she shot towards the exit, rocks falling next to her, avoided with her speed and perception. Trian and Kyrian were close to follow her lead as the team punched through the stone getting in the way.

They were back in the room Albert had been standing in under a minute, the destruction following them upwards. Luckily the group of adventurers had been fleeing the moment the rumbling had begun and were waiting outside of the ruin’s first entrance. Ilea stumbled out of the cave and let go of the other two, fresh air filling her lungs as the dozens of people looked at her. Trian and Kyrian broke through behind her a moment later.

“We’re not getting level three for that one either...” Eve said and looked to the sky above.

“Don’t worry about it, we just did three level ones in a day, I’m sure they’re at least gonna acknowledge our abilities...” Kyrian said and pat her on the shoulder.

“I’m afraid this expedition just turned into an excavation.” Ilea said while Claire shook her head.



# Chapter 112 Another one of them missions

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“We got one?? Oh that makes me so happy!” Eve said, punching the air before her. Claire just blinked at the woman before she looked around the group.

“I took it but trust me this isn’t going to be as simple as the ones before...” Claire had reported the successful missions and their team was rewarded with a bigger choice for the next ones. One of them had been listed as level three.

The mission took them southwards, deep into the Isanna desert. Ilea had underestimated just how huge it would be. The team had covered easily twice the distance between Karth and Ravenhall in the time they had been flying. It being winter, the heat wasn’t too bad but it was most of all boring. No life seemed to be filling the dunes and they were supposed to find some sort of elusive critter in all of that.

*...the Dragcal burrows deep into the desert ground, healing its wounds while its magic rages above. Its level is unknown...*

The entries in any of her monster books had been more than useless. Not as useless as the skull and ore they had found on their missions. There were apparently possible uses for equipment for Eve and Kyrian but that would show in time. For now they were on the hunt, looking out for isolated mountains in the desert sand.

“That one maybe?” Claire asked, pointing towards another mountain. They had already checked four different ones in their journey and Ilea was beginning to wonder how big this desert really was.

“Let’s check then...” she said and landed the three of them, using her Sphere to check below the rock and sand. ‘Oh what is...’

“Hey does it look like a spearfish with scales?” she asked, pointing to a specific direction “I think it’s sleeping whatever it is.”

“No idea but let’s find out what it is...” Trian said and unleashed lightning on the designated position.

“Yea that’s not gonna work mate.” Ilea commented as Kyrian’s spheres of metal flew over the sand, forming into drill like spikes and going below.

“It’s probably gonna feel the vibrations. Let’s hope it’s not gonna run away for days on end...” Eve commented, already tired of the hunt. The woman had been kept somewhat happy thanks to the storage devices owned by Trian and Ilea. She was much more keen on using Ilea’s compared to the man’s which resulted in a select amount of food, clothes and drinks that were readily available for her at all times and without the annoyance of carrying them herself.

A sudden and massive shift in the sand where Kyrian’s spikes had entered made the team concentrate. “Here it comes...” Ilea said, seeing the thing come fully into her vision. “Wow it’s fucking huge!” she exclaimed and laughed as the massive spear fish burst out of the sand. Her smile vanished as the sand followed behind. A localized storm followed and pushed against

their armor and defenses. Eve and Kyrian had joined Claire behind her shield while the others stood against the sand.

“I can’t see it!” Kyrian shouted, the metal spheres and spikes looking for a target.

“Oh shit.” a blink later Ilea stood before the runic barrier held up by Claire and stared into the eyes of the beast.

*[Dragcal – lvl ??]*

The nearly seven meter long sword part of its body moved towards Ilea at a rapid pace, its massive and heavy body carried by a wave of sand more akin to water as the storm continued around them. Ilea wasn’t quite sure how much power was coming onto her but she dodged the sword to the right and punched the quickly over a meter thick bone with all her strength. Slightly brought off course, the spear like part of the monster’s body crashed into Claire’s shield, breaking through after sparks formed from the impact.

Lightning roared above as red flashes of energy could be seen in the mist of sand around them. Kyrian’s blades and spikes tried to pierce the strong scales of the monster from all sides and Ilea helped by punching some of them into the creature’s side. Explosions rattled around its head to confuse and daze it as Eve jumped towards its eyes, her daggers dull metal blades in the darkened surroundings.

It roared out as a dozen wounds were caused in but a couple seconds, a massive wave of sand hitting all but Trian from the side. Only the base of the small mountain saved the group as they would’ve been completely without cover in the sea of sand around them. Both Trian and Ilea grabbed either Claire or Eve out of the sand and got them higher.

The sand storm raged on and compared to the breeze it was before, this time it was pushing against Ilea’s veil with more and more power. Another one of Claire’s shields formed, covering the group in the shimmering dome of energy. “How long will that hold?” Eve asked, brushing the sand from her armor.

“We’re fine against the storm but that thing is too big and heavy for me to block...” Claire said.

“Surprising speed as well, we’re in its territory. Ilea what’s it doing now?” Trian asked as he lifted his helmet to get rid of the sand inside.

“It’s waiting... healing probably. You got its eye Eve?” the rogue nodded and Ilea was sure then. “Well you didn’t anymore. Brace.” she said as the massive fish shot up from its recovering position to his the dome of magic. Right before impact the team scattered as another massive wave of sand hit them.

A series of attacks made the beast roar out and roll in the sand to shake of the attackers. Both Eve and Ilea managed to dodge the frantic movement but were pushed away dozens of meters. Again the beast went downwards to heal.

“How’s your curse doing?” Ilea shouted to a flying Kyrian, Claire holding onto his back.

“It’s spreading! Only a matter of time but it’s huuuge!” the man shouted back just when the Dragcal came out below Ilea, aiming to pierce or simply crush her. The veil broke as she was dragged next to the beast, deciding not to blink away and inflict some more damage instead. She held on between the scales as her destructive mana flowed into the monster, her ashen wings and veil trying to inflict more wounds. Explosions and lightning roared around her and nearly managed to damage her ears combined with the roaring storm of sand. ‘Oh shit let go...’ she thought as the beast landed back into the sand.

Ilea blinked upwards twice but still found herself caught in a wave of sand dragging her downwards. Suddenly she was covered, panicking for a second before she blinked out of her predicament thanks to her Spherical perception. ‘Fuck I don’t wanna be buried...’ the thought was interrupted when the Dragcal exited again, this time aiming for Eve who dodged to the side, caught by the wave of sand following the monster’s dive.

Trian was quicker and managed to grab the tumbling woman out of the torrent. The whole team was airborne now, except for Ilea. She stayed down,

rather sure that the fish would just leave if there weren't anymore targets. "Any success with the mind attacks!?" Claire shouted towards Eve who was now on Trian's back, to the annoyance of both of them.

"It's very simple but strong!! Going to take longer than that!" she shouted back and continued humming as soon as the beast was back out and aiming for Ilea. Contrary to its previous tries, this time there were two waves of sand, one on each side of Ilea. Too big to simply circumvent with blinks, she stared down the monster and met it with a last blink to dodge the bone and a kick to its massive skull. Combined with the curse, mind attacks, lightning and explosions the beast was rattled from all sides and it was slowing down despite its wounds slowly closing.

'Slower than before...' Ilea thought, seeing the scales regenerate around her. She managed to blink away again, this time prepared for the mass of sand that landed around her. Truly a terrifying force of nature. No wonder not more was known about the beast, likely sighted only when it tore through parties of travelers or from high above while attacking other monsters.

The curse and mind spells from Trian and Eve were the only reason the team even decided to come out here and face a monster like that. With its ability to regenerate and flee it was on par with having Ilea as an enemy, the annoyance and elusiveness that is. She wasn't quite on the same level of ash control as the beast's sand magic of course, let alone the sheer size of it.

Again she waited for the next attack but only the sandstorm continued. She saw below that the fish was slowing down, not going for her anymore, but away. "It's fleeing I think. Kyrian can you track it?"

"Yea, there's plenty of metal still in it. Follow me!" he shouted back and Ilea's wings spread to keep up with the other's pace, running on sand wasn't quite as effective a movement. Three hours later the monster finally stopped, likely healed back to full health again but completely riddled with the curse. The reason why Kyrian's ability was so strong and let him advance to the two hundreds as quickly as it had.

"It's down here, right below us. I doubt there is much energy left in it, nor mana." Kyrian said as he pointed to the sand below them which looked just

like all the other space around them.

“Well how are we going to get down there?” Ilea looked around the group and didn’t quite find someone willing to shovel. Claire instead opened up her pack and dropped a bunch of runed stones down. As soon as they hit the sand, the explosions started.

“It’s not super effective but it’ll get the job done.” she commented over the sound below. Most of the stones survived three or four separate casts of the spell and Claire continued to make more as she held on to her team mate.

“We’re getting closer, only a couple meters now...” Ilea said, as she went lower to see the beast with her Sphere. It wasn’t moving at all and its eyes were closed. ‘Not dead yet though...’ she thought and saw the big thing’s heartbeat drum below the sand, working hard to get rid of the curse. Another series of explosions set its back free and hell followed with it. More cursed shards and spikes, lightning and explosions blasted into the monster’s back while Eve continued her humming, the spell seemingly unfazed by the loud sounds going on around them.

The Dragcal tried to move and did so slowly but it was too big to simply get away so easily. Its wounds weren’t closing anymore and no more spells were cast as it slowly dug into the sand. ‘Fuck we’re not gonna be able to get it out like this...’ Ilea thought and flew downwards into the explosions still raining down. She grabbed onto one of the monster’s fins and flew backwards with all her power while she released destructive mana into it. Her veil and created ash cut into the beast as her team’s spells damaged its now severely wounded back.

It was strong and large, Ilea fighting with all her power to keep her team from a sand excavation that might very well be impossible. Her wings were already touching sand when the pull from the beast got weaker and weaker until finally it stopped moving. Ilea didn’t let up and continued to try and get the massive body out of the sand that was slowly closing up behind them. Ten metal spikes rammed into the beast right then and the weight Ilea had to carry lessened considerably, the metal controlled by Kyrian helping to push the body out of the sand.

Wind runes from Claire, however weak, helped push away the sand that was trying hard to close in their tank from behind. Another hand soon followed as Trian grabbed the fin next to Ilea and pulled as well. The last missing thing was Eve cheering them on but the woman didn't go that far, instead just waiting in the sand until the more strength oriented people managed the job.

“Now that is one hell of a fucking beast.” Kyrian chuckled at Ilea's comment as he scratched his head, the helmet stored away in his enchantment. Ilea had done the same, as did Trian.

“Now how do we transport that thing?” Eve asked.

“We don't, at least not like this. No Ilea, don't look at me like that, we're not dragging that thing back to Ravenhall. Might even attract attention we don't want and I'm not talking about people.” Claire commented, rubbing her temples at Ilea's stupid grin. “The mission states that they need whatever parts we can harvest of the beast so that's what we'll do, Eve how good are you at carving?”

“Very.” the woman said and spun one of her daggers around.

“Good, then get to work. Ilea and Trian will store everything.” Claire said, getting a mock salute from Eve before she started to carve into the beast while humming happily.

“Speaking of storage, how's your ring looking?” Ilea asked after walking over to Trian. “I'd be interested in some of the books we found in that ruin and if you're running out and don't want them I still have space.”

Trian looked at her and then summoned one of the books. “Legends and theories, I hope you won't get sucked into whatever that mage was hatching

but sure, knock yourself out. None of it is of consequence to me. Why so interested?"

Ilea had prepared some excuses should she be asked anything regarding Cless or the mage, she even managed to rehearse them with Aki, very helpful that dagger and definitely a critic.

"There was something about that girl. Let's say she made me curious, as did that mage Albert. Maybe I'll ask Dagon about him." she answered, telling the truth but far from answering the question, the only way Aki said she would sound convincing.

Trian snorted "Don't ask for information too dangerous to handle, especially not from that sly bastard."

"We're a shadow squad, what could possibly be too dangerous? You don't like the guy?" she asked, very interested in the first question at least.

"Yes, that we are. And I'm sure the Hand is one of if not the most powerful human organization when it comes to individuals but don't for a moment believe that it's the only one out there. Furthermore who will come for your aid when you need it, sure as hell not me. The Hand will have lost a member and that's it, not like the same would apply to a brotherhood or whatever weird fuckery the nobles and powerful call their little circles." he said.

"Maybe Circle." Kyrian commented, playing with some metal spheres while carving sounds resounded behind them. Eve was currently getting out an eye.

"And no, I don't like the guy. He's an information broker, what's to like about that? And his people have been pestering me since I arrived, in heat for a noble in the Hand. Fucking annoying that my parents..." he stopped himself and shut up, summoning an apple and biting into it.

"Ilea catch!" the eye was thrown and caught, splattering blood and a bit of gore onto Ilea's face before it vanished into her necklace.

"Hahahaha" they could hear Eve laugh. Trian summoned a piece of cloth and threw it to Ilea, a surprising gesture, especially right after he said that he



wouldn't come to help her in case of emergency. Then again it's a piece of cloth, not his life.

"Thanks." Ilea said, using it to clean herself up. "Eve you better stop that shit, I'll break every bone in your body and heal it again." she said casually as she made the piece of cloth vanish.

"I don't believe you, you're way too nice for that Ilea." came from somewhere inside the beast where Eve was cutting through merrily, likely covered in filth herself.

'She's probably right...' Ilea thought and sighed before she too summoned a meal and started eating. Keyla's cooking immediately upped her mood. 'Maybe I should bring her some of the meat to make something...' with the thought, she finished her meal and unsheathed Aki, blinking behind Eve.

"WHAT, damn you scared the shit out of me, don't just appear like that." Eve exclaimed, the look on her face bringing great joy to Ilea, even though she was wearing her mask.

"I'm here for meat." she said, spinning the dagger around as well. Eve quickly showed her which parts she could cut out without damaging anything worthwhile. It took a while but Ilea got away with a sizable amount of Dragcal meat, ready to be processed.

"So that's it then?" Claire asked, looking at the pile of body parts Eve had carved from the monster. Most of it was small enough to be stored in either Trian's ring or Ilea's necklace, some select parts weren't. Luckily for them Kyrian's metal shaping and control made it somewhat easy to carry the massive bones from the creature although the group had to pause much more frequently and the flying speed was reduced by a big chunk of speed.

Checking her messages, Ilea found a single level up waiting for her.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Dragcal – lvl 310]. For defeating an enemy one hundred levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 206 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent statpoints: 5

Unspent 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0

Unspent 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1

Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 206

- Active: Destruction – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Active: Blink – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Passive: Hunter's Sight – lvl 19
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3

## Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 202

- Active: Veil of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14
- Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5
- Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 12
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4
- Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13
- Passive: Body of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12
- Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5

### General Skills:

- Elos Standard language - lvl 5
- Identify - lvl 7
- Meditation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> 15
- Poison Resistance – lvl 17
- Heat Resistance – lvl 19
- Pain Tolerance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4
- Mental Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10
- Fear Resistance – lvl 1
- Water Resistance – lvl 6
- Wind Resistance – lvl 7
- Lightning Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5
- Ice Resistance – lvl 7
- Crystal Resistance – lvl 6
- Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5
- Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6
- Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8
- Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2
- Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1
- Curse Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2
- Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18
- Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16

- Blast Resistance – lvl 12
- Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Status:

Vitality: 600  
Endurance: 290  
Strength 251  
Dexterity 350  
Intelligence 505  
Wisdom 315

Health: 6000/6000  
Stamina: 2746/2900  
*Mana: 2899/3150*

# Chapter 113 Advances

## Chapter 113 Advances

“So you were a prisoner?” Ilea asked in a bit of a slurred tone. The man opposite her looked worriedly at the woman, the dozens of mugs on their table both a sign of a waiter’s neglect and Ilea’s immunity to the poison.

“I don’t know. You know one would think I should right? I was never chained up or anything and I worked the mine... nobody else did now that I think about it...” Kyrian explained to a half listening Ilea. Eve had already passed out next to them and was put on the bench to sleep. They were far from the only patrons in the small inn they had found in Ravenhall. A little off the main roads as Eve had called it. Both Trian and Claire had left rather early, one because he was apparently disgusted by the establishment and the other to finish the necessary paperwork to join in the tournament that would start in around a week.

What nobody had told Ilea was that the whole thing was more of a celebration. The Hand was just a small part of it and by now nobody except for maybe Dagon remembered who had started the whole thing. Ravenhall would attract many adventurers and travelers willing to come so far for the city festival. Of course any spaces to attend the shadow’s hand tournament were reserved for actual members but the city itself held a tournament themselves, the winner of which would be evaluated by the Hand, no matter what their level was.

Ilea wagered that many scouts from other groups and kingdoms were here as well, just as she was sure they were there in Riverwatch when the tournament was happening. Probably a reason why the city hadn't been completely demolished.

"It's hard you know.... Not understanding some things about the world that... that others take for granted..." the man said, looking into his cup while swirling it a little.

"I know how you feel friend." Ilea said, looking around the room to find a single waitress completely overwhelmed with the rude clientele. One of them even grabbing the woman's ass. Ilea blinked over and stumbled into the woman, using her to stabilize.

"Better lay off fool, this piece of ass ain't for you." she exclaimed and the drunk man punched her immediately, a hot rage fueled by alcohol. Drunkenly Ilea caught the fist and motioned with the index finger of her other hand for the man to stop. "You've had... too... too much to drink." she said and put some force onto the man's fist she was holding. Not quite enough to break it but his face distorted in a less than pleasant expression. She walked the man to the door, opened it and pushed him out.

The door swung close again when Ilea appeared back in her seat, the wind from outside moving the flames in the oil lamps around the room. Some of the people in the inn were looking at her and the waitress had a thankful smile on her lips but chose to continue her work, likely used to the behavior of the guests.

"Oh yea you do, you only said you're from far away. Like over the sea? I heard there might be people there..." Kyrian asked, making Ilea focus at least a little.

"I... am. I don't know. Kyrian can we not talk about this?" she asked. The man shrugged and sat back, getting a sip from the water in his cup. A suddenly appearing mist of ash pushed away the cups on the table, some of them clattering to the ground with a loud noise. Ilea lent in closer to the man as the ash took form on the table. Houses, power lines, a public pool and cars parked on the streets. The whole thing was a little hazy and the ash

moved around, influenced by Ilea's intoxicated state. "Is that where you're from?" Kyrian asked, looking at the ash model of Ilea's home town. "It looks different, interesting." suddenly Ilea focused, on the model before her as healing magic flowed through her and got out the poison of the alcohol.

The ash flattened and drifted away from the table in all directions as she sat back, her eyes in focus. 'I underestimated this inn's drinks...' she thought.

"You're not drunk anymore?" Kyrian's question brought her back as the two locked eyes.

"I'm not." the simple answer came quickly. The man looked at her with his gray eyes but soon looked past her again, finishing his cup.

"Then I apologize for overstepping. It's a sensitive topic I'm sure. Just know that if you want to talk, I'm here." he said, shocking her a little with the openness. Of course she had been used in Elos before. It was different here where everyone was apparently out to get you, your stuff or your information. On Earth you could at least be sure that people just wanted to sell something or at worst steal your money. She didn't want to think of anything worse than that, not having experienced any of it in her life there.

"Don't worry about it. And thanks." she said. "I'll take care of Eve." appearing next to the sleeping woman, she lifted her up and walked behind the bar, taking one of the keys for the rooms upstairs before leaving a couple silver coins. The waitress didn't even notice as Ilea carried Eve to her room, tucking her in and locking the door from outside, not wanting to overstep either.

"Wanna leave?" the man asked and she nodded, putting another silver coin on the table before she walked to the door, Kyrian following her quietly. Outside the winter air brushed against her cheeks when she noticed the man she had thrown out sleeping on the opposite side of the road.

*[Warrior – lvl 68]*

'He's gonna be fine...' she thought, her leather boots crunching the snow below. The street was lit by a lantern standing nearby, giving her a nostalgic

feeling after her ash creation from before.

“What are your plans?” Kyrian asked. It was in the middle of the night but Ilea had no intention of sleeping, at least not yet. The team had decided on a couple days off from both training and missions. The past days more of a toll on them than they realized in the moment. Seeing death and causing it wasn’t something one easily got used to though Ilea was sure she was neither the worst at handling it in the team, nor the best. If one could call handling something like that good at all.

‘In this world it is...’ she thought and remembered Eve cutting through the cult leader’s neck, a shiver running through her.

“Are you cold?” Kyrian asked, looking at her from the side. Ilea knew he was aware of her resistances, their whole team could probably walk around the poles for days without any clothes on before any problems would occur.

‘Maybe not the poles of Elos...hey maybe it’s flat!’

“I want to explore the edge of Elos.” she jokingly said. Kyrian chuckled.

“I’d like that too, go where nobody has gone before. See creatures and people from far away.”

“And curse them?” she asked as she started aimlessly walking. Snow was lightly falling now and people could be heard talking in the distance, the festivities were going to start in a couple days already after all.

“Perhaps, yes. I simply enjoy being free...” although the two were coming from completely different situations, Ilea felt like she understood. She nodded silently as the two walked through Ravenhall, the cold stone and snow interspersed by the first decorations put up, giving the city a more colorful feel.

“I’m gonna read probably.” she said after a while, answering one of his previous questions. “What about you? More training?”



“I don’t know. I don’t really feel like it now that everybody else is doing something different.” he answered. “Maybe I’ll try reading too...” he said as the two reached a square. A nearby inn was still lit up and cheers could be heard from within.

“Wanna see something cool?” Ilea asked, peaking his interest immediately. “You have to keep it a secret though.”

“Sure, who would I tell it to anyway?” he said and smiled.

‘Too real mate...’ she thought as her buffs activated “Keep up.” her words left her mouth as she switched into a sprint, the man behind her reacting nearly immediately, his spheres flowing out of his pack and around his hands, back and chest. Not his full armor but just enough to stabilize him in flight. The armor was left in Viscera after they had returned from the mission.

The two rushed through the city with an inhuman speed, past houses and squares until they came up on the eastern gate, Ilea’s wings spreading behind her as the two flew over it and out into the wild. Up and up she went until the city behind them was a mere speck of light in the distance. She switched directions a couple times to make it a little harder for possible followers to keep up. Kyrian did well but she did have to wait on him a couple times.

Half an hour later the two landed on the plateau where her house stood. “Is that...yours?” Kyrian asked as she started walking towards it.

“It is, had it built while we were training.”

“You have to tell me where you get that money from...” the man said and chuckled. He suddenly tensed up as his metal spheres turned into spikes.

“Relax, local resident. It’s a nice cat.” Ilea said, waving towards the tunnel where two slightly glowing eyes looked towards her. They left again as soon

as the threat was recognized.

“That’s a dangerous animal Ilea. What if you come here wounded?”

“That would be stupid right?” Ilea asked and laughed. Considering the point of return for her Blink was inside the house it wouldn’t be an issue. As long as the cat didn’t know how to open doors. ‘It’s not a raptor so I should be fine...’

“An ironic death... at least the cat would probably gain some levels...” she said as she opened the door. “Welcome to my completely over the top house that no reasonable person would ever build.” he nodded and walked in, trying not to dirty anything.

“Oh and I stumbled upon a huge amount of gold in a dwarven ruin so don’t worry about it. Never told that to anybody I think. If you need money though just hit me up.” she said as she closed the door behind herself.

“You use the strangest expressions. And it’s your gold, I would feel bad about it.” he said, waiting near the door.

“Come on in, are you hungry?” she asked, summoning a couple meals onto the table. He followed slowly and took a seat.

“Are you sure, this looks expensive...”

“Didn’t you just listen to me. And why would you feel bad, it was the dwarves’ money. I found it and I can do with it whatever the fuck I want to right?”

“I mean sure but throwing it out like this might not be wise. What if you really need it in a year or two?” he asked, hesitantly getting a plate of food.

“Kyrian but then I would’ve not lived as I wanted to for a year or two. I understand basic economics but saving up until you die is not the way to go. And if you can help out your friends in the process as well then I think it’s a good thing. I could pay your debt at the Hand, how about that?” the man put his fork down.

“Ilea, I understand that you want to be generous but there’s a certain pride even I possess. I’ll manage just fine on my own but appreciate the offer. Thank you.” she shook her head at that and sat down opposite him, grabbing a plate as well.

“I don’t get it... people receive money for whatever. I’m sure there is a huge financial inequality present in Elos as well, what with all the nobles. Do you think they deserve more? I have it so why not accept it? Not gonna push you of course, it’s your decision after all.” she said, starting to eat.

“You talk like you’re not from here. I have to say I’m getting more interested in your past. I never got that impression in our trainings. And there is inequality, of course there is. I’m not saying they or I deserve it but I will manage.” he said, getting a shrug from Ilea.

“My past is not particularly interesting. One thing might be but even that I feel is less and less so as time goes on. Maybe I’ll tell you at some point. Do you like the food?” she said, changing the topic.

“This might be the best thing I’ve ever eaten actually... even better than the things we ate in that restaurant Eve wanted to go to.” he commented, already half done with his plate.

“That’s because it’s the same cook.” Ilea said, smirking at the man.

“You hired her? Can’t say the money is wasted there...”

“I did and yes, I’d sell everything but my armor to have her food. Maybe even the armor.” she said, getting a chuckle in response.

“Do you want a tour?” Ilea asked, already done with her second plate.

“A what? Tour?”

“Of the house.” she answered, smirking towards him.

“Oh, sure. What about the dishes?” he asked.

“You’re cute Kyrian.” Ilea said, touching the plates until nothing remained on the table. “I’ll take care of it.” she said, having gotten very close to him with the last touch on the plate he had used. The smile on her face grew a little at his obvious discomfort.

“Follow me then.” she said and brushed past him. The two walked downwards as she showed him first the kitchen space and then the showroom that looked more akin to an armory.

“I know it’s not very filled up yet but hopefully that’s gonna change in the future.” she said.

“I’m sure, with the missions we’ll do you’ll probably find some interesting things to fill it with. The black skull would fit in nicely.” he commented.

“That one might actually be useful to Eve... at least if we believe the enchanters Trian asked. I don’t plan to store things away that could save one of our lives.” Ilea said. A minute of walking around later, Ilea went up again. “Come, you said you wanted to read.” she was happy to find his face light up a little at that.

“This is my favorite room and mostly the reason I had this whole thing built. You’re the first human to see it.”

“It’s... beautiful... you can see the stars from here and...” he walked over to one of the shelves “There’s so many, did you buy all of them?”

“Found most of them really. Wait let me look for something that might be a bit easier...” she said and blinked over to the man, touching his back while using

her other arm to brush against the books. “This one might be possible.” Ilea said, grabbing the novel she thought to be aimed at a younger audience. Making the plates and books on the bed vanish, Ilea put the sheets back in a somewhat acceptable way before she jumped onto it. Patting the space next to her, she looked at the man intently.

“Don’t look at me like a frightened animal, we’re gonna read.” she said as he gulped and sat down next to her. “You try, same way as we did before.” she said, smiling at the man next to her who was definitely uncomfortable. ‘Maybe this wasn’t the best idea...’ she thought but decided to go with the flow. Whatever happened, happened.

“Ok...” he said, opening the book at the first page. “T...There once w...was a... vi...vi...”

“Village.” she helped, getting a little closer to him to see the book better.

The two read for a while, Ilea slipping into the role of a teacher as she corrected and helped where necessary. Kyrian was definitely not stupid and picked up reading rather quickly. He did however stay oblivious to her advances. It was hard to say if he was uncomfortable because of the reading or because of Ilea’s close proximity. He did want to stop after around an hour, getting a little frustrated over a particularly hard sentence.

“You can stay over if you like.” Ilea said, putting the book back.

“Do you think? It’s only half an hour back.” he said.

“What if you encounter something dangerous on the way?” she asked, turning around slowly.

“I should be able to get away, not like anything was reported here in a while.” he said, locking eyes with her.

“Did you ever sleep with someone Kyrian?” Ilea asked, putting her arms behind her back.

“Wha...what?”

“Would you like to try?” she said, biting her lip and focusing her blue eyes on him.

“W...with you? But we’re not together, a couple...” he stuttered, though still looking at her.

“It’s just sex Kyrian. It’s fun, with the right people. And you don’t have to be with someone in a more permanent way to do it. Though I wouldn’t be opposed to date you.”

“I’m... I don’t.” he said and looked away. Ilea looked up at the stars, shining into her room.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to. I know I was freaked out the first time I did it.” she said.

“It’s not that... I’m...”

“It’s a bit much. That’s alright. Do you wanna sleep over anyway? Ever did that? A sleepover?” she asked, not wanting to pressure the man any further. He was obviously in over his head and they had time.

# Chapter 114 Bedtalk

## Chapter 114 Bedtalk

“I’m sorry, it’s just that I’ve never been asked that directly...” the man lying next to her said, watching the stars with her.

“Don’t worry about it Kyrian.” she said, turning over to the man. He was beautiful. Tall and muscular without it being too much. She touched his side, making him look at her. “Have you ever kissed someone?” she asked, getting a little closer to him.

“No...” he said, his heartbeat speeding up. Ilea slowly went closer until their lips met.

“Now you have...” she said and grinned, going in again. His arms slowly wrapped around her as she kissed him again, this time longer, more passionate.

“You tell me if you want to stop, it’s really alright.” she said, right over his face.

“Are you kidding me?” the man smiled at her, pulling her closer for another kiss. A couple minutes later Ilea moved up, now sitting on the man, making her leather armor disappear. The clothing below was still on her and she slowly removed her shirt, revealing herself to him.

“Oh my god...” he said, a bit overwhelmed by the sight before him. Ilea smirked and went down for another kiss.

“You’re allowed to touch me you know?” she said in between kissing. A shiver went through her as his hands brushed against her side and got to her chest. She started removing his leather armor, the two getting into a battle of clothes and kissing, stopping only at the underwear.

Ilea kissed his chest and slowly went further down until she removed the last piece of his clothing. Getting rid of her own, she slid up again and helped guide the man into her. A soft moan left her as she went to kiss him again, her body starting to move in a rhythm of pleasure. Kyrian’s face changed a minute later as his muscles tensed up.

“Sorry...” he said as Ilea slowly slid off the man.

“That was nice, don’t worry about it. Did you enjoy it?” she smiled at him from the side, summoning a fresh cloth to clean herself up.

“That was incredible...” Kyrian said, closing his eyes and falling back on the pillow. “Thank you.”

“Here.” she said and held another cloth to the man who took it and cleaned himself as well. The two laid there for a couple minutes, looking at the stars.

“Was that a one time thing or?” Kyrian asked after a while. Ilea looked over and then back up.

“I don’t know. Probably not.” she said and Kyrian laughed.

“Not that I expected anything else from you. Well you were right, it was fun. So whenever you feel like it again.” he said. “Can one get some fresh air in here?”



“I’m glad you understand and I have a better idea, follow me.” she said and walked downwards and towards the balcony overlooking the ocean.

“You’re beautiful.” Kyrian said after a while, the wind brushing against their naked skin.

“You’re not bad either. Do you feel like sleeping?” Ilea asked, looking into his eyes. He shrugged as an answer.

“Me neither... I never tried this naked...” she said and blinked out over the ocean, waving at the man as gravity took her. Ilea smirked at the look on his face as she started falling, wings of ash spreading behind her back, not slowing but increasing the speed at which the woman descended towards the water. Looking backwards she found a man surrounded by metal spheres following behind.

Her wings spread and slowed her fall a couple dozen meters before impact. It would likely not hurt her badly but going underwater wasn’t something she planned to do tonight, at least not straight into the deep part. Ilea continued onwards a couple meters over the waves while the moon shined on, behind her Kyrian followed with a bright smile on his face. A game of catch ensued and led the two out onto the ocean and then back towards the mountains, Ilea skidding on the rock to avoid capture.

She did let him catch her after a reasonable time as the two embraced in the air, his metal spheres drifting below them to create a surface to stand on. “Ever thought about doing this when you were in prison?” she asked, putting her arms around his neck and getting closer.

“Not in my wildest dreams...” he said and kissed her. The two slowly drifted back towards her house where round two of their personal tournament was held, confirming that it would not stay a one time thing after all.

“You know, I wasn’t exactly a prisoner... at least not officially.” Kyrian said as the two were lying in bed. Ilea turned towards him and brushed his chest with her hand.

“You never struck me as much of a criminal...” Ilea commented, summoning a bottle of mead. “Want any?”

“No. Thanks, I’m not very fond of it.”

“What mead?” she asked and looked at the bottle before smelling it, unsure of its vileness.

“Alcohol.” he stated.

“Ah, yes. I don’t remember you drinking. Bad memories?” she asked “Alright if I do though?”

He just nodded. “Yea, to both... I grew up in the prison, some of the people were... well a little too fond of it.”

“I can see that. It’s pretty much the same everywhere but I have to say the booze here is much better than on e... from my village. Maybe it’s magical brewing?” she said and swirled the bottle.

“I’m not gonna push you Ilea but I do wanna know, are you human?” Kyrian suddenly said, looking deep into her eyes. Ilea chuckled.

“I am, don’t worry about it.”

“Mhm... I believe you.” he said. “Gonna catch a bit of sleep though, been a long day.”

“Do that, I’ll join you in a while.” Ilea answered and smiled as the man started snoring mere seconds later. ‘It really must’ve been a long day for him..’ she smiled, thoroughly satisfied. Sitting back, she brushed through his hair and summoned one of Albert’s books before she opened it and started reading.

*...The question cannot remain unasked as to the nature of the mathematical and magical law that governs our every life and abilities. I do not want to accept the answer of gods as I have conversed with beings thousands of years old and powerful enough to destroy entire cities with a single breath. Neither them nor anything they cared to share with my lowly being indicated the existence of higher beings...*

The author certainly had interesting thoughts but Ilea wasn't quite believing much of it. 'Too much self praise...' she thought as she continued to flip through the pages. None of the books she had already checked out were written by Albert himself but he certainly had an interesting collection, seemingly geared towards the game like system that had taken over as soon as she had appeared in Elos. Maybe there was a connection to her appearance in this magical land, a weird feeling spread in her stomach as she continued reading, remembering earth.

Ilea stopped a couple minutes later and sighed, looking at the man laying next to her. 'Either this is a simulation and others are caught in it, trying to find out what exactly it is or this is real and somehow I was teleported here...' she thought but stopped herself. Snow was falling again outside. 'I literally know nothing...' Ilea was aware that there were people theorizing on the universe being a simulation back on earth as well but it always seemed a little abstract to her, and not something one should think about too much.

Now though? Stranded in this place, she wasn't so sure anymore. As much as she enjoyed herself in Elos, she was still curious. And with magic, flying people and lightning being summoned by only one's mind, there might be a possibility to actually find out something. Summoning the Tungsten Key she had found in the Taleen dungeon, she stared at the pyramid like object and turned it around before she made it vanish again, catching her breath at the amount of mana she lost again from the action. 'Ah, I forgot about that...'

"One of the dwarven keys?!" Aki exclaimed.

"Didn't you not want to talk while others are here?"

“You could’ve warned me at least. I’m sure you made his day though, congratulations.” Aki continued. “If that is what I think it is then you should probably not show it to anybody my dear friend.”

“Why do you sound sarcastic?” Ilea asked, sighing and blinking downwards and onto the balcony not to wake up the sleeping Kyrian.

“I change according to the person wielding me. And you’re one sarcastic ass.” the dagger said.

“Maybe I am. What do you know of that thing?”

“It looks like the descriptions I’ve seen. I believe it was one of my previous owner’s goals to get it, or one of them. There were supposed to be more and they were immensely important to those dwarfs.” the dagger explained.

“Any idea why? What do they do?”

“No idea, sorry mate.”

“Unhelpful thousand year old blade pet.” she said.

“So I’m your pet now? Isn’t that one sleeping upstairs?”

“Ah don’t say that. He’s a good friend and who said friends can’t have fun?” Ilea smirked, twirling the dagger in her hand.

“You know I hate that.” he said.

“Oh I do.” she did it again as she blinked back to her bed, made the dagger vanish and cuddled up to Kyrian before sleep took her as well.

“We expect them to make another move soon enough. With our influence in the Hand growing it will be an easy thing to protect the important cities.” a nicely dressed man said into the room. The group of people shrouded in shadow showed different reactions.

“It’s been two years already, you’re aware that you and your master aren’t the only ones that will suffer should this investment be for nothing.” a female voice whispered. The man didn’t know who had spoken, the tension in the room a little much, even for him.

“The organization has been standing for over a thousand years, it’s not easy to...” he was interrupted.

“We know. We’ve been watching. The time is now and if you do not act quickly the window will close.” a man said with finality in his voice. “Now go back and we hope to hear from you soon.”

“What should we do about the boy? He managed to get out the void mage. I told you we should’ve killed...” the man overheard as he nodded and teleported out of the room. His smile vanished as his hands started to shake a little. It would be a long week.

The preparations were going well. Ilea was sitting on top of a house in Ravenhall, watching the people around her more busy than she had ever seen them. Building and decorating all over the place, turning the stony city into something more akin to Salia. Or at least what Salia had been before the accident. She finished her meal and looked up at the suns shining down on her, trying their best to melt the layer of snow covering the city and wilderness beyond.

A thud could be heard next to her as she lifted her head to look at Kyrian in his light leather armor. She bit into a fruit, checking the man out her eyes

moving on to two people nearly fighting about a cart blocking the road.

“You left? Could’ve woken me up.” Kyrian said, his voice neutral.

“You looked like you needed the sleep and you were cute.” Ilea answered in the same neutral voice. The man just grunted.

“Watching the girl?”

“You noticed? Yea, she’s inside reading.” Ilea answered, seeing Cless with her Sphere in the building she was sitting on. The man next to her didn’t ask any further questions.

“I’ll go train in the forest. You can join if you want to.” he proposed but Ilea didn’t quite feel like that after so much of it in the past months.

“Probably not, enjoy yourself though.” she said genuinely and looked at him with a smile. He awkwardly smiled back and then looked away.

“I’ll be... yea alright.” he said, stumbling over his words before he jumped off the building, catching himself in the air as he wobbled towards the city walls. Ilea chuckled lightly, watching the two men in the street fist fight. She shook her head and jumped off, not to interfere but to move on. The excitement in the city was palpable as she walked through the streets, checking out the already finished stands and shops.

None of it came close to Keyla’s cooking but there was something about streetfood that made Ilea happy. The team would meet again a day before the tournament to discuss their tactics. Having a higher rank than their current one would take time to accomplish. A good result in the tournament would change that rather quickly. With a higher rank came better missions assigned to them and a better pay. Of course money wasn’t on the priority list for Ilea at the moment but better missions also meant stronger enemies to fight.

An excited smirk spread on her face as she heard some interesting music coming from a couple streets over.

His claws sunk deep into the mage before him. A tragic loss. Another high level human, dead at his hands. His resolve was unwavering as he ripped out the man's throat, blood coloring the street a deep red. With a mere thought two slime like monsters came into existence, taking care of the body and blood. Adam's hands turned back as he checked his surroundings with all his skills. 'They're getting closer...' he thought 'I'm sure this one wasn't with the Hand. Not the only ones investigating then...'

The past months had been very successful. Dagon had believed him and the man's work was spectacular. Wallace wouldn't find much purchase in the Shadow's Hand after their plan went through, even with Adam's slight modifications. He scratched the last runes in this part of the city, linking the whole picture together, his heart closed to the inevitable result of his work. 'Maybe I really am going mad...' he thought, looking up at the heavens.

Three days had passed since Ilea's night out with Kyrian and the man hadn't shown himself even once after their talk on a rooftop in Ravenhall. She smiled and entered the familiar pub in Viscera, seeing a familiar face in her Sphere, or rather a lack thereof. As on most days there was a band playing music, giving the establishment a good reason for people to be there instead of in any other bar, at least up in the city proper.

Ilea walked to the group sitting on the table near a corner of the room. "Hello there." she uttered "May I?" she smiled and turned around a free chair to join Sulivhaan and Rock.

"Ilea. Yes I've heard of you joining. I'm glad someone like you chose the Hand. How have you been faring?" the man seemed pragmatic as ever.

“Ah look at you! I expected you to be much higher in level already, what happened?” Rock said as he smiled at her.

“Got a bit bogged down by team trainings. Not that it was a bad idea.” she admitted, looking towards Sulivhaan, quite glad he had suggested this endeavor to her. There was a not so slight possibility that her corpse would be rotting in some long forgotten dungeon out there somewhere without the things she had learned here.

“I’m glad you have cooled down a little. Don’t get too settled though.” the masked man said.

“What do you know? This seems to be more ominous than just a random comment...” Ilea said and motioned to a waiter with three fingers up.

“I don’t drink.” Sulivhaan said “But those are all for you. I see.” he nodded. “Things are in motion that cannot be stopped. Perhaps a part of it will come down upon the Hand. Be prepared.” he said, looking around the room, his last sentence a mere whisper.

“Does he always talk like that? I haven’t been around him in a while...” Ilea asked in the same whispered conspiratory voice.

“You should’ve seen him in Dawntree...” Rock shook his head. Sulivhaan said nothing and just leaned back.

“It’s good to see you safe.” he said quietly, crossing his hands in front of him.

“Same, rest of the team?” a confirming nod left her with a bit of a better feeling. “Where’s Navalis, I wanted to ask her about archery related skills.” she suddenly said but the men looked at each other and shrugged.

“Your guess is as good as ours. So tell me, is your team joining in on the tournament?” Rock asked, his mood turning from bored to excited in the span of a mere moment.

“Yea, last team in the ranks but that should change rather quickly.”



“Oh I’m sure it will. If your team members are anywhere near as crazy as you are then most others won’t stand a chance.” he chuckled and drank one of Ilea’s mugs, the additional one she had ordered just for that reason.

“Only if they’re meatheads like you are.” she said, sipping on her own drink.

“A lot of them are.” Sulivhaan said, getting a hurt look from Rock.

“On another note, you mentioned Dawntree. Did they breach the city?” she asked but Rock just smiled at Sulivhaan.

“Oh if anybody breached anything then it was us. You should’ve seen the remains of those poor elves.” Rock said.

“Not something you hear everyday.” Ilea said, finishing her drink right after.

“You do here.” he said.

“Don’t joke about it too much. You still haven’t fought a true elf.” Sulivhaan said, again in his ominous voice.

“You’ve been talking about that for so long, at this point I truly believe it’s just your myths speaking.” Rock said, shaking his head.

“Just be prepared.” the masked man said. Ilea believed him. It was just reasonable to assume that there were stronger enemies out there. His mistake she thought, was that he apparently limited his view to elves.

# Chapter 115 Tournament

## Chapter 115 Tournament

“So I presume you’ve all read through the tactics sheets.” Claire asked into the group. Eve looked like she hadn’t slept for the past week, Trian looked like a whole group of stylists had worked on his perfect look and Kyrian was avoiding Ilea’s looks though more out of embarrassment than anything else. Ilea looked at the others and back to Claire, freezing as the woman stared into her eyes.

“Hey don’t look at me like that, I’m sure the others haven’t read it either... Claire it was fifty pages of boring formations...” not only Kyrian was avoiding her gaze at that point, abandoned by her friends as if she had never existed.

“Well that’s what I expected. As soon as there are no direct monsters or money involved you slack. Well that’s why we met so early. We’re gonna go through it all together. I hope you have your notebooks with you.” Claire said as Ilea sighed, looking up at the fake sun in Eregar’s Haven.

‘Save me Helios...’ her eyes teared up as she looked into the light.

The next nine hours were not the most fun Ilea had ever had but she did see the necessity and after so much lounging around it wasn't hard to concentrate for a while either. Eve got more and more enthusiastic as the day went on, not a hard thing to do with her starting level of a literal zombie. Well not literal but close to. It made the whole thing a little more enjoyable and Ilea at least showed some initiative just for her team mates.

Kyrian became more comfortable again as the day went on as well. At one point after the session he even came up to her to apologize for not showing up and for his behavior. He needed some time to think about things and she didn't fault him, likely a lot of things swirling around in his head, her things being two of them.

“The tournament starts tomorrow so you better sleep enough beforehand and be prepared. This is our ticket to better missions so it should be in everyone's interest. Don't disappoint me.” Claire had said at the end of her nine hour monologue, a truly impressive feat. Ilea was surprised she hadn't gotten a Speech Resistance but when weren't charisma based characters overpowered?

Kyrian visited her that night though only to share her bed to sleep. She was quite fine with it and enjoyed talking to the man, feeling closer to him than anybody else she had met so far in Elos. Roland was nice but he did have a family waiting for him. Kyrian just somehow felt as out of place as Ilea knew she was. She was pretty sure about her theory of him imprisoned in a mine for most of his life. The two slept rather late, a little excited about the coming days. They would come face to face with high level teams that had worked together for decades if not longer. Ilea wasn't quite as convinced as Claire when it came to their success but they certainly wouldn't fail for a lack of trying.

Ilea woke up an hour after she fell asleep, silently getting out of bed before she blinked down onto her balcony, summoning Aki and a cup of hot coffee. Her necklace really was a blessing. “Good morning.”

“Morning. How long did you sleep?” the dagger asked as she put the sheath onto her leather armor.

“Not longer than two hours I think.”

“That can’t be healthy.” Aki commented but both of them knew the woman didn’t need more. At least until she would fall into a coma for a decade. So far it had worked out and she didn’t feel tired.

“You mean like a thousand year meditation session mr blade?” Ilea asked, watching the sun rise as she sipped her coffee. It was tea really but at this point the taste was close enough to what she remembered from earth that it hardly made a difference.

“I like the house I must say...” the dagger said, likely enjoying the view as much as she did, if not more considering the past hundreds of years of his existence.

“You think we’re gonna get far in the tournament?”

“Not really. You all are impulsive, undisciplined. You and sparky are the only ones who can take more than just a little beating so it will likely be you two standing as the last ones and as much as you have grown, I doubt you can stand against five people at your level.”

Ilea was quiet for a while, enjoying the icy breeze flowing through her hair. “You watch me.” she said after a while.

Kyrian woke to a bountiful breakfast waiting for him in the dining room. Ilea had been eating and reading for the past two hours until he got up. Aki was lying next to her with an opened book next to him. He was helping with getting through the collection of books they had found with Albert, the barrier mage inexplicably obsessed with teleporting and the nature of existence. At least if you judged the man on his choice of literature.

‘Does that make me the same?’ Ilea thought as she rubbed her eyes, looking up at Kyrian starting to eat opposite her.

“What do you think of levels and skills, the way we get stronger through killing and training?” she asked, sitting back and sipping another coffeetea.

He looked up and then down again, putting together a sandwich Ilea was less than intrigued by. “It is how it is. Questioning it will likely only lead to madness.”

“Yea, some of those people at least sound mad...” Ilea said, making the books on the table vanish.

“Is that an heirloom or something by the way?” Kyrian asked, nodding towards Aki.

“Yes, my great grandfather gifted it to my great grandmother. She thought it was so pathetic it’s become a bit of a gag to gift it to the least favorite child.”

He looked at her, then at the blade and then started eating the abomination he had created. “I’m not sure what to believe anymore from you Ilea...”

“So you’re learning, good.” she said and chuckled ‘Better than me at least...’ she thought. At least she was virtually indestructible at this point so any slip-ups caused by her trusting nature would be smoothed out by her recovery and resilience. As long as nobody else was drawn into it.

The two left another hour later, flying over the snowy mountains near Ravenhall. The sky was clear that day and they reached a city in celebration. ‘This might be a bit much...’ Ilea thought as she saw the masses of people packed in the streets. Compared to an ordinary busy day in a big city, this felt more like a tourist trap.

“Let’s get to Viscera as soon as possible...” she said to her companion flying next to her. The tournament would start on midday, which meant they had quite a bit of time left. Sadly Viscera was in a similar state as the city outside. Apparently they had let in more than the usual amount of peddlers. Additionally the people Ilea saw with a level over two hundred was higher than at any previous point in time.

The two made their way down to Eregar’s Haven where the tournament would be held and where they would meet up with the team. Even here there were more people than ever before. ‘Out of what holes have all these high level people crawled out of?...” Ilea wondered as she saw the massive fields prepared for fights, ready with barriers and cover, elemental resources and stands for people to watch.

Of course only full members of the Hand were allowed down in the Haven but considering they were team 34 it was only logical to assume there to be at least close to two hundred people at their level. With the destruction someone like Trian could lay down, a considerably big arena was only to be expected. ‘It’s gonna be hard to close in on people with that much space...’ she thought as the elevator came to a stop at the base of the Haven.

“Quite busy...” Kyrian commented and stepped off the platform, starting to fly towards their destination.

“Yes it is...” Ilea said, her wings spreading before she followed him. If anything she hadn’t seen so many people fly in one place until today.

Eve was surprisingly not the last one to arrive. Considering how much she had anticipated the tournament it wasn't much of a surprise. Still Ilea hadn't expected it. Claire was already half an hour into her explanations, planning and going through profiles of people they might face. It really was a waste of time. There were too many unknowns and the match ups wouldn't be announced until the first one started.

Ilea leveled her metaphorical speech resistance another two levels until finally they made their way towards the main stage of the tournament. A massive structure of stone and metal, certainly a showing of power from the Hand. Questionable since everyone here was already part of the organization but perhaps they wanted to retain the members.

Their group made their way to a couple seats on the side and back of the seating space as Ilea checked out the people around them. A lot of them were showing off some strange looking armor, trinkets and even auras and spells casually floating around them. She didn't quite get the whole thing, the tournament seemingly a bigger thing to the members than she had expected.

'Can't wait to trash some of those snobby looking faces...' she thought and smiled before she sat down. In the next couple minutes the crowd settled down and found their seats. There were five seats on the stage, two of them empty. One of them occupied the man who had evaluated Ilea when she had joined. Not William. The name didn't come to her mind at the moment. The other two seats were occupied by a man and a woman, neither of which Ilea had seen before.

The woman got up as soon as the last of the members found their seats, walking to the lectern.

"Hello. Elder Strand will now speak to you." she said and went back to her chair, sitting down to a rustling of whispers. Ilea made out more than just a single conversation around her. The woman was an elder as well. The name Quil fell a couple times, apparently it was quite a spectacle to see her.

'Not one for words then...' she thought and was a little confused as to why the woman had spoke at all. The man who had helped evaluate her got up and continued where the woman had left off.

“Thank you elder Quil. It is an honor to talk to all of you on this day. Many of you I have evaluated myself over the years. To see you form experienced teams ready for every challenge makes me proud to be a member of this Guild. Let’s not pretend that you are here for sentimental speeches and start this. First fight will be team six versus team nine. Good luck, to all of you.” the man finished and walked back to his seat.

The last man still sitting on his chair looked a little confused at elder Strand but focused quickly and got up as well.

“Welcome, members of the Hand. To this prestigious tournament...” this last elder definitely didn’t quite share the same antipathy for long speeches as the others. Ilea zoned out after the first couple sentences, unsure if anybody else was even listening anymore.

“He’s not like the others...” Kyrian commented from the side in a whisper. Other people were talking as well, obviously not listening to the man still talking twenty minutes later.

“Why make this political?” Kyrian continued, seemingly genuinely interested.

“Because that’s what he is. That man might be dangerous for this whole organization. The other elders don’t seem to care, two of them didn’t even bother to show up...” Trian commented.

“Why dangerous?” Kyrian asked but the elder finally came to an end, motioning to the first arena next to the assembly of people. Most of them got up and flew or teleported to the seats on the other side. Twelve people remained on the soon to be battlefield, the two teams mentioned by Strand. Ilea checked them all out but other than their levels being above two hundred, they didn’t look much different from any adventurers she had seen before.

None of them were wearing anything black so she had reason to believe they weren’t using their best gear at least. People weren’t supposed to die in this tournament after all. Some people were actually selling food out of their storage items, something Ilea didn’t quite thought possible. ‘Guess there are merchant opportunists even here... among the elite...’ she smiled and mused



if they had more gold than even her. ‘They must have... if you even use this to sell things...’

A loud explosion and fireworks above the arena signaled the start of the fight. Immediately different elements were thrown at each other and people started vanishing and reappearing. The fight reminded Ilea of their training sessions, similar abilities and tactics being used in the fight. She did have to admit after five minutes that the teamwork was something else. Ilea’s team would need quite a while to reach that level of understanding with each other.

She sat back and enjoyed the show, even buying some food from the people selling, their eyes lighting up at another customer. ‘Yea I doubt we can beat them if it’s not about killing...’ she thought after a while, at least about the two teams currently engaged. A sudden feeling of wrongness spread through her body as she dropped the snacks in her hands, standing up and activating her buffs.

Many of the people around her had similar reactions as she felt the mana flare throughout many of them. “What is this..” Trian asked to nobody in particular, sparks forming around him.

“Something’s coming..” a mage said.

“Eve are you alright?” Ilea asked, using her healing to soothe the obvious headache plaguing her friend. The woman just looked up at her with fearful eyes.

“We have to...we have to get away...” she uttered when runes lit up all around the area and beyond.

“I knew those were a bad sign...” Claire said “Come we need to...” people were talking over each other until a voice of authority broke through. Ilea looked towards the female elder who had spoken but a few words at the start of the tournament.

“Everyone, destroy those runes!” she said in a calm voice, two black axes appearing in her hands before she vanished, appearing next to a circle of

runes on the field, smashing the ground with both of them. An explosion rattled through the runes, making the gathered magic vanish. People picked up quickly but the circles were too numerous.

“What are those?!” Ilea asked as she too appeared next to a circle and smashed into the ground. People on the stands had started fighting each other as well which made her even more confused. She certainly wasn’t the only one looking around in confusion but one thing she knew, the runes had to be destroyed.

She appeared in front of the next circle, in it a creature had started forming, still only halfway to something recognizable. ‘They’re summoning something...’ she thought, destroying the runes below. The creature didn’t vanish but instead a tentacle like limb shot out at her, Ilea dodging to the right in the last moment. The arm moved around at her, making her dodge again, this time backwards.

‘What the hell...’ she thought, the sound of fighting and magics appearing all around her, joined by screams and growls. Blinking backwards to avoid another attack from the abomination before her that slowly shuffled forwards on its tentacle like limbs below the mass of flesh and eyes that formed its body.

*[Demon – lvl 192]*

‘That explains it... why here though...’ she thought, trying to find her team in the mess of fighting. An explosion ripped into the earth next to her, making her lift her arm to block. The juggernaut armor appeared around her as a veil of ash came into existence. A tentacle impacted her chest but Ilea stood her ground, grabbing the limb and pumping destructive mana into it.

*‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Demonic Essence -25 hp/s -25 mana/s for the next five minutes’*

‘Aw fuck.. of course it’s poisonous... or was it venomous?’ she thought and appeared next to the demon, truly a disgusting looking thing. A punch of her sent the creature skidding before it caught itself with its tentacles. Ilea jumped backwards, her wings spreading when another monster impacted the

ground where she had stood, earth exploding outwards. This one was more shaped like a humanoid, other than its right arm which looked more like a massive bone mace. Flying up, Ilea noticed that there were more and more of the demons coming from magical circles around the Haven.

Explosions rattled through the area as she tried to find her team but there was too much going on for her to notice any of them. More than six shields similar to Claire's could be seen as she quickly ascended. 'Ah great...' she thought as a flying demon came up to her from the side. Ilea dodged the teeth that basically formed the creature's whole head and held onto its wings, flying back towards the ground with the monster held in front of her. It tried to get to her with its spiked limbs but only managed to scratch at her armor, its tries ended when all of Ilea's speed and weight smashed its light body into the ground.

'No time to rest...' she thought as a two meter tall demon looking like a bull with fins and an exposed rib cage ran up to her.

# Chapter 116 Horde

## Chapter 116 Horde

The only reason she didn't dodge away was the demon being at an identifiable level. She remembered too late that Walter had told her about how specialized those things can be as she was impacted by the whole weight of the beast, pushed backwards several meters until she decided to blink above it, kicking at its spine.

Two more flying beasts had appeared, making her disengage the monster on the ground, catching one of them with a punch to its teeth. None of them managed to get through her defenses as the veil closed again after the impact. Ilea ran over the ground, occasionally covering distances by flying when she tackled a monster barely held off by a female warrior pressed onto the ground, blood flowing from several cuts on her body.

Ilea punched the beast three times, something cracking in its chest until she spun around in the air, using both her momentum and strength to flight the thing as far away as she could. Blinking back to the woman, she healed her wounds, ignoring the words uttered by her. Seeing another two beasts approach through her sphere, she mentally apologized to the woman before she grabbed her and flew upwards, continuing to pump healing mana into her. Up and up they went, now already followed by three flying demons.

Ilea glanced over to see many of the demons going up towards Viscera. 'That can't be good.' someone else apparently had a similar thought as a beam of red light impacted where the elevators would vanish upwards, sending rock

and metal down onto the creatures. Ilea didn't have time to see where the attack had come from as the woman currently held by her regained her senses.

“Good?” she received a thankful nod and turned around again, now flying downwards while avoiding the pursuers, two of them scratching at her veil.

“I can fly!” the woman said, Ilea nodding and letting go of her. Thin lines of black matter formed behind the warrior who flew downwards towards the dropped spear still lying where she had been. Ilea blinked away, dodging the thrown chunk of rock thrown towards her as she flew downwards, impacting a demon running towards a dome of light. Her knees impacted the creature and sent it into the ground before a series of punches rained onto it.

Three flying spikes impacted Ilea's veil, one of them managing to get through and scratching against her armor. The beast below her used the distraction to punch at her, making her disengage again. Ilea ran towards the barrier, finding not Claire inside but three other people, one of them heavily injured. She found herself unable to blink inside so decided to dance around the barrier, smashing and throwing away the attackers.

Three demons ran at her at once when a black flame appeared around them, a mage flying by and winking at her. Ilea appeared next to him and caught the jumping demon trying to get to him. It clawed and bit at her while all her attacks were dwindling away its health, breaking bones and destroying organs with kinetic and magical force, each punch increasing in power thanks to her Ashen skills. The two landed, only one of them still alive. Ilea blinked back towards the still standing dome, now unchallenged by enemies and punched it to get the mage's attention.

“I can heal!!” she shouted but the rune mage just shook his head with tears in his eyes before a series of spikes impacted Ilea again. ‘That fucker...’ she thought, looking towards the thing standing a hundred meters away, spikes growing from its back. She looked towards the mage next to her again but found the woman on the ground dead already. Her anger spiked as she ran towards the ranged beast, dodging the demon trying to tackle her.

She appeared next to the beast and punched deep into it, ripping out anything she got a good grip on until the thing fell lifeless to the ground. Looking back she found the dome not standing anymore, the demon with the mace like arm from before trying to get to the people inside. She flew back but before she could reach them a stream of red lightning impacted the creature's chest, stopping its jump and pushing it into the ground. Ilea appeared behind it and punched it in its spine with an obsidian gauntlets, breaking it with the combined force of both attacks. The lightning stopped as she threw the lifeless body to the side, looking up to Trian.

The man was in his black armor, nodding to her in an exaggerated fashion. 'Fucking idiot...' she was happy to see him alive. He motioned in a specific direction and she followed, grabbing the two people who were still standing up, obviously injured. Her mana flowed into them as she flew behind Trian who she saw was aiming for a set of people having formed some sort of defense with walls of earth and metal, rune mages using their powers to enhance the defenses while ranged mages rained their spells onto the attackers, warriors and tanks defending the ground line. It was chaotic but they would have to work together to survive this.

Ilea landed in the middle and put the two people next to the other injured where two healers worked on them, nodding towards her. She would be more of a help fighting, that was for sure when she saw one of them creating a field of light healing ten people at once. Ilea flew upwards, checking her mana which was already down to around forty percent. There were people resting in the middle of the circle as two mages organized the gathered.

Ilea went for two attacking flying demons and caught them each in one hand before she flew downwards and smashed them into the ground right before a warrior with a massive ax. Nodding to the armored man, he lifted his weapon and smashed it into the ground, Ilea disappearing to engage a spindly monster with spikes as arms, running at the formation. The explosion of power behind her told of the demise of the two flying demons as she impacted the enemy, boned claws breaking through her defenses, scratching at her armor, Ilea using her higher weight to slam the monster to the ground, holding its back with her hands and head-butting it with her helmet while her wings and veil cut into the creature.

Using her legs to pin it down she started to deliver blows with her obsidian gauntlets, wrecking the enemy below her, its piercing weapons ineffective against her armor. She looked up to find another bull like creature charging at her but the elder who had reacted at first appeared above it, red flame around her axes as they impacted the monster, making it smash into the ground and skid towards Ilea. The elder looked at her and nodded before she vanished again, intercepting a flying demon two hundred meters away.

Ilea couldn't help but smile as she blinked away as well, helping out a warrior defending against three heavy hitting monsters. Ice lances impacted their chests but were ineffective. Ilea appeared before one of the demons and kicked at its knees, breaking bone, blinking behind it and ripping away the bone plate covering its neck before another spike of ice dug into the creature and ending its life. She blinked backwards, avoiding another one's blow as she repeated the same tactic, her teamwork with the mage somewhere above quite effective.

She stopped after that and walked to towards the enchanted and growing defensive line, using Meditation to regain as much resources as she could. The poison had worn off a while ago but she had to rest to avoid an early demise. Other warriors and mages had gathered around three people playing music and touching people. Ilea joined them and her mind focused more than ever as she heard the music, her will to fight and win strengthening immensely.

"You can heal on your own..." the woman in front of her said and walked to the next person, touching their chest and Ilea saw the small cuts on him heal slowly. She didn't dare stay longer than a couple minutes, going back into the fight. Red lightning could be seen a couple hundred meters away as she saw Trian fly away from a group of pursuers. Abandoning the group, Ilea flew towards the man just when his magical energy ran out and he crashed into the ground, his lightning wings vanishing in the process.

A bone mace was about to hit him when Ilea jumped in to grab the man and fly away, the mace impacting only stone. She tried healing him but found it impossible. "What's wrong sparky? Ran out of juice?" she asked as she flew back to the only recognizable defensible position in the near vicinity.

“Curses, and some of them block my drains... damn creatures.” the man said when a series of explosions resounded behind them, scattering the monsters as the two landed, Ilea ripping out the bone that was stuck in Trian.

“Didn’t you learn from Kyrian...” she scolded as she healed the slowly closing wounds caused by the enemy. “Where are the others?”

“I have no idea... thanks.” he said as he got up again, both of them meditating. The explosions didn’t stop, ripping through the demons who had pursued them, a mage flying above and then towards the exit of the Haven where more and more of the creatures made their way out.

“What the hell is happening?” Ilea asked, looking around at the carnage.

“I have no fucking clue... this isn’t the tournament I expected.” Trian answered.

“Ready?” she asked and the man nodded.

“Let’s find the others.” he said and flew off, Ilea following behind.

Claire held onto the power in her runes, blocking the horde of advancing creatures trying to get higher up and towards Viscera. “How long rune mage?” the man who had fetched and got her up here asked. A group of Hand members preparing their spells and auras behind her.

“Not long, a minute at most.” she said as the group readied themselves.

“What about the people down there?” someone asked “There’s hundreds of demons...” their voice was shaky.

“There are tens of thousands above as well...” another voice chimed in “I’m more worried about them, they’re not seasoned warriors.” suddenly a ranger



appeared from behind as Claire looked at the wounded woman, collapsing as a healer ran towards her.

“Th...they are in the c... city...” she managed to say before she gasped, the healing power flowing through her.

“They’re breaking through!” a mage said as one of the demons used its magical power to infest Claire’s barrier with its energy.

“Your minute is up.” she said as warriors ran past her, spells fired towards the small corridor, her explosive runes placed in the corridor beyond ripping through the creatures.

“Three more over there!” Trian shouted as the two joined the three warriors fighting off a horde of demons, Ilea impacting five of them with all her speed as a stream of lightning impacted the other side of the enemies.

“How are your resources looking? Start meditating...” Ilea shouted, holding off a demon while punching another one below her. Trian flew around the group, his attacks drawing the monsters towards him as Ilea finished off one after the other. A minute later the warriors joined back in, their stamina recovered enough to help.

“There’s a group of survivors that way, go.” Trian shouted when all of them looked towards a specific location. A ripple formed in the air a couple hundred meters away as a complicated looking set of runes came to life, much bigger than anything from before. Reality itself ripped apart right before their eyes as a tear in space was forcefully opened up.

“We have to stop that...” Trian said and Ilea was flying at her top speed before he had even finished talking, overtaking the man in a moment. The tear was trembling but still getting wider and higher. Below it Ilea could make out

a tall creature with clawed hands and spread arms, fin like extensions could be seen on its back before it flew into the tear in space.

“Focus on destroying the runes!” Trian shouted from behind, Ilea flying towards the crack when they saw something come out from the other side.

“I think we might be too late!” she shouted backwards, massive clawed limbs coming out of the tear, followed by an flood of water. The tear spread more, seemingly pushed open by the sheer strength of whatever was trying to get out. A head slowly moved out of the crack, similar looking like a crocodile but there were no eyes and it was about a hundred times bigger.

“What the hell is that?” Ilea shouted as more of the creature moved out, the flood of water reaching them at that point. The whole backside of the creature was just a set of wiggling tentacles as it flowed out of the crack completely, somehow levitating in the air. It opened its eyes to reveal not teeth but a black abyss when a pressure hit Ilea right before she wanted to slow down.

*‘ding’ ‘You have felt the pulse of a mighty being. You are paralyzed for ten seconds.’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Veteran - lvl 1  
You have experienced the shouts and spells of beings completely out of your range of imagination. You will not survive but at least you won’t be completely immobilized while you get eaten. Good luck warrior.’*

‘Can’t have fucking learned that with the last one...’ Ilea thought as she watched the abyss getting closer, unable to move her body or use her skills. ‘Fucking BULLSHIT!’ she shouted when a figure clad in flame smashed its two flaming axes into the monster’s head, the impact sending a shock wave outwards as the monster moved its arm towards the warrior, the female elder looking towards Ilea with a big grin on her face right before she was blown back by the wave of force coming from the creature’s mouth, apparently unable to teleport away as she was shot into the ground, skidding to a halt a hundred meters further back.

Ilea was still paralyzed as she continued to fly towards now not the creature but the crack in space. ‘Are you fucking kidding me...’ she thought as she entered the tear, water flowing into her mouth as she drifted deeper into the dark. ‘This isn’t good.’ she thought, using her Meditation, Mental and Fear Resistances to stop herself from panicking immediately. The sound of battle stopped immediately upon her arrival but the sound behind her made her nearly lose it, reminded of the last of the water leaving the tub after a finished bath.

‘Yea, bad.’ she thought as power flowed through her again, her Spherical perception spreading and preparing for impact but there was only one thing in the near vicinity. She held the remaining air within her lungs as she blinked towards Trian who had succumbed to the same fate. Looking backwards she found no tear and the flow of the water didn’t indicate any exit nearby. Nonetheless she swam with the still paralyzed man towards the supposed opening but found nothing. With her enhanced body she could search for a little longer but a feeling of fear and panic slowly settled in her stomach, only kept at bay by her skills.

The darkness around her didn’t respond and her air was slowly dwindling. ‘Focus Ilea...’ she thought and hoped to whatever deity was watching that they had come out the right way up, using all her power and even wings to swim upwards. A minute later the darkness was replaced by a dark blue, giving her at least a little bit of hope. Trian was coughing by now, the last of his air leaving him, Ilea covering his mouth with her own, pushing some of her own into him. The two worked together now to get up as quickly as they could, realizing their angle had been less than optimal.

Ilea used her healing power to heal both Trian and herself from the fast pressure release that managed to damage even their powerful bodies. Finally the two broke out of the water and coughed and breathed for a minute until their wings spread and got them higher above the water. Dark clouds were hanging above the still ocean with no end in sight in every direction. A set of three moons were shining down on them.

“Where the hell are we...” Ilea asked after a while, not quite expecting an answer out of the man.

Trian coughed again. “Wherever the demons are from I assume.”

“How do we get out?” Ilea asked. Trian just looked at her, neither were smiling anymore.

“Do you think there is land anywhere?”

“Probably... I might be able to use my third tier skill to get out but I can't take you with me...” Trian had a complicated expression on his face but ultimately nodded.

“If you want to use it, then I suggest you do it as soon as possible.” he said.

“And leave you behind? No.” she said and looked around.

“Let's go then, the less time we waste, the earlier we're back. More and more I hate myself for not taking that underwater fighting course...” Ilea answered.

“If we can get back...” Trian said, following behind as the two flew higher and in a random direction.

“You saw the thing going into the crack... whatever, whoever that was found a way to get in. Means there must be a way to get out. Plus I have enough food with me to last us a while, we'll figure something out. I hope... otherwise I'll go out and try to get help.” Ilea said and chuckled. ‘Not the first time I was ripped out of a reality...’

# Chapter 117 Salt

## Chapter 117 Salt

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Arilla – Breaker lvl 196 – Demon]*

...

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Sakin – Bone Warrior lvl 203 – Demon]*

Ilea skipped through the messages regarding the demons she had killed. Most of them were around level two hundred with three outliers, one of which being at two hundred and thirty.

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 207 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 203 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

Ilea put all her remaining points into Wisdom, bringing the stat up to 330.

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 2'*

‘Not really helping me in this situation...’ Ilea thought as she kept flying at a high speed next to Trian, both of them quiet. The ocean was eerily still.

“What kind of third tier spells do you have?” she suddenly asked, trying to start a conversation.

“Lightning attack, I couldn’t yet chose any of my movement skills to get to the third level. Would probably make this situation a lot easier...” he sighed.

“Yea...” Ilea said as the two sped over the water. There were some waves now indicating that the ocean did change from time to time.

“Aki do you know anything about this place? I think at this point I’d rather know than hide you.” she suddenly said, Trian looking at her from the side. The two stopped and floated over the water, the moons bathing them in a pale light.

“Who’s Aki?” the man asked and Ilea unsheathed her dagger.

“This. And I swear you little shit if you act like you’re just a normal dagger to make me seem like an insane person I’ll put you back into the forge were you belong..” she held the dagger right before her face. Half a minute passed as Trian’s expression turned from confused to worried.

“Ilea I don’t think you...” he started but was interrupted by the dagger.

“Alright alright, I though it was funny. Hello Trian, nice to meet you.” he said and Ilea just sighed.

“You cheeky fuck..” the three continued flying onwards but at a slower pace. “Do you know anything about the demon realm?”

“I haven’t actually been here before. It’s fascinating. Thanks for being stupid enough to get into that portal. I’ve heard of a person going in before but that was a long long time ago. I’m not sure if they managed to get out again but apparently it was an accident. Now what I know is that you can’t just open portals on accident so this place might be a little different.” Aki explained.

“Nice to meet you too dagger. So you believe this realm is easier accessible? Demon summonings are rather known so maybe there is something...” Trian said.

“Exactly, you don’t hear about other beings being summoned. With a demon realm existing one would assume there are other realms as well. Why do we commonly only know about demon summonings?” Aki asked.

“There are other things one could summon. Animals and spirits would be among them but you have to catch them first or befriend them somehow. Perhaps we’ll find out something but if the demons can get out through summonings, maybe there’s a way out for us as well.” Trian added.

“Just make sure to not drop me down into the water. I’d rather not be trapped in that crap forever...” the dagger said.

“Where did you find him? He seems...” Trian asked.

“Familiar? Yea apparently he gets some influence from me so now you’ll be annoyed by two people at once. Found him in the Taleen dungeon I was in, truly a treasure trove though I compare this guy more to a cursed item you have to throw into mount doom.” Ilea said, sheathing Aki again.

“Again with the weird references...” Aki said. “Trian now that you know about me, fuck you for those lightning and draining attacks.”

“Noted.” the noble replied. The three continued onwards for another six hours before quickly stopping to eat and drink something in the air, not wanting to drink the salt water. Ilea was somewhat confident it wouldn’t be much of an issue for her body to make it work but they still had some resources stored away in their items.

“What’s that?” There to the right!” Ilea suddenly exclaimed.

“You’re dreaming Ilea...there’s nothing...” Trian said, flying onwards. It had been three days of nonstop flying and the man was getting a little delirious.

“She’s right, there’s something there...” Aki confirmed her observation.

“Come on, to the right!” Ilea said and took the man’s arm who followed without further complaint. In the distance the white speck Ilea had seen became bigger and bigger, behind it a set of another white specks came into view until the first one, a sizable chunk of rock protruding out of the water was clearly visible. The form of the rock didn’t look very natural to Ilea, too even and too many angles.

Finally reaching it, there was a platform they could land on on one side of the white rock. Trian immediately collapsed, sleeping in the span of ten seconds. “Weak.” Ilea commented in a joking manner. She bent down and licked her



finger before touching it to the ground. Licking it again she spat on the rock.  
“Salt.”

“Of course you immediately lick the ground of the new place you’re in. Can’t level your poison resistance any other way...” Aki said.

“I regret revealing you Aki. This is all salt, rock salt to be exact...” Ilea commented as she sat down and summoned a meal. She made it vanish again a second later, thinking about their situation. They might need to ration at some point and they had eaten around ten hours ago already. She instead summoned her notebook and started sketching the surroundings, writing about their discoveries.

“What are you doing?” Aki asked, not seeing the page. She unsheathed him and put him on her lap.

“I’m documenting.” she simply stated.

“You surprise me time and time again Ilea. Is your brain going through random shrinking and growing processes occasionally?” the dagger asked but didn’t continue the banter upon not receiving an answer. He instead reminded her of some useful things she might want to note about the realm they had found themselves in.

“Does your hunting spell not pick up the thing you saw enter as well? Or anything else? I’d keep it running...” the dagger said. Ilea had already been doing that but found nothing so far except for water and salt.

“If I find something I’ll inform you.” she said and continued the drawing.

Trian woke up four hours later, obviously a little embarrassed for how long he slept, taking the next shift of guarding their little rock from anything that

might appear. Ilea slept for around two hours before she got up again and saw Trian working on something quite similar to her own previous activity.

“Continue?” she asked in a tired voice, her buffs activating to rid her of the state, wings spreading behind her as Trian made his decorated leather book vanish. He nodded and followed. The last stretch of ocean was covered and the two landed on the bigger surface.

“I wonder if it’s just an island or something bigger...” Trian commented, looking out onto the rocky formations of salt, some of them going high enough to constitute as small mountains.

“I’m picking up things here... at least more than before...” Ilea said, using all her senses to try and locate something that wasn’t salt or water. There were some smells, dried blood at the edge of her Sphere and even a small bone left behind. “There were living things here and they’ve been here rather recently. I would assume this is where they live.” Ilea said, quite happy that they were standing on somewhat solid ground.

They decided to walk for a while, just enjoying the ground again until two hours later they started speeding over the difficult to navigate terrain again with their flying abilities, sometimes stopping so Ilea could check the surroundings. More of the same until finally another twenty minutes later they saw something move in the distance.

“That’s one of them alright...” Trian said, stopping in the air. Ilea looked at the thing running. It looked like one of the massive demons with an open ribcage. Suddenly the thing fell down and slowly got up again.

“Broken leg or what?” Trian asked.

“It’s hurt, yes. I don’t think it’s their own fault...” Ilea said, pointing to the left where another beast came into view. A massive ten meter long abomination with a worm like body and teeth all around and inside of the opening at the top of it. Ilea shivered just looking at it.

“Should we engage?” she asked, watching the scene before them.

“You should wait and see, fight the survivor.” Aki commented and the two others agreed, flying a little closer without alerting either of the monsters. The worm like creature tore into the other demon’s back, the latter stopping all resistance after half a minute.

“It’s eating isn’t it?” Ilea asked, the three now hovering above the creature.

*[Demon – lvl 212]*

“Yea, should we end it or follow it.” Trian asked, looking over to her.

“I can follow its trail now so we can finish it.” she said, her buffs flaring up before she blinked next to the creature’s perceived head. A kick made it stop eating and focusing on the newcomers. It cried out and was shut up by another kick, followed by lightning slamming into its body. Ilea dodged two of the beasts frantic movements before she lifted her hands in front of her, blocking the mass of teeth with her Veil of Ash as she pushed destructive mana into it.

The cries didn’t stop and while its attacks didn’t manage to get through her defenses, its own durability was rather impressive, outlasting both of their attacks for more than ten minutes until it decided flight was the better choice. Slithering away from them, the two mages didn’t relent until it stopped moving altogether.

*‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Zar-Anil – Bone Warrior – lvl 212]’*

“Not a single level up...” Ilea commented, seeing that not a single skill had leveled from the encounter.

“Only got a skill level... wanna find more of them then?” Trian asked as Ilea took in their surroundings, focusing on the trail left behind by the two creatures.

“I’m not sure we’ll find more of them that easily... at least we have a source of food should all else fail.” she commented, enjoying the look in his eyes.

“Or is the thought of eating demon flesh too disgusting for the noble...”

“Stop always calling me that. It’s not all I am and you know that.” Trian said, motioning for her to lead the way. Ilea just shrugged, running and occasionally stopping to take in the scents around her.

“I know it isn’t Trian.” she said after a while but didn’t elaborate on it.

“Is this the forbidden romance growing inside the demon realm?” Aki said right after her remark.

“Why again do you carry around that piece of metal?” Trian asked, the three coming up on a cliff side. There was no water on the other side but a flat plane of salt, single creatures visible in the distance.

“If I’m ever again stuck inside a temple I’ll at least have someone to talk to...” she said and twirled the dagger before sheathing it again. This time no remark came from Aki. “Wanna go hunt, maybe if we kill enough of the creatures we’ll lure out the boss of this place.”

“The boss? I’m not sure there is something akin to that Ilea.” Trian said but didn’t oppose to hunting. Fighting something after three days of flying over a nearly motionless body of water had certainly been quite boring.

“Hello, can you show us how we can get out of...” Ilea started and moved to the side, two of the shot bone shards scratching at her veil before they impacted the ground a couple dozen meters further back. “Well that’s rude my friend.” she said, staring into the massive mouth of the creature before her. Another set of bone shards slowly grew from the left behind holes.

“Though if I looked like that I’d be pissed as well most of the...” she couldn’t finish and blinked closer, both avoiding the attack and moving in to engage. Lightning crashed into the creature when her fists hit at the same time. The

two didn't relent as more and more blood and guts splattered on her before the creature burst completely.

"Eww, fucking tone it down man." Ilea said, using her ash manipulation to push away the blood still sticking to her Veil.

"You're shielded aren't you. Just imagine if you didn't have that skill." Aki said.

"The smell is bad enough..." Ilea said, looking at the remains of the demon they had hunted down. The forth one already on the plane. And the forth one that didn't respond to their questions with anything else but bones and a bad breath.

"I don't see this going anywhere..." Ilea said, folding her hands before her. "It took what, three hours to hunt those and we're not getting anywhere..."

"What else would you suggest? We can only follow their trails until we find something. Whatever that may be." Trian said.

"Or we get you high enough for another third tier skill, just keep using that teleportation spell."

"I don't think that's viable..." he shook his head.

"Better than nothing, at least I got a level from this so it's not a complete waste." Ilea said, putting the new stat points into Intelligence, her main class having reached two hundred and eight.

"Yea but we're not... wait... what is that? Do you feel that?" Trian said slowly hovering towards a specific direction.

"Feel what? Not really. If you can sense anything then let's go, whatever it is it's better than following these bloody demons. Lead the way!" Ilea said and followed behind after he nodded, picking up the pace.

"It's like it's calling for me, a pulse of mana but it's weak. Very weak and far away." Trian tried to explain, five minutes later Ilea could feel it too. It was

faint, so incredibly faint and she was impressed that he had managed to make it out. Might have to do with her lack of skill based mana sight.

“Look at that...” Ilea said a couple minutes later. “Seems like we’re not the only ones looking...” a winged gray blue creature with clawed tentacles for legs was moving in the same direction as them. “Should we take it down?”

Trian didn’t respond as a bolt of red energy left his fingers and impacted one of the creature’s wings, grounding it a second later. Ilea landed hard on it and smashed into it with both her fists until it wasn’t moving anymore, only a paste of blood and guts remaining before her. She got up again and followed Trian who hadn’t stopped to watch. The demon had been below level two hundred and no level up messages appeared after the kill.

“We’re getting closer.” he said when she caught up.

“Yea, I can feel it pretty well now too... look around you, that wasn’t the only one.” she said and watched as dozens of different creatures robbed, slithered and flew towards the intended destination. None of them seemed to care for each other or for the two humans in the mix and Ilea got a bad feeling about the whole thing.

“We should slow down, see where this is going.” she shouted towards the man who nodded, slowing down a little as the two continued to advance. Coming over a small hill they came to a halt, the scene before them a scene of chaos. Hundreds of demons were circling around one humanoid creature holding a crude looking staff of bone, its black eyes hollow as it pushed visible mana into the runes painted in blood all around the area.

“What the hell is that...” Ilea said right before the creatures all came to a halt and red energy was released from the runes below, leaving no track of the humanoid creature behind.

“It vanished... as did the pulse...” Trian said, the monsters around them slowing to a halt before some of them started screeching, looking around in a confused manner.

“Some of the monsters did as well...” Aki said, surprising the two of them. Chaos followed as the demons started attacking each other, having lost the binding of the mana pulse that had vanished with the staff wielder. Flesh and bone ripped as the battle commenced, Ilea looking over to her team mate with a grin below her black helmet.

“Feel like joining?” she asked, the man just sighing as red lightning crackled around his arms.

“Think they’ll gang up on us?” he asked, slowly hovering higher.

“I sure hope they will...” Ilea said, punching together her fists as her bladed Blue Steel gauntlets appeared, her chosen weapons for the occasion. “The one who gets less pays for dinner!” she shouted and ran in, appearing closer to the horde with a blink, the blades already cutting deep into an unfortunate demon standing a little too close to her.

“Fewer.” Trian murmured, lightning gathering around him before a massive explosion of red light ripped through a group of monsters.

# Chapter 118 Mind Weaver

## Chapter 118 Mind Weaver

Ilea's veil reformed when another set of claws was stopped by it, her bladed gauntlets cutting into the monster's mouth and beyond as she pushed on, grabbing its jaw and ripping downwards. It screeched, Ilea ripping out the blade to blink towards her next target, her blades flashing, two tentacles and two bony legs removed from her enemy. The blob of meat fell to the ground when her bladed gauntlets turned black and she landed in an explosion of gore and blood, some of it splattering on her armor even through her veil.

She looked up to find a massive demon charging at her, her body moving skillfully towards the beast as she turned with the exact timing to merge her full bodyweight and enhanced power into a destructive and heavy punch that stopped the monster in its tracks. Ilea moved back barely a single meter as she heard the bones crack, blinking upwards to deliver another punch aided by the massive weight of her gauntlets. This time what she thought of as the spine was the target, her fist smashing the bone as if it were just a wooden twig. The creature fell down and Ilea jumped towards its head and finished it with a stomp of her armored boot.

Looking around, she found a blood red battlefield covered in corpses, a smell worse than what she had ever experienced and a flying mage delivering death upon a group of zealous demons. Some of them were still fighting each other, unaware of the intruders. Whenever they did notice they turned on the humans but Ilea quite welcomed the confusion, stomping again



on the clean ground next to her to remove the guts that had splattered up her leg.

The obsidian gauntlets vanished again as her speed increased, landing with a bladed twirl of her other weapons in a group of entangled monsters, already injured by their previous battle. Tendons were cut and limbs removed as Ilea dodged and weaved through the seven creatures around her, ash spreading to distract and shroud as she cut and killed, ripping through them like a hurricane of blades.

A heavy impact on her back sent her flying, unable to blink or dodge the attack that likely wasn't even meant for her but for the creature she still had her blades sunken into. Ilea skidded to a halt, coughing up blood into her helmet before her healing skill took over. The beast focused on her again and she danced backwards to avoid any further hits, appearing before its head after the third back step, her blades both sinking into its head. It grabbed at her, making her store her gauntlets and blink downwards, kicking into the back of the demon's legs, making it stumble.

Her bladed weapons around her arms again, she removed the legs altogether with another set of attacks before a blink landed her on top of its chest, a set of heavy punches landing into it as the three meter tall muscled creature desperately tried to get away the under two meters woman destroying its bones and organs with her black gauntlets. Her veil protected her from the enemy's claws until it finally stopped moving altogether, Ilea blinking away right before a set of bone spears entered her.

The armored woman ran through the splattered and broken corpses while avoiding any projectiles, looking for more fighting creatures ready to be surprised.

Trian used his ranged attacks to fry any clustered groups of demons engaged with each other or running after Ilea who managed to attract more attention than she thought she did. Compared to the demons that had attacked the tournament half a week ago these seemed to be more preoccupied with each other than the two humans but then again the situation was considerably more chaotic for the members of the hand, now the whole thing was reversed, at least the surprising party was.

The two continued moving through the thinning mass of demons, Trian noticing that many of them actually started running away from the area, either injured or visibly weaker than the remaining actors. Ilea dodged a set of bone spears and finally managed to make out the aggressor, a mass of flesh regrowing bone as it slithered around a mound of corpses, hiding away right after the attack. The woman came to a halt and blinked towards the enemy, keeping her buffs and sphere up as she activated Meditation, ready to move quicker again as soon as the situation required.

She wasn't in any dire need of a pause yet but in a battle like this one had to pace oneself, otherwise the remaining enemies may be too much and this time Ilea didn't think she could just run to the next room as she did with the Taleen robots. These demons looked like they'd hunt her down right up to the ocean and perhaps even beyond. "Come on out little one..." Ilea whispered, spotting a bit of movement next to the mound, spears of bone flying towards her before she blinked, her field of vision changing to the enemy standing in front of her, not quite ready for what was to come.

Shaking her shrouded fist of the guts and blood, Ilea looked around while Meditation helped her restore some of the spent energy. Trian was flying in the distance, followed by a couple flying demons and two rather slim ones running below, occasionally throwing a corpse or bone his way. Her buffs active, the blue and red light inside her helmet reassured her as her fist closed and reopened, a cold breath leaving her mouth. "Alright." she said and started running, ignoring the smell of blood in the air and the terrifying noises of screaming monsters ready to tear out her limbs.

The two slim creatures were running and watching Trian in the air, avoiding the thrown projectiles and flying monsters behind him when the armored and buffed level two hundred First Hunter crashed into them, her weight and speed aiding the bladed weapons to cut through both of their necks with a precise motion, their bodies sliding onwards for several meters before they came to a stop. The Hunter had already left the position, jumping up with the help of her ashen wings she was following Trian's pursuers and cut them down one by one, in the end nearly colliding with the man who finished the last of them.

More demons had noticed the two humans in the meantime, following them on foot mostly as Ilea nodded to Trian before she turned around, her heavy gauntlets equipped before she flew downwards and into the first of the creatures with her full weight, the demon's claws cutting through her veil and scratching at her armor in its last living movement. A set of spears scratched at her chest armor, pushing her back when one of the projectiles fired from close range managed to pierce right below her shoulder, destroying her right lung right before Ilea saw a boned mace land on her chest from the left. She managed to blink twenty meters backwards and pulled out the bone with a scream as a burst of lightning stopped the running mass of demons closing in on her.

Hunter Recovery took over as the wound closed and the spear was tossed aside. Ilea let out a hiss and focused on the ranged demon slithering between the more aggressive monsters. She blinked inside as lightning wrecked through their adversaries, her fists smashing into the creature, leaving it close to death before she ducked, the bladed bone rushing over her head, her left hand landing on the ground before a kick sent the demon behind her flying. She blinked upwards, summoning her bow and shooting a lightning arrow into the injured ranged attacker, killing it instantly.

The bow vanished and was replaced by obsidian gauntlets that landed with a heavy punch into the massive creature blocking the way of even more monsters. Two more punches landed before the beast extended its ribcage outwards, piercing Ilea on several weak spots in her armor. She pushed herself off before blinking next to Trian, blocking several thrown spears with her arms. The man wasn't completely fine either, pierced by more than a single projectile.

"We should go, that thing you just attacked is blocking like fifty more of them..." he said and she nodded, flying upwards while touching him, sending a healing pulse through the man.

"Get those spears out." she said as the two flew upwards, avoiding more projectiles coming from below thanks to her Sphere and some intercepting lightning. Trian started ripping out the bladed weapons, leaving heavily bleeding wounds behind that Ilea immediately took care of, her own injuries

stabilized already. Looking downwards she saw some flying enemies following but they wouldn't be much of a problem.

“You alright for more?” Trian nodded, breathing out.

“Give me a minute...” he said. Ilea nodded as they continued upwards, already inside a low hanging cloud. The two stopped after exiting above and Ilea intercepted the flying monsters coming from below with a grin below her helmet. She blinked behind the first creature, cutting into its back with her bladed gauntlets and pushing her destructive mana into it through her legs that wrapped around it. Feeling a lack of struggle from the creature, she let it fall down and blinked to the next one, her wings letting her avoid its sharp claws coming for her. The other flying demons focused on her now as well, Trian still hanging a couple dozen meters higher up as Ilea smashed her fist into the next unfortunate demon.

“Fuck...” she gurgled, one of them having managed to get through her defenses with a clawed arm, cutting into her neck. She grabbed and threw it away before stopping the bleeding with her hand, her healing taking over right after. Lightning coursed through the enemy she had thrown as two more of them advanced, making her blink behind them. Ilea grabbed them by their necks and held them upwards when a massive bolt of lightning coursed through the three of them. They stopped struggling as Ilea's veil started rebuilding through her team mate's attack, her Resistances to his magic likely miles higher than the adversaries she let drop a moment later, their lifeless bodies entering the clouds below.

Silence followed after, Ilea getting her health up to the max as her meditation skill helped her regain the used mana. Summoning her weapons took a little less out of her than a combination of Wave of Ember and Destruction and for the demons it was preferable to attack with blunt or bladed weapons instead of her usual mana intrusion. Trian slowly made his way down to her.

“Couple minutes then I'm ready.” he said and got a nod in response.

“Me too, you think they're fighting each other again down there?” she asked, looking down not seeing a thing through the dense clouds.

“Let’s hope so, otherwise we might have to move away from here at this altitude...” Trian answered.

“Let’s move a little while we meditate then, some are certainly waiting right below.” she said and the two slowly flew into a random direction.

Around seven minutes later the two slowly made their way downwards expecting either scattered enemies or a bloodbath between the creatures. The actual circumstance of the battlefield was rather different as the remaining fifty or so demons of various sizes were standing as if frozen, clustered in a group below where the two humans had flown upwards.

“What are they...” Ilea started when a heavy pressure suddenly pushed against her head, breaking her concentration and making her wobble in the air. Trian’s wings vanished as he started plummeting downwards, caught a couple meters later by Ilea, her veil up and consciousness fighting against the mind attack she was very familiar with. ‘Knocking out Trian in a single hit...’ she thought, shaking her head as she pushed healing mana into the man in her arms. The attack was strong certainly and had taken them off guard but it was brute force compared to Eve’s attacks she had trained with.

‘Where the hell is it...’ she thought, looking around, finding a single demon looking towards her from the middle of the clustered group, his head sporting the same black holes as the staff wielder had. The same look as the demon summoned into the necromancer home so many months ago. Compared to then it was easy to resist, the pain but a distant phantom gnawing at her brain as she locked her eyes with the lack of his, or hers.

“HuuuMan.” its voice echoed through her head, the sound of its voice more painful than the mind attack that was still hammering into her defenses.

“Yes, human. Nice to meet you demon. Would you be so kind and stop this so we can deck it out like the monsters we are?” she asked in a more than sarcastic tone.

“YoU ResIst? How?” its voice sounded more curious than anything else. Compared to the arrogant supremacist demon she had met before this one seemed rather pleasant. Maybe second date material even.

“I have fought your kind before.” Ilea answered, curious as well as to the nature of her enemy. The other demons seemed rather adamant on getting their teeth into her, Trian and each other for that matter. Getting information wasn’t her strong suit but even Ilea realized that perhaps this time talking came before her fists. The fifty demons likely under the adversary’s control didn’t help the fist argument either.

“YoU HavE, aNd SURviVED???” the creature was now moving a little closer to them, actually hovering over the ground at around half a meter.

“I like that hovering, is that a skill?” Ilea burst out, actually interested as it did look rather cool to her.

“AaaH YeeS, IT iiiS sloW but AERiAL comBaT is POSSible. ThOSE ThiNGS wHAt arE thEY?” the other demons had turned towards them and were marching closer, pushing away the corpses of their fallen brethren as they mindlessly advanced. Ilea was a little confused as to the question but the motions the demon did with its hands made her understand.

“Ah yes, those are my wings. Ashen wings to be exact.” she answered, slowly moving backwards at the same pace as the creature advanced. Trian was still out and she was pretty sure she would lose against the combined forces of the enemy without his help. At least without flying away.

“WiNGs? AshEN? ThAT is IntERESTING!” the shout inside her brain made Ilea wince.

“Do you not have those... can you talk a little less loud, you’re hurting my brain.” she asked.

“LeSS LoUd... Do you mean this?” the voice was still uneven but much less loud. “I can do that but are you sure you can understand me?”

Ilea nodded “I can hear you just fine, before you were shouting.” Ilea said.

“AAAAHhhhh yes, your skills in mind magic are inadequate at best. For the sake of curiosity I will humor you. No, we do not have wings but they do look similar to some of the flying variations of spawn. The word itself was unfamiliar. Ash is new as well, what is it?” it asked, the whole group of beings slowly moving through the salt desert while the conversation went on. Ilea was certainly impressed with the creature’s ability to keep so many of the demons under control.

“I have answered some of your questions, now it’s your turn to answer some of mine.” she said, immediately a strong force of magic pushing against her mind. Ilea was ready and endured, her healing pulsing through her.

“HoW DaRE YoU DeMANd?! SpAWN!!” the demon was shouting again. Ilea’s negotiations were certainly not going well.

“I’m not spawn and if you don’t answer I’ll just fly away and you won’t get anything out of it. Are you not interested in trading information?” she asked.

“Trade... you do look quite unlike spawn. Are you not human then? Is that black shell... perhaps a new species?” the demon seemed to calm down again.

“I’m not sure what you mean by spawn actually. I’m human but I can obviously resist you so are you interested in new information. I can tell you about ash... about fire and lightning. Hmm?” Ilea said. “Or I can fly away and you will be left with nothing.”

The demon stopped as did the fifty creatures around it. “Intriguing. You are human but your logic is sound. I will have to add this to the collection. What is it you desire to know?” the demon asked, Ilea rejoicing in her mind.

“Finally. Alright...” she said, quite unsure of what question to ask first. “Aki you there?” she whispered. “What should I ask it?”

“I’m here, didn’t want to interrupt this miracle from happening. It’s like watching two imbeciles of different species figure out fire together.” the dagger commented, making the demon look at the piece of metal.

“Another artifact, with a bound soul. Interesting...” the demon said, not trying to hide the words.

“Will you help me or not? Not like the ten thousand year swimming lesson isn’t still up my friend.” Ilea chuckled.

“Alright alright. We need to know where we are and how we can get out. Focus on that and don’t get distracted by unnecessary things as you usually do.” the dagger said. Ilea nodded and focused.

“Alright demon you heard him. Where are we?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t understand. You are here human.” the demon answered.

“What, no. I mean how is this place called? Is it part of Elos or are we somewhere else?”

“This?” the demon motioned around him and to the ground below. “I do not know of Elos. The salt is referred to as the great emptiness by some.” it said.

“What about the ocean around it?” Ilea asked, receiving a confused gesture from the monster. “The water around the salt?” still nothing “The waves you know...” she moved Trian in a wavy motion.

“We do not speak of this.” the demon said.

“Aaaalright then. So the great emptiness... well that’s not helping. How do we get out? Any idea?”

“Out, yes. You want to leave as well then?” Ilea’s mood sunk a little at the realization that they might not be the only ones trying to get out of here.

‘This might take a while...’ she thought.



# Chapter 119 Bone dog

## Chapter 119 Bone dog

“I might have some info on that but won’t give that to you just like that. We came here to find someone, they entered right before we did.” Ilea said.

“And they came here on their own? A realm traveler then... Perhaps they can bring us away from here then. It is decided, non spawn human. You will serve me on this purpose to find the realm traveler.” the demon said.

‘It’s interpreting quite a bit but nothing too far from the truth...’ Ilea thought, looking at Aki. “What do you think?”

“Well this way you’ll get help from the thing and whatever group its part of. Just make sure it doesn’t realize you have nothing to offer in regards of realm traveling as it calls it.” the dagger said and Ilea nodded.

“Sure, we can work together. I’m not gonna be following your orders but we’ll find the thing faster if we work together...” Ilea said, thinking about the thing that had entered the portal. If it went into another direction and this plane was as vast as Elos, they had very little chance of finding it.

“Do you have any idea where to start? Are there cities around here or places of power or something?” Ilea asked, not sure she would follow the being in there should it suggest such a thing. Right now she assumed it wanted out of this place as much as her considering the demon actually agreed to work with her. Of course it would betray Ilea and Trian the first chance it got but at the

moment she felt reasonably safe. Should escape be needed, it would be trivial to flee from the slow moving mind mage.

“Beings wander the salt. There are some places I can think of but it would be dangerous to go there. I saw you fight so you distract whatever being there is and I check what’s inside.” the demon said.

“We switch up the distractions, then I’m fine with it. As you’ve attacked me before you will distract the first thing we find.” Ilea stated. “And you stop using your magic on my friend here, otherwise this partnership ends now and I kill all of you.” Ilea finished, smiling below her horned helmet.

“You threaten me? Aaaah...alright, I agree to your terms.” the being said after a while, the prospect of leaving this place likely more compelling than throwing away such an opportunity. Perhaps it was fear that drove it as well, seeing the woman unharmed by its magic.

Ilea checked through her messages when Trian finally woke up a couple minutes later, the two following the mind weaver through the flat environment, only clouds and nearly white ground visible in the distance.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Ptulin – Breaker lvl 184 – demon]*

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated....’*

She skipped through the names and levels of the demons, noting that some of them were more than twenty levels above her own, making her proud of the fight. Though she didn’t want to think of demons armed with armor and specialized weapons and magical gear. Perhaps the result would have been different in that case. Her armor and gauntlets certainly helped her stay efficient against the different enemies she had fought. Checking the more interesting notifications, she found quite a bit of level ups.

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 209: 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 210: 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 204: 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 205: 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Perception reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

Ilea's Mental Resistance didn't level even after the strong assault which actually made her even more confident at working with the demon, at least if it was only one of them. The staff wielder they had seen before wasn't anywhere to be found so she wasn't quite certain the demons worked together. There was of course the possibility that the one that vanished couldn't take another sentient demon with him or it did something completely different, like blowing itself up with a new spell it tried out.

Ilea chuckled at the idea and looked down to Trian, having finished checking her messages. "Awake sleeping princess?"

He rubbed his eyes as her healing mana continued to flow into his head specifically. 'Can't cure a retard but it's worth a try.' she thought when he answered.

"I'm not a princess, what happ...." his wings came to life as Ilea let go of the man and lightning formed around him.

"Chill out, we're working with them!" Ilea shouted, blinking between the group of demons moving in front of them and Trian.

"What?" the man simply stated.

"She struck a deal with the thing, it wants to get out of here as well it seems. I theorize what we saw the staff wielder do was just that... getting out. And the other demons wanted a piece of that." Aki explained quickly before Ilea started talking.

"Basically that, yea. Don't worry I know it will tear us to pieces as soon as it gets the chance but right now we should try and work with it. It knows the place and its inhabitants." Ilea supplied as well.

Trian just floated in the air and looked at them a little confused before he sighed. "What the hell have I gotten myself into..." he thought and looked around. "Well I agree it's the best way for us to find a way out but honestly, this is bloody ridiculous." he commented.

“Well you’re the one without a third tier teleportation spell...” Ilea mumbled as she watched the man fly closer to the group in front of them before she followed behind.

“You don’t know if your blink works from here you know?” Aki said and Ilea had to agree but something told her the skill would manage just fine. If a horny necromancer could summon a demon then her third tier suicide moss cult skill would do the trick.

“Demon!” Trian called out, making the being stop and with it the group of horrors around it, their bodies of flesh and bone slushing to a stop on the salt ground.

“What is it other human?” the voice resounded through the surroundings but Ilea had to wonder how the sound moved, it felt different than normal noise, magical in nature.

“I understand we are to work together to get back to our plane.” Trian said “I would like to understand some things about you and your kind first before we continue. Answer my questions and ask yours should you have any. If you don’t this arrangement ends.” he finished.

The demon looked towards them with its dark abyss like eyes before it started speaking a full minute later. “You are aware of our plight but do not think yourself superior or in control human. Should you overstep yourself I won’t hesitate to end you with all the power I can muster.”

Trian looked towards Ilea who just shrugged. “Ask your questions...” it said with a hiss.

“You are sentient. Your goal is to reach another plane, why?” Trian said. “We hear legends of demon summonings and appearances all over our continent

with promised contracts and control assured.”

The demon made a noise Ilea couldn't quite interpret. Perhaps an ethereal chuckle would be the closest thing. “Look around you human.” it said and gestured, the beings around it sloshing a little further away. “There is nothing but blood and salt in this place. The flesh we eat is of our own. There is nothing but pain and struggle here... that is reason enough to seek another realm, something all the sentients learn of early on. Some manage to leave but we do not know where to. It may be better or worse but having lived in this place for two hundred years I want nothing more than to see something different, to feel something else. The gift of sentience and mind magic is but a curse to bear... but also an opportunity. You are not meant to have this knowledge but I have lived too long to care. I want. To get. Away.” it finished, turning away and continuing to move towards their destination.

“That's more than I expected...” Trian said in a quiet voice, Ilea flying next to him.

“Seems like a shit place to be in honestly. If we can all get out then that's great.” she said to the man before they followed the mind mage.

“How should we call you?” Trian asked towards the being.

“Names hold power human, do you not know that?” it asked. “Demon is sufficient or if you like mind weaver, you know of my abilities already.”

“What does it mean?” Ilea asked.

“Alright, mind weaver it is.” Trian said. “I'm not sure regarding the name thing.” he looked towards Ilea and shrugged.

“Why don't you ask it?” Aki suggested.

Trian nodded. “What do you mean by names hold power?” he asked.

“That is a question for which I will want an answer of my own.” the demon said. “You will tell me of fire and lightning as you have promised.”

Trian looked at Ilea and she smiled at him. “They apparently don’t have that here...” she said.

“Deal.” Trian accepted the proposal.

“Very well. I know of more than one skill that if at a high enough power it can reveal things about a being of which you know the true name. The extent of said knowledge I do not know about but be wary.” it said.

“Interesting... maybe that’s why?” Ilea murmured “The Hand doesn’t usually share their names with outsiders right?” Ilea said to Trian.

“Perhaps, yes. I’m sure the elders know more.” he said.

“Or Dagon will...” Ilea commented.

The group flew for quite a while, their tempo reduced considerably by the demon that was now carried by one of his minions. It didn’t seem like the beasts had any way of fighting back against the mind weaver’s hold. Trian had explained a lot about lightning and fire to the demon who listened carefully, asking questions from time to time.

“Do they not get resistant to your magic at some point?” Ilea asked, the mind weaver looking towards her.

“They know what will happen should they fight back. And they know that if they follow me their chances of getting away are considerably higher. Even their degenerated brains understand this.” it explained, Ilea nodding and looking at the monsters. She smiled at the thought of none of them actually in control, more a symbiotic relationship. Somehow it made her feel a little more at ease. Maybe not all of them would try to slaughter them on command but instead flee. In the end it was better not to find out.

Five hours of traveling later the demon slowly came to a halt. They had exchanged knowledge but found the being either lacking or unwilling to tell them about some of the questions they had asked. Specifically about their kind, the beasts under its control and the ocean. Ilea feared the massive body of water enough as it was, this eldritch demon unwilling to talk about it didn't quite help ease that feeling.

“We have arrived. Can you feel it?” the demon asked and both of the humans looked out onto the area before them. There were pits here, all around hundreds of meters before them. Ilea strained her senses and could feel a soft pulse but nothing substantial.

“I can. It's of magical nature. Is it one of the beings inhabiting the place?” Trian asked.

“Perhaps, yet it is more likely a facility of the Old. A place to start our search.” the demon said.

“The Old? You haven't mentioned those before. Who are they? Another race from here?” Ilea asked.

“It is possible. I only know of the facilities. It is said they come from the Old. I have not met a being declaring itself one of them in my life.” the demon supplied.

“The facilities aren't guarded? Are they some kind of ruin?” Trian asked.

“Ruin? I'm not sure what you mean. They are not guarded but their power attracts many a being. The craters you see are likely from a fight between beings trying to claim it.”

“Have you ever been inside one of those places?” Ilea asked the demon.

“Yes.” it simply stated. “Do not try to comprehend the runes, should there be any. It is... unwise.” it said when one of the monsters under its control



started running towards the craters.

“Trying to lure something out?” Ilea said more to herself. “That demon is below two hundred...” a loud noise resounded when a hound like demon emerged from one of the craters, smashing one of its four clawed legs onto the scout demon, smashing it completely.

“What the hell is that...” Trian asked, the monster looking like a greyhound on steroids with bones growing out to form spikes, its bloodshot eyes staring at them.

“Dunno but it looks hungry.” Ilea said.

“I will distract it while you explore as we have discussed.” the mind weaver said but Ilea had other plans.

“That seems manageable, do you wanna fight it sparky?” she said to her team mate, not wanting to use his name in front of a potential enemy anymore.

“Sure, not like the hours we save would help us much...” Trian answered as the two flew over the allied force of demons and towards the monster.

“Attack its mind and use your ranged fighters to weaken it. Don’t try anything stupid.” Trian said to the mind weaver before following Ilea.

“If the demon tries anything we fly up, doesn’t look like that one can fly...” he said, looking at the dog that sniffed the air in front of it. Getting closer, the demon started running towards them, its paws crashing into the ground below.

“That dog isn’t even cute...” she murmured before the monster opened its mouth, red energy filling it before a blast nearly engulfed them, both Ilea and Trian teleporting to their respective side and avoiding the attack. “Bad dog.”

she said as she dodged away from the paw that moved towards her. The thing was only showing question marks but the usual two so she wasn't too worried about fighting it.

A moment later the beast looked towards the group of demons in the distance and growled, the mind weaver's attack not going as unnoticed as Eve's attacks were to some monsters. It didn't have long to be distracted before both Ilea's and Trian's attacks started hitting, much more physical and imminent. Ilea's bladed gauntlets cut through the tough muscles on the monster's legs while Trian focused mostly on its head, melting away the beast's eyes before the counter attacks had him dodge again.

Ilea overextended a little with her slashing and was blown away by the sudden and unnatural movement of one of the beast's legs, moving backwards and against its supposed joints. Blood burst out of her mouth as her veil was pushed into her chest, blowing her ribs backwards into her organs. Nothing broke but Ilea would be out of the fight for at least half a minute until her healing would take care of the worst damage.

She blinked backwards twice and found the beast advancing on her again, already at the first blink's position. Ilea was injured still and this time moved upwards, carried by her wings and teleportation when more lightning hit the monster's back. Set on its target the monster ignored both Trian and the demon and jumped, intending to intercept the flying warrior. Ilea's sphere told her exactly when to move as she blinked downwards right below the beast's maw, using her heavy gauntlets to deliver a punch to the soft flesh.

With the impact came an unexpected counterattack, a bone suddenly extending out of the dog's neck and straight into Ilea's defenses. It scratched past her veil and armor, sending the woman spiraling through the air, unbalanced by the force of the attack. 'Fucking hell what is this thing...' she thought, blinking away from a beam of energy it sent her way.

The monster wasn't slowed down by the other mages' attacks yet and continued to barrel towards her, its body opening up in some places to reveal even more teeth and spiked bone. "You ugly fuck." Ilea said and engaged, this time without any gauntlets but with her traditional fighting style, unable to determine if cutting or blunt damage would even be effective against this

monstrosity. Blinking on top of the beast, she released a kick with her destructive mana into the beast while her recovery finished taking care of her internal bleeding.

A set of tentacles rushed out of the beast nearby, making her dodge downwards and to the right, with every movement releasing punches and kicks into the beast. Both her own damage and the one sustained by the enemy would increase with time, aided by Wave of Ember and Form of Ash and Ember. Knowing the monster only looked like a solid dog instead of the blob of meat and bones it actually was. The dodging continued, Ilea dancing around the monster's surface, delivering punches and kicks as she evaded bones and grabbing arms of flesh shot towards her. The flesh below her opened up more than once, leaving her no choice but to blink away. With her second stage of Azarinth Reversal, Ilea would be able to keep this up for quite some time, practically reducing her Destruction mana cost even more, each hit removing a little of the monster's mana pool and adding to her own.

# Chapter 120 Diamonds in the sky

## Chapter 120 Diamonds in the sky

The ranged attacks slowly showed their effect as the monster's wounds closed slower, more and more burned flesh remaining as it was but the dog certainly wasn't out of tricks. With a sudden and faster than expected movement, no doubt helped by magic or a skill, the beast turned around, doing a barrel roll with its whole mass. Ilea blinked away as far as she could but was still caught in the cascade of flesh and bone, the impact flinging her downwards and into the salt ground before the mass of the beast followed, its immediate impact preventing her from blinking away.

Teeth and tentacles tried to grind down her defenses as she screamed and punched back, the mana leaving her body before it burned into the monster's flesh. Her defenses were breached and the impacts rocked through her, the juggernaut armor the only thing preventing her death. Summoning her bladed weapons, she cut through several tentacles and crouched down before she blinked out of her predicament, the skill working again after the beast's assault was interrupted and she wasn't in direct contact anymore.

'Damn that was close...' she thought, inspecting the blunt damage she had received from the attacks. Were it not for her armor, she wasn't sure about her survival with that one. 'That's what it's there for though...' she grinned and punched her armored chest, the veil of ash appearing around her again, healing mana flowing through her. The monster slowly crept upwards and out of the crater it had created with its skill, moving towards Ilea with a frenzy. She didn't blink away and instead answered with a hard punch of her own,

their momentum adding together to shred both the beast's flesh and Ilea's arm and shoulder.

The damage healed quickly as the beast continued to push against the woman with its full weight, spikes of bone and sharpened limbs pushed against her defenses as she hit back with all she had. The tactic worked and would kill the beast in time as both the somewhat friendly demon and Trian were bombarding it from a distance, their full attention focused on dealing more damage to their foe.

Ilea's heels pushed into the salt ground, pressured by the unrelenting attacks. She blinked away right before her veil was broken through again and calmed down, the beast slowing down its assault, not following her immediately but instead breathing hard as it locked eyes with the woman, still standing after all of its attacks. Ilea just smiled below her helmet, every second the monster gave her another second spent with meditation. Every second another strike she would deliver.

Their stare down didn't last long, Ilea not even sure it counted considering their differing numbers of eyes. Lightning rained from above and into the monster's exposed back, covered by less and less protective bone. Blood pooled on the ground below, creating a scent of death in the area as Ilea advanced again, tired of waiting. There was no way of telling if the beast had a regenerative ability as well and she didn't want it to focus on Trian, his healing was substantially worse than her own. Plus it was fun.

Her hit landed right in the somewhat reformed leg of the creature, its body changing to the form of a dog again, although much of its flesh had molten, the transformation hard to watch. Worst of it was the sound as bones moved around inside of the massive monster, increasing Ilea's wish for its timely demise. The punches continued as more and more of her mana pulsed into the beast, her power near the maximum as she attacked with the highest efficiency, recovering her mana whenever possible with meditation and azarinth reversal, weaving in and out of the monster's reach and attacks, moving fast and slowing down whenever possible.

It was only a matter of time now until the weakened beast would fall, its attacks coming slower and weaker while Ilea's increased in both power and

quantity. More and more of its flesh was burning, neither of the Hand's members stopping their attacks for longer than a couple seconds, each alternating in their pauses to stop their foe from resting. Another turning move was executed by the flesh dog, this time much slower and weaker, Ilea simply blinking backwards and in again after it had landed.

Several more minutes of attacking later the monster fell down, the light in its eyes vanishing and a reassuring message popping into Ilea's mind. The fight was over, her death as close as ever.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Abomination of despair – lvl 330]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty levels or more above your, bonus experience is granted.'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 211 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

No further messages appeared, leaving Ilea a little disappointed in the fight and hoping there would be two or three of the dogs next time. Progress was progress and she moved on, dragging the massive corpse of the beast away and checking for any loot that might've dropped. It was a scarce thing but with monsters as big as this one there was always hope. A crystal of sorts actually was actually lying next to the corpse and Ilea blinked closer to examine it.

*[Mana crystal 50/50 – High Quality]*

Storing the thin in her necklace left her at ninety out of her maximum two hundred and fifty carrying capacity. The weapons she still carried were the heaviest even after putting most of them into her new house. She quickly went over the items in her mind, noting the remaining 2350 gold, the Tungsten Key,

a bunch of food and many other items. Even after building the house and buying a lot of Keyla's food her finances were off the charts.

'Perhaps I should invest in something...' she thought before she checked through the dozens of other items in her necklace. Truly a marvelous item. 'Still have those elven corpses...'

"What are you lost in thought for? The demon is slain, rejoice." Trian said as he landed next to her.

"What are you a priest? Know what a mana crystal is?" she asked the man.

"Found one? They're pretty rare. Usually rich individuals use them to power unnecessary enchantments. They break after they empty but fetch a nice price." he finished when the demon horde approached, the mind weaver at the front of it.

"Would you... claim this prize?" the demon asked in their minds.

"The corpse? Do with it what you like." Ilea said and shrugged towards Trian who nodded back.

"Not a necromancer so these bones are useless to me." he said. A moment later the demons including the mind weaver fell over the corpse like a starved swarm of piranhas, cutting and slashing through the monstrosity with a fervor Ilea had seldom seen, it did remind her of the time at the shitty fast food place however.

"Aaah burgers." she said, smiling at the bloodbath before her. 'Guess it looks like that where they're made.' she thought, looking around the area. "We'll go and check out what that thing was looking for or guarding. Join us when you're done." she said towards the demon, feeling an affirmative pulse of his mind magic a moment later. Trian followed as she flew upwards, checking around the area.

'There's nothing here...' she thought, seeing the craters likely created by the monster's defensive measures against invaders to its territory. Trian moved past her and towards the ground between some of the dents in the salt. "You

found something?” she asked and followed, landing next to the man on the hard salt rock.

“There’s something below... see anything with your skill?” Trian said, his voice a little excited.

“What is it? This doesn’t seem like you...” Ilea asked.

“The magical pulse... it’s well... indescribable.” he answered, Ilea rolling her eyes.

‘Nerd...’ she thought, summoning her obsidian gauntlets and lifting them high. A loud boom echoed through the salt plains when her fists landed on the rock, creating cracks while sending big chunks outwards. Ilea continued to pound the ground for ten minutes, Trian standing to the side and ignoring the ridiculousness of the situation when Ilea finally exclaimed loudly with a cheer.

“I can see something!” Trian moved closer immediately, shielding himself from the flying rocks with his hands, some of it striking his helmet and making him flinch.

“What is it? Describe it to me...” he said, moving even closer to Ilea, digging like a madwoman.

“It’s like the start of a diamond, or some other geometrical form... I don’t remember. Can’t look past it sadly...” she finished. A couple minutes later the two stood inside a new crater and looked at the shiny gray metal before them. The exposed side of the structure below.

“This doesn’t look like salt.” Ilea said.

“Or anything those monsters could create... are they still eating?” Trian looked towards the direction of the other group while Ilea inched her hand closer to the metal before the man appeared next to her and grabbed it.

“Don’t touch it.”

“Why? Because YOU want to touch it?” Ilea asked.



“Precisely.” Trian said while removing one of his gauntlets before putting his hand on the metal. Mana flowed inside and his eyes opened wide a second later.

“It’s... responding... is it a creatu” the man was interrupted by a loud cracking noise from below, both Ilea and Trian teleporting upwards and flying even higher as the noise got louder and louder. Cracks upon cracks first only sounded out but soon were visible all around the ground below them. A rhythmic sound soon took over, loud bangs resounding every other second before the salt rock below them fell downwards and into the spinning metal shredder they had apparently unleashed.

“Yea sure, let’s touch it.” Ilea couldn’t help herself, because she would’ve done the exact same thing which in turn would annoy Trian even more. Disappointing her with his response, the man just watched the scene below them with wide eyes. A minute later the spinning stopped and the massive shiny rhombus shaped object floated inside the massive hole it had created. The thing was at least forty meters high and twenty broad.

“Well that was fucking cool.” Ilea said as she started floating towards it.

“Wait don’t go closer!” Trian shouted “Don’t offend it!”

“Offend a fucking geometrical object... what is this? Evangelion?” Ilea asked and got closer before she touched the object as well. Even after pushing some of her mana inside with reversal, the object didn’t move. “I think we’re safe here...” she said and floated downwards, seeing the opening in the metal.

Trian floated downwards a little more hesitant than her but joined the woman right next to the entrance in the shape of a triangle. “Whatever they are they like their shapes...” she said and got inside, landing on the metal floor as her wings dissipated into flakes of ash. She prepared for a response but nothing happened. There was a magical light of sorts casting the corridor before them in a dim orange red light.

Walking onwards, the corridor opened up to the right before going back towards the middle, the two intruders looking around with wide eyes when

they reached the open core of the structure. The shell must have been five or more meters thick but most of its size was in the room they were standing in now, the walls purely metal and absolutely covered in runes neither of them had ever seen. Some of them lit up here and then, likely the reason the object didn't simply fall down.

“What the hell is this...” Trian asked and Ilea didn't have a good answer to it and she was running low on jokes.

“It's beautiful...” she said after a while, floating into the open space with the help of her wings. Touching the runes did nothing. “If only Claire was here...” she commented. “Aki anything?”

“Nah, doesn't ring a bell either.” the dagger responded.

“I'm not the worst at runes either, just don't have the class for it. Maybe I can figure something out. I think we should stay here for a while and try to learn more about this thing. Otherwise who knows how long we're stuck in that salt desert again...” Trian suggested and Ilea agreed wholeheartedly.

“Yea, that sounds great. You try to figure something out, I'll go hunting and exploring a bit.” she said.

“Are you sure? That monster looked to be quite close to killing you...” the man commented, looking at a rune and sketching it down.

“Exactly that's why I want to go.” Ilea answered and went back to the doorway, flying out and upwards to be greeted by the mind weaver.

“A marvelous find. If only my kind didn't lack the skills to use it.” the demon said right into her mind.

“So you know how to use it?” Ilea asked. “Then come on down.” she smiled below her helmet, this place was getting dreadfully boring. Caves at least had vegetation and sometimes water in them.

“This rune here is speculated to be drawing energy. This one as well, while these four expel it in some way.” the mind weaver explained to Trian who was intently listening and writing down all he could get out of the demon. Ilea was sitting near the entrance, her armored legs dangling below. She was eating a celebratory meal from Keyla, their find completely warranting the waste of food.

‘I can still eat demons... doubt they’ll compare to even Drakes... ew.’ she thought as she looked at the beautifully crafted meal before her. A combination of sushi and desert. Both spicy and sweet but somehow the woman had made it work. ‘Maybe she just has the skills and whatever shit she dishes together will be delicious...’ the thought was interrupted by the crackling of lightning.

“There was a reaction, definitely.” Trian said, shaking his arm.

“There was but it’s not the right energy of course...” the demon said, its voice shaking in Ilea’s mind.

‘Is it excited or what?’ she thought, continuing her meal.

The two mages continued to try things out and Ilea had to heal Trian occasionally because whatever they did to the runes was apparently quite dangerous, enough perhaps to kill a weaker adventurer even. She absently noted that the mind weaver hadn’t brought its platoon of horrors down into the structure with it. ‘Now’s the time to kill it...’ she thought but only smirked, her helmet put away for easier eating. The demon didn’t seem like much of a threat to her anymore, perhaps it managed to knock out Trian with a surprise attack but even he should be able to resist if he was prepared.

Again she was glad to have leveled all those resistances. Her veil had become a nearly constant partner as well, always at the ready and even activated in unknown places. Hours passed but Ilea didn’t feel like going out just in case something did progress down here. The two mages had gotten continuously more nervous and excited, learning more about the runes with their testing.

“You think that will work?” Trian asked and the demon nearly shook before answering.

“Yes... YES I'm SuRE of IT... TrY!” it had gotten back into shouting a while ago but Trian didn't seem to mind. Ilea just tanked through it, reading a book from Albert's collection.

‘I hope the others are fine...’ she thought. ‘The demons would probably be stopped by the Hand but that massive thing in the end.’ She wasn't sure about it. ‘Though the elder flying into it might've actually done it, who knows.’

“Ilea we need you here!” Trian shouted and she made her book vanish, getting up and flying towards the two crazed scholars, neither looking the part. “Hug on tight and heal me, can you shroud us in ash or something?” the man asked and Ilea went behind him, their armors touching as she wrapped her arms around the man's chest in something akin to the Heimlich maneuver before her healing started. “You too demon, I don't think this works if you're far away or turned to dust.” Trian said, obviously closer to the creature now that they had worked together.

‘Sharing hobbies is a good way to make friends...’ Ilea thought as her wings came to life and wrapped around the two men before her. Right when she considered the demon to be Trian's friend, it was a man in her book. The implications otherwise would not be nice to think about. Ash came to life around them, building crude walls that might protect them from whatever was to come.

“Are you ready?” Trian asked, healing mana flowing through all of them before lightning crackled and struck four distinctive points in the structure. The feedback was as quick as lightning, energy flowing through them at a constant pulse, only increasing in power as Trian upped his output. Ilea's healing fought against the damage but if nothing happened soon she wasn't so sure the demon would make it, the two humans were still mostly fine, herself not bothered by the damage in the least.

“Come on, MORE!” Trian shouted, a massive pulse of red lightning leaving him as the first demons burst into the room, breaking through the mind weaver's control to be part of the event that might bring them somewhere

else. Ilea saw the first of them enter the energy field and bursting into flame when light filled her eyes. Dozens of colors floated in front of her before they vanished, replaced by dull gray metal making her question the thing she had just seen.

Before her she found two damaged individuals, blinking between them and healing both. The demon that made it inside the field didn't quite come out as well as the two she was healing, the torched and smoking corpse filling the room with its stench. Trian started coughing a minute later as Ilea took in the surroundings. One thing was for sure, they weren't in the same place anymore.

# Chapter 121 Chambers of the Lost

## Chapter 121 Chambers of the Lost

“Is he going to make it?” Trian asked Ilea who was still healing the demon, the pronoun used giving her more relief than she expected.

‘Maybe I’m more stuck up than I thought... dudes should be able to fuck demons, none of my business... but if I have to travel with that... aw man.’ Ilea thought “Trian am I racist?” she asked in a somewhat worried tone.

“What? Why would you ask that now? I mean you’re healing a demon so I doubt it.” he said when the demon started moving again. A pulse of mind magic flashed through them, images of blood, violence and pain quite prevalent.

“I think he’s fine now. Hey weavy, wake up.” Ilea said and lightly slapped the mind mage, considerate of her higher Strength.

“Have we made it? Made it beyond?” the demon asked, an elation in his voice quite unlike anything they had heard of him before.

“Dunno, we’re definitely in a different place but the metal looks quite similar...” Ilea said, looking to the opening in the room. Her sphere only told her that this structure was bigger than the rhombus they were in before.

“The runes in this room are similar as well...so whatever this is it’s for spacial travel?” he asked, carefully touching some of the runes. “If we could recreate this...”

“Well I hope you sketched down all the runes in the other place...” Ilea said and started walking towards the exit. Stopping, she sighed. “Don’t tell me you want all of these as well...” but of course the man would. If this could be recreated it would mean an advancement in magical travel unprecedented to human kind, at least not the general population. Ilea definitely suspected there to be organizations and countries in Elos hoarding their knowledge. The Taleen alone had something similar to this if her suspicions to what happened to Edwin were true.

‘You’d always have to travel with a tank and a healer...’ she thought. Another somewhat easy job she could make money in should she ever use up her reserves. “I’ll go check it out while you finish the drawing.” she said. The mages didn’t respond to her, completely taken up by the runes in the room, now even more obsessed as they knew what the magic could do. ‘What if it just moves you fifty meters away...’ Ilea thought but quickly dismissed the idea as she came out of the room and into a massive open space, clad in dark gray metal.

The tapping of her steps was the only noise in the complex, the woman looking up and around, lost in an alien facility. ‘Who the hell built this?’ she thought, admiring the architecture and beauty of the whole thing, quite similar to something a modern human from earth would build if all they had was metal. The angles were different as well, this builder preferring diamond and triangle shapes compared to the square ones humans usually built with for efficiency.

Ilea checked out different rooms and halls, finding all sorts of weird machinery and items she didn’t know what to do with. Her identify skill only spat out weird names that helped her just as much as simply looking at the items. She refrained from pushing mana into any of them before Trian and the demon had a look. If anything her expertise with the practice was destructive at best. Perhaps the structure that brought them here would’ve simply exploded if it were her to push in her mana.

‘Maybe healing mana...’ she thought but still didn’t do anything. It would’ve been different had the items looked interesting in the least but they were just more weird forms of metal covered in runes, surely to fulfill some great purpose like making the best smoothies in the galaxy. ‘Maybe...’ she thought

and just put everything movable into her necklace, planning to give it to the others as soon as she would go back. “Less walking for everyone...” she murmured to herself while sketching down the layout of her path.

“This place is impressive.” Aki said, Ilea’s buffs coming to life as soon as the voice reached her ears.

“Don’t fucking do that you edgy shit.” she said, releasing the auras again.

“You’re jumpy today, everything alright?”

“Yea, stranded in yet another place I don’t know shit about and this time it’s demons and a weird metal obsessed civilization. I bet we’re underground as well... why wouldn’t we be?” she said, walking to the next room and continuing her pillaging.

“Another place. So it’s true then? You’re not from Elos. I had suspected it. How did you get there then? Are you a secret space mage?” Aki said, making Ilea freeze up.

“Aw I blurted it out. Oh well, I don’t think it matters much at this point. Yea I’m not from Elos.” she said as she spun around a rod of metal marked with runes. “Sadly I’m not some powerful traveler of the realms, just an unlucky student. Or perhaps this all isn’t real and you’re a simulation. Or maybe I’m dreaming, just really really deep.” Ilea commented.

“Or maybe you were supposed to be summoned somewhere else? Or perhaps a demon traded places with you, who knows.” the dagger said. “Do you want to go back?” he asked a while later, two rooms of searching later. They all looked similar, the orange red light coming from the magical lamps covering everything in its hue.

“I don’t know. Maybe? If I can keep my abilities there but I somehow doubt it.” she said.

“Why would you not keep them?”



“I don’t think magic is a thing where I’m from. I didn’t get a class until coming to Elos at least.”

“How does everything work then? Without magic I can’t imagine a functioning world...”

“I’ll tell you all about it someday... let’s go back, I hope they’re done by now.” Ilea said, checking her surroundings and finding nothing but old metal and herself. ‘No traps, no enemies... what is this place?’ she thought and returned the way she had come from.

The mages took another twenty minutes after her return to finish documenting all the runes. Ilea convinced them to inspect the items she had found while actually exploring the place they had found themselves in, instead of the suggested study session in the same room the demon had suggested. She did hold the items in her necklace so there was a certain leverage she had over the others.

“Come on just activate it.” Ilea said after the two mages had looked over a runed rod she had handed them. Trian seemed to be losing his patience as well, not as interested in studying the runes of a likely more mundane tool compared to the teleportation device. He grabbed the rod from the demon who was floating next to them and pushed his mana into the item. The top started glowing immediately and produced heat.

“What the hell is that?” he asked and handed it to the demon.

“Smithing tool maybe?” Aki suggested as the demon put the glowing end on his arm.

“AAAAaahH” the obvious result didn’t surprise Ilea as she just walked over, took the rod from the demon and made it vanish before she healed his wound

without any words. The thing at least didn't look embarrassed but she certainly hoped it felt that way.

The exploration continued as the mages tried out different items left behind by whomever had built or used the place. Most of it looked similar and without Ilea's sketches she doubted finding the teleportation room again would be a simple task. Some of the halls were massive, the detail in the metalwork very impressive. All of it had the same flair and was built with the same kind of metal, no other materials could be found anywhere, except for the lamps brimming with a dark orange.

Ilea could see into the walls but found nothing but metal. There were small mechanical details inside the lamps but dismantling one revealed a mana crystal and apparently nothing substantial otherwise according to Trian. It was a lamp after all. There hadn't been a notice regarding a dungeon when they had come here, scratching that possibility.

"Are you sure?" Trian asked and the demon affirmed via his mind magic. They were standing in front of a round form, comparable to a big table. Runes were carved into it and the demon had apparently found the control panel for whatever it may be.

"Well activate it, we've been walking around for hours, I want something to happen. Even if it's a trap." Ilea said. The others had tried all the things they had found so far. While the items were impressive and possibly ground breaking for the respective branches of society they'd be used in, nothing helped them find out more about the place or how to get out. Ilea hoped they weren't trapped in the facility forever.

Trian just walked next to the mind weaver and used his magic to activate the runes. He winced and Ilea blinked next to him and healed while he continued to push electric mana inside. The runes on the table lit up with the same

orange red Ilea already hated before a holographic map formed over the table.

“Oh wow that’s cool, a hologram. Hold it Trian, let’s draw that down.” Ilea said, summoning her notebook and moving her leg closer to his to keep the connection for her healing spell.

“It... hurts...” the man said through grinding teeth.

“Perfect, you can level your Pain Tolerance. Now I’m jealous, this is actually useful to you.” Ilea said in a dry tone. “Trust me the second stage is worth it.” she finished and started drawing.

“You h... have the second s... stage?” Trian made big eyes, partially because of the pain flowing through him. Ilea didn’t respond and just kept merrily sketching, glad the man didn’t stop until she was done.

“Alright, I tried to make it as 2D as possible. Here’s the first floor, here’s the second and here’s the third.” Ilea said as Trian released his connection to the table. “I think we’re supposed to be here...” she pointed to a dot she had painted that had been blinking when the map was still holographic.

“2D? Holographic? Are you secretly interested in rune magic?” Trian asked, wringing his hands where the runes had injured him.

“It’s more light magic I think. I learned about some things from this crazy old teacher in our village.” she answered. ‘It’s nice that these guys weren’t that keen on security... seeing how some dumb fuck noble can just access the maps. Might be a fake map or lacking secrets but still...’ she thought. Seeing how the mind weaver couldn’t activate the map then perhaps the ones who built this didn’t see a threat of anybody ever seeing it. The demon could use the smaller tools as they just ran on mana and not elemental energy like Trian had used.

“Light magic... well that seems pretty advanced, never came across anything like it. Then again your own class isn't standard either... where should we go then? There's several bigger rooms but it's hard to say how big the whole facility is.” the man finished.

“Well we haven't come across anything so far so I doubt there are traps or enemies. Of course there could be some waiting but if I'm at the front I'll be find from nearly all surprise attacks that would take me out immediately.” Ilea said. Trian understood and nodded, looking to the demon and then to Ilea.

“He can climb your back?” she asked, laughing as his expression turned sour.

“It's safer, he'd die if I get engulfed in flame or something.” she argued and watched Trian nod in resignation.

“Hey demon, how fast can you run... or float?” Trian asked. The speed they had traveled together before was less than thrilling, at least to the two mercenaries.

“I'm fast humans.” he said.

“Show me black eyes...” Ilea said, gesturing for the demon to start. The mind weaver turned around and sped through the corridor they had come from, Ilea looking to Trian a couple seconds later.

The man avoided her gaze and just gulped. “Alright... alright I'll hold him. Do you have some clothes at least, he's covered in blood...” Ilea smiled at his answer and summed some dwarven clothes she still had left.

“You're wearing armor, it's not like he touches you. Not that even that should bother you.” Ilea said, basking in his discomfort.

“Well it does.” Trian said as he walked to the returning demon, throwing the clothes at him. “Get those on, ask her if you need help. I'll carry you.” he finished and walked into the corridor, waiting for the two to finish. The demon looked to the man and then at the bundle of clothes in his clawed hands. Finally he looked up to Ilea.

“How can you look like a puppy with those terrifying features?” she said and smirked, walking towards the demon and taking the clothes, explaining the concept to him. It took a while to get them on without damaging them badly, too many claws and bones.

“There you go. You look much more sophisticated now but I think a cloak or something would be better. Maybe a big coat.” looking up at the demon’s face she furrowed her brow. “Maybe a full plate helmet as well.” she smiled brightly at the man and summoned her helmet again. She had some dwarven helmets left but didn’t want to give him anything yet, not like anybody here cared about the demon. She thought about the existence of racism in Elos and decided that should the demon get out with them, he would get a helmet from her. Otherwise it would be killed in mere days. If it decided to not attack them after they get out. In that case she would destroy the guy’s face.

Trian grudgingly got the demon on his back, both of them visibly uncomfortable. ‘Proud powerful men.’ Ilea thought and smiled brightly under her helmet. “Let’s go then.” she said and started running.

The first big hall was empty as the hallways and rooms had been before, the sheer scale of it an indicator of how big this whole facility truly was. Ilea slowed down as she looked up, feeling small in the presence of this old and truly awesome architecture, their steps the only sound in the vicinity. Ilea wasn’t sure anymore if she was prepared to meet whoever built this place, especially not if they were hostile.

“What the hell have we found here... demon, do you think we’re still in the same realm?” Trian asked his backpack, time having resolved the discomfort of their arrangement.

“I do not know human... the Lost... they surprise me again. In my years I haven’t seen something like this...” the demon commented, still sitting on Trian’s back. The clothes made the humanoid look less like the monster they’d found him as. The constant mind magic coming from him just for the

sake of communication was getting more and more normal as well, just a buzz in the back of their minds by that point. Ilea glanced over to the demon, quite glad they had a mind mage with them in this unexplored place, an asset that could save their lives, or kill them in an opportune moment.

“The Lost... do you know anything about them? Why aren't they here?” Trian asked as they continued to walk through the hall. The demon looked over and then back to the front.

“They were before... we have found artifacts of them all over the great emptiness but none could activate anything until now... until you.” the demon explained in an elated tone.

“I'm sure we're not the only ones... have you never met one of them? Are they even something you could meet?” Ilea asked, thinking of perhaps something otherworldly that couldn't be perceived with the human senses.

“It is told... there were meetings, sightings. Not for many hundreds of years but we are certain they are a people of some kind. You are the first ones to activate something that I know of. The chance of course exists that there were others... that there are others. You spoke of something that came here, perhaps that something can manipulate the artifacts as well.” the demon answered.

“Speaking of...” Trian said and pointed to one of the faraway walls where a massive alignment of metal shapes had started moving at a more and more rapid pace until finally a pulse of orange red energy formed from the wall behind them, shooting into the alignment and away into the dark void that opened up behind it. Ilea couldn't imagine the energy required for a beam that big, she was pretty sure it wasn't just light.

“Well either that is something that happens periodically or somehow in reaction to our intrusion or someone else is fucking with things...” Ilea commented.

“Let's find out, can you tell where that beam went?” Trian asked and motioned for the demon to get on his back again. Ilea opened her notebook and looked through the sketches, finding the place that was most likely the

destination of the light beam should it simply have continued onwards in a straight line.

“Yea, another big hall. Seems like it’s the middle of the middle floor. At least of what we saw in that map, might not have been a complete one.” she said and activated her buffs, her wings spreading.

“We have a goal then. Hold on demon and I swear if you try anything stupid you’re fried meat.” Ilea said and could see the demon gulp with her Sphere. At least he knew he was outclassed. Perhaps he had found some respect for them with the successful activation of the artifacts, or fear.

# Chapter 122 Flashy Beams

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The flight to the central chamber proved to be longer than expected, even with the previously high travel time. The Lost didn't build for someone either so small or slow. Perhaps it was simply not an issue for them considering the teleportation devices they must've built. Ilea had the theory that they simply were loners and wanted to be as far away as possible from the others of their race without completely giving up the comfort of socialization and perhaps a market or something.

Ilea put her remaining twenty stat points into Wisdom to have a bigger mana reserve for whatever was to come. Checking her stats she felt rather confident of fighting or at least flight in the worst case scenario.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent statpoints: 0

Unspent 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0

Unspent 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1

Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 211

- Active: Destruction – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20

- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20



- Active: Blink – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20
- Passive: Hunter's Sight – lvl 20
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5

## Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 205

- Active: Veil of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15
- Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6
- Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 14
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6
- Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15
- Passive: Body of Ash – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13
- Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7

## General Skills:

- Elos Standard language - lvl 5
- Identify - lvl 7
- Meditation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> 15
- Poison Resistance – lvl 17
- Heat Resistance – lvl 19
- Pain Tolerance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4
- Mental Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10
- Fear Resistance – lvl 2
- Water Resistance – lvl 6
- Wind Resistance – lvl 7
- Lightning Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5
- Ice Resistance – lvl 7
- Crystal Resistance – lvl 6

- Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5
- Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6
- Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8
- Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2
- Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1
- Curse Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2
- Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18
- Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16
- Blast Resistance – lvl 12
- Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1
- Veteran – lvl 1

Status:

Vitality: 600

Endurance: 290

Strength 251

Dexterity 350

Intelligence 510

Wisdom 350

Health: 6000/6000

Stamina: 2888/2900

Mana: 3432/3500

The whole way took over two hours to travel and the group more felt than saw more of the energy pulses flow towards the center, getting stronger as they went.

“Be prepared.” Trian said as he slowed down, letting go of the demon before they entered the next supposedly big hall. And big it was, even more so than the first one they had found. Additionally there was a rhombus formed metal object floating in the middle of the room, hundreds of meters in the air with other metal objects floating around it. A beam of blinding red light entered the object in that moment from six different openings in the faraway walls of the hall before the lighting dimmed down again, Ilea’s sight adjusting quickly.

With her sight recovering, Ilea saw a beast approaching through her sphere, reacting immediately as she dodged a swipe of massive claws before three punches hit the creature that looked a little like a beefed up mole, the power of her punches combined with the destructive mana rocking through its body, leaving a weak and dying enemy that was killed with the stomp that followed Ilea's jump towards it.

Looking backwards Trian was already in the air, lightning charging around him as her wings spread, following the man to the middle of the room. "That wasn't something we've seen before. Maybe one of those Lost?" he asked.

"I doubt it Trian..." Ilea said as they came closer. Around them there were animals and monsters of different kinds running towards the center as well, occasionally looking towards the flying warriors of the Hand. "Look at that, there's a guy there and he doesn't look a lot like a different species. Demon you don't have a description of them?" she asked and realized that the mind weaver was falling behind already and didn't even hear the question.

Getting closer Ilea's eyes opened a little wider. The two landed before the man who was now surrounded by a plethora of monsters, all of which looking towards them. Ilea looked to Trian and then to the man before them who was obviously confused and surprised that someone had come to this place.

*[Mage – lvl ??]*

"Elder Strand." Trian said. "So you were the one to open the rift and summon the demons?" he asked, Ilea remembering the name associated with the face of the elder that had supervised her evaluation at the Hand all these months ago.

"Ah yes, you are the noble of the house Alymie. And you?" Adam Strand asked, the monsters around him spreading to encircle the two warriors. The man looked to be around forty, his gray and black hair strengthening the piercing effect of his blue eyes. He walked to the side as well, likely to not damage the mechanisms governing the laser show the others had observed in the past hours. The man's robe was armored and definitely magical but he wore no helmet.

“Perhaps one of the new ones... your eyes do seem familiar but not that armor. A beautiful set of elven craftsmanship.” he mused, the monsters circling further while Ilea and Trian stood their ground, both confident in their teleporting abilities, a strategical surrounding quite meaningless to them, perhaps even beneficial as the enemies were spread out.

“Why are you here? Why summon those demons to the Hand and Ravenhall?” Trian tried again, his first question completely ignored. The man did confirm he wasn’t an illusion or shape shifter, should such a thing exist, knowing about Trian and his family. At least a partial confirmation to Ilea but the thing she had seen enter the rift looked quite a bit different than the man they saw before them.

“I have my reasons noble. The demon invasion will be a test for the Hand, one sorely necessary. A test truly for all of humanity should they make it further out...” he trailed off, still walking. “The more interesting question is, why are You here and how?” the elder asked, slowing down and eventually stopping. The two were now completely surrounded, the mind weaver floating a couple dozen meters further back, as of now ignored by the elder.

“We followed behind. To find the reason for all that death an chaos...” Trian said, both him and Ilea realizing that there probably wasn’t a diplomatic way out of this.

“And to find a way back... because of that you're coming with us, willing or unwilling.” Ilea said, her body tensing up at the chance of a fight, ready for anything the man would throw at them. He just sighed and shook his head.

“Reckless and young. If only the majority of members consisted of people like you.” he smiled and looked up. “It is inevitable. Your will stands against mine. Come then, warriors and meet your end.” he said, their vicinity exploding in motion as several monsters launched ranged attacks on the two. Ash surged outwards as Ilea appeared next to one of the ranged beasts, more of them running towards her previous location. Trian appeared above, dodging more attacks when Ilea delivered a punch to one of the monsters, this one not reacting the same way the weak drake that the elder had summoned at her evaluation had, instead biting towards her with its beak. She dodged and

delivered an uppercut before a kick to the beast's unprotected stomach ended it, blood coming from its mouth as it collapsed.

Ilea flew upwards as well, not wanting to be surprised by the lurking elder, seeing the animals and monsters as a mere distraction. Her bow came into her hand as she aimed, moving her head a little to the side as a blob of acid flew past her. The heavy metal arrow was released and pierced through a cat like monster's head, digging deep into its body and killing it.

*'ding' 'You have learned the General skill: Heavy Archery – lvl 1  
You have proven to be capable with a heavy bow, hitting your targets with destructive precision. This skill will improve upon your capabilities, making the bow just a little easier to handle, its impact just a little higher.'*

Ilea smiled brightly as her perception of the weapon in her hand changed, the massive string coming back to her ear with unprecedented ease, the next arrow striking a moving bear in its chest, making it slow down and fall to its knees, the spear like arrow protruding out of its back. 'Where are you?' she thought as lightning struck a group of monsters that tried to protect three ranged attackers annoying Trian.

She perceived the elder below her with her sphere as he climbed through the air at an incredible speed, his movements as quick as her own ability to fly. She waited for the last moment and blinked away, her bow vanishing into its bracelet as she locked eyes with the man turned monster. His facial features were distorted, his blue eyes smaller and more piercing. The old body turned to muscle, his hands ending in shiny claws long enough to pierce through her neck.

The elder's nose had vanished, his mouth now rows of teeth as he stood on shimmering air below his clawed and powerful feet, webbing showing between the toes.

“Alright sharkman, are your old bones really willing to go through with this?” Ilea said, smirking below her helmet before the elder approached, his expression staying the same through her taunting, his movements efficient and deadly as he walked through the air as if it was solid like the ground below.

He reached her and his clawed hands slashed out, three of his strikes were dodged, Ilea trying to find an opening, her own attacks dodged or blocked just as expertly by the summoner. The man had more levels and experience which showed after just half a minute of exchanging blows. Before she was pushed back, Ilea simply changed her style to one a little less focused on defense, willing to take a couple hits to land one of her own. The man’s claw cut into and through her veil, hitting hard on her armored shoulder. Ilea managed to get in a punch with her offensive spells but the elder didn’t even flinch, hitting another claw into her less protected elbow, his claw cutting through and drawing blood.

Ilea moved backwards, continuing to block as her wound healed again and she switched to the offensive again, blinking next to the man and hitting hard into his side, making him slide away in the air and turning back towards her. He held his side and looked at his hand.

“Quite deadly, and you’ve already healed as well. I do remember you now. Ilea was it? The healer tank. I see you’ve improved on your lacking offensive potential. Why are you here then, did you really come to bring justice to me?” the man asked, surely just stalling time while he himself healed or tried to figure out the damage Ilea had caused. A quick glance around told Ilea that both Trian and the mind weaver were working hard to decimate the hordes of monsters below, most of them unable to fly like they could.

“So you really did summon all those demons. Though the way you talk it doesn’t seem like you just wanted to cause damage. As hard as they’re trying to get out of this place it’s probably as hard to get in?” Ilea asked, trying to get as much information out of the elder as possible. She thought about it and really couldn’t find herself to care much about the demons being summoned to the Hand. If anything it would help a lot of people improve their skills and levels. He did however endanger her team members, herself and Train, worst of all the defenseless Cless still residing in Ravenhall. Additionally as much

food as she had already hoarded, if Keyla somehow got killed there would be hell to pay.

The man didn't respond, rushing at her again. Ilea met him, his fist clashing into her while a bladed gauntlet scratched across his chest, not quite managing to get through even though the hit was direct. 'That's not gonna work.' she thought and avoided several of his strikes before a kick sent her spinning through the air, the woman blinking away from the ranged attacks that were thrown at her from below. Strand was nowhere to be found as she found her bearings, checking quickly for her team mates when she saw the elder run towards Trian.

"Trian!" Ilea shouted and blinked before she sped up and followed. The noble had heard his team mate and backed off from the horde below as best as possible, finding the elder just as he was upon him. Ilea smiled knowing how good he was at avoiding a close combat fighter. Seeing his reaction and the instant teleportation and counter attack she decided against a direct intervention and summoned her heavy gauntlets, flying downwards in an arc towards the group of monsters that had been engaged with the lightning mage a moment ago.

The armored and buffed woman impacted hard on the biggest of the summoned creatures, its blood and guts spraying outwards blinding some of the other crazed creatures before ash came into existence around her, the woman appearing and disappearing with her heavy weapons, breaking legs and skulls, each of her punches destroying one of them. The seventh creature was killed when she saw the elder approaching through her sphere, her knees tensed as her fist shot upwards inside a cloud of ash, her obsidian gauntlet intercepting the elder.

His hand cut through her defenses, stopped enough for her to angle her head to avoid most of the force while her fist collided with his abdomen, air and ash pushed to the side from the power of the impact as Ilea skidded backwards several meters. More beasts were upon her as she weaved through them, her gauntlets vanishing to increase her speed as she delivered more attacks to the monsters, trying to use them to dodge the elder's attacks. She found his control incredibly efficient, the man weaving through the

monsters and combining their attacks with his own as if they were extensions of his body.

With the last hit she flew upwards and away, only the elder following while some elemental spells were shot towards her, his icy eyes focusing on her own, not leaving the woman enough time to find out what had happened to Trian or the demon. Their fight continued with the elder more calculated and expecting her reckless attacks more and more, leaving the woman nothing else but to back up further and try to defend against his unending attacks. Somehow that got easier and easier with each of his attacks, it seemed while she was getting stronger the longer the fight was going, the opposite was happening with the elder.

Thunder could be heard, the elder looking backwards, an annoyed look in his eyes before he flew towards his summons. Ilea pursued immediately, seeing a bloodied Trian rain lightning on the elder's mob of underlings. She couldn't make out the mind weaver but hoped he hadn't been killed somewhere along the line.

The elder landed in the middle of his summons, putting his hands together while some of the monsters formed a circle around him. Trian didn't stop his assault, pulverizing some of the beasts below, Ilea making her way towards the obviously wounded man, a part of his armor cut through even. Something that hadn't happened to her own elven one, still holding strong for all this time. Some chips and scratches were starting to get noticeable, from her encounter with both the elder, the monster hound and Albert, each managing to at least damage the armor slightly.

A pulse of mana and energy came from the elder before Ilea reached Trian, the man releasing a bolt of lightning into the circle of monsters. No impact resounded as Ilea looked left, seeing a being of pure lightning standing above the elder, its body pulsing with blue energy before it extended its hands towards Trian who was charging up another attack.

Ilea moved closer to the man and blinked in the last possible moment, the counter attack pushing into her Veil, breaking through after a second, her teeth clenching as her healing spell and resistances worked against the lightning that coursed through her, pushing her backwards in the air. Trian was behind



her but didn't catch the woman because of the lightning still in her body. Ilea slowly descended and landed on one knee, her burned body healing from the inside, organs rebuilding. She opened her eyelids, the freshly regenerated eyes looking at the enemy with newfound respect.

“That puts even you to shame Trian...” she said, locking eyes with the elder who was once again in his human form. The blue being floating above him in addition to the beasts forming a defensive circle around him quite the opposite of an invitation. Trian broke down to one knee next to her before she touched the man, healing mana flowing through him. The damage was far more extensive than she had expected.

# Chapter 123 Horde Mode?

Chapter 123 Horde mode?

“Are you alright?” Ilea asked the man, her own health topped off again by her superior self healing spell. Her friend would take a while longer to recover but it didn’t seem like the elder was about to attack them again, focused on the controls he had been working on before the fight. The being of lightning would likely prevent Trian’s ranged attacks and Ilea wasn’t sure she could overwhelm even a weakened elder in the midst of his summons, his control of them simply too adept.

“I’m... fine.” Trian murmured, touching his armor that was cut through near his right shoulder and chest. The man stood up a minute later, Ilea restoring her mana through meditation.

“What should we do? Any idea what that blue thing is?” she asked the man.

“That, is a lightning elemental.” Aki responded. “And I suggest you two don’t go near it again. How the hell did a human get his hands on one of them?”

“The fact that its lightning directly counters Trian means there might be more elementals in his repertoire.” Ilea commented, Trian replacing his damaged chest piece with another one, red and white instead of the Shadow’s black.

“Possible, we’re not gonna be able to approach him like this.” Trian said. None of the enemy monsters had attacked them from a distance in this pause.

“Let me try something... maybe he’s too preoccupied.” she said and summoned her bow, the string coming back to her ear with an explosive arrow before she let go. The spear traveled at a high speed and right towards the center of the group before a blast of lightning cut its flight short, the explosion rocking the ground. “Well that was a waste...” she said and looked around.

“Check for the demon, maybe he can do something with his mind magic.” she said.

“You think he actually survived?” Trian asked when another set of massive beams of orange red light flowed into the middle of the room. The beams collided together and created a blinding flash, both Ilea and Trian holding their arms in front of their faces. Trian’s retinas were actually damaged, nothing a quick heal couldn’t solve.

“Well I think he finished whatever he wanted to do here.” Ilea commented as Trian rubbed his eyes.

“Why?” he asked but the answer was rather clear when he looked around, blinking back tears from the newly healed eyes. The elder was gone and with him all of his summoned monsters, leaving the room nearly as quiet as it had been before. Something bothered Ilea as she looked around.

“Do you hear that?” she asked, straining her ears and looking to the other side of the massive hall. Her wings came to life as she ascended to get a better view of the distance. “Oh man, here we go again...” she said, Trian floating towards her as he looked at the scene before them. Dozens of doorways were situated around the hallway, many of which now occupying running demons coming into the hall, many of which already fighting with each other.

Adam blinked a couple times before he went down on one knee, breathing hard. Looking around many of his summoned companions hadn't made it through the teleportation, the stench of burned flesh filled the room and would last even after he dissipated them. A waste of resources to be sure. The man looked at the lightning elemental, the being not in the least bothered by the ordeal they had just went through, the process feeling like being burned alive for hours.

His transformation had lasted through all of it, giving him the resilience needed for the travel. The man silently cursed the builders of this place and continued onwards, the surviving beasts following behind. Adam had many more ready to be summoned but still the two survivors of the Hand had been more than just annoying. Luckily he could counter the noble's magic quite proficiently.

"I'm getting old..." he said and looked up, wincing as he touched his side where the woman had punched him, the flesh already healed completely. A small smile still managed to get on his lips, partially glad the Hand wasn't completely out of competent and reckless fighters and partially because he didn't have to kill them in the end. He was too proud to admit that it would've been a difficult task even for him. The two would have a hard time surviving the coming waves of demons anyway, the opening of the portals all around these cursed lands would've attracted hundreds if not more of the creatures, all of them led into the hall he had been in moments ago.

Truly a marvelous magic, something quite unimaginable to him just weeks ago. The crude demons he had thought to be the perpetrators of his misery just another toy for the real enemy to play with. He shook his head, he knew nothing as of yet but it wouldn't stay that way. He would find her and refused to accept any other thought.

Ilea and Trian were resting in one of the side rooms of the hall, both nearly spent on mana and stamina, the woman looking up at the metal ceiling when a thump resounded, the door denting a little. She was unconcerned, seeing through the wall with her Sphere, knowing that two demons on the verge of killing each other were the reason for the commotion.

“This is pretty good experience.” she commented to the mage who was lying on the floor next to her, scrolling through the skill and level notifications she had gotten from the four hours of fighting just now.

“Yea but we didn’t catch the elder and who knows what he’ll unleash on Elos...” he said.

“True, didn’t seem to me like his goal was the destruction of the Hand or humanity but that might’ve been an act...” Ilea said, her legs dangling from the metal crate she was sitting on.

“You will have to get to the central control panel he used.” Aki commented.

“Yea we do, no other reference point to work with really. Gonna take ages to clean out the hall...” Ilea answered, getting up seeing her mana was full.

“What if there’s more coming? Maybe he opened up something for them to come in?” Trian asked which made sense to Ilea.

“Let’s chose a corridor and clean it out. We’ll find the source at some point.” she said, finishing the last of her notifications and splitting up her stat points into Endurance and Wisdom.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Darkush – Bone Whirlwind – lvl 205]’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Sanioth – Thrasher – lvl 189]’*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 212 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 213 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 206 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 207 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 208 – 5 Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Body of the First Hunter reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1'*

*Passive: Hunter's Sight – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1*

*Your eyes are unmatched and so is your nose. Perceive the smallest irregularities in your surroundings to find clues about your prey's whereabouts.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Through experience you can feel your prey's general state of distress.*

*Category: Body Enhancement*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Heavy Archery reaches lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Heavy Archery reaches lvl 3'*

As much as Ilea was pissed the elder had gotten away, the trap he supposedly left behind was doing a good job of soothing her feelings. More levels to take him down as soon as he would be found and a way for her to vent and improve on her abilities. For now the two blinked out of the room and made their way to one of the doorways where demons were still occasionally joining the big hall. Most of them ignored the two and simply dashed to the middle, coming back to their senses and joining the massive brawl that was held nearby. Other weaker demons ran away but found themselves rather lost after just a quick run. They were in an unknown environment after all.

Ilea kept a lookout for their demon companion but was unable to find even a single of the sentient variations. The hall behind them was splattered with guts and pieces of burnt demon, a testament to their skill. "We're not trapped in here with you..." Ilea said, smashing her fist into a demon's skull, its brain painting the nearby metal wall. "...you're trapped in here with us!" she shouted and blinked to the next running monstrosity coming their way, a ray of lightning entering the beast, its skin cracking before it quite literally exploded.

"That's a cool line." Trian said and smiled below his helmet.

“Yea, most people say the comic is better but I rather liked the film.” Ilea explained, following her team mate into the next room where a couple demons were already fighting.

“Now these references make more sense...” her dagger said but didn’t comment any further, immersed in the action and gore his bearer produced.

“That’s it?” Ilea asked the man next to her. “Wanna fuck with it?” her fist landed in a demon’s face that had just appeared.

“Seems like the only way to close it...” Trian said, lightning crackling and shooting into some specific runes in the room before them. Red light flashed before the energy subsided, the two standing amidst blood and gore in the now quiet room, the mana vanishing that had previously powered the runes.

“Aaaalright, next ones coming up.” Ilea said and smashed her fists together, her gauntlets creating a metallic sound.

“Yea, let’s go.” Trian added as lightning crackled around him, infected by her enthusiasm. The two ran out back through the carnage they had created and out again into the big hall. The group of demons hadn’t gotten smaller in the time they were away but they continued to ignore it, running towards the next door where demons still came out.

“That should be the last one right? They’re really not that scary when you get used to their mugs.” Ilea commented, throwing the last killed demon’s corpse into the deactivated teleportation room. “No mind mages weirdly.” she said, shaking her arms to get off a part of the blood covering her armor. She created some ash and tried to scrub it clean but found her control of the



material a little lacking, setting her new goal with the material to be a self cleaning one.

“The one we found was very slow. Most of the other demons are faster.” Trian argued.

“Might be the case.” Ilea said, dropping the ash around her. “Let’s find out what that control panel can do then Sparky...” she commented and lightly punched his shoulder as she walked past the man, through the guts of the monsters trying to find a way out of these barren lands. At least they died knowing something else than salt, although Ilea wasn’t sure she’d prefer metal in the end.

Reaching the hall again, Ilea stopped Trian after approaching the group of fighting demons, feeling both a throb in her head and seeing something weird with her Hunter’s Sight. “I think we found the mind weavers... if there are more than the one we know. Up your defenses, I don’t want to carry you again.” she said and didn’t get a response, seeing his head slightly dip downwards in embarrassment.

From the closer proximity Ilea could make out that some of the demons were twitching, going back and forth while others were fighting each other and then suddenly turn and fall on another one, their minds likely divided either by mind weavers or some other influence. “There’s more than one of them, otherwise they’d just let the demons take care of each other until there was only a group large enough left to be controlled. What do you think?” Trian asked.

“Yea, let’s hunt the weavers then. If they attack us we kill them.” she said, knowing that there was a possibility to convince them to join but having more than one of them would put the balance of power into their favor, not something Ilea wanted to happen in a place like this. She could deal with one or two of them but a combined effort might even knock her out, meaning the death of both of them.

“Let’s get to it then, glad you’re reasonable.” Trian said, already questioning their team up with one of the demons in the first place. The two stayed close together and ran around the perimeter, the enemy too occupied with each other to notice the two, until it was too late. The first of the mind weavers was located by Ilea’s Sphere, the demon lightly camouflaged and lying on the ground between a metal beam protruding outwards. Ilea grabbed the demon and was immediately assaulted by mind magic. Slamming the demon into the ground stopped its attack immediately. No clothes and the different level compared to their demon made her sure it wasn’t him. Another slam and punch to the skull ended its life in a gory mess, the woman as deadly to them as a mind mage was to a regular adventurer.

They got four more before they reached the corpse of the first one again. “He’s not here. Clean up the horde?” Trian asked and Ilea nodded. The hall was high enough for them to simply fly up and hide somewhere in the metal architecture to protect themselves and rest should the fight exhaust them too much. Knowing the monsters better and better meant to Ilea and Trian the beasts were merely levels to their classes and skills, the two springing into action a moment later, smiling at the coming demise of the demons.

The horde was bigger than the one they had encountered in the wild where the mind weaver had shown up at first. Compared to the first encounter there were many injured ones here. The two mercenaries tried to attack the stragglers and groups at the edge of the fighting area to not immediately attract the whole horde to them which mostly worked well, Ilea’s fighting wasn’t flashy or loud in the first place and Trian simply focused on closer fighting and his draining abilities. He definitely got injured more often, twice even severely but with his healing abilities and Ilea nearby neither of the injuries were a close call.

Ilea herself was getting better and better at dealing with the different variations of demons, finding more and more similarities between some of

them. Of course each one looked different, the bones and claws in different places but in the end they had similar classes which made their behavior and attacks somewhat predictable. A stomp landed and then four more until the demon's skull cracked into gore, the woman looking around for her next victim, neither the smell nor guts an issue to her anymore, only registering it to warn her of the slippery ground, a smile reaching her face as she blamed the demons for not putting up *Freshly Cleaned* signs.

On the contrary Ilea reveled in her skills, her strength and the rush of adrenaline and power that flowed through her while she appeared and disappeared, her fists destroying tissue and bone while she dodged enemy attacks with the smallest possible movements of her body, the claws and teeth scratching on her Veil or armor before she delivered her destructive magical payload or used her gauntlets to cut and mangle.

She became an ashen horror in the midst of the eldritch creatures, spreading the material to blind and distract while she moved in it like a fish through water, showing the creatures that not all humans would react the same way to their horrifying grimaces and high level.

“You’re positively nuts.” Trian said, looking over at the woman who was breathing heavily and looking up at the faraway ceiling. Around them were splattered corpses of demons, some parts still moving. The stench was mostly of blood but in a day or two it would become something different altogether.

“I enjoyed this, you’re getting better Ilea.” Aki commented, the woman looking down again, her meditation helping her regain the spent resources.

“Trian don’t act like this is only my doing. You paused what, twice?” she asked and tried again to clean herself with the ash. It worked a little better

but mostly just smeared the blood over the still clean parts of her armor, her veil the only reason there even were any clean spots.

“Yea, and you did once... in the middle of the field. You’re taking unnecessary risks.” the man commented but Ilea just shrugged.

“I trust you Trian and come on. It’s not like these guys are strategic geniuses attacking in formation when they see one of us slow down...” she said and tapped one of the corpses with her boot.

“Still.” the man said and looked away. “I don’t want to find your corpse in the midst of this mess.” he whispered but Ilea heard and blinked next to him, punching his arm lightly.

“I’ll be careful ok? I’m damn near indestructible at this point.” she tried to reassure him.

“No one is.” he simply said and walked away.

# Chapter 124 Into the Light

## Chapter 124 Into the Light

Ilea looked through the corpses to see if any items were dropped or if any of the demons wore anything valuable or interesting while Trian checked out the runed control panel in the middle of the hall which had made the elder vanish. She had gained another couple levels in both classes and some skills but nothing changed significantly.

Her new second stage of Hunter's Sight revealed nothing about the demons she was fighting. Some of the mages they had killed at the beginning panicked right before they died but that was evident on their reduced but not completely absent facial expressions. Ilea activated her buffs when she saw something a little unexpected, a mind weaver hiding below a pile of demon corpses.

"I can see you demon, come out or die." she said, Trian glancing towards her but continuing his tinkering right after. The demon moved immediately but was obviously stuck under the corpses, its strength not enough to move the massive pile of flesh even in the slightest.

"It's Me!" it shouted into her mind, Ilea's eye twitching at the sudden assault of mind magic.

"Why not just say that immediately you idiot." she said and walked over, grabbing the first best corpse and flinging it away, the body landing with a

thud on the metal ground, its innards and blood splattering the gray with red. Another ten seconds later the demon was lying before her, looking at her with his biologically big eyes, or lack thereof. Ilea just grabbed his leg and flung him away as well, the demon using his levitation magic to somewhat dampen the impact.

“Don’t use your mind magic like that, I’ve told you before. It’s like me just randomly punching you. I can start doing that if you like.” Ilea suggested but the demon got up quickly and held out his clawed hands to soothe her.

“No, no. I don’t think I’m as resilient as you are to my magic.” the monster said, floating a little above the corpses around him. Ilea could feel a little distress in the demon when he looked at her. A good thing she thought, lest he makes a bad decision that will cost his life. She continued her work while the demon joined Trian, the two immediately sharing their thoughts on the runes and their respective functions, nobody bothered by the blood soaked cloth the demon was dressed in.

Ilea had reduced her perception of smell inside her sphere to the minimum, the stench not overwhelming her anymore. ‘Another one...’ she thought as she pushed aside a massive demon corpse, taking the small mana crystal lying below. She had found eight in total, each only having a charge of three, whatever that meant. Compared to the fifty charges in the one she got from the dog it was obviously worse.

Looking up to the faraway ceiling that was tinted in orange red light, Ilea held up the crystal and looked through it and remembered the first time she ran out onto a battlefield with a smile on her face. Dale had been there, looking over the inexperienced healer. It all could’ve ended there, with her breaking down in the midst of that ambush. “But it didn’t.” Ilea said out loud and made the crystal vanish. Trian’s concerns meant more to her than he knew, her regards of him gaining favor again and again.

He was a good man and a good friend, putting on the noble asshat facade whenever he spoke to people but she knew there was more to him. Of course he didn’t know that she kept up her sphere while she rested in the middle of the field, her second stage of Azarinth Perception ensuring that no attack would outright kill her in one blow. In the midst of them she could see them,

smell them and it was then that she felt most confident in her abilities. Ilea would get strong enough to fight the Taleen Praetorians, she would gather enough knowledge to find out what had happened to her, what had brought her here. And most important of all she'll have fun doing it.

A flash of light and loud crackling noise brought her out of her thoughts, looking over to the others she found Trian's body slightly smoking from the control panel's feedback. Blinking over she checked but found him barely damaged, healing the rest with her spell. "It's gonna take a while isn't it?" she asked but he just ignored her. The demon looked away, Ilea sighing and walking away, removing her helmet and summoning a cloth to clean it.

"I'll be nearby, call out when you're further." she said. Her helmet cleaned up, she summoned one of Albert's books and started reading, sitting on a metal ledge far enough away from the carnage to not smell terrible.

"Ilea! You might want to see this!" Trian's shout got her out of the concentration, the woman placing a small piece of paper into the book and snapping it closed. It vanished as her helmet came back over her head.

"Progress already? Been barely two hours." she said, her tone a little on the sarcastic side. Trian didn't answer but showed her as lightning flowed into specific runes, a holographic image coming to life above the control panel. The image flowed between sceneries, Ilea using her buffs to enhance her body to the fullest, trying to see the different environments. There were deserts, rock, water, fire, snow and many more. Ilea thought the snow was more prevalent but the images were moving quickly.

"Are those places we can go to?" she asked, seeing glimpses of different civilizations rarely in between. More so than the massive and terrifying creatures she saw as well, one of them looking right back at her.

“Space squids, what the fuck...” she said, taking a step back.

“Are you alright? I can’t make it slow down. This rune here is supposed to be responsible for targeting but I have no idea how to do that. At least we think it does that...” Trian explained, the last part not inciting confidence in Ilea.

“Dagger, got any ideas?” he asked.

“It’s Aki, and no. Just because I’m old doesn’t mean I know a lot about demonic runes.” the dagger said.

“Not demonic, the Lost use... older runes. Different.” the demon beamed into their minds.

“Just think of something real hard? Like Viscera maybe?” Ilea asked and Trian shrugged, activating the runes again. This time there were more glimpses of cities and underground halls but nothing looked quite like the city they’ve grown to know.

“So thinking does have an influence. Can I try?” Ilea asked, having an idea.

“I don’t think you can activate the rune.” Trian said.

“Well you keep it activated and I’ll just touch it, I think I can at least let some mana seep into it.” she said and used reversed reconstruction to push her mana into the rune. This time cities appeared again, a glimpse of earth made her release her spell and take a step back. “That’s...” the possibility was there. Whatever this device was it had the power to bring her back home. Still the images had been moving incredibly quickly and Ilea hadn’t yet started trying her initial idea but still, there was a possibility.

“I need a moment.” she said and walked away, going back to the same place she had waited for the others. Trian just shrugged and continued to focus on something, even trying to talk to the runes.

“You’ve seen it, haven’t you?” Aki asked. Ilea nodded after a while.



“Well do you want to go back then? Or back to Elos?” the dagger asked, a question Ilea found hard to answer. Not because she didn’t know but because she felt guilty about her answer.

She wanted to find out what had brought her to Elos and why. She wanted to know if there was a way back. At least now the possibility of it all being a simulation was significantly smaller. She wanted to understand but in the end, she didn’t want to lose everything she had gained in this place filled by magic. Kick-boxing couldn’t come close to what she had here, the thrill of fighting for one’s life something she couldn’t have imagined beforehand. The reality of being gunned down no matter how good one was at martial arts blowing every wish to become a certain bat.

And she would have to start studying. With her powers here she had several sure job securities that brought both fun, freedom and money. Not something one would easily give up. Most of all in Ilea’s mind was the fact that she could fly. That fact alone, even before considering everything else was enough to make the decision an easy one. Still, she felt guilty. Her family was there and even with the relationship they had she knew that a mother and father would not be unaffected by the disappearance of their only child.

But just as they had been selfish, this time it was her turn. They would get over it, both of them already had a psychiatrist, one of them assigned by law. Suddenly Ilea was quite happy that she hadn’t found love in her time on earth, or friends she would die for. The choice between this nearly intoxicating freedom and love was not something she would want to face.

“No. No I don’t want to go back.” Ilea answered the overdue question and walked back to Trian who was still standing in front of moving images. She simply pushed her hand onto the rune while using reconstruction. Her mind focused on her home on the cliff side. “Hold on demon, this might be your way out.” the monster immediately grabbed her arm, Trian still using his lightning to push into the runes.

The pictures were moving quickly, images of houses and cliffs flying around when Ilea activated the third stage of blink. Her mana drained quickly as the magic took hold. Time passed as she focused all of her thoughts into the living room of her newly built palace. Half her mana was gone and the others

waited for anything to take effect. Ilea wasn't sure it would work but it felt like the best bet, the combination of her magic with a set destination and her thoughts maybe enough for the device before them to find their intended destination.

A big mana pulse came from the machine, the images moving with a slowing pace. Ilea stopped focusing on them and closed her eyes, only thinking of her home and the spell forming around her. Ten seconds before the half hour activation time came to a close, she spoke out. "Give it all you have Trian." she said and vaguely noticed him nodding. A pulse of lightning as bright as the sun came out of his hand and flowed into the rune and nothingness took them.

Kyrian watched on as the little girl finished her latest masterwork, his thoughts on the possibilities should she reach higher and higher levels of her skills. There was something entrancing about her skill usage and even now she would rival the best nobles at her age with her output of power, her barrier able to stop a surprising amount of force.

"Cless, are you ready for dinner?" he asked, the girl looking up to him and smiling. She nodded and jumped off her small chair and walked towards the stairs, leaving the man who looked at the painting. One of many that now decorated the walls behind the dwarven weapons displayed in the cellar. "Where are you?" he asked into the silent room and shook his head, walking upstairs to join the girl.

She was sniffing at the cooking food as always, squealing at the smell. Something she had in common with their unknowing host. Ilea had left behind plenty of food, able to feed half a town. Plus they were far enough out from Ravenhall to ensure the girl's safety and his own for that matter. Kyrian grabbed a chunk of meat and walked outside and closer to the cave nearby.

Its resident at first ignored as a nod to Ilea but in the weeks that passed it turned out to be the right decision.

The chunk of meat was put down at the beginning of the cave and soon the swordmouth tiger appeared, looking first at Kyrian and then the meat. He tried to wait for the animal for a while but again it wouldn't come closer, looking at the man with its blue eyes glowing. Sighing he left the cave and went to eat with Cless who told him about her hometown, something she had started talking about after the first week of living together in Ilea's house.

"I'm happy I don't have to go to school anymore. Mrs. Johnson doesn't like me, I think there's more you know?" the girl explained.

"I do, I do. Now eat or it'll get cold Cless." the man answered, his armor clinking when it touched the glass on the table. Cless looked at it and frowned.

"Don't you have nice clothes?" she asked, for the tenth time already in the past weeks.

"You know I have to. I promise I'll get something nice after this is over." he smiled at her and continued eating. Twenty minutes later he got up.

"Do I have to hide again?" the girl said and pouted.

"You can paint more, no?" he asked but found the answer unsatisfying after giving it so many times. "Look Cless this isn't forever ok, we'll find a solution at some point. A safe place where you can stay. Or you can work on your skills and get stronger. Until you can match me it's too dangerous out there right now." he explained to the girl. She was smart and would understand. He knew she didn't like it and was craving entertainment but sadly he wasn't the best to teach her reading with the copious amounts of books upstairs.

"We'll do something as soon as Ilea is back ok?" he said, having found that mentioning the name made the girl usually light up. She nodded and waved towards him, walking down into the cellar again right after.

The man stood there and sighed again. He had been doing that a lot lately. Kyrian's helmet appeared and he walked outside, closing the door behind him as metal spheres started floating around him. It wasn't easy without the team, he had gotten used to their support. Two spheres landed in his hands and two formed chunks around his legs before they started pulling him upwards, his face turning serious as he flew upwards at a high speed, a little faster every day.

Checking the surroundings of the house, especially the area above, Kyrian found it deserted as most days but he had to make sure. "Alright, let's go." he said, trying to emulate Ilea and Trian who never seemed to doubt themselves when rushing into battle. It did help a little in the end. The first screams could be heard in the distance, no human screams. Flying over the next snowy hill he found his first targets. A group of demons shy of reaching level two hundred eating a dead horse and a woman unfortunate enough to be around.

He concentrated on the demons as the metal spheres around him formed into small needles, some into bigger spikes. Mana flowed into them as the curse concentrated. Two small needles sneaked around the distracted group of monsters and started painting into the snow below. Twenty seconds later the storm was set loose, the demons looking up and screeching when the curse took hold around them, followed by needles and spikes of metal crashing into their bodies, shredding their slowed and feared bodies with the multitude of sharp flying objects.

A minute later the last of them fell without even knowing what had attacked it. Kyrian glanced at the destroyed body of the woman, went down and closed her eyes. Something Ilea had told him about. He felt like it was the right thing to do.

Continuing onwards, the man took care of all the smaller groups of demons he found, even some stragglers completely alone. The bigger ones were a bit

more difficult but with his skill set it was only a matter of time before they fell. He had to hide several times when flying demons or groups too big for him to handle appeared. The mind mage in the most recent group had nearly detected him but Kyrian stayed calm, hiding behind a set of trees and breathing steadily.

They had hid well when the demons first appeared in Eregar's Haven, not showing themselves even after it had been declared clear. Kyrian knew he could resist one of them at least but they were different beings still, some stronger than others. Eve and her magic was the reason he was still alive at this point, wherever she was. The group of demons passed, running towards the east and Kyrian got out from behind the trees, flying at a low altitude until he came up on the hills overlooking Ravenhall. The fires were still burning, it was quiet as he looked towards the broken gates and the mind mage standing on the walls, looking towards the outside world with its black holes for eyes.

“Not today...” the man said and ran westwards, every killed demon another dent in their forces, albeit a small one.

# Chapter 125 Ripples

## Chapter 125 Ripples

Kyrian soon came up on a battle still going on, a squad of the hand was resisting a large number of demons, pushed back meter by meter, all of them looked weary. A beam of golden light came from far above on the mountain side and struck a demon, its brain splattered to the ground, the gray corpse falling down, its blood coloring the snow below. Kyrian couldn't see the ranger but his own magic preparation was finished right then, dozens of needles flying out and striking the demons who didn't even notice the attacks with prey right in front of them.

Kyrian ground his teeth as he fueled the curses blooming inside the dozens of demons before him, seeing them slow down just as quickly as the mana left his body. He stayed for another minute and then left quietly through the forest he had come from, the metal losing its connection soon after. He would come back another day to get the needles back but for now helping out was enough. The man gulped when he remembered the last time he tried to interact with a group of survivors he had saved but he soon steeled himself, concentrating on the snow before him, soon finding the next enemies, these at a low level of eighty, some still wearing pieces of the celebratory clothing they had wore when coming to Ravenhall. Kyrian's brows furrowed, anger blazing in his eyes as he cut them down.

“What do you think?” Maria asked, looking over the battlefield. Edwin didn’t respond, as he was prone to do, crouching down next to one of the dead demons and moving it around to see its face.

“If the Hand couldn’t stop them I’m not sure anyone can.” Maria commented. She had gained some weight again after being released, having forgotten how good meat and wine tasted.

“You know who could, not that they will.” Edwin said as he got up from his crouch. “They’re getting closer to more cities.” he stated.

“Are you sure about this, they’re gonna be on high alert in there.” she said as she walked behind him.

“Yes, for demons.” the man said, walking back to their hideout nearby, Aliana likely cooking already.

A set of runes was activated in the distance, blazing explosions cutting through the running demons. Not enough to stop them but certainly enough to damage them. “Miss, they’re circling around, we better go back.” the old adventurer next to her suggested.

“Stand where you are.” she commanded and turned around, seeing the creatures of horror moving through the trees. If she knew anything about them then that they wouldn’t ignore a direct target if no mind mage was nearby to control them. There had been no onslaught of magic so far so she was rather sure about her plan. No mind mage she had encountered so far had the ingenuity to not use their skills immediately. Only once, at Ravenhall where the monsters were initially summoned but she doubted more and more that it

had been a decision by the mages. Something else was at play but now was not the time to think about that.

Claire focused as she ignored the shivering adventurers next to her, some because of the freezing cold, some out of fear. Their strength was inadequate at best to face what was lurking in the trees before them but their resolve was commendable, choosing to leave the walls of the town to come out with her. Claire's magic wasn't very suited to use inside the stone walls of Vihall but out here. Out here she was in control.

Screeches sounded from the trees before her as she took three steps towards them. "Stand fast and you shall prevail." she said and held out her hand, focusing on the tree line. A moment later the monsters broke through. Gray flesh hanging from bones, beasts made of muscle and bone. Different yet similar to each other. One of the adventurers started screaming next to her but Claire ignored him, waiting for the last moment to activate her magic.

A wall of light formed before her as a big chunk of mana left her body, the woman never stopping to meditate through the whole encounter. The monsters crashed into the line of light, crashing together with their brethren before Claire closed her eyes, an explosion rocking through the ground before them. Five seconds later she opened her eyes and found the blood dripping down her barrier that she soon took down, the guts falling down to the ground.

Some of the demons were still moving, quickly taken care of by some of the adventurers who needed several attacks to finish the already dying monsters. Some glanced at her, different feelings and thoughts present towards the armored angel of death that had come to rescue their small town. The respect for the Shadow's Hand had gotten her quite a bit of power and influence, having the town prepare for the demon attack much longer before any others nearby. Word would reach them soon that the Hand itself was responsible for the summoning but Claire wasn't too worried about the peasants and low lords in the area.

Of course it wasn't the fault of the Hand, they had destroyed thousands of the monsters but it hadn't been enough, their forces splintered and retreating to save their own lives before saving a lost city in the mountains of Lys. But Claire knew humans, she knew that reason and fact wouldn't prevail against



emotion and anger. Still in a town like Vihal she had little to worry about, even if she thought in a paranoid way.

The way back was quiet, the others only starting to whisper when the walls came into view. It was a nice town and Claire smiled at the memories she had of the place. Winter painted the stone walls in an especially beautiful way, the thick forests around giving it a magical feel. The gates opened when they saw the approaching woman armored in black. She would have to work longer today, preparing more runed plates to use. Luckily the city council had offered to provide her with materials immediately. After seeing her use them there was even more support.

“My lady! You have returned safely. Was the hunt successful?” the captain of the small guard in the city greeted her, a frown immediately forming under her hood.

“Don’t address me in such a way Mack.” she said in a serious tone.

“A come Clairry, for old time’s sake.” he smiled but she ignored him and walked onwards. The man followed behind, a warrior at level eighty, one of the highest in the whole town.

“Lord Felt wanted to meet as soon as you’ve arrived.” he said and continued “The reinforcements you requested have been finished and the inventory of food has been completed. You already have the list of people living here. We’re also gathering water in the tanks you requested to be built. Are we awaiting a siege?” the man asked.

“We have to be prepared for everything. The demons will come, one way or the other. Men will see an opportunity as well, especially with the refugees from the west. Don’t let anybody in for now. Only adventurers are to leave and only for good reason.” she explained as they walked upwards towards the center of the town where the Lord had positioned his guard and all the logistics upon Claire’s request.

“What if they want to flee, I’ve already arrested two of them.” he said.

“They’re of no help to us. Let them go but do so discreetly, we don’t want morale to sink further than it already has.” Claire answered the man’s question, a smile getting to her face, the management task definitely more fun than the one of killing demons.

“Miss Russel. You have returned, how many this time?” Lord Felt asked, the man a mage at the early hundreds in level and early forties in age, at least looks wise. Claire looked at the fancy leather armor he wore with unnecessary embroideries. His eyes were focused and waiting for her answer.

“Forty six, all of the smaller variants but more will come. Let us hope the villages and towns nearby have heeded our warnings.” Claire answered, walking to the central table inside the repurposed inn where a massive map of the surrounding lands was displayed. People were hustling around the room but many glanced at her and stopped to hear the talk between their lord and the member of the Hand who had suddenly appeared a couple weeks ago, followed by the monstrosities now present in their lands.

“Some have come but far too few.” the lord said, finding himself on the opposite end of the table.

“Vihall isn’t the most fortified place around so there’s hope for more people surviving. The first step is surviving the winter, food is more important right now. Are the hunters still out?” she asked. The man nodded.

“They are, are you sure the beasts also kill animals?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ve seen it many times on my way here.” Claire answered before she received the promised inventory. “I will tend to my runes then my lord.” she excused herself, using his title as previously discussed with the man. He nodded and locked eyes with her. Claire had no desire to gain power over

the town and the Lord's fear of her doing just that helped immensely in convincing the man to listen to her advice. Claire was more or less in control, just not officially. Not a bad thing considering the superior education she had received on the relevant topics.

With her notes and the stacks of paper she had received, Claire made her way through the town receiving some nods and fearful looks from people around her. The word was spreading that she was here to defend the town which made the people less distant to her, quite a comparison to her initial arrival.

Reaching a small dilapidated house in a side street, Claire looked around and entered. She put the stacks of paper on the small table in the kitchen and walked around opening the windows to let some air inside. "I'm home!" she said into the rooms in a loud voice. Getting to the last room she knocked and entered.

A woman with gray hair was sitting in a chair next to the bed, her hands in her lap and her back bent forwards. Claire got a pillow from the bed and put it behind the woman's back and got the second chair, sitting down in front of her.

"Hey mom. It's me, Clairy. Today I went out with some adventurers to fight monsters and I got the inventory from Mack so I can start planning for the next couple months and the provisions for the families...." she continued to tell her mother about her day and then some. Despite the lack of reaction, Claire continued to do so every day. She had felt guilty for leaving the town to go to the Hand but already she had more power and money to protect and care for her mother than she ever had before. She sighed and got up before kissing the woman on her forehead. "I love you mother." she said and walked down to get the papers. Today she would work in the bedroom.

Sighting she sunk into her chair, the food situation didn't look good. Hopefully the hunters would be able to bring some more to at least feed the people at the moment. Grain and other goods that wouldn't perish immediately would have to be carefully rationed. She trusted the Lord could do so with his employees. A letter was written up informing him about just that before she went to see the smith about her runed plates. The metal plates she had requested to be put around the city had been finished and put in place, all of them holding destructive payloads that could be activated by her and her alone. Only the threat of imminent death convinced the Lord and higher ups in the city to agree to that measure of defense but in the end it did.

Hard weeks and months would soon come but still Claire smiled. She was back, as promised. And now she was in charge.

"Hey look at this one!" one of the men shouted, Eve listening intently to their conversations.

"Oh yea, that one will be valued a little higher. Take her to the wagons, leave the rest." the man said.

"Shouldn't we burn them? The demons will take the bodies otherwise." the first man asked, both wearing full plate armor, the only reason Eve hadn't slit their throats as of yet.

"We'll be long gone, let them sow some more chaos." the second man said. Eve could see the other man didn't agree, even scum like them showing contempt at creating more demons. Still his professionalism won over as he dragged the woman to the wagons. Eve followed in silence, ignoring the dying people, injured and freezing. The slavers had several wagons with them and finally they were in the same location.

“Do you hear that?” one of them asked, a hum filling the air around them before the first of the men hit the snowy ground, bleeding from his neck, the blade expertly placed between the man’s helmet and chest piece. Four more fell before one of them managed to get out of the trance of Eve’s spell. He shouted about them being under attack and tried to get some of the others out of her influence but five more of them died while he did so.

Three men remained, having at least some ability in defending against her magic. Not surprising considering the quality of their wagons and gear, let alone their training. Eve had stalked them for three days already and found it hard to approach. She had to wait for them to find people to get into range, their attention divided. With the elven attacks in the west and the demons now coming from the southeast, it would be a perfect season for their business. Luckily for her it was rare to find someone in her range of personal power to join a band like this one. If there were any they would be the ones in control of these people.

Eve simply showed herself, slowly approaching the three men who quickly focused on her and activated their skills and magic. Her hum turned more pressuring, not caring about subtlety anymore. They were already dazed and when she pushed even harder right before engaging them, Eve already had an opening on the first man, dodging his blade and sticking her dagger into his face. He was dead in an instant, falling down into the snow, the crunching sound menacing combined with her humming.

“Who are you? I’m sure we can negotiate!” one of them shouted but several of her clones walked out from her own being. She didn’t answer but simply approached the two men. One of them turned tail and ran. Eve threw one of her blades, the weapon piercing the man’s leg right at the knee. He would tried getting the blade out but black runes were already forming around the wound and he was dying moments later, gurgling in pain.

“What the fuck... come on girl I’m sure there’s something I can give you! What about the location of our base? Or money, I can give you money!” the man shouted, all of his dignity and professionalism gone now that he was standing in front of death’s door. Eve stopped approaching and just watched him. The man spilled everything he knew, of course it was doubtful that he was telling the truth but he would die nonetheless. Free possibly good

information wasn't something she would let go. A good thing that someone so inexperienced had still managed to defend against her mental attacks.

A shame that his potential wouldn't be fulfilled, for humanity. His choices and actions have led to his current situation and Eve would not let him go. The man was still talking but soon stopped when he didn't detect a change in her behavior. His face changed to become even more pale than before. "You're not gonna..." he stammered out.

"No. No I'm not gonna." Eve answered and walked closer, dodging the man's last desperate strike with his sword, her fingers hitting hard into his windpipe before she spun into a crouch, kicking at his legs, the man already unbalanced fell down. All her strength focused on one point, Eve sunk down and pierced the man's leather armor, right through to his heart. She ripped out the dagger and walked to the other dead man and getting the second one.

The group of people found and robbed by the slavers was still sitting in the same place, told that they would die should they move away. Some of them looked up to Eve as she approached, noting the black armor and smiling mask. "Do you want to live?" the woman asked them.

Sitting inside an overfilled inn, Eve looked at the man sitting opposite her. Neither of them touched their drinks standing on the dark wooden table. "I have two requests that would match what you're looking for." the man said after a while. Eve was wearing old leather armor and a hood to conceal her facial features.

"Though I wouldn't recommend pursuing this any further, whoever you are." he said and handed over a letter. Eve took the letter and placed a gold coin in his gloved hand before getting up and leaving the inn. She walked to the next best side street and jumped up to the roof of the building before nesting herself into the architecture. The letter was opened and its contents read. She

smiled and burned the paper with a small magical lighter device. “Finally.”  
she whispered and got up.

# Chapter 126 Return

## Chapter 126 Return

“Your votes have been received.” the voice from the shadows said, Baltimore not reacting while he sat on his desk, the office lit in a dim light. The paper with names and comments in front of him crumbling to dust.

“Good, leave then.” he said and got up. Opening the door the servant wasn’t surprised that the master of the house had known about his coming.

“My lord you have a visitor. I must apologize to have found it impossible to gather a name.” the servant said but Baltimore didn’t react, the apology simply a formality as few of his acquaintances would mention their name.

“Main hall?” he asked and the servant confirmed. An annoyed look came to his face as he walked through the decorated and beautiful mansion. The main hall was located in the east wing and big enough to host a whole kingdom’s nobility for dinner, not that that ever happens. Baltimore opened the door and stepped inside, finding a face that justified building the hall in exactly this way.

“Ah there you are. Beautiful place you have, I always forget.” the man said, clad in casual clothing made from expensive silk.

“Don’t flatter me Michael. Why are you here?” Baltimore asked, different thoughts and possibilities swirling in his mind as he waited for the man’s response. Michael wasn’t the kind of person to play the games of schemers so he was somewhat sure a fight wasn’t on the table this day.



“I’m here to talk, didn’t my attire suggest such a thing. You seem annoyed, is it so busy?” the man asked, his demeanor betraying the plain look of his face. Brown eyes and hair, were it not for his clothes and the aura of power combined with the question marks above his head Baltimore might’ve mistaken him for a mere peasant.

“It is indeed *busy*. Aren’t you as well, what with all the refugees and demons roaming around, I’m surprised you have time for such a thing. Or have you learned a cloning or illusion spell?” Baltimore asked, walking to the buffet that still held some food. He hadn’t eaten anything in at least two days and this talk was perfectly useless for him to fill that need in the meantime.

Michael laughed, Baltimore continuing his movement to grab a piece of bread and sausage with a fluid and trained motion, betraying the tension that was building up inside of him. “Oh yes, it’s very exciting isn’t it?” Michael said, a big smile on his face when Baltimore turned to him and started eating.

“People and demons get lost in the chaos and while the situation is terrific there’s less mouths to feed, less demons to kill. Everyone profits in the end don’t they?” the man said, causally sitting down on one of the chairs.

“Yes they do, some more than others.” Baltimore said “Now get to the point. I dread casual conversation.”

Michael sighed at that and got up again. “You’re so dreadfully boring old man. I truly am busy as are you but one must have one’s fun.” he said, his demeanor changing from the playful one to one much more serious, the smile leaving his face. “Your protégé has appeared. Maria Acantha has vanished with at least thirty dead in the hidden prison. This has happened weeks ago but you may want to move it if you want to stop the possible chaos to ensue.” he finished.

Baltimore damn near choked on his food as he processed the information. His eyes focused on the ground before him before going back to Michael. “Why tell me?” he asked but the man just shrugged and walked to the door.

“It’s in your hands now, the hounds have been sent.” he said and exited, leaving Baltimore standing there alone. He lifted his hands and looked at the

food before he stuffed his face with it.

“That idiot of a brat...” he said but the grin on his face betrayed his words, his headache intensifying by the minute.

Edwin looked through the documents stored in the hidden vault behind the now bloodied painting, a soft gasp sounded from the room beyond, followed by the sound of something hitting the floor. A shiver ran down his back as he made himself concentrate on the documents again.

“Found anything?” Maria asked as she stepped into the room, her clothes clean and her expression neutral. Edwin locked eyes with her for a moment.

“Yes, finally something useful. They’ve expanded into whoring now as well and it seems they’re financing the production of enchanted weapons for Baralia.” he explained, handing over some of the documents.

“Treason then? Can we make a case with the empress?” the woman asked.

“You’ve not learned a lot about politics in your time as a prisoner.” Edwin said, regretting his words immediately. Every other man who said that would’ve been dead the moment his words had left his mouth but Maria simply stood there, her lips quivering before she turned around and left the room.

Edwin continued his work. They had limited time, soon the pattern would be uncovered and hunters would find them. At least so far their capabilities were grossly underestimated but he didn’t doubt the competence of his enemies, the elves and demons merely a small help in his endeavors. People and locations, finally he had found a lord stupid enough to document every unnecessary detail. He would’ve died either way but at least one of them had helped them out.

He gathered the necessary documents and stored them in Aliana's ring he was wearing. "Come now." he spoke to Maria who was waiting outside before the two jumped out an open window and into the dark city of Virilya, shrouded by the night. The capital was loud and busy that night, just as it always was. Approaching demons and the elvish attacks from weeks ago not on the thoughts of people dancing and drinking through the night. Edwin welcomed it, the city and its protectors less vigilant than in the places they had visited in the weeks before. The goal that seemed so unreachable for years was now closer than ever. He allowed himself to smile a little as he dashed towards their hideout, his childhood friend quietly following behind.

"That's why you have to work on your attack and defense skills as well, I've explained that to you four times now Cless. Please try to understand." Kyrian said, his food getting cold in front of him.

"But why do I have to fight monsters?" Cless asked again, causing the man more stress than facing several mind weavers at once. A sudden distortion in the midst of the living room made Kyrian jump up, all his metal spheres floating from his quiver as his helmet appeared, the man standing in front of Cless.

The girl already had her shield activated around her, gaining a smile from Kyrian who concentrated on the space anomaly before him. He could see glimpses of a place clad in metal, corpses of demons were visible before the anomaly vanished again. He was relaxing again when suddenly a fissure in space appeared and three figures fell out of it, his spikes of metal stopping shy of their bodies as he realized who it was.

The fissure vanished again, taking a piece of both the floor and ceiling with it. Two of the figures were still laying on the ground, both of them coughing.

“Fuck, my floor!” Ilea exclaimed before she puked right into the gap of missing wood. Trian managed to keep it together and simply kept laying on the ground.

“Ilea you’re back!” Kyrian exclaimed as Cless ran past him, stopping shy of reaching Ilea because of the smell of both blood and puke. “That demon is alive you know...” he finished, spikes of metal floating around the abominable creature.

Ilea slowly got up and motioned for him to calm down. “He’s not to kill, at least not yet. Helped us out in the demon realm, what a place. Well now we don’t have to ration food anymore! Can’t believe that stunt worked.” Ilea said, walked past Kyrian and sat down on the table before six steaming meals appeared before her. Kyrian knew he wouldn’t get much more out of the woman for a while so decided to go help his more reasonable team mate, whilst keeping an eye on the demon who was laying on the ground still as well.

“Trian, you’re back. What happened?” he asked but the man motioned with one finger in the air for him to shut up. He retched and then swallowed again.

“Ahh, better now. Ilea I want some of that food as well. Do you have something alcoholic to drink?” he completely ignored Kyrian and walked to the table as well.

“Not even you...” Kyrian said as he tensed up, watching the demon sit up.

“This is... this is AnothER ReALM!!” the voice boomed in his head as he registered it as an attack and moved to respond accordingly but the demon just touched the wooden ground. While Kyrian thought of the voice in his head as an attack it didn’t feel anything but happy to him, nearly hysterical even.

“What are you doing? Stop that!” he shouted at the demon licking and biting the wood on the floor. “Everyone’s ignoring me...” he simply said and walked to the table, defeated.

“Welcome to reality pal.” a voice yet unknown to him exclaimed as he looked around confused.

“Down here, Ilea’s belt.” he looked to find the sheathed dagger Ilea always carried around. “Yea right here, you’re dreaming right now. Wake up.” it said to him. Kyrian felt himself lose balance as he sat down on a chair and smacked his face, forgetting that he was still wearing a helmet. Removing it he just grabbed one of the dozens of plates of food before Ilea and started eating as well, forgetting himself in the pleasure of whatever godly meals she had gotten her hands onto.

“The demon’s not getting up.” Trian said, holding his stomach as he looked over to the still eating Ilea. “I think he’s hurt... I think I’m hurt.” he said, looking down on himself.

Ilea finished her plate and looked at him. “I’ve been healing you guys through the whole thing, even when we arrived.” she thought both of them were fine for now. Touching the man she found a bit of burn damage left, healing it in the next minute. She got up and walked to the demon before she also touched him.

“I’m glad you like the wood but calm the fuck down, you’re freaking everyone out.” she grabbed him and walked to the table while carrying and healing the monster. Cless made big eyes as she hid behind Kyrian. “Do you eat human food? Well let’s find out, come you’re in my house so eat.” she slid a plate in front of the demon who hesitantly touched it. The following scene was certainly unexpected when the demon shoveled some of it into his mouth, chewed for two seconds, froze and passed out on the table. Ilea checked him and found nothing wrong with his body.

“It’s not poison. Guess he was exhausted or it was just REALLY good.” she said and continued eating herself.

“Am I really dreaming?” Kyrian asked himself next to her.

“You’re not, that’s my stupid dagger Aki. Aki you know Kyrian, Kyrian, Aki.” she unsheathed the blade and put it next to the man who just looked at it.

“Booh!” the dagger exclaimed, Kyrian just getting up and walking to the door.

“I need some fresh air.” he said and exited.

“Hahahaaaa” Aki laughed as Cless took Kyrian’s place and looked at the dagger, taking it and turning it around. “Hey girl don’t do that, Ilea this child is handling dangerous weapons.” Cless apologized and just held the dagger normally.

“The only danger you pose is to everyone’s nerves.” Ilea said, taking Aki back from Cless nonetheless and putting him back into his sheath.

“He reminds me of someone.” Trian said, drinking from a cup of tea and looking away.

“Don’t you dare sparky.” Ilea simply said, done with eating as she made herself a tea as well. The mind weaver was still passed out on the table, drooling on the wood. She would have to get a wood mage to fix the damage. Perhaps she would leave it as well, as a reminder of their safe return. A smile formed on her lips as she thought of the books in the room upstairs.

“So you just let the man responsible for Ravenhall’s destruction and hundreds of thousands of human deaths go?” Kyrian asked, both hands on his forehead while he sat opposite Ilea and Trian. The demon was awake again and sat next to him, to neither of their pleasure.

“Well if you phrase it like that it doesn’t sound very good.” Ilea stated.

“We had no way of knowing if there was another way back. Even this one was more guessing than anything else. The elder somewhat knew his way around it seemed so catching him would’ve been difficult.” Trian explained.

“Or killing him, he had a counter for Trian’s main abilities and inside of his monster horde I don’t know how I would’ve fared.” Ilea said, getting a sigh from Kyrian.

“Well you’re here now and I doubt there’s an easy way to go back there. Let’s just hope he doesn’t somehow unleash all of the demons on us or does something else that would destroy Elos as we know it... not that he already did.” Kyrian said.

“I thought he destroyed Ravenhall, not all of Elos... and honestly he didn’t sound like he wanted this result in particular. Why would he lie to us in a situation like that?” Ilea asked.

“Yea let’s hope you’re right, you’re too trusting though Ilea.” Trian said.

“The demons have a way of using corpses to replicate so there’s a few hundred thousand demons running around the empire now. More in the making.” Kyrian said.

“We’ve got ourselves a zombie apocalypse. Great, let’s get to work then.” Ilea said and moved to get up.

“Wait up paladin Recking.” Trian said and held her back.

“Who’s paladin Recking?” Ilea asked in a confused manner as she sat down again.

“Doesn’t matter now. Kyrian I’m sure the empire knows what’s going on so cities are being closed down and adventurers are hunting down the demons. What’s the average level of corpses turned to demons?” he asked.

“Depends on the corpse I guess, I’ve seen anything from thirty to two hundred but the latter is very rare.” he answered.

“What about the rest of the Hand. You’ve survived so there must be more.”  
Trian asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know anything about it. I took care of Cless and hid out here while hunting demons anytime I could.” Kyrian explained. “Some of the Hand are still nearby, fighting demons as well. They’ve spread out and it’s been weeks so I think much of the empire is affected as of now.”

“That’s good then. If they spread out we can take care of them. I doubt a couple hundred thousand of the monsters working together could be stopped. Mind weaver do you think your kind could work together to control such a force?” Trian asked, shocking the demon who was focused on touching the wood of the table.

“Oh, no no. The small bond we share with each other holds only until we make it to another realm. There will be no alliance. The strongest mind weavers I’ve seen control several hundred spawn at once.” he answered Trian’s questions. Kyrian gave the demon a look, not used to the mind communication yet.

“Good, then we’ll assume there’s some that can control a couple thousand but likely not more and they probably work alone. You said Ravenhall is being held by one of them?” Trian asked.

“Yes, not sure if it’s only one but I saw it standing on the walls whenever I got close to the city.” Kyrian explained.

“Good, Ilea how many you think were in those fights we’ve had?” Trian looked to the woman.

“Couple hundred I think. They’re easy to deal with if you fly up to regain your breath.” she said.

“Well we can all fly and now Kyrian is here as well so a couple hundred more should be easy.” the noble said.

“Don’t you want to go back to your family, protect the city or something?”  
Ilea asked.



“They’re near the capital, I doubt a single demon will make it past the walls. And there’s a lot of them running around here. We know how to fight them so we can advance our skills here.” he said.

“You’re too focused on strength. We should look for Claire and Eve as well. If they made it out.” Kyrian said, the last sentence in a quiet tone. Ilea appeared behind him and smacked his back.

“I’m sure they did. We’ll look for them, starting with the ruins of Ravenhall.” she exclaimed, thinking of her friends and acquaintances dead. An ice cold fury rising inside of her that she had only known once. When Roland’s family was killed. Now though it was graspable compared to the confusion she had felt before. “Let’s go.”

“Ilea calm down, we’ve barely began planning. Claire would flip out if she saw this...” Trian said, shaking his head slowly. “Do you have paper and a pen, a map of the surrounding area would be good as well.” Ilea provided most of what he asked, as well as snacks and drinks.

“Let’s start then.” the noble said, sketching on the small part of one of the maps Ilea had gotten in the devastated city of Salia.

# Chapter 127 Air Support

## Chapter 127 Air Support

“That brings us to you demon. You’ve reached your goal and I’m debating on killing you right here, right now.” Trian said, the map already looking too complicated for Ilea to remember all of it.

“Why would you do that, he’s not attacked us since.” Ilea said.

“Because we’re right here. What if he leaves and hunts down humans?” he asked but the demon interjected.

“You speak true human, I have reached my goal. But now I desire to experience this new world. If I may be of use, do use me. If you should not kill me or even protect me in turn I would do anything to stay!” he was obviously in distress. Gaining all these new influences and now his life was up for discussion. Ilea was a bit disgusted at Trian’s suggestions but she had to accept that there was a demon sitting on their table. One of the demons that had massacred thousands of humans. Not him directly but one of their kind.

“Don’t be a racist.” she said quietly.

“Ilea. They eat humans.” Trian just stated. “Alright then we’ll use you for now. Just be aware that if you betray us we’ll kill you and if you flee and hide or attack humans they’ll fight back and kill you as well so I suggest you listen to us. It’s your best bet of continuous survival.” he explained, driving a

hard bargain but a truthful one nonetheless. Of course the near level two hundred mind mage would wreak havoc among any given human city but in the end he would be cut down, one way or the other. That was if he was alone.

“How many of the spawn can you control? And would you be willing to cut down your own kind?” Trian asked. The demon just looked at him for a while.

“I’m confused. Why would I not fight them? I’ve been doing so for two hundred years.” the demon said.

“That’s settled then. Well I want us to work together. We hunt down demons and some of the higher leveled ones we find you add to your troop.” Trian explained.

“That sounds agreeable. I can control around one hundred and fifty spawn, less if they’re above my level.” the demon said, his impressive level of 186 would help them a lot against most of the spawn at much lower levels.

“Good, then we all know our roles. Let’s move out.”

“Finally.” Ilea said, lifting her head from the table it had rested on.

Sulivhaan ate in silence as he usually did, his mask lifted just enough to be able to eat. He didn’t allow himself to smile as he looked around the campfire to find his team still standing strong. Some of the few that remained in close proximity to the deathtrap previously known as the city of Ravenhall. Rock’s stomach rumbled when he finished the meal but it would cost them days to get to the next town for re-provisioning. They had enough to work with but in these situations the squad leader was missing a storage device of some sort the most.

“I should be fine now, going to sleep for two hours.” Rock said as he put the plate down and started rubbing it with snow to somewhat clean it. At least water wouldn’t be an issue, even if it weren’t winter. Navalis nodded her very light nod, barely noticeable to anybody outside of their team. They all were still clad in black but more and more, red was joining in, their gear growing more rugged by the day.

Senia, their rogue was already sleeping, her skills not allowing her much in the sense of reduced rest. She was small and Rock would carry her in normal circumstances. Aided by Sulivhaan’s gravity magic it wouldn’t be much of an issue. The ranger and mage were left behind at the still warm site, now only ashes remaining from the camp fire. They had learned early on that demon encounters wouldn’t increase much when they lit a fire, a peculiarity the monsters didn’t have in common with most other predators in Elos.

Navalis got up quietly and left for her hourly scouting while Sulivhaan was working with his gravity magic to ease the rest of his companions. He put down his mask again as he meditated.

Sunrise came and a pat to his shoulder woke Sulivhaan out of his meditative state. Navalis was standing near a tree and Senia above it, already somewhat shrouded in shadow. Sulivhaan reduced gravity around him as he rose, prepared for another day of fighting.

“We’ll scout around the south of the city today, same as always.” he said as the group moved out, more and more familiar with the surroundings. Senia vanished into her surroundings, about as hard to make out as Navalis who reached nearly the same level of camouflage with experience and the help of some minor skills. Sulivhaan was glad that the young woman saw Navalis more as a role model and less as competition, otherwise he wasn’t sure the team would still be together.

Rock was their tank and would lure enemies towards him but even he managed to stay relatively quiet while he ran through the forest. Sulivhaan himself of course was floating, the exercise not a skill but a combination of his gravity magic spells that he worked on for years to perfect, now the fastest moving member of their team for long distances.

It didn't take long for them to find the first group of demons. Whoever controlled them was sure to send out scouts and groups of them to check the surroundings of the city regularly, proving them to at least not be mere beasts. Of course Sulivhaan had his suspicions as to the reason of the demons' appearance. He wouldn't put it past some of the Hand's members to use this for their own gain. His best bet was on a failed experiment by a random member dabbling in necromancy or summoning, not that it hadn't happened before.

Of course the extend of this outbreak was different but they would quell it, one way or the other. The emergency protocol of the Hand would be put in place whenever Ravenhall would fall, something that has happened at least three times in the history of the order. They would meet in the current capital of the empire or kingdom the city currently belonged to. In these times that would be the empire of Lys with its capital, Virilya. He himself had seen many of the Hand flee, most of their casualties coming from the encounter in the Haven. Seeing Verena fight that monster was something he wouldn't forget for quite some time. The heights of human power and still she would continue to grow. With people like her on their side it would take more than some simple demons to take them out.

The woman had vanished into a portal the beast had summoned, with a group of members that had helped her fight it but Sulivhaan was sure they were all alive, he was an optimist after all.

“RAAAAHHRRRRR” the battle shout of their tank made Sulivhaan focus as he prepared his magic, the group of demons a big one. Navalis would assess them from a distance and would call for a retreat if she thought the encounter not manageable but so far there was no signal, so they engaged.

A field of increased gravity spread out around Rock who swung his massive hammer around him, blood and guts spraying as he cleaved through some of the monsters, their bones crushed together before they impacted with the next body. The first lines of golden light came from the trees behind Sulivhaan, impacting the heads of several demons. Senia appeared in the midst of the group, slashing at their necks and heads with her daggers while using Rock as a shield to find shelter behind. She would appear and disappear, reaping the lives of their enemies while moving in tandem with Rock’s hammer swings she guided pursuing demons towards.

His preparations were finished and while Sulivhaan was not one to hold the spot of being their leader through sheer force, he had more than just a strategic mind and ability to lead. A big chunk of demons suddenly flailed in the air when a magical force took them upwards. The gravity field around Rock suddenly pulsed outwards as the tank smiled, his shoulders hanging less low, his stance less strained and his hammer light as a feather. The demons around him couldn’t move, pushed towards the ground as hammer swings and daggers took them apart.

The group hanging high in the air stopped before a pulse of magic left Sulivhaan, the demons flying towards the ground with around five times the speed they should’ve fell. The snow on the ground didn’t help much as their bodies were splashed on the ground, leaving none of them alive as he prepared his next spell, focusing on another group when a heavy presence in his mind made him focus on a specific part of the forest in front.

“Mind weaver!” he shouted as several golden streaks of light flew into the direction of the mage. A massive monster, bones growing from its back blocked the ranged attacks as two more groups of demons appeared on either side of it, each as numerous as the one they had just fought. The signal for retreat came immediately from Navalis, Sulivhaan preparing his last area spell to slow down the enemy as they retreated. The mind weavers learned to

round themselves with demons, less arrogant than they had been in the first couple days after their appearance.

Another signal arrow came from their ranger, now from a different position. A signal to reengage. The man smiled as his delaying spell was reformed into an offensive one. A loud crackling could be heard from above when a massive bolt of lightning smashed into one of the groups of demons, their flesh burning, some even exploding from the sheer energy of the spell. Simultaneously spikes of metal smashed into the massive bone monster protecting the mind weaver when a winged silhouette in black armor landed hard in the group coming from the left, ash coming into existence around the warrior as demon corpses were thrown out of the cloud. Sulivhaan concentrated again as his spell took form, lifting up the bone monster and mind weaver behind it, the two rising as lightning and golden arrows smashed into them. Senia vanished into the black ash cloud while Rock engaged the remaining enemies in the right hand group.

The mind weaver was dead already from the continued ranged attacks, the pressure in his head leaving gradually as he put a chunk of his mana towards the fall of the still struggling bone demon, the subsequent impact sending a shock wave of snow and frozen dirt towards them, the cloud of ash clearing as two mages landed near it, the warrior in black standing next to Senia who teleported away and towards Sulivhaan.

They did engage the demons but Sulivhaan was prepared for everything, at least until the helmet on the black warrior vanished, revealing a face he hadn't seen since the collapse of Ravenhall.

“HAHAHA Ilea you fuck!” Rock exclaimed, throwing his hammer to the ground as he walked towards the woman who followed his example, the two hugging briefly before they disengaged and smashed their fists together, creating a loud noise of metal against metal.

“Wow.” he said to himself as he approached the group, Navalis falling in next to him.

“You knew it was her?” he asked, knowing the answer even without a response.

“Another squad is still here, that’s good news then.” Trian said as he looked at the approaching figures. Ilea knew at least one of them, that was sure and they were fighting demons while wearing black. A good enough reason to join them.

“Yes, all the demons are dead... nothing left for our weaver.” Kyrian said, looking back to see the slowly approaching mind weaver with his band of sorry looking demons. They had fought all through the night and morning but had found few high leveled enemies, until this group.

The ranger of the other team was rather perceptive, raising her bow and aiming towards the slope where their group of demons was approaching, still hundreds of meters away. Trian appeared a couple meters in front of her with a disengaging stance. “They’re on our side.” he simply spoke, the ranger keeping her bow tense until the mage of the other group spoke.

“It’s alright. Very interesting, now I would like to know the reason for a friendly group of these monsters. My name is Sulivhaan, squad leader of team eight, Shadow’s Hand. And you are?” Trian smiled now, having heard of the team before.

“Trian, team thirty four. And yes, I’m sure we have a lot to discuss.” he said, shaking hands with the man.

“The day is still young...” Ilea said as she approached the group, lightly nodding to the ranger in the process. “And the sun is high. Our numbers just doubled and the enemy’s numbers in the hundreds of thousands, why are we still standing here?”



Sulivhaan had expected some people to have stayed behind but in the past weeks all they had found were individuals, all trying to get into the destroyed city for personal gain, both random adventurer and member of the Hand. At this point he hadn't expected to find a full team had remained.

His inquiries were cut short by the team leader of the other group, Trian. They had apparently managed to talk one of the demons to their side, a story much too vague for him to believe at the moment but Sulivhaan was rarely one to be too hung up on the details. A job needed to be done, and he would get it done. Seeing the others reap through the enemy group of demons currently being slaughtered by them brought a big smile to his masked face, their powers working together incredibly well.

The large enemy groups allowed for full scale usage of all their abilities without inhibiting themselves, something seen only in bigger dungeons or wars. A group of seven level two hundred individuals going all out was not something most people or monsters alike would want to stand against.

The woman had grown, at a pace he had expected. More importantly she had made friends, team mates that would hopefully stand by her side whenever she needed them, whenever the barrier she tried to punch through was too much to overcome on her own. She would survive, and help the others do so as well.

His spell finished as he stopped thinking about his newfound companions, the enemy stopping in the air and flying to their deaths a moment later with a more than unhealthy velocity. Sulivhaan looked to the next group even before the previous one impacted the hard stone ground below. Hard winds pushed at his coat, making parts of it flutter as he saw streaks of red and gold destroy the confused enemy lines.

A storm was coming up, not uncommon in these altitudes. The snow would help them more than the enemy, concealing their forms and magic to their enraged and wild minds. The current group numbered in the sixties when they had found them and by now their melee fighters were hunting down the last

remaining standing stragglers who managed to escape the large scale magical attacks by his gravity magic and Trian's lightning.

"Good job." Trian said, checking on some of the injured demons who were left alive on purpose.

"Are you sure we can trust that demon?" Sulivhaan asked the flying mage next to him. The armored man looked at him, his once black armor was chipped in places and showed red below the applied color by the Hand, something common to anyone returning to Ravenhall after months of travel and fighting. The man coughed and clapped his hand together, a spark forming and growing all around his body.

"Not at all, he's a demon like them but we can use him. Trust me that monster is afraid of us more than of his brethren." the man said.

"And once this is done?" Sulivhaan asked but the man just looked at him and then back to the field of snow and corpses below, floating downwards slowly.

"We have three at one sixty and another four at one twenty. Guess we'll use em." Rock stated, chucking the screaming demons on a pile, their arms and legs removed by the skilled rogue in their group, quite skilled at removing limbs and not something anybody below her strength would want to ask about.

"Best we could get, seems like the higher leveled ones died mostly in the initial summoning or they're hiding inside the city." Rock said, motioning towards the general direction of Ravenhall with his hammer.

"Some must've gone off to other cities or even the south." Senia said, moving one of her daggers around her hand as if it were floating.

“Then let them dry to death in the desert.” Trian landed and looked around.  
“Where’s Ilea?”

“She’s fighting one of them still, low leveled. I think she’s trying something with her ash skills.” Rock said and pointed to a silhouette in the distance, the falling snow making it hard to make out details.

“Ilea!” Trian shouted and waited for the figure to turn around. The woman came closer soon, her hand firmly grasped around a struggling demon’s neck as ash circled around her, tendrils pushing and pointing at the corpses and the ground.

“Come and heal them, where is that damn demon again. Mind weaver!” Trian continued to shout, now floating upwards again.

“Could at least ask nicely.” Ilea said and threw the demon at Trian, its claws trying to dig into the floating man who responded with a high voltage charge that fried its brain.

“Fuck off!” he shouted down to her and continued to look for the friendly demon.

Ilea just shrugged and walked to the pile of moving demons, her face showing a disgusted grimace under her helmet. They were obviously in pain, enraged and powerless against the opponent they had found themselves against. They were rabid, monstrous killing machines akin to something she had seen in science fiction movies about aliens. Demon was a good name for them but still she preferred just fighting and killing them. Mutilating didn’t sit right, they were animals at least. Still she started healing the first one of them, the suffering of these monsters worth it a thousand times over if they could be used to fight the remaining masses left behind in the city she had grown to like. More importantly to avenge the humans they once were.

# Chapter 128 Family Dinner

## Chapter 128 Family Dinner

“We can make camp in the woods later, it’s safe enough.” Sulivhaan suggested to the man who quickly went over to Ilea, talking in a whisper.

“Sure, Sulivhaan you guys can stay at my place as well. I have plenty of food and everything.” Ilea shouted towards the mage who was a little confused as to where that place would be. The woman of course had only been in the proximity of Ravenhall for a couple months, already she had made herself a home. He didn’t dare expect anything special, perhaps just a cave. Not that the woman didn’t have any class but he thought she’d definitely sleep in a cave should the circumstances require it.

He was not wrong of course but in this case Ilea’s offer brought a massive improvement. The three of his team mates unable to fly reacted quite differently to Ilea’s suggestion to carry them down. Navalis skidded down the cliff side, occasionally holding herself to reduce the speed of her descent. Senia grudgingly agreed to being carried by the woman and Rock was laughing, continuously joking about his weight and her inability to lift him. Obviously he was wrong. They all landed quite safely on the rock extending from the cliff side, the house built on it harder to make out from a distance than its owner thought.

“So you built this?” Rock asked, the skepticism quite obvious in his voice.

“Nah, had it built.” Ilea answered, reappearing in the cave nearby and coming out with a swordmouth tiger she then tightly hugged. The beast was wild and didn’t seem enthusiastic at the encounter but Sulivhaan just thought of small cats some people liked to keep in their homes and shrugged, thinking that they also didn’t seem to enjoy their predicament. With the woman being at over level two hundred, the comparison was less abstract than it seemed at first glance.

“Rich as well, you have a suitor yet?” the big man asked, Sulivhaan noticing the glance coming from the quiet metal mage traveling with them. He thought not mentioning anything was the best course of action and followed Ilea into the weird looking home.

“I don’t really have any beds other than my own... well you can stay downstairs I guess. We’ll find something tomorrow.” Ilea said, thinking on anything that might be usable as a pillow. The kittens had grown in the cavern but probably not enough for this and they would be scared of new people.

“That’s quite alright, we have our packs.” Rock said, stepping into the house with lightly cleaned boots. Ilea nodded to that as she saw Kyrian going downstairs and checking on Cless who was staying in the showroom slash armory. He would probably cook for the others, she had yet to thank him for saving and taking care of Cless. The story would be an interesting one but knowing the man his retelling of it would be as dry as the winds in the Mongolian tundra.

The mind weaver was staying high up above the location of the house, his horde of demons not something Ilea wanted in close proximity to the house.

Considering his life in the salt hells, he agreed immediately to her proposal of staying up there, the trees and snow as exciting to him as they were to a one year old puppy.

Ilea quickly blinked upstairs to find her bed neatly made, her intention to quickly get a book interrupted by the sweet gesture. She smiled and got one of the books she had planned to read and blinked downstairs again, changing her juggernaut armor to a more comfortable one and sitting down on the table. Trian changed into clothes as well and sat down.

Ilea looked at the new group who had joined them, her eyes opening wide. ‘I forgot to build in a nice bath...’

“Fuck...” she said and opened her book.

“I think Kyrian’s cooking. I’m not sure about a bath but the ocean’s close?” Trian said.

“Thank you.” Sulivhaan said and bowed his head.

“I’ll go help.” Rock said while smiling, his helmet neatly tucked under his arm. Navalis nodded and walked to the door and back outside. Senia sat down on the table as well and started playing with her dagger.

“Don’t cut the wood, it’s expensive.” Ilea said, a stern look shot towards the rogue who glared back.

“How long of a rest does everyone need?” Trian asked the other team leader, the role of Claire automatically shifting to him with her absence.

“Two, four and six hours respectively. Our ranger even less but I’m not sure how much.” the other man answered, sitting down as well.

‘This just isn’t super cozy...’ Ilea suddenly thought. Seeing all the people sitting on the table looked more like an uncomfortable family meeting compared to the inn atmosphere she would’ve preferred. A thing she would change in the future, at some point.

“We have similar rest patterns, although I believe the highest is at four hours. Not sure if Ilea even Needs sleep.” Trian said, the woman ignoring him quite proficiently. She liked sleeping, nothing wrong with that.

“Then I suggest everyone with less rest needed and an ability to escape easily or fly should go out to hunt in the night as well. Who is the fastest among you all?” Sulivhaan asked, Trian looking at the woman already lost in her book and sitting in a relaxed manner on two chairs.

“A message or reinforcements?” Trian asked and the man nodded.

“It might be too early but as soon as we have a comprehensive scout report of the city and its surroundings. The number of enemies and possible weaknesses. I’m sure we can convince some if not all of the remaining members of the Hand and some adventurers or even the empire to help out.” Sulivhaan explained but Trian seemed skeptical.

“You’re an optimist. I’m sure they’re busy enough with all the demons that spilled into the lands. Where are they located?” Trian asked.

“Virilya.” the answer made Trian nod.

“Shouldn’t be more than a night to and back with her speed. Worth a shot at least.” the man nodded and then summoned a map, continuing to discuss specific approaches for their group with the other team leader. The smell of food coming from downstairs made more than just one stomach rumble. In the end Senia went downstairs as well, leaving only the team leaders and Ilea in the big living room.

“Alright, then I’ll ask the demon how much rest he needs. Otherwise we’ll work with the proposed teams.” Trian said to Sulivhaan, food being placed on the table around them. The map and notes were put into the noble’s

storage ring a moment later before he vanished to go see after the demon. Ilea put her book away a moment later and everyone appeared from downstairs, Cless hiding behind Kyrian and looking towards the new mage.

Rock patted Sulivhaan on the back, motioning to the girl, everyone else sitting down in the meantime.

“Hello there, my name is Sulivhaan.” the mage said as he knelt down next to his chair to be on her eye level. “I like your shirt! Did you chose the colors?” he asked and the girl giggled, emerging from behind her protector.

“Let’s eat.” Ilea said and started, the others following suit a moment later.

“That was delicious Kyrian, I might hire you as a cook if we don’t find Keyla again.” Ilea said, giving him a thumbs up. The compliment made him smile awkwardly as he hid his face with the action of eating, the reaction quite obvious to the more perceptive members of their party.

“So I’ll leave with Navalis and Sulivhaan. You and Kyrian go out later, what about the others?” Ilea asked, looking at Trian who had explained the plans beforehand.

“They’ll join us at noon when we go out together.” Trian answered, Senia concentrated on the plate before her, perhaps a little embarrassed at the additional sleep she needed to function properly. Ilea nodded.

“Alright, maybe we can find some beds somewhere. We’ll check out the villages and towns to the west as well. Maybe Morhill is still standing.” Ilea suggested but the doubtful look coming from Trian dulled her enthusiasm a little. At least there would be demons to hunt down.



And demons there were. The night was a dark one, the moon clouded by heavy snowfall as Ilea floating effortlessly above the white layer below her, the gravity defying ability of hers to fly not something she even thought about anymore. Seeing Sulivhaan float behind her made her own skills seem even more reasonable. Navalis was nowhere to be found of course. Outside of Ilea's sphere but close enough to lodge an arrow between enemy eyes whenever necessary, a comforting thought.

The small group had traveled through the mountain chains, hunting down any smaller groups of demons on the hunt for the more and more scarce populations of animals, monsters and humans in this terrain, their hunger insatiable. A group of dead demons lay in the snow right outside of the forest line Ilea had found herself in, proving that not all of the wildlife bowed to the new predators.

“Wanna investigate, hunt down whatever did that?” she asked Sulivhaan in a whisper, her breath forming a mist in front of her mouth, the mountains still clinging to the cold of winter while the lower altitudes slowly rid themselves of their white and freezing mantle. She only wore some comfortable clothes combined with her Juggernaut armor, her resistances and general vitality making the weather as comfortable as a summer breeze.

“It's no concern to us if it kills demons. Not for now at least.” Sulivhaan answered. If it killed demons it could kill men but Ilea wasn't in the mood to argue, their goal was definitive and any distractions would lead to less killed demons. Whatever did this had already helped them out.

The city of Morhill was located another two mountains further but while there was a little hope left, both Trian and Sulivhaan had talked her out of the likely misplaced optimism. It was one of the closest larger settlements to Ravenhall and would've been one of the first to be assaulted by the demon hordes initially leaving the city. Of course there was reason to believe some of the members of the Hand had reached them early and warned them of what was to come. Many likely would've refused to leave either way, their homes

and security too much to give up on a stranger's word, even if it was the Shadow's Hand.

The group traveled over the remaining mountains, ignoring the common paths. Ilea had asked the mage before if Navalis didn't want to be carried but he had only chuckled lightly as a response. Floating in the falling snow and strong winds, Ilea clenched her fists at the sight before her, the town in ruins just as Ravenhall had been. No fires or smoke could be seen from the distance, a bad sign for the human population once occupying the fortress city fitted with high walls.

"I'll go in and check for survivors." she stated and looked to her companion. "You better stay here, I don't think you're fast enough to flee should worst come to worst." the man nodded, knowing of her durability and speed.

"Be careful, we'll support you from a distance should you need it." the man answered. It was a risk of course but while Ravenhall was teeming with demons and at least some mind weavers they had seen from far away, Morhill seemed relatively quiet in comparison.

The walls were reached in under a minute, the dark winged figure landing quietly on the stone as her sphere scanned the surroundings. There were figures stalking in the dark, just down from the wall. Two demons, looking for food. Lucky for them Ilea didn't plan on engaging anything for a while, she wasn't as proficient in sneak attacks as others in their group and the risk of alarming the remaining demons in the city wasn't something she wanted to take right away.

Switching her heavy armor to a leather one that would produce less noise, the woman blinked quietly from the wall to the next rooftop, inside the house and then to the next one. There weren't many of the monsters in the streets and even fewer in the homes but so too were the buildings lacking in human life. Compared to Salia where the streets were full of corpses, Ilea was downright creeped out by the lack of bodies, the city more a ghost town than anything else. She had found suitable beds and some other necessities for her new guests rather soon and stored them in her necklace, to be distributed later.

The search continued for the good part of an hour, until finally she perceived movement that didn't come from a demon but from people. A closed up cellar at the bottom of a nondescript house held several individuals sitting below blankets, cold and quiet. Ilea made sure to check the surroundings but found no demons in the near vicinity, before she blinked in front of the closed up door, hidden below an entrance that was covered by a massive rug. A good hiding spot, its existence questionable in any other situation than this.

She knocked on the door, three times and then waited. The people inside stirred, one man starting to cry as a woman went and held him close, reassuring him that everything will be fine. One of the people came closer to the door and put his ear close.

“There's no demons nearby. I'm going to come inside.” Ilea said and watched the people through her sphere. This was as much preparation as she was willing to give before she blinked inside. Her dinner nearly came up the moment she appeared, her sense of smell toned down to the minimum as she took in the rugged appearance of the people inside.

“Good thing the fuckers aren't exactly dogs.” she said out loud.

“You're human!” the man at the door walked to her. “We're saved then, you're with the Hand?” his look was pleading. “Is the city saved?” the bloodshot eyes stared at her and Ilea found herself a little annoyed that she even bothered coming down here. Saving people was a hassle but still she wouldn't just let them die.

“No, the city is fucked. And I'm afraid you'll have to stay down here for another while but we'll get you as soon as the streets are cleared. Not sure how long that will take.” she said, walking over to the buckets filled with shit and piss. The remaining food was hidden in a blanket in the corner, not enough to last them the week. The buckets vanished into her necklace and a bunch of food materialized on top of the blanket. Enough for a month at least, maybe longer.

Before any of the people could react, Ilea blinked above and a couple houses over, dumping the content of the buckets before she went back, placing the emptied containers in their previous spot. The smell issue couldn't be solved

quickly, not with them staying here for another month so she didn't bother trying to do so. She filled the water container up again and was about to leave when she turned around again, four sets of eyes focused on her, fear and confusion in their eyes but also gratitude and hope.

“Was this your house?” she asked and the woman nodded, tears forming in her eyes. Ilea blinked upstairs and checked the house for books and personal looking items, some empty pages and pens included she went back downstairs and put everything on the small table in the room. It was cold but they had a lot of blankets and now they had new things to keep their mind occupied and food to keep them alive.

“Thank y...” one of them started but Ilea was already gone, to the next house and looking for more survivors. It would take hours if not days to look through the whole city and she was sure there were many more, both here, in Ravenhall and in and other settlement nearby. The question was if it was more beneficial to help them survive or to destroy the demons who caused them to be hidden away.

Ilea concluded that both would be necessary and she would propose cleaning out Morhill and nearby settlements before tackling Ravenhall itself. With no mind weaver so far and the erratic movements and savagery she had seen in the demons here it was more likely for people to have survived here rather than in the Hand's stronghold.

Ilea did go to the noble part of town, finding shelters in nearly every house but all of them empty, the people likely either fled or were strong enough to fight back. Still they either died or left in the end it seemed. The main hall of the local lord was impressive, the lack of people and light lent its splendor an eerie touch but Ilea wasn't bothered by it, no rather she felt strong. To stand inside the ruins of an abandoned city, its highest governing members having given up on it yet here she was.

Time enough had passed and Ilea's search would have to continue later that day, perhaps with a less subtle entry. She smiled at the roar behind her, one of the demons having found her inside the government building looking more akin to a palace.

“Did you think I’d leave without at least saying hello?” she asked before her leather armor was replaced by the dark full plate protection she had grown to trust. Still with her back to the demon she blinked right before its massive claws reached her, a multitude of skills activating at once as she appeared behind it, her hand reaching out around its throat, stopping the monster in its tracks. Her hand closed before a crack could be heard, its spine broken at the top, the monster dead in her hand.

The noise in her head notifying her about the low leveled monster she had killed was thoroughly ignored, most of the fought demons in the past day a mere trickle to her experience. Her skills would level but she was growing a little bored with these beasts, their predictable actions and fighting skills barely itching the more and more experienced warrior. The only exciting thing they had was numbers.

She tossed the demon corpse into the street below before she loudly started to sing. Snow was falling around her as more and more monsters were attracted to the noise coming from the stairwell leading to the main palace of government in Morhill. A once busy place, hosting diplomats, merchants, warriors and mages from all over the empire, now empty, a lone warrior sitting on its steps, missing her headphones and the sound of her favorite tracks.

Perhaps she would somehow get back to the demon realm and from there to earth, just to get a solar charger, her phone and some headphones before coming back to Elos. Standing up Ilea stretched, her bladed gauntlets replacing the juggernaut armor on her arms, ash forming and moving around the blades before the first demon appeared, screeching at the newfound source of food it may find hard to digest.

Like a beacon of light in a stormy ocean, more and more demons came and went, slashed through by the untiring warrior in black, her movements

efficient, practiced and deadly. The mostly rather low leveled monsters were still dangerous but Ilea knew them by now, knew their tricks and movements, their hyper aggressive approach to fighting now used against them as the woman danced through the masses, each move both dodging an attack and delivering a kick or slash.

Four minutes into the fight she noticed streaks of gold flashing in the distance, punching through skulls of nearby demons. A smile formed on her lips as she went into a trance of fighting, becoming one with her body and her abilities. No ash was created around her to let the ranger see her enemies and to let the two members of her team see should she get into a desperate situation, not that such a thing was likely. Her veil was pierced a couple times but the demons were too vicious and aggressive to specifically target weak spots in her armor.

Her resources were running out a while later. Not sure how much time had passed, Ilea's wings burst out from her back as she jumped upwards, kicking at a demon that tried to hold on. Projectiles rained against her veil, some piercing through to be stopped by her armor as she slowly rose up. Her bow appeared in her hand as she targeted specifically the ranged monsters, the massive arrows punching through their flesh and into the stone ground or ceilings below. Soon her stamina too reached a low as she blinked higher and flew towards where the golden streaks had come from, soon slowing down to meditate and get back her energy.

She landed next to Navalis who was still shooting her incorporeal arrows into the masses, sitting down next to her and watching the demons confused and screeching in the distance. There were hundreds still, if not thousands. Her skills weren't suitable to deal with numbers like that efficiently but tomorrow would be different, tomorrow the demons would find themselves back in hell.

“I want to check on a village nearby. A friend of mine lives there.” Ilea said to Sulivhaan who appeared soon after. Her reserves were growing steadily, nearly full again she was glad her Meditation skill and general regeneration was percentage based and not simply number based. Otherwise it would take hours or days for her mana to grow back.

“Did you find any survivors and the supplies we needed?” the man asked her and she just nodded.

“I think we should clear out this city tomorrow. Then check surrounding villages and finally assault Ravenhall.” she said.

“Yes, that was the plan. Trian agrees as well although I think we should focus on Ravenhall first and foremost.” the mage answered, motioning for her to lead the way. Ilea nodded again and got up.

She looked to Navalis and spoke. “Let me know if we need to slow down.” she said and started flying towards Indur, the village where Balduur Birch had his little smithy.

# Chapter 129 A Good Show

## Chapter 129 A Good Show

“I expected as much. It’s weird that there were no demons in that village but that might be a good sign after all.” Trian said. The sun was rising, illuminating the living room of Ilea’s house with the morning light. Senia and Rock emerged from downstairs, their rest extended a little after Ilea had brought some comfortable beds, pillows and blankets from their little expedition to Morhill.

“Breakfast will be ready any moment now. Everyone feel prepared for the day?” Trian asked, getting some grunts in response. Ilea chuckled, his demeanor reminding her of a mother preparing her children for the day at school. The reactions were similar as well. The man looked at her with a frown but it didn’t reach his eyes. She assumed he was glad to be out of the demon realm. Her last stunt with the third stage of blink was admittedly risky but she believed he would’ve figured out a way to get back if it would’ve failed. It would’ve taken longer probably but he and that demon would’ve found a way.

Breakfast arrived swiftly, everyone’s mood improved by miles compared to the day before, some for different reasons than others. Ilea was somewhat falling into competition with Rock, at least that was what the man thought, continuing to eat way past his needed calories. The woman of course was unaware of this and just ate to her heart’s content until Trian clapped his hands together, his patience reaching its end. Morhill would be their main destination for the day.



The sun was rising over Morhill and Eleonora knew that something had changed. Something had happened in the night before but her subordinates were either drunk or blind to miss it. The demons were riled up, more than they usually were and they had gathered around the main government office in the city.

“Are you sure you haven’t noticed anything? Bloody fucking drunk...” she said, murmuring the last part, all of their team gathered near a rock formation overlooking the town below. Jeff of course didn’t even react, his position in the squad secure as ever. Nobles and their shitty influence. Of course they had to put their reject into her squad but there was little she could do about it and on a job like this she couldn’t let team issues distract her. At least everyone else was carrying their weight.

The others weren’t happy with the situation either but they had to involve the man, at least somewhat. Otherwise they’d be chewed out again by the higher ups. Eleonora had two more years of service to go until she would be allowed an adventurer post by the empire itself, a highly desired position and one she wouldn’t give up because a team member annoyed her.

Usually the jobs were simple as well, the scouting squad rarely asked to actually deal with problems, more often only asked to report them. She had hoped to god it would stay that way, especially because her branch was assigned to the area around Ravenhall and its mountain chain, now of course the opposite of the previously safe and secure spot it held in the empire. The Hand had dealt with most problems themselves, some of the reported monsters vanishing overnight without anybody paying for the mercenaries even.

There were many reasons the empire let them do as they pleased and that was one of them.

“So what should we do captain?” their healer asked, a man in his thirties with classes so contradicting she questioned his base intelligence. Of course having a healer in the team was more important than anything else so she didn’t deny his application, not that she had much of a choice. She chuckled at the thought of being a scout captain, a job highly praised when she was still in the academy in Virilya. Experience told her otherwise but she wouldn’t be found trash talking the job, lest the empire’s hounds ask her uncomfortable questions.

“Boss, someone just appeared near the south gate, look.” the blue haired ranger said, her tone of voice as boring as her character. Eleonora had thought rangers would mostly be interesting people. She wasn’t wrong of course but there had to be an exception to the rule. ‘Two more years...’ She thought, saying the three words like a mantra in her head. Of course she had noticed the mage flying above the south gate, mages at that, one of them flying at a much higher altitude.

She wasn’t concerned about being discovered, they had an illusion spell cast on their location, making them very hard to discern. A couple more flying people appeared soon after, one of them even carrying two people. All of them were clad in black.

“So the Hand hasn’t fallen completely... hahaha, and here I thought they had all given up.” the healer said from the side, his negative attitude towards the Shadow’s Hand common knowledge in their squad but Eleonora had given up on trying to change his mind. Let him insult one of them and see how he fares with his shitty camouflage spells and self healing.

“Yea, why not throw your life away in that horde of demons... seems like a great idea.” Jeff said, making Eleonora’s breathing speed up. She was so very close from ripping off his head.

‘Two more years. Two more years.’ The woman wasn’t annoyed for very long though, seeing the people above the city start their move. A full squad or even more Shadows moving together and fighting against a horde of high leveled monsters was not something you saw every day, the show would be good and they had premium seats. Food and drink was missing but that was a given, the Hand rarely appeared where there were such things to buy.

“What are they doing?” the healer continued, disbelief and confusion showing on his face. Eleonora agreed with him for once as she watched the dark warrior plummet downwards with their two teammates, one held on each hand. The mage let go in the last second, all three of them falling into the demon horde, the mage in the middle suddenly wearing bladed gauntlets. More likely a warrior, Eleonora thought as the three impacted hard into the horde, immediately engaged with more than five demons each.

Contrary to her thoughts, the warriors weren't overwhelmed. On the contrary, they absolutely destroyed the masses of demons. The warrior using his hammer smashed five monsters at a time, completely uncaring for any claws that scratched at his armor. The small rogue appeared around the big warrior from time to time, cutting heads and limbs off the nearby monsters but the gauntlet using one was on a completely different world, their movements so fast they nearly blurred in Eleonora's vision. Movements like a dance, leaving only sliced through corpses and flying limbs behind. It was almost comical how a foe so overwhelmingly terrifying was pushed through as if they were mere village bandits engaged by the imperial guard.

Nobody spoke another word when a loud crack resounded, a massive stream of lightning impacting the flooding masses of demons, the stream coming from another flying individual. Metal spikes flew out from another one, shredding through the demons, their bodies falling like flies before a big chunk of them suddenly started floating. Upwards they went and the full scout squad of the empire was locked on the floating monsters clawing at the air around them, utterly lost in their position before they crashed downwards at an unnatural speed, impacting on the houses, streets and their brethren below, the sound of squashed bodies interrupted by the loud lightning and golden flashes coming from somewhere on the other side of the valley.

Eleonora was white at that point, unable to comment on the massacre before them. The sun was shining down on the gruesome scene, calling in the coming of spring even in this snowy place. It was still cold, oh so cold. She hadn't noticed how cold it was and put her coat closer to her mouth, breathing into the thick fabric as she watched the warriors and mages of the Hand dance and fly through the demons, monsters of terrifying children stories burned and smashed by the overwhelming power of these individuals.

Her whole perception of the Hand changed in these moments, from an entity the empire allowed to exist for their use to a terrifying organization allowing the empire of Lys to host them.

“Fuck the hell...” the previously quiet warrior next to her uttered, more or less mirroring the whole team’s thoughts on the matter. This was not something they would forget, not ever. What they did with this experience would vary from person to person. Eleonora at the very least felt weak, so terribly weak and cold. A fire was lit within her, one that hadn’t burned for many years as a quivering smile forced itself onto her face.

Ilea cut through three demons at once as her veil was pierced from behind, two golden streaks taking the lives of the monsters who dared to attack her a moment later. She appeared in a crouched position ten meters away right before a scorching beam of lightning burned away a group of demons next to her as she spun, taking the heads of four more monsters. A big smile on her face as she teleported again, further away to not disturb the others. A cloud of ash sprung into existence around her, confusing and blinding the demons frantically clawing at each other to get to the juicy prey that had suddenly appeared in the city.

It was almost too easy as she danced through the beasts, her knives biting through bone without noticeable resistance, her strength and equipment simply too much for the enemy. A sudden push from the right sent her flying through two walls of a nearby house. Dusting herself off she looked for the offender and found one demon standing a little taller than the others, its level at over two hundred, rare for this encounter to say the least. Most of the monsters were below seventy, the main reason why their group was destroying them so easily. They simply lacked the strength and resistance to reasonably fight back, their big numbers in the open space a detriment and without coordination provided by a mind weaver, the ranged attackers were hitting more demons than humans.

Ilea's wings spread as she screamed towards the demon, her bladed gauntlets replaced by her normal armor as she shot towards the monster with her full speed and weight, landing on its chest and sending the two of them through the house behind the demon, landing on the street beyond where an unfortunate beast was squashed by their combined mass. Ilea ignored the monster's struggling and punched at its head, some of the blows missing, the stone street cracked and broken where her fists landed, creating booms on impact. Of course the demon's head didn't fare much better even with the higher level. Four blows were needed until it was paste, Ilea blinking upwards to avoid the claws of four more monsters when she summoned her heavy gauntlets and fell downwards, her fists smashing two of their heads, the blood and brains splashing against her Veil of Ash.

The woman blinked upwards to a balcony, summoned bow in hand and loosing explosive arrows into the masses. She ducked when a group of demons rained down from the sky, their bodies destroying more of the monsters and parts of the houses. A rain of golden rays came from above and hit more than thirty of the beasts as Ilea jumped back down into the fray, advancing through with her blades until she met up with Rock and Senia.

"Rock! Let's play catch!" she shouted as she cut through the demons close to his back, Senia appearing in front of them and her daggers entering two demons' heads.

"What? Oh I get what you mean!" Rock shouted back, a heavy swing of his hammer landing on top of an unfortunate enemy before him, the blood splashing on his already red armor, wet from all the killed monsters. Ilea blinked away and shouted towards him again when the man turned his huge body with all his strength and speed around, his hammer swinging with all the force before it was let go, flying towards Ilea. Fifteen or so demons were completely obliterated on the path of the hammer when Ilea caught it and spun around again, sending the heavy object back where it came from.

The fight continued, each of them pausing from time to time, Ilea flying out Rock and Senia after they took more damage than they could sustain for the moment. She healed them up and let them rest as she went back into the horde of demons. The mages of their group fell into tandem as well, each of their mana regenerated in shifts as they continued to absolutely destroy the demons on the ground who were distracted by Ilea and soon again Rock and Senia.

The ranged monsters were much rarer and were taken care of with cold precision by Navalis who changed position on the mountain side from time to time, rarely ever stopping in her attacks, perfectly paced and efficient. There were no flying demons, likely because they already left these parts of the world, not held back by the confusing city layout or mind weavers taking control. As soon as the ranged enemies were dead it was only a matter of time and perseverance for the group to finish the thousands of demons on the ground. Nearly all of them were at a low level, making the whole ordeal much less dangerous than expected by both Trian and Sulivhaan. Still both Sulivhaan and all the melee fighters got minor to severe injuries in the process, all taken care of by Ilea.

She herself nearly lost one of her legs at one point, the lucky demon attacking exactly the weak spot in her armor Albert had previously used to nearly incapacitate her. Perhaps Balduur could help with that if he had survived but it wasn't the time to worry about her equipment, it was serving her incredibly well after all. She flew upwards and used Meditation to get back some of her resources as she breathed in and out slowly, the sound of cracking lightning and screeching demons all that filled her ears. A couple moments of rest were all she allowed herself, the cold anger inside of her demanding she take out as many of the beasts as possible, for the people they once were.

Eleonora gulped, the whole group fixated on the scene before them still. It had been hours, hours of continuous fighting, the members of the Hand

untiring, calculating and ruthless beyond compare. The destruction beyond anything she had ever seen in her life, one not quite young anymore.

“We have to... we have to report this...” Jeff said, backing up a slow step.

“Don’t you fucking move!” Eleonora said a little too loud. “The illusion spell is all that keeps us from being noticed... do you really want these people to see us?” she said. Although they were nearly one hundred percent on their side she didn’t want to risk it. If there was only the slightest chance of offending these people all of them would die, she was sure of it.

Of course her fears were misplaced but Eleonora’s experiences and history had shaped a person cautious and mistrusting. Her squad at least agreed with her reasoning and even Jeff didn’t talk back, getting back into a crouch and watching on as the mercenaries gradually cleaned out the once human population of Morhill.

“Absolutely amazing...” the woman whispered to herself. Mere hundreds of the demons remained and still the people fought on. She was sure that they wouldn’t stop until the last of them were killed.

“How the hell did Ravenhall fall if they had dozens if not hundreds of people like that?” the healer asked, even he was awed by the display of power.

“Less efficient abilities? Stronger enemies or perhaps the assault on Ravenhall was different in some ways. Many of the demons coming into the plains were reported to be around level two hundred, decimating even high leveled military bands. The ones down there are lower. We could take care of a couple dozen or even more ourselves.” the ranger explained in her monotone voice. Eleonora agreed but still it didn’t quite make the scene any less impressive.

‘I’ll get to that as well... I will. Fuck this squad, I’ll quit and find an adventuring team until I hit two hundred... and then... then I’ll join the Hand...’ Perhaps her thoughts were a little emotional at the time but she was quite convinced of her reasoning. If this level of power was obtainable for humans then she would reach it. Hell she was close already, just another fifty levels. She gulped at the necessary risks and fights she would have to get

through but suddenly the quiet life of an empire sponsored adventurer didn't seem as appealing anymore.

“Wait, isn't that guy coming straight for us?” The healer suddenly said, pointing towards the masked individual floating towards them at a somewhat leisurely speed.



# Chapter 130 Noble Halls

## Chapter 130 Noble Halls

“Are we done?” Rock asked, the grin translating to his voice as he looked around the battlefield that spanned several streets and squares of the once proud city.

The lingering cold of winter helped with the smell and decaying issue somewhat but come spring, someone would have to clean up for more than just a couple hours to make this place hospitable again, the sheer mass of all the corpses would be a nightmare to any cleaner on earth but luckily for everyone involved, there was magic. Not that Ilea knew of any ability that would help them here. Perhaps there were beasts that could be let loose to simply eat everything up.

“A couple more in this side street!” Ilea shouted towards the man as ash formed around her, partially dragged with her as she blinked away from his line of sight. It was only a matter of time now until the last of the demons were hunt down.

“Rock, was it? Can you help me close and shut the gates? Maybe we can avoid stragglers finding their way in again.” Trian said from a slightly elevated position near the warrior. The man looked towards where Ilea went and then resigned, nodding towards Trian and following him. The mechanisms of the gates were likely broken when the demons pushed in but with sufficient strength and ingenuity that wouldn't be an issue.

“Welcome to Morhill. I'm afraid I'll have to ask who you are.” Sulivhaan had approached the hiding squad Navalís had immediately spotted on their arrival, their medium grade illusion magic an indicator for their levels. They hadn't interfered and Navalís had reported them to be wearing imperial gear.

One of the people stood up, the rest remained crouching. “Captain Eleonora, empire of Lys scouts division three. You must be a member of the Hand?” she said, very open about information and visibly nervous. A good sign to Sulivhaan. They likely weren't a reason to be concerned and if their acting skills were high enough to fool him in such a fashion, then he wondered what nobles were doing so far out of their city walls.

“We are indeed members of the Hand. If your mission is to surveil the city then I presume it is done. Do you have a camp or reinforcements nearby? There are survivors in the city and taking care of them would be a waste of our resources.” Sulivhaan said, stating fact more than being arrogant. Now that he was close enough to see their levels he binned the idea of having them join their team, a single level two hundred demon would trouble each one of them and there were still plenty of them around.

“Of course sir. Some of us will go back to report and send for reinforcements while the others gather the survivors and secure the city.” the woman replied, a slight grin on her lips. Sulivhaan didn't miss her addressing him as a higher ranking officer, quite uncommon with soldiers but this one might not stay one forever.

“Then that's discussed. We're gonna be here for at least an hour or two so let us know if you need anything. The woman in plate armor will let you know where the survivors are, check in with her.” he said, looking back to find Ilea still hunting down some stragglers. One of the soldiers gulped while looking at the same scene when Sulivhaan turned back.

The captain said her commands and two of the soldiers moved outwards and towards the plains. Hopefully they would bring reinforcements and the

situation in the bigger cities wasn't quite as dire as in Morhill. Sulivhaan was optimistic but he had little faith in the military and nobles. The crisis would forge more capable warriors and mages, he told himself, hoping that the price would be worth the rewards. Looking over the devastated city he knew that wasn't the case.

Two people hesitantly moved downwards to the city while the captain remained, looking at him. "As soon as you reach level two hundred, come find me or the Hand. Wherever it may reside." he simply told the woman whose smile grew a little before she too followed her companions.

Ilea looked upwards to see three people approaching from the mountain where the imperial squad had been watching. Ash came into existence around her as she tried again to clean herself of the blood and guts that managed to get through her Veil whenever it had been damaged. It worked a little, smearing everything much less than last time.

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

She blinked away the notification joining the already large list of skill and level ups from the fights the day before and now. Punching her breast plate, she walked over to the approaching people who quickly slowed down upon noticing her movements.

"H...hey, we were told you'd show us the sur... survivors." The man managed to get out, intimidated after their display.

“Yea sure, we'll have to walk around all of the city. I only know of two groups so far. Come.” she simply stated and walked off, quickly deciding to sprout her wings to avoid walking on the corpses. Only one of the soldiers apparently had a flying ability, moving to the air a moment later.

A couple minutes later she had gouged the others' speed and checked below and inside all the houses they passed for any survivors. Sadly they didn't find any until they reached the place Ilea had visited the night before. Knocking on the door, the people weren't as startled this time around. Blinking inside she simply opened the massive steel door and led the soldiers inside.

“Two of you with me.” she said and walked out again, ignoring the people who started crying behind her. She did feel happy to be able to help but it was a bit much. Additionally a part of her mind made the connection that every single person who died inside Ravenhall and Morhill was as much a living and thinking being, snuffed out of existence by the summoning of that elder. Perhaps they shouldn't have left him there but it was too late to think about it now, there was enough to do here after all.

She moved on, followed by a woman and a man. They ran through the city for the next hours, Ilea occasionally moving into a house and finding survivors hidden away inside closets and cellars.

“How long have you been doing this?” the woman asked Ilea at some point, while the man was taking care of some kids they had found in a kitchen cupboard.

“Doing what?” Ilea asked as she watched the man talk to the kids. He was better at it than herself.

“Being with the Hand... having that... well power.” the woman finished, getting progressively more quiet as she talked, avoiding eye contact with

Ilea. She looked at the woman and then back to the man.

“Not long, couple months at this point. We all have classes here so a certain strength is available to anybody.” she responded.

“But you're different. You and your group.” the woman said but Ilea disagreed.

“You can reach it too, so can these kids. I know that there are much stronger beings out there too. With classes and skills, you put in the work and you get a reward. The higher the risk, the higher the reward. That's how I see it.” she explained and walked outside again, breathing in the fresh air and asking herself how these kids had survived for weeks on end.

“Maybe the risk you're willing to take is the difference.” the woman said more to herself as she joined Ilea outside.

“Let's get going, we're barely done with a third of the city.” Ilea said and conjured her wings.

Another four hours later, Ilea and the soldiers joined the growing group of people in a central square devoid of corpses. Both Ilea and Trian had contributed a part of their food and water supplies to the people but at this point the rest of their group had found enough in the city stores for their personal contribution to become unnecessary.

Big fires were burning in the square with food all over, warm clothes and packs were gathered to prepare the survivors for their oncoming journey. Sulivhaan had decided the city in the mountains was too dangerous for them. They would move to the plains and to the closest intact settlements. With the supplies they would take with them, the nearly two hundred survivors would be taken in with joy. At least he had hoped that to be the case.

“Ilea, you're done then?” the man asked as he landed next to her.

“With the city? Yes. But I'll eat first before we can leave. I assume I'll be the one to escort the group?” Ilea asked. Considering their earlier talks of visiting the capital and checking in with the survivors of the Hand, it only seemed reasonable to her to also take this task.

“I did want to ask you, yes. Additionally you're the only healer around so you can take care of anybody that might get injured.” he explained. Ilea just nodded in response and summoned one of Keyla's meals. She rarely shared them with others so still had a high number of them stored away. Blinking upwards, she sat down on one of the rooftops and started eating.

Two of the remaining soldiers would come with her, the remaining one left behind to inform the possible reinforcements of the current situation. Securing the city was in the empire's interests, moving away the now refugees wouldn't change that.

“Wanna go check on the vaults?” Rock asked after he had jumped up to her. “I'm sure most of them won't miss a bunch of coins and treasures.”

Ilea gulped down the food and nodded. “Why not. Let's see what kind of fucked up shit the nobles here were up to.” she smiled.

“Fuck yea. Wanna ask the others?” he asked as he jumped down, Ilea landing next to him.

“If we see them.” she said and started flying, increasing her speed as the man kept up. The heavy hammer on his back didn't seem to slow him down much. She would've been terrified of facing him on the field a year ago but now. Now she would definitely have a bout against him but that would have to wait for a bit longer.

“Another empty one here...” Rock complained, kicking at a metal door and leaving behind a noticeable dent.

“Seems the nobles had more storage devices than I would've thought. Or maybe they simply had enough time to get out of here.” Kyrian said, walking out of one of the rooms that still smelled exotic metals, only dust left of whatever was once stored in there.

“Maybe they simply didn't own a lot.” Ilea said, lifting her head out of the empty box she had just checked. Not that her sphere didn't let her know of anything in there anyway but it wasn't easy to trust a new sense like that completely, even after such a long time.

“Couple more rooms down the hall but I doubt they left anything...” Rock complained, his easy treasure hunt turning into a disappointing journey into empty and boring cellars. At least the houses themselves were nice to look at, the wealth of the nobles clearly showing even in a smaller town of the empire.

Walking past the remaining rooms, Ilea already saw what was waiting in the last hall in the corridor, skipping past the empty ones altogether.

“Hey guys, I think you should....” she started but was interrupted by a weird feeling in her head. A feeling that reminded her of Eve most of all, her magic that was. Veil of Ash came up and the feeling was reduced to a slightly irritating pulsing in the back of her head.

“Now who of you guys is doing this?” she asked into the room full of cages, creatures of all kinds were kept in them, many of them dead. Left behind to starve while the gold and expensive gear was taken. Ilea was angry though she understood the nobles' actions. Some of the cages were empty, indicating that some of the creatures were taken, or the cages were empty to begin with.

“So it's you... now what exactly are you hmm?” Ilea stopped before one of the cages, a cat like creature was residing inside, blue eyes and sparks running across its soft looking fur. Ilea concentrated on its eyes, focusing on the pulsing in her head that had gotten more subtle the closer she got to the animal.

“Drop it, I know you're in my head.” she said and hit the cage with her hand. The impact made the cat move to the back of its cage, the pulsing interrupted for a quick moment. Ilea didn't miss the bright ball of lightning residing in the cage that quickly turned back into a cute looking cat. A cat that was in fact too cute. Ilea didn't even like cats that much, even now with the swordmouth tiger near her house.

Not that she liked dogs anymore. The dagger was quite fine as a pet. Speaking of, she unsheathed the knife and held it towards the weird mind magic creature.

“Any idea what this is? How does it look to you?” Ilea asked, remembering that Aki had never mentioned any mind magic to be able to influence him before.

“It's a ball of lightning. I think I have heard of it before. A rare creature from the Navali forest. At least that's where its usually found. What does your identify tell you?” the dagger asked, surprising Ilea that he finally did in fact know a thing about a creature she encountered.

*[Silintis – lvl 103]*

“A Silintis it says. At level one hundred and three.” Ilea recited and crouched down to look at the thing.

“Ah yes. It's mostly a ball of lightning. Why do you ask, are your eyes failing you?” Aki asked.

“Its mind magic is pretty good. It looks like a cute little cat to me. Didn't starve yet that one.” she said and got up again.

“Any idea if these eat meat or would attack me upon release?” Ilea asked her dagger, soon joined by Rock and Kyrian who helped evaluating the surviving beasts.

“Most of them are harmless but they're not supposed to be in this climate.” Rock said, opening the cage to a turtle like creature that slowly floated towards him right after.



“If we take them wish us people would eat or sell them. Kyrian can you and the others take them to my house and feed them. I'll think of something later.” Ilea asked of her friend.

“What about that cute creature here, I think I'll take care of it myself.” Rock said, stepping next to the cage where the Silintis was held.

“That's a Silintis, it's in your head.” Kyrian said, his resistances to mind magic considerable as well from their training with Eve.

“Oh boi, I'll get out of here then. Fuck that mind magic bullshit. You don't look like you'd kill it?” Rock asked but left before he got an answer, Ilea's look enough to dissuade him. The man shook his head and walked off. “I'll check the last houses, join me if you feel like it.”

“It's the cutest thing I've ever seen...” Kyrian said, opening the cage. Ilea didn't intervene, the man was old and strong enough to handle a critter at level one hundred.

“They don't eat meat so it should be fine...” Aki said from the side as the two watched the creature walk up on Kyrian's armor, resting around his neck.

“Is it gonna take over now?” Ilea asked.

“I doubt it can do something like that, otherwise we'd likely have a lot more of them around...” Kyrian said before he pet the creature on its head.

“I'll take care of the rest here. Don't worry about the creatures. Now stop with your magic.” he said as he snipped the creature with quite a bit of force. The animal screeched and ran off, soon resting on Ilea's head instead.

“He's right you know?” Ilea said and grabbed the animal from her head, looking at it while she squeezed a little. The creature released its magic, revealing its ball lightning form to the onlookers. Ilea summoned a piece of meat from her storage and held it towards the creature. After nothing happened for a couple seconds, she exchanged the meat with a head of salad. This time the creature extended some tentacle like arms and grabbed the meal, the whole head vanishing inside of it in the span of three seconds.

“Hungry eh?” she asked but the creature turned back into a feline and fell asleep, its spell still active in that state. She placed it into the cage again carefully and nodded to Kyrian.

“Yea, that one isn't very dangerous.” she said, looking over to a rabid racoon inside one of the cages, some runes keeping the fire magic released by the creature inside at bay. “Don't let them into my room, alright?” she said and left the man to his post, a little forlorn amongst the strange creatures.

“Nothing nothing nothing. Man this sucks, seems like they weren't quite as unprepared as the rest of the city.” Rock said as he came up from the cellar, joining Ilea in the big dinner hall that still had questionably fresh food on the massive table.

“Not completely...” she said, changing into a black dress while spinning around, her armor exchanged with the beautiful fabric that now adorned her.

“Whoa there...” Rock said, taking a step back at the warrior now dressed in a noble's dress.

“Looks nice right? Honestly the pain of getting one of these made, the price and the time it takes to just get it on is just not worth it... but like this?” she asked, switching the dress to a red one in the next moment. Ilea had checked a couple houses already, seeing that the vaults themselves held little of interest but up until this house, nobody had a similar size to her. These fit nearly perfectly though, enough for her to consider using them should the occasion arise.

A wedding perhaps, or maybe to blend into a ball or something. Ilea shrugged as she switched back to her armor, her helmet still left inside of her necklace as she tried some of the wine that still seemed good.

“You're gonna poison yourself... or catch a disease.” the man said, having caught himself after the display.

“Good thing I'm a healer.” Ilea said, appearing in the biggest chair at the end of the table, wine glass in hand as her legs landed on the expensive silk covering the table. Some glasses nearly fell at the weight of her boots.

“They wouldn't be happy about this...” Rock said, loosely motioning to the big flag placed on the wall behind her. He walked to the table and grabbed a bottle, sitting down opposite her, lifting it in toast.

“To killing demons?” she asked, lifting her glass in turn and the man nodded, downing the whole bottle in a single swig. Ilea took a single sip and put the glass down again. Wine wasn't exactly her preferred drink but it did taste rather rich. It was the last noble house in the city and Ilea was sure the survivors were soon ready to leave. Getting up, she waved to her friend who had finished five bottles and held another three in his arm, gentle enough not to crush them.

# Chapter 131 Escort Missions

## Chapter 131 Escort Missions

“Just one of them will come with us?” One of the many overlapping voices whispered to the people next to them. The concern was evident and Ilea just waited on her spot on top of a house near the group of people that was being managed by the soldiers who would come with them.

Ilea just smiled, just one of them? The people didn't even consider the soldiers who were nearly at one hundred and fifty, certainly not incapable warriors. However it would be a shame if the survivors died on the way and Ilea did plan to do as much as she could.

It seemed the soldiers finally managed to explain the formation, where to go and most importantly the rules for the survivors. The woman who had previously talked to Ilea waved towards her and turned around, towards the gate that had been opened a couple meters wide by Rock.

“See you Ilea, don't take too long.” Trian said, having landed next to her. “Don't fuck around too much in the capital.” the man said and she just nodded.

“You really embraced that team leader thing you've started. I wondered one thing Trian.” she said, peaking his interest as he looked at her through the slit in his helmet. “Why are you still here? I thought you just joined the Hand

because it's a family tradition or something, wouldn't now be the time to get out?" she finished, knocking off the gathered snow on her armored legs.

"What a surprise, you actually care about me? Well don't consider me too much, I have my reasons and you have yours." he said but she just shook her head.

"I like to fight, and I like you guys. That's reason enough but hey, whatever goes on in your head..." she touched his shoulder. "I'm glad you're still hanging around." she winked and summoned her helmet before following the rather big group of survivors and two soldiers leaving the gate. The close vicinity had been cleared by Navalis and Trian beforehand so at least for the next couple kilometers there wouldn't be imminent danger.

The survivors had been divided into three groups. Children and elderly unable to fight, adults below level fifty and the rest. Adding to Eleonora's bad mood the two first groups were much bigger than the last one. She looked over to find a mage at level seventy walking next to her. A sigh left her mouth, the air visible before her as she pushed her coat closer to her face.

The last of the group had left the gate of Morhill, the formation not quite what she had intended. It was a given though, the civilians unable to follow her instructions without any training as soldiers or adventurers.

"Where's... oh.." she whispered to herself as she looked around and then up to find their escort flying about a hundred meters above, the lightly falling snow making it hard to see her. Still the black wings could be made out.

"Man I wish I had wings..." she continued to murmur to herself, annoyed at the still cold weather. At least down in the plains the cold would be more

forgiving. For now she hoped at least half the people made it to the next city, if that city was still standing of course.

Ilea landed on top one of the demons, crushing its head with a quick punch, destructive mana entering the demon while it screamed and flailed upwards, the sharp claws glancing off the hovering ash around its target. The other demon nearby ran at her but the woman simply appeared behind it, sending the creature to the ground with a hard kick. Another blink and stomp later and the area was clear.

Looking around, Ilea breathed out and looked towards the rising sun. They had encountered stragglers, both demons and other monsters using the opportunity to hunt or forced to relocate due to the new threat. They had come out of the mountains a couple hours ago, the refugees having slept for a couple hours earlier. The motivation to get behind walls was high and pushed the group further than Ilea thought possible, certainly further than most humans on earth would be capable of walking in ten hours. Not like an elderly man could even walk for ten hours straight.

The several dozen people with levels above fifty were the reason for their success, willing to carry people and more of the light equipment they had taken with them.

Ilea turned around and flew back into the nearby forest, finding the refugees huddled together and waiting for her report. The soldiers and capable people formed a protective circle around the rest. Ilea landed near the woman, Eleonora Siva apparently, captain of the scouts squad they had found near Morhill.

“All clear, we can move out into the plains. You lead, I’ll stay above as before.” she said to the woman and flew upwards, checking the surroundings. The day was clear and down here the snow had already melted. The forest

was thick and dark, more than a few of the survivors had injured themselves at the brisk pace. Other than Ilea there wasn't a single healer in the group. Luckily no demons or other monsters had managed to sneak by to heavily injure too many people for her alone to handle, the mostly just sprained ankles had swiftly been healed.

The country spread before her as Ilea checked for movements, the speed of the group below her picked up as they finally exited the forested hills. The lands were still mostly frozen, soon plants and flowers that didn't survive the winter would sprout again and color the area in a lush green but it would take another month at least.

The sun was high on the horizon, its warmth burning away the remnants of winter. Ilea could finally see a wall and lights in the distance. There was no massive smoke going up from the still rather far away town, which was a good sign. Only a few demons had approached the moving group in the past hours, each taken out by Ilea before most of them even realized there was something coming. A few feathered Drakes made themselves seen but quickly moved away after Ilea shot an arrow their way.

“It shouldn't be very far to Marwatch now.” Eleonora said to her companion, moving her pack a little on her back.

“I can see walls and fires in the distance. I assume that's the city we're going for?” Ilea landed next to the woman, motioning towards the general direction of the town.

“Probably, if I didn't get lost completely. I can't say until I see it myself though.” the woman said and Ilea nodded, grabbing her around the chest and flying upwards. Eleonora gasped as they got higher and higher but soon she was mesmerized by the quick ascent and newfound birdsview.

“Fuck that's so awesome...” she said, Ilea just smiling below her helmet as she nodded towards the town in the distance.

“That it?” she asked and the woman nodded quickly. “Wanna see something cool?” she asked and didn't wait for an answer before she simply let go of the captain, the scream making her smile as she flew after her, quickly overtaking the woman with a blink and catching her a moment later.

“You're mad...holy shit why did you do that?!” the woman was gasping for air but the punch directed at Ilea was either not meant seriously or her strength stat was under leveled at best.

Ilea just shrugged as an answer, quite happy the boring tour would finally be over.

Darkness filled the room, day in day out it had been the same. Eve opened her eyes from the meditative state to check if she didn't miss anything. The hall was the same it had been a week prior. The bookshelves were still empty, the table and the adjacent chairs unoccupied. And so she waited, completely invisible to most eyes she waited in her chosen corner of the room.

Space enough for her to lean comfortably but not enough for someone to choose it as their own spot for lounging. All the leads had come together to this building. An old house, quite well built but then again most buildings in the capital were made to last. To her annoyance, there was nobody to stalk, nobody to get information from, just the dim light that occasionally made it inside from the windows.

The house held little to no comfort, this room obviously holding the only importance. The only reason Eve was still there after searching through the whole place was that there was no dust. The space was used, she was sure of



it and with the information she had managed to obtain in the past weeks she was sure to have stumbled upon something big, something she had been looking for for many years.

And today would be a day for answers, she felt it. She literally did though as the vibrations of someone entering the house could be felt from below. The place wasn't registered, didn't show up in any public records of the city, even some middle level officials didn't know anything more about it or simply let her know she should stay far away from it.

Of course her actions, as experienced as she was, would alert anybody that would occupy such a place if they had paid the right people, had influence in the right circles. If this was worth her time though, these people wouldn't care or they would send someone to hunt for her. It had always been that way and at this point she knew it to be one of the most effective methods to get her targets to show themselves. Being a little too obvious, making intentional mistakes. It would help increase their biggest weakness, that so far at least nine out of ten people possessed. An otherworldly sense of superiority.

A smile bloomed on Eve's face as she pushed her magic further to be even harder to detect. Even Ilea would have difficulties with her weird spherical vision Eve had trouble completely avoiding. The training had pushed her to be even more creative in using her powers. Smells merged around her and light fell naturally through her illusion spell as she slowed her breathing.

The door opened and a well dressed man in his fifties entered. Gray hair and beard with black eyes. His hair was well taken care of, looking like either a butler to a noble house or rich establishment or perhaps a noble himself, trying to blend in a little more. Eve doubted it, rarely would it be required and even more rare was the benefit of a noble dressing down.

She was excited, her waiting had paid off. The man checked the room with trained eyes before he walked to the door and operated a small switch that activated different magical lights built into the ceiling. Eve's eyes adjusted quickly, ready for any move on the man's part but all that happened was him walking to the windows and closing the heavy red curtains.

He meticulously checked the whole room and cleaned some parts, dusting off the non-existent dust from some of the furniture. Eve changed the visual of her corner a little to make it nice enough for him to ignore. His cleaning ended an hour later, all done in silence before he set the table. A red tablecloth was brought in and placed on top of it, as was an expensive bottle of wine including a glass. Expensive enough for Eve to at least consider revealing herself to taste the beverage, one of her few pleasures in life.

She controlled herself, the possible gains too high and perhaps they had more stored away somewhere. Her thoughts came to a close as she concentrated on the room again. The butler had left but Eve was rather sure he hadn't left the house at least, not feeling the heavy door downstairs move.

She blinked and on the chair next to the wine bottle a woman was sitting. Black hair and an open back was all Eve could make out in the first moment. The woman was beautiful, her hair long and healthy, white porcelain skin showed on her arms and back where exposed. She wore a dress, a black dress that allowed for quite a bit of movement. This woman was either a passionate dancer, escort or according to Eve's identify, a quite dangerous warrior.

*[Warrior – lvl 230]*

An elite human, truly Eve had made the right decision to come. Even here in Virilya it wasn't common to see people above level two hundred, the occasion reserved for travelers and adventurers from far away or nobles that didn't show themselves in the streets.

The woman quietly opened the bottle of wine, putting a nail into the cork and simply pulling it out before the glass was filled with red liquid, the heavy aroma drifting as far as to reach Eve. The glass was swayed in the woman's hand, an occasional whiff of the smell deeply taken in.

It took only five minutes for the door to open. This time it wasn't the butler but two people coming in, a woman and a man. Both below level one fifty, each a mage.

“Master.” the two said at the same time, bowing low to show their respect for the woman sipping her wine.

“Report.” she said in turn, simple and direct, her voice clear and controlled. She wasn’t a simple upstart, Eve thought, her composure and grace one built on experience. Though it would likely come to a bloody end Eve held a certain amount of respect for the woman sitting in front of her.

“The boy has been sighted in Virilya. Four more dead nobles, all minor. For names and further details the report.” the woman said, handing over a letter to the woman on the table who motioned to the table itself, where the letter was finally placed.

“A woman was sighted with him, the sources are questionably reliable but we have two reports and one more where other people were mentioned.” the man added after a moment, their master not reacting to the letter or anything they had said so far. His unease was showing on his face.

“The sister?” the woman on the table asked, finishing her glass of wine and putting it down.

“It’s a possibility but the sources descriptions didn’t match with what we know. Perhaps it’s the escaped prisoner.” the other woman said.

“Hmm, yes. Any leads or is this all?”

“Nothing more. They’re experienced and leave little evidence behind.” the man said, getting a gesture of dismissal in response.

“You may leave then. Continue as you have.” the woman said, the two people in front of her bowing again and leaving the room quickly and quietly.

“Aaaah, incapable subordinates. A pain.” the woman sighed, pouring herself another glass of wine before she started swaying the glass again. “Wouldn’t you say?” she asked and looked backwards right at Eve.

Her eyes opened a little wider but she stayed quiet otherwise, her magic still activated. Certainly impressed but not convinced, Eve simply waited,

calming herself for a possible incoming fight. It wouldn't be easy. The woman was a warrior and nearly twenty levels higher and should a fight break out, there was no factor of surprise on her side.

“Did I get the wrong corner? Oh well, doesn't hurt to check, does it?” the woman said and suddenly appeared before Eve, a thin slightly curved blade in hand, she cut through the wall, right past where Eve was standing, the movement fluid and strong, the blade shaving through the wall with no noticeable resistance.

“Not here huh.” the woman said and appeared in the next corner, cutting into the wall again. A sudden pain shot out from Eve's left arm. Looking at it without moving her head, she could see a deep cut. Blood slowly made its way outwards, soaking the cloth below her armor as she stayed quiet, her mind fighting against the pain and her body's demand to scream. An experience trained and known.

It was only a matter of time for the first drop to land. Her reveal inevitable, Eve waited for the woman to appear in the next corner before a clone appeared and ran towards the window. The woman appeared near the clone immediately, her blade cutting through the air when Eve's dagger closed in on her neck. Suddenly a shiver ran through Eve, her whole body shifting to the left by a couple centimeters, the blade of her dagger scratching the woman's skin on her neck before the blade was brought towards the attacker.

The second dagger intercepted the enemy blade but still a cold impact could be felt on her chest, a line of red formed, deep enough to draw blood. The woman moved her blade upwards when Eve whistled. A loud deafening whistle startling the woman, a burst of mind magic pushing against her as she lifted her blade in defense. Eve didn't question the move, assuming the woman had some way of defending as she moved past the table quickly, grabbing the letter and jumping through the window.

She created four clones in the air and landed, seeing one of them cut down by the woman who had appeared next to her outside. Again the woman teleported and smiled as she cut through the clone with a letter in her hand. Unfortunately for her, Eve had let go of the letter in her fall, near invisible

and barely a meter away from the woman she aimed her dagger at the center of her target's mass.

Her body shifted again but still her blade struck true, cutting through the surprisingly tough dress and into her lung. The dagger was let go as she created more clones, the woman appearing behind her but unable to swing her blade. She screamed as she tried to grab the dagger in her back, the cursed blade rotting its way through her flesh before a second dagger struck her stomach.

Eve stabbed and stabbed again, the woman resisting at first but soon her lifeless eyes stared back at her, the blade clattering to the ground. She had done it now. Eve ripped off a piece of the woman's dress, grabbed the letter and ran off, her injuries too serious to engage the others in the house, likely rushing towards the noise in that very moment.

Four streets later Eve wrapped up her wounds with the cloth and started moving through the alleys more strategically, her magic working to mix up the trail of smell she left behind. Eve ran for two hours straight, not once sensing anybody behind her. She concentrated fully until she finally arrived in one of her hideouts she had in the capital, stumbling into the cellar and shutting the door behind as she fell on the stone floor.

She winced as the wounds continued to bleed, slowly moving towards a corner of the room, grabbing the health potion she had in every hideout. Stolen wares and sadly nothing compared to Ilea or another capable healer but it would hopefully do the job of stabilizing her. She undressed in silence, taking stock of the wounds and any infections or curses, luckily finding nothing. A poison was running through her but what Eve hadn't ever mentioned to her team mates was that her resistance to that kind of attack was likely on par if not higher than their tank's.

Finally the wounds were bandaged and Eve moved to the bed, stopping her meditation and iron mind skill, falling unconscious nearly immediately. The blood loss and strain to her body given free reign over her consciousness, still her sleep was plagued with nightmares.

# Chapter 132 Recovery

## Chapter 132 Recovery

Eve woke up with a start, the combination of clouded thoughts and bodily pain making her cough immediately, nearly retching up whatever little food was left in her stomach. She hated sleep, being rudely woken by the demons that sought her. Falling back down onto the hard bed, her eyes were focused on the ceiling. She wouldn't be able to sleep again today, at least not sober.

The danger of being hunted was sadly too high to justify such an action. Checking her injuries, she found them nearly healed already, which meant she had slept for over ten hours. No light came into the cellar, completely closed off from the outside world.

She knew where everything was, the same layout as in any other hideout she had bought, stolen or simply taken in the past years. Both in the capital and any other place she'd been. Eve knew there was a certain risk of someone connecting the hideouts together but to her it was worth it. Otherwise she might've died the day before, unable to find the health potion for just a second too long.

A deep sigh left her. It was a little close the day before, too close. The woman had only been a couple levels higher and still managed to injure her so badly. The blade shifting skill the woman had threw her off, in the end a simple ruse had won her the fight, her opponent's experience not quite as extensive as previously estimated.

These would leave scars, she thought as she brushed against the hastily applied bandage. No new bandage had to be applied, the woman quite proficient at doing them. Blood had nearly soaked them, so a change later in the day would be necessary.

Maybe she should've stayed at the Hand, should've looked for the others. She put the thoughts out of her head, focusing on the tasks at hand. It had been the single best opportunity to get out of the Hand's deal with all the training she had received and no debt. For all they knew she was dead and a demon by now, or simply eaten.

"A healer would be nice though..." she whispered to herself and held up her uninjured right arm. She refrained from moving too much, not to reopen one of the cuts she had sustained. It was however too hard to resist grabbing the bloodied letter sitting on the ground next to the bed. The woman groaned as the cut on her chest started bleeding again.

Letter in hand, she lay down again and breathed slowly. A little annoyed at herself for the lack of patience but even more so the lack of care she had fought in. Eve had learned a lot in her time at the Shadow's Hand but a reliance on a nearby healer shouldn't have been one of them.

She waited for an hour before moving again, this time only lifting her right arm with the letter, opening it with one hand. The paper was brown and thick, to not allow anybody to see through. On the page itself was simple ink. Names written down, dates and how the people died. The woman had apparently been looking for the murderer, in this letter only the name Red was mentioned, which could refer to anything.

Perhaps whoever this Red was, they could help her, could work together with her but then again it would likely be a waste of time. Another one trying to expose her, trying to use or control her. That time was over and she would find her own path. Alone. A slight pain in her stomach quite different than the one coming from the injuries made itself known.

A bitter smile formed on her lips as she carefully touched her belly. "I know. I miss them." she said to herself but her mind steeled, the non physical pain soon leaving her. They were too soft, the lot of them. Though she didn't doubt

at least Ilea would be up for some of these hunts. The synergy of their skills was simply too unusable and the woman was a volatile, uncontrollable piece of fury. Eve liked her, something about her simple approach to life. It had crossed her mind that Ilea might truly be just as old as she looked. She had secrets, of that Eve was sure but as much as she fought and killed, she was no veteran in it. At least not yet.

Trian was completely useless to her, not one to hunt down his own people. The man would question every single decision she made. Him and Claire weren't ones to follow, they were ones to lead. Not bad at what they did but ultimately useless to her. Kyrian was the one that got away. Had she encountered that boy before joining the Hand, she might've not gone at all. A powerful mage, yet so inexperienced in life, perfectly moldable.

The letter did mention a couple interesting things but nothing that would lead Eve to her next destination. It didn't matter much, she had three people to look for anyway, people that likely knew enough to at least find more targets. The woman brushed through her newly colored and cut red hair. "I need to find a bloody healer..." she murmured before she closed her eyes, thinking on her next steps.

Loud pounding rocked through the heavy wooden door of her room, Claire waking up with bloodshot eyes. "Again, god fucking damn these fucking cunt ass demons...", hissing to herself she got up, still fully armored as she made her way to the door, opening it with force.

"Again?" she asked and the captain nodded apologetically, his own face showing the strain of the past week as much as her own. The two started running, the captain letting her know about the direction of the attackers. The wall was manned, too thinly but still manned. Arrows and spells were shot out towards the yet unseen enemies as the two climbed the stairs.



The fresh morning air brought form to their breaths as they reached the top, looking over the walls to find a sizable group of demons running towards them. Two hundred of them at least but Claire calmed down, knowing that their rabid approach indicated the absence of a mind weaver, the true danger of these monsters. She simply hoped they would avoid her town and somehow all get cut down by the empire, the Hand and the adventurers signing up for such a ridiculous task.

She smiled, knowing that her team would take that job immediately. The idiots, coldly efficient and capable idiots at least. Her Hand was lifted and magic left her as explosions rocked through the enemy lines, the force pushing through their skin and bones as if they were mere paper. Blood and guts sprayed and burned to ash in moments as a big chunk of their numbers ceased to exist. Some lone creatures braved through the assault, an indication of their higher levels and resilience. Original demons most likely, summoned and not born from a human corpse.

The parasitic ability of the demons was the true bane to their existence. If it hadn't been for most of Ravenhall's population falling and turning to monsters, taking care of the summoned demons might've even been possible for just the Hand and their members. Doubtful but possible, especially with the demons hunting down the thousands of people in the city, distracted by all the targets. As it was, the city fell in mere hours, every fallen human taking ten more with them as soon as the demon curse made them rise again.

Claire was scared, truly scared for humanity in these past weeks. The elves had come and gone, ultimately uninterested in humanity's complete destruction. Claire was sure that something kept them occupied or they simply enjoyed toying with humans. Like boys toying with insects, she thought as another set of explosions extended from the plates that covered the fields around the town. Barely any trees or greenery had survived the continued assaults.

Arrows were loosed around her, the morale of the defenders spiking with her arrival as it always did. A member of the Hand fighting alongside a city guard was a motivation rarely witnessed. The lower leveled demons were taken down by the ranged assault with time. Claire focused on the higher leveled targets, handing out her runed arrows to the archers and showing

them where to hit. Each target impaled by an arrow exploded in a gory mess a moment later, the direct and internal attack too much for them to take, Claire's skills and enhancements to them too much for their defenses.

Two hours it had taken, two hours of continued fighting until the last of the enemies fell. A single level for Claire but looking around she found that more than one of the defenders had grown considerably. The enemy waves didn't relent but their expertise at fighting them increased daily. At least that was something positive. Their food reserves would hold for another couple weeks or even months, the hunters more successful than she had anticipated.

This was all only the case should no refugees arrive at all and Claire was a realistic as it got. There would likely be a whole city's people arriving at some point, their walls having fallen and most of their population turned to the enemies they had been fighting.

"I'll be back in bed." she said to the captain who nodded, likely having the same thought before she jumped down the wall and walked the short distance to the barracks. Her house was a little more central, the minute or two of traveling too much to justify. The demons also attacked mostly from the south, though she feared the day a mind weaver would make the city of Vihal its target.

Claire drifted off into a meditative state as soon as she hit the bed, sleep taking her a moment later.

Ilea slowed down quickly and landed, taking a couple steps to stop her movement. The sun was high and warmer than it had been for the past months. “Fuck finally, I’m never escorting refugees again!” she shouted to the gods above, her wrath would find them in time, she was sure of it.

It had been an organizational disaster. The city was full already and even with the provisions the survivors brought they didn’t want to accept them inside at first. Luckily the soldier woman that came with them had a little more say than Ilea had assumed. Apparently the scouts were pretty high up in the empire’s hierarchy. Considering nearly all humans have at least heard of the Shadow’s Hand, Ilea did think a military unit comprised of level one fifty people was at least somewhat capable.

She summoned a meal and started eating. What really annoyed her were the demands and constant complaining of all the parties involved. She understood, both the survivors and the inhabitants of the city. It was a complicated thing to manage resources and a complete disaster to have a couple hundred more mouths to feed suddenly appear. Outside of an empire or kingdom, the people would’ve likely been shown the way off the lands or even attacked, their provisions taken.

The issue was that Ilea just couldn’t bring herself to care much. She had protected the people, they had cleared out Morhill and had looked for them, had given them food and warm clothes. That was as far as she would go. The politics involved afterwards were out of her hands, out of her abilities and out of her range of fucks to give. A blooming headache was quickly suppressed by Hunter Recovery as she nearly cried at how good the food was.

She would look for Keyla in the capital as well, pretty sure that the cook had some pan handling abilities to smack away some demons. Proud of her pun, she finished the meal and got up, summoning her notebook that at this point contained quite a treasure trove of information. At least for someone new to this world.

Ilea did briefly wonder if she should just go public with coming from Earth, perhaps more people like Cless would turn up. Then again that didn’t mean they knew anything about it and at this point she liked her friends and

acquaintances here more than back on good ole Earth. Additionally she did have a somewhat unstable way of getting back, should she ever desire it. The demon realm. Both Arthur and Adam knew at least some amount about other realms so perhaps she would look for them at some point.

For now though, she blinked backwards and grabbed the approaching demon's head before it was smashed into a tree, leaving only paste behind. "Fucker." she said, throwing the limp corpse away. The things were part of the environment by now, the sheer numbers overtaking the local wildlife. Ilea wondered at what kind of impact this would have ecologically speaking but then again it couldn't be as bad as cars or industrialization.

"Car dystopia or demon realm, not sure what's worse." she murmured to herself before wings sprouted on her back. The notebook summoned again, she checked for directions and sped off, a big smile blooming on her face at the sheer joy of flying. The woman spun around in the air, laughing as she made her way towards the central human settlement in the south east part of the plains, Virilya, capital of Lys.

Occasionally Ilea shot down and smashed through groups of demons, her gauntlets used in rotation to get a good feel for them. The ability of changing her weaponry at a whim was something she thought of as pretty important. More important than even that was her ash creation and manipulation skill. The higher the skill grew, the more she felt it to be immensely versatile and important. More and more she tried to attack with a tendril or spike of ash summoned in the midst of fighting.

The damage of course was negligible, even lower in impact than what her veil's attacks produced, still she continued to improve her control and tried original ways of attacking and surprising her enemies. Ash had only been used as a distraction so far anyway, why not get better at that at least?

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 15'*

"Finally..." she murmured, having used the skill through all the fights of the day. It had been a little forgotten, rarely useful but Ilea at least wanted to see what the second stage of it did before she inevitably discarded it for a better skill that might emerge from her class at some point.

She quickly checked her status and smiled. It wouldn't be long for another set of 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skills and of course her Ashen skills were approaching the required levels as well. Considering the amounts of demons she had killed in the past weeks it was a bit of an impudence for her not to have reached higher results already. Another reason to find out about the existence of gods and their physical damage resistance. Hopefully nothing silly like an absolute immunity existed in this world.

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 45*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 217*

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 3*
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 18*
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Hunter's Sight – 2nd lvl 4*
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 18*
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 10*

*Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 213*

- Active: Veil of Ash – 2nd lvl 15*
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 16*
- Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2nd lvl 10*
- Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 15*
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 7*
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 13*
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 10*

- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 16*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 11*

*General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 5*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – lvl 2nd 16*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 19*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 10*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Ice Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Veteran – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 600*

*Endurance: 300*

*Strength 251*  
*Dexterity 350*  
*Intelligence 510*  
*Wisdom 365*

*Health: 6000/6000*  
*Stamina: 2756/2900*  
*Mana: 3620/3650*

Considering the somewhat easy time she had with the demons, the growth level was acceptable, even good. She had only come close to dying a couple times. Additionally several people had already told her that leveling after two hundred was more difficult. She was just a little bummed out because right now the demons were abundant. Ilea would try to hunt down as many as possible but at some point they would run out and she would have to find new things to fight. Hopefully some of her team mates would be alright with going to more dangerous places.

# Chapter 133 Immigration Documents

## Chapter 133 Immigration Documents

“Is that it?” she asked herself, falling back into the habit of talking to herself as soon as she wasn’t around people anymore.

“Should be it.” Aki answered, the first words out of the dagger in more than a day, startling her a little but not as much as before.

“Ah, I live for this...,” the dagger said, pure joy radiating from the metal.

“You’re not technically alive you shit. Well you don’t shit but that’s the point.” Ilea said, flying higher to see the extent of the city.

Contrary to the way most cities worked on Earth, there was very little housing outside of the high walls, monster attacks likely too dangerous for anybody to even consider it. Some still did of course and there were even smaller walled off settlements a little outside of the city. A big forest spread to the west, somewhat uncommon for the plains, at least what Ilea had seen of them so far. A lake opened up into the forest as well, some ships stationed near the city.

East and northward, the city spread. Quite far, even with Ilea’s high aerial view. Flying further down and a little closer, Ilea marveled at the Gothic walls that were ridiculously high and delicately decorated. Must’ve cost



them a literal fortune to build that. Her thoughts were interrupted by her seeing a couple figures approach from the walls at a high speed.

Five people, two of them winged and the rest simply floating came closer towards her, soon identified by their matching armor as a cosplaying group of some kind.

“State your... name and business in Virilya!” the man in the middle shouted, a little stressed out at her high level. Ilea wasn’t sure if he could identify it or not. The people were of varying levels, the highest being a mage at one ninety. Still, the highest city guards she had ever encountered. A given, the city in question being the capital of an empire and her approach being the flying one probably not being covered by most other guards on duty at the time.

“Lilith is the name. I’m here to look for the remainders of the Shadow’s Hand. I’m one of them myself.” she stated, most of it the truth. The silly fake name didn’t seem so silly to her anymore considering what the mind weaver had told them about names. A lot of people already knew her name but at least sometimes she wouldn’t shout it out for everyone to hear. Especially in new cities.

The man looked over to his colleagues but seemed much more relaxed after the mention of the Hand. “Yea, many have arrived in the past month. You’re pretty late. Come, we’ll check the formalities.” the man said and flew downwards, the other four spreading around Ilea as she followed him, not fully trusting of the stranger yet.

Ilea thought of what to spend her 45 remaining stat points on as they approached the beautiful walls. “These are honestly the nicest walls I’ve ever seen...” she said to nobody in particular.

One of the men chuckled. “First time in Virilya?”

“Yes actually, you’re for hire as a guide?” she asked in a joking manner. The man opened his mouth to respond but was swiftly shut up by a gesture of the man next to him. Professionalism seemed to be higher rated than comedy, a shame Ilea thought.

“We have a wave of demons approaching to the west captain.” a mage flying to the left of Ilea said. “Should we go for support, the west wing has had a rough time the past two weeks.” the man said.

“They’ll send out a signal if they need anyone.” the warrior to the right of Ilea retorted.

“I’ll go, where can I find you afterwards?” Ilea said, stopping in the air, her wings moving steadily as she watched the demons’ movements in the distance. The walls were much too high for them to climb or break through but what the beasts lacked in intelligence or planning, at least without mind weavers to control them, they made up with sheer ferocity and numbers.

And numbers they had. There were at least a couple hundred of the monsters moving in, the light of magical spells forming on the top of the wall as the sunlight reflected from the lake to the west. It looked beautiful, idyllic even. Ilea smiled at the view, even the noise of the demon horde below couldn’t reach them at their altitude.

“No, you’re coming to fill out the required forms. Afterwards we’ll see if we can get you a spot in the civilian support corps.” the captain explained, only looking back at her while shaking his head, apparently thinking it to be a silly notion.

Ilea’s smile turned into an outright laugh as the people around her stopped to look at her, confused at the sudden outburst. “Yea I don’t think so. The other guy here mentioned the western side of the wall to be understaffed and I’m a perfectly fine killing machine.” Ilea said, waving towards the man who had talked about the military resource situation.

“I don’t expect to be paid either, so don’t worry about your gold.” she said offhandedly before she dove downwards. Shouts could be heard behind her, quite efficiently ignored before some of the people followed, quickly left behind as her buffs came to life, the speed of the armored warrior-healer reaching her maximum capacity in mere moments.

“Civilian fighting corpse? What the hell is this bullshit.” Ilea murmured to herself, admiring the somewhat circular wall around the city, the closer she

came the more impressive the sheer size of it was. Moving onwards she started concentrating on the upcoming fight, her muscles itching to move freely and at full power after the rather inhibiting escort duty she had to follow.

Sulivhaan would have to wait a little longer, she thought as the first long ranged fire, ice and lightning spells were launched from the top of the wall and into the horde below. Impressive but nothing compared to any long ranged artillery one Earth. Ilea thought of the possibilities of launching big chunks of rocks with explosion enchantments over long distances and laughed at the idea of climbing one to become additional payload.

Her landing was not quite the impact of a launched piece of rock the size of a house but certainly close enough. Obsidian gauntlets upfront, she dived straight into the ground, the impact completely flattening an unfortunate demon before she hit the ground, her body compressing as the ground gave in below, dirt and rock surrendering against her assault and flying outwards to blind or strike her enemies.

Demons hissed around her as a black mist appeared in the vicinity. Ash, the densely packed clusters of the element spreading out to encompass a rather large area. The first demons to approach the small crater left by the ballistic human missile found it rather empty, a moment later the first of them fell. A woman clad in black armor spun through their midst, shrouded by ash and hidden to their eyes she moved efficiently and deadly, the low leveled monsters showing little resistance to the blue steel blades weaved into her gauntlets, covered by the red of their blood.

“Yea I’m not going in there.” one of the aerial guards following behind Ilea said, after stopping in the air. The mage next to him deflected a bone spear shot from a rather large demonic monster below.

“Neither will I but we’ll have to keep an eye on her. We don’t want anymore unregistered refugees in the town…” the mage said, floating back upwards to the rest of their team coming closer in the distance, the two of them the fastest fliers in the group.

“Are you kidding me,” the first guard said, his sword deflecting a ranged attack before he started moving upwards again too. “Refugees don’t jump into demon hordes. Did you see that impact?” he asked, soon outside of the enemy’s range.

“Yea, for all we know she misjudged the height and is now paste on the ground.” the mage commented, getting a chuckle out of the other man.

“I mean she’s with the Hand so fair enough. Crazy fuckers.” he said right before the captain and the other two members of their squad reached them.

“Where is the woman, I saw her flying into that group. Why didn’t you stop her?” the man asked, quite stupidly in the other’s opinion. He was a capable fighter but sometimes his reasoning left a little to be desired.

“She’s faster than any of us captain. And as nice as those eyes looked I really don’t wanna try and touch her.” the first guard said.

“Where is she now?” the captain asked as they all tried to make sense of the battlefield below. By now parts of the forest were in flames, fireballs and ice lances racing down into the demons, destroying them as if they were mere toys. Some special ops squads jumped down the walls or were already waiting before the massive closed gate to the city to reduce the damage the demons could deal on the infrastructure.

Rock and ice walls formed near the wall, joined by several barriers in front and behind to form a front perimeter. A couple crazy ones jumped over the barricades or flew down into the masses from above, joining the new member of the Hand the team had encountered. Just a few, each one taking an unnecessary risk in most of the onlooker’s minds. The horde wasn’t controlled, a simple matter of time to be dealt with. Something as trivial as this might’ve scared a guard recruit in the first week of the demon attacks but by now it was a common sight. Terrifying still, but common.

Ilea weaved through the masses, avoiding exploding projectiles falling from the sky around her, both her Blink and Sphere abilities a massive boon to her maneuverability and continued survival. She reaped the lives of demons running right outside of a fireball's blast radius, finishing off the monsters injured by arrows and ice spikes.

The sheer number of projectiles was impressive but considering the likely population of the city and its resources it was expected. Could've used that in Ravenhall, Ilea thought but then again the enemy had come from the inside. Ravenhall wasn't that much of a pushover, the circumstances simply led to disaster. Three more blinks and seven enemy casualties later, a flash of light blasted through the three demons before her, the angle of the spell indicating a much closer combatant having dealt the blows.

She turned to the right as she continued running and saw a mage in black robes and mask channeling what she could only compare to the power of the sun. "Cool!" she exclaimed, jumping over an exploding crystal, some of the shards glancing off her Veil of Ash before she spun in the air, impacting a demon with her blades extended before she disappeared in the direction of the mage.

The light mage was slowly pushed back and upwards as he continued to send beams of light inside and through the monsters' skulls. Four of them closed in and forced him to teleport away when Ilea appeared above them, taking two of them down with bladed arms and the other two with kicks enhanced with Destruction and Wave of Ember. All four of them were dead when she landed on their bodies, sliding for two meters before she jumped off, blinking towards the next set of enemies.

The mage descended behind her and channeled a longer spell before a beam four times the size of his previous attacks burned through the approaching

beasts, vaporizing the body parts it came in contact with while Ilea cut through the demons behind him.

“With the Hand?” she asked as she ran past him.

“Yes, group them up for me and teleport out when the spell hits!” he shouted towards the fast moving woman, her heavy steps digging deep into the dirt below, her velocity and weight creating a deadly combination of force as she impacted the enemy line. Having heard the man, she shouted as loud as she could, not moving too far from her position as more and more demons piled on her. Seeing the slowly approaching spherical object behind her, she waited for the last second as the first claws finally punched through her veil before she pushed herself off, blinking backwards and behind the object.

Appearing, she saw a small globe of light floating into the mass of demons, her hands instinctively moving upwards right before an explosion of fire and light turned the grass and dirt below into ash. Her Veil took the hit in stride as she turned and nodded towards the mage, moving parallel to the wall, followed by her new ranged friend.

The two of them repeated the same tactic for another two chunks of demons, Ilea playing the target to pile the enraged creatures up and the mage to detonate a deadly payload in the midst of them, the combination more effective against the large numbers than the two of them fighting independently.

“May I join in?” a female voice sounded out behind them just after the latest blast took out at least thirty demons. It was of course a rhetorical question as a wave of lava seethed out of the woman’s hands and impacted the ground to the left of Ilea, forming a line forwards and to the left. Demons hissed as their way towards the wall was cut off, too far to jump or too much of a pain was the lava for them to simply cross it.

Ilea understood and so did the sunlight mage, moving behind her as she stepped a couple meters to the right before another wave of lava shot out, this time to the right.

Ilea grunted as she held out her arms, her Veil working overtime as a continued stream of ash blinded the creatures she tried to block in front of her, the beasts falling into and over each other in the confusion while they were being funneled into the death zone the three mages had created.

This time the explosion caused by the light mage was a little stronger, singeing a part of her Veil before it was reformed. The demons weren't quite as lucky, only ash remaining of their corpses.

“Wanna move further, they can't see us here.” the woman said but Ilea just moved her arms, the ash parting and flowing into the streams of lava, the demons beyond screaming towards the enemy they once again saw before them.

“That works as well I guess.” the woman said. “Charles, how many charges left?” she asked, speaking to the light mage floating behind Ilea.

“Six of the big ones, better make them count. Regroup at the wall after.” the man said as they continued their tactic. Ilea had noticed that no ranged attacks impacted their vicinity from the wall above, the defenders at least gracious enough to let them do their work.

The bloodied and burned mud was squashed by metal boots as Ilea made her way over to the two talking members of the Hand. Many of the soldiers, guards and adventurers by the looks of them had joined to clean up the battlefield, of the somewhat rare drops of items and of course fires and other elements. Ilea brushed at her helmet, her gauntlet coming away with a layer of mud, blood and ash mixture.

“There she is, not bad. You're one of the new ones right? Full member already?” the man, Charles, asked her as he looked her way with his masked face. Ilea was intrigued at the making of his helmet, a mixture of metal and

cloth that looked to her liking. She did like her horned helmet still, but one day she might find something better than even her Juggernaut armor. As long as it didn't burn to ash after every fight she'd be fine with it.

"Yea, been for a month or so." she answered before stopping in front of them.

"Right in the thick of it then. Well good thing there's new people to fill in the sad sods that died in the last month. Don't remember a hit to our numbers that bad." the man said and shook his head lightly.

"How many are left actually? I come from near Ravenhall, looking to retake the city." she said, putting together her fists.

"Yeahh!" the woman with lava magic exclaimed in a high pitched sound, some heads around them turning towards the group, most quickly looking away again upon seeing the dark armor and high levels.

"Told you we'd go back." she said to the man next to her who kept looking towards Ilea.

"The mountains are overrun. Are you sure a small group could take care of it? The initial demons summoned were as high as two forty, at least what I've seen." the man said, certainly seeming intrigued.

"We cleared Morhill out two days ago. Couple thousand and we're seven people. The demons are uncoordinated and easy to handle if you take out the ranged ones first and have flying abilities. Ravenhall will be different, some Mind Weavers there for sure, the smart ones coordinating the other demons. I think we can take it though, just here to get interested people, otherwise we'll do it ourselves." she explained, looking towards the wall, the gate alone was around twenty meters high and around seven thick, Ilea feeling truly caught in a fantasy world in that moment. This wasn't something that humans on Earth could reproduce, at least not without a shit ton of money and time.



# Chapter 134 Virilya

## Chapter 134 Virilya

“Oh I like her. I’m Petra! Charles can we go please? I want a piece of those fuckers.” the woman said, first happy and smiling, turning furious at the last part of her sentence.

“We’ll think about it alright. I’m Charles as you already know, I assume you want to meet the people in charge?” the man said.

“Ilea, nice to meet you two. And yes, who would that be? Adam was the one summoning the demons by the way so he’s out.” she said.

“What? Adam? That’s gonna change things a little. Elder Urn was killed during the assault, Elder Quil has vanished with that massive beast and at least twenty of our own. She’d be the one in charge if she’s alive. The other two elders are nowhere to be found as always, probably in the north or looking for natural wonders for all we know. Dagon is actually the one organizing the members staying in the capital at the moment.” Charles explained.

“Hmm, the librarian? Sounds alright. Lead on then, I assume there’s no trouble with these guys?” Ilea asked, motioning behind her where the group of flying soldiers she had initially encountered were floating.

“Don’t worry about them. Petra would you take care of it and join us later darling?” Charles asked.

“Of course.” the woman said, her smile a little too enthusiastic but Ilea wasn’t going to stop whatever fun she would have with the soldiers.

“Well follow me then.” the man said, walking off towards the gate. “Time of essence?” he asked, looking sideways towards Ilea. The soldiers and workers around them glanced at the two completely black armored people every now and then, avoiding eye contact.

“Not really. I’ll go back whenever I’m done here. I have a letter from one of the squad leaders for Dagon. We’ll meet at Morhill in a week or two if it takes longer. Worst the demons will do is summon the literal devil to destroy all of Elos.” she answered.

“Alright, well it’s not gonna be less than a week anyway with everything going on. Maybe some of us will come with you immediately. Scouting the city and planning will take at least that much time. At least we know the terrain, secret entries and every building.” Charles said, walking through the humongous open gate. Ilea looked around, taking in the view.

“I’m not sure what that devil is you speak of but I assume you’re joking.” the man said, Ilea not reacting to what he said, stopping in her tracks right after entering the city. The smell had changed, a square opening up before her with beautiful trees, a massive fountain and colorful houses built with attention to intricate detail. It looked like a theme park’s interpretation of a medieval European city with the budget of Wall Street, sprinkled with magic.

“Didn’t grow up around here did you?” Charles asked and chuckled. The streets were bustling with activity, the people unconcerned about the massacre that had just happened a couple hundred meters outside their walls. The sun shined through the trees as merchants, bakers and smiths were shouting their wares and prices, restaurants and pubs serving food to their patrons as music played from their interiors.

“It’s beautiful...,” Ilea simply said and looked towards Charles. “No, never been here before.”

“Well then you’ll want a tour. It’s quite rich in character. I believe Viscera was inspired by Virilya, or the other way around. Both been here for a while.

Considering the circumstances I suggest we wait with the tour though, objection?" he asked, surprising Ilea that he would even consider asking her. With the possible ramifications they didn't know about Ilea was sure they should at least treat the retake and clearing of Ravenhall with utmost importance. She didn't want to find out if there WAS a devil that could be summoned and knowing one mind weaver she knew they wouldn't just sit idle on their newfound prize.

"No objections, lead the way. If it's more than a couple minutes we can run or fly." she said. The man nodded and started running, Ilea following behind a second later as they both sped up to find a comfortable pace for both of them, avoiding the people in the streets by jumping up to the buildings. Ilea nearly stumbled as she got a better view of the massive buildings, churches and literal wonders of architecture.

"Found myself in Rome eh?" she smiled and followed the man. "Why not fly?" she asked as they jumped over another building, both of them landing with such expertise that not a single brick moved out of place.

"They don't like it. Not that it matters much but a happy host is a happy host. Running on the rooftops is already considered rude." Charles replied in a loud voice as they sped through the city.

Ten minutes of high speed running later, Charles jumped off the building into a small square with a lot of trees and benches, devoid of people. The buildings adjacent were overgrown with ivy, their dark red color below reminded Ilea of something you'd see in the southern parts of central Europe.

In front of them however was a cathedral in gothic style, smaller than most of the others she had seen in the distance while running but not any less impressively built. Charles walked towards it, Ilea close behind.

Coming inside a massive man in black full plate armor nodded towards them upon entry. Next to him was the biggest sword Ilea had ever seen.

"Nice sword." she said, looking at the thing, the man puffing out air as a response as they walked into the cathedral proper. The windows had a sand like tone to them, dimming the sunlight a little from outside. To Ilea it looked

similar to one of the old churches she had visited, the only things missing were the rows of benches, an organ and pictures and sculptures of holy men and angels.

Instead she found tables and chairs, gear in piles and boxes, a bar near the wall with a man cleaning glasses. Warm magical lights gave the place a homely feeling. The place was near empty, only around six people sitting or walking around. Four of them were playing cards and drinking which didn't leave many.

“Dagon, we have a visitor. With news from Ravenhall.” Charles said as the two walked to the man occupied by piles of letters in front of him. The man looked out over his glasses and took in the two people, a small smile forming as he spotted Ilea.

“Another survivor. I will note it. Welcome back to the Hand.” he said, getting up from his chair that nearly broke under the stress.

“Hey Dagon.” Ilea said and waved. The card playing people perked up and paused to see what she had to say.

“Letter for you.” she said as the item appeared in her Hand, giving it to the man who opened it immediately and started reading.

“So much for the worth of knowing you have a spacial storage item..” he murmured, looking at her for a split second before he continued reading. Ilea shrugged and waited.

“Hmm yes, yes yes. This is good. I'm happy he survived.” Dagon said. “A shame about Adam but I'm sure he had his reasons. Making himself an enemy of the Hand, I never thought he'd go that far.” he shook his head, his voice cracking with the last bit. Ilea noticed his hand was shaking a little.

“I suspected it....” he said and shook his head again, his hand brushing against his glasses as he steadied his breath.

“You lot, get together all the members you can find. We're retaking Ravenhall.”

Ilea discussed the details she knew about with Dagon before she sat down at the bar, getting some mead as they waited for the Shadow's Hand to gather. After finishing her drink she asked the barman if Dagon drank. The man didn't know so she simply ordered a drink of his finest strong alcohol, walking over to Dagon with it.

"Do you drink?" she asked and stopped next to him, seeing that he had a blank page with a dried out feather next to it on the table.

"Here to buy information?" he asked after a moment.

"No, but I don't want to be rude." she said, placing the drink next to the paper. "I'm sorry about the elder. The way he talked he seemed sure of his decision but not happy with it." she stated and walked back to the bar, not waiting for an answer.

"Do you have food as well?" she asked and the barman nodded, serving her a cold plate of snacks. "Any idea where I can get information on survivors from Ravenhall?" she asked and the barman looked at her like she was an idiot, nodding towards Dagon on his chair.

"I don't want to bother him right now." she said, getting an understanding nod from the barman.

"You don't speak do you?" she asked, the mustached man just staring into her eyes with high intensity. He was at level two hundred as well, giving the stare quite a bit more weight.

"I'm looking for a cook. Keyla is her first name. Worked for this establishment... damn I forgot the name of it." she said, starting to drink the fresh mead he had placed next to her.

The barman put down the glass he was cleaning, walking over to Dagon and taking one of the books on his table. Flipping through the pages he stopped at one and placed the book next to Ilea, a finger on the name Keyla Aranoth. Alive and in the capital it said next to the name.

“Glad to hear that. I’ll get in touch with her at some point then. Thanks.” she said, summoning a gold coin and placing it on the counter. He nodded and took the coin when he was behind the counter, picking up the glass again.

It took a mere three hours for the previously empty cathedral to be bristling with life. At least a hundred people were present, not a single one below level two hundred. Certainly a force to be reckoned with.

Dagon cleared his throat, the room going quiet a moment later as all eyes focused on him, most of the people seated or leaning onto something, previously occupied by their own conversation.

“Welcome. Shadow’s Hand.” he started, Ilea looking on from the bar that was now occupied by more than just her.

“Thank you all for coming. We have word from a survivor near Ravenhall. Morhill was cleared of the demon infestation, seven members having stayed behind to hunt down the beasts.” he said, some of the people starting to murmur.

“The most likely suspect for the summoning is nobody else than our own Elder Strand.” he said, the people reacting less enraged than Ilea expected, a couple even laughing at it. One of them got hit by a team mate, shushing him.

“Now I’m sure I’m not the only one who would like to punch the man. First though we will have to retake Ravenhall and Viscera. A simple matter of

principle. There is no pay involved here.” Dagon continued, the room quieting down again.

“I’m sure all of you have lost people and while some might be happy about that let’s just get this over with and fuck up the invaders to our halls.” Dagon said, getting up from his chair as some people smiled and chuckled, apparently a surprise to hear the man curse.

“I’m tired of this city’s pretentiousness and bureaucracy. Let’s go back to the mountains.” he said, getting a cheer from some people who lifted their hands. Ilea smiled, not quite the inspiring speech she had expected but then again the man was a librarian, not a warrior.

“We meet in Morhill. The woman at the bar leaves today and I’m going with her. Feel free to join.” Dagon finished as Ilea walked up to the table, noticing the glass was empty.

“Let’s gut some demons!” a man shouted from the corner of the cathedral.

“Shut the hell up.” a woman stated before the people broke out into their own conversations again, Ilea ignoring most of it.

“You alright?” Ilea asked Dagon as she reached him. The man extended his hand and shook hers.

“Thank you, for coming. And for caring. When are you leaving?” he asked.

“Don’t mention it Dagon. As much as this cathedral is nice, your library just has a certain charm to it. Whenever, now?” she asked and shrugged, having no reason do delay further.

“Now it is then.” he said and opened one of the heavy tomes on his table, slamming it together. The created shock wave and sound caused people to look towards them, some shrouding themselves in shadow or preparing spells to counter the attack.

“We leave now. Meet me at the central south gate in one hour.” Dagon said before walking out. Ilea smiled as a puff of air left her nose.

“An hour to check out the city.” Ilea said to herself as she looked around and found Charles. Walking up to him, she put a hand on his shoulder.

“So we have an hour for a quick tour.” she said, smiling at him.

“An hour? For Virilya? That’s not even enough for Viscera. You won’t see all of this city in a month.” he answered, shaking his head.

“I can show you some of the places around the most southern part if you like. I’m sure Petra will gladly play the guide though.” he said, the woman perking up and jumping towards them, leaving her previous conversation behind upon hearing her name.

“Did I hear the words Petra and guide? City tour?” she asked excitedly and locked eyes with Ilea as a big scary smile blossomed on her face.

“You’re intense.” Ilea said as she grabbed the woman’s shoulders. “Show me the city Petra!”

“You better keep up then, newbie.” Petra replied and ran off.

“We’ll meet you at the gate then.” she said to Charles who stood next to her, his eyes focused on Petra.

“How was it?” Charles asked as Ilea and Petra joined the man at the south gate. Everyone not in black armor or robes looked on at the scene, more people gathering by the minute to see the spectacle.

“More running than seeing. She does know a lot more about history than I would’ve expected.” Ilea answered, checking around her. The hour would be up in a couple minutes.



“She does.” the man said, his voice holding a little sadness but Ilea didn’t ask.

Dagon came out from the gate in that moment, the man covered in heavy armor from head to toe, a metal book the size of Ilea’s chest under his arm as he walked through the gathered people, reaching her a moment later.

“Let’s go then.” the librarian said, breaking out into a run, each step he took pushing deeper into the ground until he was past what any human on Earth could manage. Around her, Ilea watched as people took to the air, wings and magical extensions sprouting from people’s backs as animals and monsters were summoned, to carry people both on land and in the air.

“They all came.” Charles said next to her as he started floating upwards, pride in his voice as Ilea joined next to him.

“Carry?” Petra asked from below, lifting her arms towards Ilea with a smile.

“Carry.” Ilea said as she lowered herself down again, letting the woman grab her right arm.

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“Still think it would’ve been a good to stop her?” a guard of the seventh southern aerial squad asked his colleague as they watched from the top of the wall as over a hundred people in black left the capital. They didn’t know where but the guard himself felt a little lighter with all of them gone.

“Fucking spectacle isn’t it?” his friend said.

“Yea, whatever they’re heading for I don’t want to be there.” the first guard said as the people around them started to disperse again, the gate below would soon close again, lest another demon attack followed the earlier one from that day.

“Shift’s over in ten, wanna go to Tally’s?” the man asked his friend.

“Sure, you’re paying and stop trying to talk to that barmaid. I told you she’s not interested.” the guards argued as a faraway bell rang in the busy city, only a small number of people even hearing about the Shadow’s Hand coming and going. The name Lilith had reached a couple more people that day and more than one soldier had gulped at the distant warrior standing before the approaching demon tide, arms wide open.

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A bandaged woman woke to the bells ringing in the evening hours, a heavy cough shaking her body as blood reached her mouth. The room was dark again, Eve lying back down as she checked herself. The cuts had healed, enough for her to be ready again. She got up and walked to the other side of the room, grabbing some water to wash herself, the bloodied bandages were carefully removed and stacked to be burned at a later time. Blood magic was to be taken seriously after all.

Today she would go find some people to *interview*. A man, a woman and a butler, though she doubted the last one would yield anything important. Then again there were surprises waiting for you at every corner in life, especially when you were in Virilya. Her daggers were washed next, the blood already dry and sticking to the blades in an annoying way, one of her prime reasons not to get injured in fights too heavily. She could clean the blades right after.

A quiet hum filled the room with an eerie atmosphere as the near naked woman continued to scrub her blades, short red hair and cold eyes focused on the task at hand.

# Chapter 135 Roguey Rogues Doing Rogue Stuff

## Chapter 135 Roguey Rogues Doing Rogue Stuff

“How does it look?” Sulivhaan asked, Navailis having arrived just a moment ago. One of the most central pubs in Morhill had been chosen by the squad leader to use as their base. The square in front had been prepared by Rock. Barricades blocked all the entrance streets to the square, the pub only easily accessible by air or by climbing over everything.

As soon as they had any earth mages around, the defenses would be extended. For now it wasn't feasible to defend the whole city against possible intruders but the empire would arrive at some point and perhaps Ilea would manage to convince a couple of the Hand's survivors, if there were still some in the capital.

Senia regularly scouted the city and gates, taking care of stray demons near the city's walls.

“At least three mind weavers visible. Ranged demons stationed on all walls and high buildings behind. High level scouting bands patrolling around the city and I saw at least five unidentified previously unknown demon variations.” Navailis reported, walking next to the big table in the middle of the pub. The rest of the tables and chairs had been moved away to make space. Oil lamps burned around the room, giving it a warm feeling. The hearth was currently cold, the remaining occupants of the city not in need for the warmth although the soldier who had stayed behind was sitting huddled in a corner, covered by several blankets.

Even at level one thirty the man didn't seem to have a cold-, frost- or ice resistance. Sulivhaan ignored the man, perhaps he would finally gain such a resistance in the coming weeks. It would take some convincing for the empire to assist them in retaking Ravenhall, at least in the time necessary, now that the demons were still establishing themselves. The army wasn't quite known for their timely reactions when it came to an external organization like the Hand. Retaking the city would cost quite a number of lives, combined with the resources that wouldn't be available elsewhere, where cities were still under control and the population alive.

“Good, it seems their movements haven't changed much but either they were hiding those creatures or creating or summoning new ones. We should focus first on destroying their scouting teams, I'll talk to Trian and Kyrian about this. They should be able to take care of that.” the man explained, marking the newfound information on the big map of Ravenhall and its surroundings. At least the demons didn't seem to be immediately expanding already.

Other than a few stragglers and small groups, no enemies had come close to Morhill.

“No word from Ilea yet?” he asked and didn't receive an answer. “It's been four days already. She shouldn't need longer than a day to travel to the capital. We'll have to send someone if she doesn't come back in the next two days.” he said, though having another one of their already small group depart would put a dent in their plans.

“No resources, no resources...” Sulivhaan grumbled under his mask when Rock bust into the room, a big grin on his face.

“You should come see this.” the warrior said into the room, motioning with his hand for them to follow him outside as he held open the massive wooden door with his free arm. The three occupants of the room left a moment later, Sulivhaan and Navalis looking at each other before following Rock.

The square looked the same but when Sulivhaan looked upwards to the sky, a content smile replaced the frown that had plagued him for the past month. In the distance a group of flying people, all in black broke through the heavy

clouds above, a lot more than he had expected. More importantly it wasn't the empire, it was the Shadow's Hand.

“I always say you're too pessimistic, old man.” Rock said, looking towards their squad leader. Even Navalys sported a light upwards curve on her lips, a rare sight to say the least.

“There's a difference between realism and pessimism Rock.” the mage replied, their banter evidence for the immediate mood improvement as they walked towards the center of the square.

Ilea and Dagon were among the first people to land, the woman waving as she put down the man she had held with one arm. Quite an impressive feat, Sulivhaan thought. More importantly it seemed the librarian had taken the lead, which explained a few things. Among them the appearance of what likely amounted to nearly all surviving members of the Hand. It would make things considerably simpler. His posture less tense, Sulivhaan walked up to the big man with extended arms.

“We rushed here as early as we could. I'm glad you survived, old friend.” the librarian said, hugging the smaller mage, yet not managing to lift him up. Sulivhaan's gravity magic fought against the other man's strength, a tradition they had upheld for quite a long time, originally a bet.

“Come then, we have much to plan.” Sulivhaan said and nodded to Ilea who copied the gesture. The two men and several interested people followed and went into the pub while some others put up tents or claimed houses or floors for themselves. Others again spread out towards the walls of the city, to ensure a higher security or to go hunt. The Hand's members were mostly independent, working in small teams. This situation wouldn't change their approach, they simply had more teams and firepower available, not a problem with the big city they would have to cover.

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Ilea watched the two men's backs as they walked towards the pub. "Good job, you were faster than I expected." Rock stepped next to her, following her gaze. "I assume it wasn't exactly hard to convince him?"

"No, well I'm not sure what exactly the letter entailed but he was certainly eager to take back the city. Most of the others as well." she said, looking around.

"Yea, it's weird isn't it. We're not exactly fighting for a cause but I think most of us saw at least Viscera as somewhat of a home, if perhaps only a temporary one." Rock said after a while.

They stood in silence for a while, before Ilea stretched and yawned. "Been a while since I slept. I think I'll catch a couple hours. Let Trian and Kyrian know I'm here, will ya." she said and punched the man's arm, walking away on her hunt for a nice bed.

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Sulivhaan looked through the info in front of him, a list of all the people who had come to Morhill with general abilities and class information. A big chunk of them were here with their full squad, likely having survived the demon summoning together. Others were alone or with lacking members to their registered team. He wouldn't ask, simply glad they had come.

"I expected the empire to form the bigger chunk of the force but I think with this, we'll be able to work our way through a big part of the enemy until they even decide on sending reinforcements." Sulivhaan said, sitting down on a chair next to the map.

“I talked to some officers before we left Varilya, so there's a chance we're gonna see imperial colors earlier than you'd expect.” Dagon said as he removed his helmet to sit down next to the central table, his small glasses still sitting on the bridge of his nose. The other people that had followed were entering by now, each taking either a chair or standing position around the map, each a veteran in one way or the other.

“Alright, let's start then.” Dagon said and pushed his glasses upwards a little.

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'Damn, too late...' Eve thought as she took in the scene before her, her body camouflaged against the red stained white walls. The corpses were nobles again, the first ones she had found before the authorities or the weird organization that was looking for the people she was now hunting as well. Not to kill them but perhaps they knew more about where she could continue the search. Additionally staying on their trail would mean staying on the organisation's trail.

'Edwin Redleaf...' she thought as she carefully walked around the carnage. 'A bit of an enthusiast when it came to killing it seemed.' a man to her own heart. She smiled as she enjoyed this hunt more than many others before. Instead of farmers and children, this time it was nobles riddled with illegal backgrounds and more than questionable morale who paved the road to her goal.

A noise could be heard from a couple rooms over and Eve enhanced her Illusion magic, quickly moving to the room with complete silence. 'There he is... I thought he'd be smaller.' she thought as she watched the man touch the ground where someone laid dead. Perhaps not the person she was looking for in the end but at least someone had made it to the scene of the crime before her, impressive.

“Already someone here?” the man suddenly asked, turning around as a dagger appeared in his hand. The black blade shimmered a little as he turned, not looking at Eve directly. She was still hidden. Perhaps he had sensed something about her, his surroundings or there might be someone else around that he noticed as well. She usually stayed silent in those moments, more often than not was the discovery of an intruder not quite as helpful as one would assume. If the intruder was hiding right next to you, all you get is a skill activation and perhaps an enhanced defense.

If Eve was good at anything though, it was at waiting. And right now she would learn quite a bit about both the person in front of her and the soon to follow investigators should the man choose to stay.

“Interesting skill... yet you haven't shown yourself. Who are you?” the man asked towards his surroundings, turning in place, his blade held at the ready. Eve stayed silent as well, now smiling a little as she heard people approaching through the front door. The man would probably want to move should he be Edwin Redleaf, or perhaps killing guards was not something he would frown upon. A minus point in Eve's book, the men and women employed by the city or empire to guard it and keep it safe had rarely much to do with political decisions.

She moved backwards, standing right beside the hallway wall opposite the room. A moment later four imperial soldiers marched through, scouts as she saw from their uniforms. Not green ones either, each looking around the place, skills activated and careful not to disturb any of the corpses.

The front man ran into the room with his mace drawn but quickly stopped, sheathing the weapon and saluting to the man in black still standing in the room, blade drawn.

“Sir? What are...” the man asked and quickly prepared his weapon again, moving his hand in a couple motions that Eve knew meant the perimeter wasn't safe and that they should create a defensive line. 'Good soldiers...' she thought and watched them quietly discuss what happened and what the next steps would be.



“If you're here for me, then find me. I wish to talk, if only for that hiding skill you're using.” the man said, sheathing his blade again.

“Are you sure sir?” the squad leader asked, his voice calm as he scanned his surroundings. The other soldiers did the same, one of them with a little shaky hands.

“If whomever is hiding wanted you dead then I believe you wouldn't have reached the entrance of this house. And I believe they are not directly involved with the murders. Continue your work.” the man said, suddenly vanishing out of sight. Eve concentrated to fend off an attack, thinking his inability to find her a possible move to manipulate her or gain further information about her before he would strike.

Two minutes later that didn't seem to be the case, the soldiers' tension lessening by the minute. A good opportunity to strike but she had learned what she could from this. The man was involved somehow, or perhaps he was investigating as well. Meeting him would be her next step, now that all her other sources had either vanished or were silenced.

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'An intriguing skill...' Baltimore thought as he blended into the city's shadows thrown by the low hanging suns. Virilya was as busy as ever and while he welcomed the noise and people as a good way to make his own movements less noticeable, he had been too late. Too late to find Edwin before another one of his murders. Already he had the attention of an enemy he wasn't prepared to handle and while he was still of little consequence to them that would change with time and amount of people killed.

Still he smiled a little, knowing that was exactly what Edwin wanted, the little Redleaf tornado. He wondered how much the boy had progressed. At least so far he didn't make any mistakes, remembering his lessons from so

long ago. Baltimore moved slowly, not using his teleporation ability as excessively as he would normally, still feeling the presence somewhere close, not close enough to endanger him but whomever it was, they were following. 'Another possible lead...' he thought as he jumped to the next house over, his view of the city blocked by bigger buildings around him.

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He was leading her on, Eve was sure of it. The man had moved leisurely, at least for what she assumed to be his skill. As much as she was looking for another clue, perhaps so was he.

*[Warrior – lvl 220]*

She identified the man to make sure. Any warrior at that level with a goal in mind would be moving more quickly through the city, even on his first day here. Thinking of Ilea, she stopped that kind of thinking as she continued to follow. Then again the man hadn't seemed like an impulsive fighter nut, otherwise the house probably wouldn't be standing anymore.

For the next hour, she followed the man as he went deeper and deeper into the city, below bridges and through sewers and rotten away cellars and underground tunnels until finally he stopped, deep down inside a place that was so mundane Eve just couldn't think of it as a trap. Seeing the man hadn't attacked or looked for her in the noble's house, he probably wanted to at least talk first. Something she could agree with.

A clone of her materialized a meter to her left, the man shifting his eyes to look at the clone.

“A projection? Interesting again. That's already two things about you that I like. I nearly can't tell the difference between that and a real person...” the man said as he slowly clapped.

“To follow me was a risk, what if this was simply a trap? A runed destination specialized in uncovering you?” he asked.

“You had four members of the scouts with you, I believe a strike would've been most reasonable then, why wait? You don't seem like a fool to me.” she answered.

“True, your analysis is sound. What if I simply wanted to capture you, murder you or torture you? For my own joy?” he asked, a black dagger moving around his hand in a fluid motion as he delivered the questions in a completely monotone voice.

Eve's clone started to grin, a little too wide to still look beautiful. “Then all the more reason to come here.” she answered his question. Apparently she had taken the man by surprise as he chuckled a little.

“Oh I see. Well aren't you motivated. Plenty of targets for you then in Virilya. Now tell me, do you know anything about the man you're hunting? Or were you the one to kill those nobles?” he asked.

“There are, there are. I don't assume you're one of them then. Perhaps a trade of information might be beneficial for the both of us?”

“What do you want to know?” the man answered, Eve quite happy at his direct approach.

“The name of the organization that is hunting this... Edwin Redleaf. And perhaps a location or person that would be able to tell me more... yet I do believe I might've found such a person already.” she said, smiling at the man. Depending on his next words she would take her chances at engaging him. No external influences would be around to save him and her close call with the huntress three days prior still sat sour with her.

“So you're hunting the hunters. An efficient way to look for them, that certainly is true but if you have any thoughts of engaging the Golden Lily, you're not even gonna wake up again to realize your mistake. Edwin seems to be trying himself, a little stupid for someone taught by me.” the man said, Eve

preparing to fight. Nobody would reveal so much without the intention to silence anybody close by.

“The Golden Lily hmm? How come I've never heard of them?” she asked, unsheathing her daggers, still cloaked and standing a meter away from her clone.

“Oh they're quite good at silencing people who shouldn't know. A passion for some of them I wager.” and with that, he vanished. A black mist appearing in front of her clone, expanding quickly.

Eve moved backwards and through the tunnel as the black cloud advanced for another twenty meters, touching her back a little in the last moment. 'Black magic...' she winced at the phantom pain, knowing a little about how that particular magic worked. Quite effective and without her iron mind skill she might've already been knocked out by the contact.

Dropping her camouflage in the next room, four of her clones appeared as she turned around and skidded to a halt. Out of the smoked tunnel the man stepped, a black mask completing the light armor set he had been wearing. The time for talking was over.

# Chapter 136 Vihal - Town Defense Simulator

## Chapter 136 Vihal – Town Defense Simulator

'Good thing I fought against Ilea so much...!' Eve thought as she blocked another blade aimed at her back, dodging slightly to the side as soon as the man had appeared behind her, her dagger turning in her hand to deflect his attack before he vanished again.

The shadowy tendrils attacking her were dodged as well, much slower than Trian's or Kyrian's attacks. Comparatively they stayed behind, ready to catch her whenever she touched too closely to the shadows still lingering. The pain wouldn't finish her but a lapse in concentration was just as much of a problem.

Eve had yet to use her mind magic, the man moving too quickly for her to find a good way to surprise him. She was absolutely sure that her magic alone wouldn't be enough to take care of him so she waited, strike upon strike she defended and was slowly driven to the stone wall behind her.

He didn't leave her a choice as she started to hum at a high tone, the man appearing a couple meters away, hands clutching his head as shadowy tendrils shot towards her, the woman dodging and moving in on him quickly. Her dagger moved but was stopped in the last moment by his hand, the curse entering him through the wound.

Her adversary hissed at the pain and feeling that slowly crept up his arm before he vanished. Eve stood there, bloody dagger in hand as the manifestations of shadow around her started to crumble and disappear, a good source for further information lost with it all. Eve frowned as she walked back the way they came, her daggers and magic at the ready should the man chose to ambush her again, though she doubted it. Other than Ilea and maybe Trian there were few people she knew that could resist a curse once it's entered the body.

Her hood up again, Eve entered the city from the tunnel entrance below a big bridge, water rushing past below and towards the lake as she breathed in deeply. Spring sent its first emissaries as Eve spotted the growing leaves on the trees above, to the side of the bridge. Soon the city would be covered in color again, the way she liked it most.

'Golden Lily...' she thought, remembering the name the man had mentioned. He had seemed keen on finishing her off and in the end it was more a warning than a confession. He had been capable, very much so. Had it not been for her surprise and effect on him with mind magic, she would've been dead. The man was very dangerous in close quarters, that was for sure.

Maybe too dangerous for her at the moment. Then again if she thought like that, his warning would seem like something to take seriously. She sighed and left. The first step would be information gathering. Perhaps finding this Edwin and working together with him would be the best bet, hunting down the guy she'd fought was a possibility as well. Or simply asking around for the Golden Lily but that one seemed like the worst option.

As much as she liked the approach of having the enemy try and find you, if a man who nearly killed her warns of their danger, then maybe she should find out more things about them before she painted a target on her back. First things first, she needed a drink. A strong one at that.

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“They're breaking through!” the lone shout of a town guard was lost in the screams and shouts of both monster and man, the moon lightly illuminating the massacre below in this cloudless night. Explosions rung through the area as a cluster of demons was shredded through, their lifeless bodies flung into their brethren, breaking bones and tearing muscles. Some of them howled in pain before well placed arrows silenced their screams.

“Stand your ground!” a woman shouted, looking to her right and extending her arm. An explosion sent the demon flying, spraying blood over her long armor skirt. Claire's mana was running somewhat low, her meditation skill running at full capacity as she sent destructive waves of explosions into the demon horde below. Their approach had been tactical, coming in the night right when their guard was at its lowest.

The two smaller attacks in the day must've been planned as well, to drain them and scout out abilities and key personnel. This time the demons didn't just mindlessly charge the walls but headed straight for the gate, slowly breaking through the thick wood with sheer ferocity. Claire's explosive runes had been placed a little further out, especially near the gate to not accidentally damage it.

The enemy must have known as much or simply assumed the gate to be the best way to approach Vihal. Claire looked around as more and more of their soldiers ran to the gates, woken by the ringing bell or comrades running through the barracks. The gate wouldn't hold for long, even with the earth mages below reinforcing it constantly.

'Thin the numbers...' she thought as she threw another runed stone down into the screaming crowd, their numbers impossible to determine in the dark of night. The following flash tearing into the enemy wasn't very reassuring. A projectile glanced her helmet, an addition the guard captain had insisted on. “Ranged enemies at forty degrees!” she shouted as some of the archers took aim, their arrows sent off loosely into the stated direction.

It wouldn't matter much, the enemy seemed too numerous for lacking accuracy to become a problem. Some of the archers were pretty good

actually, hunters or rangers but fighting against demons in a life and death situation wasn't exactly on their daily menu before a couple weeks ago. Not something one gets used to quickly.

An orange shield was conjured right after Claire saw the light of the moon reflect on a mass of projectiles, the bone smashing into the barrier while the demons below continued their assault on the door. Claire had previously instructed the earth mages to construct further barricades behind the gate and the close combat soldiers to take cover behind them should the time of a breach come. Now was that time and she nodded after checking the defenses with a glance, many people already standing at the ready with their weapons drawn, support spells being applied from behind.

Vihal had been mostly self sustaining, which meant they had priests and healers, mages of all kind and an assortment of warriors and hunters at least capable of defending the city against your average monster in the surrounding forest. Not something most smaller towns in the empire could boast, having the opportunity to get imperial guards and healers instead and work with adventurers for the rest. It had given the city some leeway when it came to laws and taxes, perks all of them enjoyed. The lord had apparently realized that such a constellation was only possible with everyone at least somewhat benefiting.

Claire jumped down and placed the last of her runed plates around the barricade, looking into the fearful faces of her companions. The swords were held loosely, the defender's body language not showing confidence. Claire frowned under her helmet. She wasn't confident either, the enemy numbers being unknown. Should there be more than a single mind weaver, she didn't think they even had a remote chance.

“Stand now, this is where we stop them. Otherwise all you hold dear will be slaughtered and turned into one of them. Turn your fear into fury.” she spoke, walking to the front line, the people moving away to let her pass. The earth mages ran back as the first claws cut through their improvised defenses, the demons chipping through more and more of the quickly moved rock. Arrows shot into and around the holes, injuring or killing the demons beyond but more of the monsters replaced the dead as more and more of the barricade was eaten up.



“Prepare, as discussed. Wait until the barrier is down to strike!” Claire shouted, right before the gate fell. Instead of squeezing through the small holes they had already created, the demons waited for a sizable entrance to form so they could enter in greater numbers. Not something they would do without a mind weaver to coordinate them. Ten of the monsters ran towards them at once, another wave following right behind.

Claire extended her hands and waited as mana built up inside of her, a big chunk having regenerated in the down time they just had. The captain of the guard was standing next to her with battle ax in hand as the demons reached them. An orange barrier shot up from the plates below, the demons crashing into the physical barrier, three rows of them clashing together, the monsters unable to stop their momentum in time.

“Attack!” Claire shouted as the barrier came down, with it the slashes and strikes of swords and maces, helped by the ranged attacks of arrows and magic. The confused demons still in the process of standing up were slain by the attacks, as more of the monsters tried to get through from behind, pushing at the demons in front, opening them up even further for attack. This went on for two minutes straight, the towns people gaining confidence and ferocity in their own attacks.

Claire carefully watched the battle before she held up one arm. “Move back, four meters, move now!” she shouted, the people around her reacting slowly but within her calculations. The initial waves of demons had been slain, Claire activating the prepared explosion runes now sitting under the enemies in front as she activated the next line's barricade. The explosions ripped through the town's streets and a part of its gate, making it harder for more of the monsters to join the fray.

The barrier came down again as they formed the next line of defense. This one was physically strengthened by spikes and a small wall that would stop the initial speed of the demons, Claire expecting the same barricade trick not to work again, at least not against controlled demons.

“Ring the bells.” she said to the captain next to her who nodded and shouted her command. A moment later the screams of their enemies and sounds of

magic were interrupted by the ringing of bells, the noise soon spreading across all of the town.

A sudden pressure hit Claire's mind, her last effort put into the prepared runes before her, a white barrier coming up immediately. Her mind cleared as she checked around herself, glad to find nobody else affected. The mind weaver had targeted her, as expected. Though the sheer force of its attack was quite different to Eve's use of the magic. It would be dangerous to let her guard down for more than two seconds.

“It's here, all ranged attackers take down the mind weaver!” she shouted, spotting the demon mage floating a little above the destroyed gate, demons rushing past him and towards their group. Its face wasn't visible from the distance as arrows and magic were thrown its way. Demons jumped in front of the mage to take the brunt of the force as it slowly retreated.

“No you're not... captain hold the line, I'm going after it. Follow the plans!” Claire shouted as she ran and jumped to the wall on their left, continuing to run towards the gate where the mind weaver wasn't visible anymore. She knew he was there as she blindly ran close to the gate and jumped off.

The pale moon illuminated the flying woman and the horde below, her black armor reflecting the light as she tried to make out her target. She couldn't but it didn't quite change her approach as she channeled mana into her arms and hands, landing on a spot of grass between the monsters as a big wave of fire and kinetic force spread outwards around her, burning and shredding most of the close by beasts.

Turning around, she saw the mind weaver, floating a little higher than its peers as it locked eyes with her, the black abyss like forms staring deep into her as she lifted her left arm, a rune on her bracelet starting to shine and a small white shield forming in front of her. The money gained on the missions wasn't wasted, instead invested in a long term plan to make even more at a later time. Of course all her plans were on ice for the moment but depending on how this situation turned out, maybe it would all be for the better.

The enemy's magic tugged on her mind but it was dull and weak compared to the near shock like state she had been before. Her shield was raised before

her as she quickened her step, running past the horde around her. A big number of them blocked her way, Claire using her other bracelet as she channeled mana into her arm and extended her hand, an explosion extending outwards and into the group, shearing a path through them.

She jumped through and threw out four runed stones as she watched the mind weaver slowly retreat, more demons approaching from all around. Suddenly their voices were cut off, Claire standing up as she confidently held up her right arm, the white shield shimmering with power. The runed stones wouldn't last long as they supplied the dome like orange shield around the two of them. Claire wouldn't need a lot of time.

Three quick and powerful steps brought her in front of the enemy who tried desperately to claw at her. A futile attempt as she simply dodged the attack, her right hand grabbing the demon's face before a small localized explosion tore into it. Another set of explosions followed as she slowly pushed the less and less struggling monster downwards and into the dirt. She didn't stop her attacks until the notification of her enemy's death came to her mind.

Claire allowed herself a small smile as the attacks to her dome first stopped and then continued. She waited for the last second where the barrier would collapse and ran off towards the town, jumping past the monsters around her, using explosions to get around bigger groups. Jumping back onto the wall, she was quite happy to find the demons inside breaking into doors and spreading out in complete chaos.

Wincing, she held her side as she looked down. Blood was pooling on her hand, something to be taken care of immediately. Only she didn't have either the time nor resources to do so. So she continued to run, this time trying to avoid the demons that were focused on their imminent surroundings, their controlled destructive power turning into a fizzle of its former glory. Now only wild beasts, trying to find their next meal.

Claire crashed into a wall, the wound on her side worse than she had previously realized. It wasn't far and she made herself move, her legs taking one step at a time as she closed in on the armory in the center of the town. The gates were open, a large group of demons trying to get to the people inside as swords and magic slowly worked through the enemy, the beasts too

feral to realize their tactical disadvantage as they slowly funneled into the gates in single or double file, easily taken care of by the people inside who rotated to ensure prepared and fresh warriors were at the front while mages continued to rain fire and ice from the flat top of the building.

Claire smiled as she watched the scene unfold, quite happy everything was going according to plan, one of six plans in place at least. Slowly she sunk to one knee, her eyesight growing more hazy by the second. A chuckle left her, she had taken down the enemy commander and ensured the town's survival and yet she would die, alone and from an attack she hadn't even noticed.

'How un noble of me...' she thought, chuckling again, this time she coughed, blood coloring the wall before her. Then her vision went black.

Waking with a start, Claire held her hand in front of her face, blinded by the light around her as she winced at the pain in her side.

“Lay down again! The wound has reopened, come help me Anne!” a woman spoke loudly right next to her as she listened and lay down, the warm feeling of healing magic entering her as the pain lessened.

It took a while but a couple minutes later, she was stable.

“How's the situation?” she asked “Where am I?”

“The demons have surrounded this place but it seems they can't get through.” the woman replied with a shaky voice. “Come, let's get you well again so you can help out. And don't go collapsing in a side street again.” the woman said but it was quite obvious she was glad to see Claire alive. Another wave of healing magic flowed through her. In most other situations she would be fine with this already but considering the defenders had the situation at least

somewhat under control, it didn't hurt to get more than just an acceptable level of health.

The room had been hastily remodeled to allow a higher amount of people and beds to be placed inside, the usual weapons and armor given to the townspeople to help them defend the city. It was an emergency situation after all. Claire lay down again and closed her eyes as the young healer next to her, a girl of barely eighteen used her magic, beads of sweat forming on her forehead and arms.

She hoped the casualties of this night weren't as high as she feared. Then again she was generally not an optimist and her expectations had already been surpassed with only one enemy mind weaver and the townspeople actually making it into the impromptu shelter.

“I... need. I need to meditate.” the girl next to her said, breathing hard at the mana exhaustion that had already started to set in.

Claire opened her eyes and checked her status. “That's enough. Recover and care for the others. Thank you.” she said, touching the girl's shoulder and getting up a moment later. Her vision went black for a second after getting up but she simply waited it out.

“Alright, let's go finish this one.” she said and walked to the door.

# Chapter 137 The Storm after the Storm

## Chapter 137 The Storm after the Storm

The sun rose slowly over the town of Vihal, illuminating the carnage left behind by a night's worth of gruesome warfare. Corpses littered the ground, both human and demon. Eyes open in fear, anger and sheer ferocity, lifeless and in parts already infested by the first fleas, infesting the newfound source of food. The sun wouldn't do the smell any good, people with lower Vitality would have to stay inside to evade an infection and possible sicknesses.

Claire stood upon the armory, looking around to find any last surviving demons, her eyes scanning through the burnt and frozen corpses, bits and pieces left behind by the mages taking the vantage position on top of the armory, the demons having been unable or too stupid to get up to the flat top of the building. The smell was already bad but it would get worse as time went on. A good thing they had some surviving earth and fire mages. Burning pits would do the trick but first they had to take stock of how many they lost, how many they still had.

“The rangers report no more surviving demons, the last groups were led here and taken care of.” the guard captain said, walking up next to her with a notebook in his hand. He was injured, a bloodied gash in his armored shoulder showed as much, as did the lessened stability in his gait.

“Here the report on all survivors. The evacuation was completed in time, none of the people there were injured. Regarding the fighting personnel it doesn't look quite as good.” the man finished, handing her the notebook. Claire took it and nodded to the man.

“Go see one of the healers, at least they're getting some experience out of this.” she said, the man chuckling in response.

“Not the only one there, I got ten levels from this one. Still, dying isn't worth it.” he said and Claire had to agree to that. Although she herself had to ignore that kind of thinking from time to time to get to level two hundred. A certain risk was always involved, it was just a simple calculation to determine the worth of a dungeon expedition or monster hunt. Claire had other reasons for coming to Vihal, her calculations were forgotten quickly, the pages in her own notebook would soon be burned, her less than ideal outlook for the city and survival rates would only lower morale and her standing should anybody come across them.

'Let's get to organizing..!' she thought as she flipped through the pages, seeing all the marked people who were either heavily injured or died. A good amount had survived, mostly the people she had seen die in the initial break through the gate were included in the victims. Sadly some of them had been capable warriors or mages but she had to work with whatever she could. Around her people were discussing, some laughed and cheered, the victory still fresh on their minds. The information on the losses would spread soon and then the work required to refortify the city and prepare for another attack.

It would be good to start soon. “Everyone, downstairs. We'll discuss the next steps.” she said rather loudly so that everyone still standing outside would hear her. She made sure the people looking for survivors in the field of corpses heard her as well.

She closed her eyes as the sun shone onto the town, battered but not broken, Claire allowed herself a quick smile before she put on her business mask again. She was still wearing her helmet of course and sighed, tucking the notebook under her arm before she walked down the stairs to the big room below. The governing body was present, as were all the warriors and mages who had taken part in the fights. The rest of the people, children, elderly,

unsuitable classes or simply too low leveled people were further down in the armory's cellar where enough food and water was stored to give them at least two weeks. Preparations that now seemed a little excessive but Claire's plans proved to bring them victory, her influence had grown and it showed.

Compared to the previously uncertain, fearful or downright hostile looks she had gotten from some of the warriors, this time they all looked towards her with respect, nods came from a lot of them as she entered from above. Claire stopped at the bottom of the stairs, looking around and making sure that the whole room would be able to hear her while not taking a central position that would threaten the governor's authority. If there was one thing she didn't need, it was more enemies. She breathed in a deep breath, clearing her mind and focusing on the tasks at hand.

The torches in the room were flickering from the winds coming in through the open gates, the fighting force of Vihal was gathered and focused on the black clad mage standing before them. A stranger to most and yet they looked upon her for guidance. Most of the people were aware that they wouldn't be standing here today had it not been for her.

“Alright people.” she started, smiling under her helmet. “We won!” she shouted, a thing she didn't do very often, at least not outside an active fight. Lifting her arm she waited for a moment before the first other voice joined in.

“We won!” a man shouted, followed by another.

“Vihal stands!” someone else joined in until at least most of the people got their voices in, the joy of survival against a terrifying enemy like the demon horde spreading like a forest fire through all the people present. Claire let them go on for half a minute before she lifted her arm again. The people calmed down rather quickly, intent on listening to the Shadow's Hand mercenary before them.

“I am proud of all of you. We managed to defend Vihal and we will continue to do so. The next few days will be hard, perhaps harder than even the fight last night.” she said and let that sit for a moment.



“We have a lot to do but all of you have at least some more levels and stats from the fights so we'll put that to good use.” she said, getting out the notebook still tucked under her arm.

“The injured will be taken care of by the healers. All rangers, scouts and rogue like classes spread out and look for surviving demons and humans. Take care of both. Afterwards meet at the front gate, send one to inform me and the rest spread out on the walls. Report any demon or monster activity immediately. The armory will be the central governing space for the moment. Any objections?” she asked, looking towards Lord Felt, the governor of the town.

“No objections.” he simply stated.

“Good, then move out. We'll inform you about further steps as we go, including food and rest.” she said, several people in the room nodding and moving towards the exits.

“Earth mages, close up the main gate and any other weaknesses in the walls. Fire and water mages take care of any burning buildings. Afterwards report back, we'll have to make pits to burn the corpses. Move out.” she said, another group leaving the room.

“The rest, prepare food and help out where you can. Afterwards move the demon corpses into piles. Smiths, enchanters and rune mages to me, we'll have to rebuild the defenses for further attacks.” she said, everyone spreading out into groups, some of the mages moving towards her. Claire just hoped the next attack would take at least two days. As long as the people didn't have rest, they were not ready to fight. For another couple hours she needed all the man power she could get, after that they would organize shifts. Another headache started to bloom in her mind, a wonder she didn't have a Headache Resistance already. Claire chuckled at the thought as she motioned the mages to follow her, to prepare a workspace for them.

Damian shivered at the morning breeze, rubbing his hands together to create at least a little bit of heat. If he continued to progress as quickly as in the past month, he wouldn't have to worry about cold weather soon enough. A rustle behind him made him draw his bow, turning around to see a familiar face.

“Relax, it's just me.” the man clad in leather armor said. Brown hair and a scar covering near all his face, the beginnings of a beard showing on his chin. He smelled and Damian kept his bow drawn for just that reason. Accidents could happen and then they would be rid of the freeloader but he remembered Geoff, he didn't take kindly to anybody harming their own.

The tension in his bow string was slowly reduced and the arrow put back into the simple quiver on his back.

“Any news? Some of the demons came to the camp and the boss wants to know the situation.” the man in front of him asked. More a boy in Damian's eyes but still, he would grow in their group, still there was food plenty and with the demon invasion it was rather simple to get more.

“Rangers and scouts are manning the walls again, they actually managed to destroy the demon horde. I think tonight would be the perfect moment to engage, they're probably all exhausted and I'm sure their numbers were reduced by at least half considering the demons' numbers.” he told the man who grunted in response before spitting on the ground.

“Aight, guess you can come back too then or do you wanna do more scouting?” he asked, Damian shaking his head. Scouting was dangerous, he wanted to stay with the main group for as much as possible.

“Good, good. Let's go back then.” the man said, taking a look towards the town, smoke rising above it as the sun rose slowly on the horizon.

No attack came during the day. The gates closed off for now with earth and rock, spikes had been formed around the town and what little numbers of runed plates they could manufacture in the day were distributed around the main entrances to the town. At least two thirds of the fighters and mages were resting, some of them had the privilege to have slept already. Claire was sitting on a small stool inside a stone watchtower that overlooked a big part of the town.

The pits were still burning, hundreds of demons placed into them and reduced to ash. The smell was horrible but as the day progressed she got used to it more. A couple more days at most and it would be gone. Water mages were still walking through the streets, cleaning up the blood and guts still littering the place. The barracks were filled again. Claire had the fighters distributed around the town again to be able to respond more quickly than with a centralized group at the armory. Any organized enemy would be better fought at using the walls and not a single building. Luckily the demons didn't have any explosion or earth mages among them, otherwise last night's battle would've turned into a massacre.

She had allowed herself two hours of rest earlier in the day, when all the necessary jobs had been distributed, some of them already complete. One good thing about losing people was that the food would last longer. She didn't want to go as far as to cure or store any of the demon meat, at least not yet. The sun was already setting as she continued to scribble in her notebook. She had visited her mother earlier as well, the woman had gotten a separate place in the armory's cellar, with furniture and items from their home. A couple nice women agreed to take care of her. When she checked on her she wasn't stressed, her empty gaze as it had always been. She wouldn't want her to come out while people were still fighting, on the other hand she felt bad about having her stay in an unknown environment.

It was crucial to keep her safe, Claire told herself. And there was no safer place than the armory, at least for now. Reinforcements to the building itself were underway as well, luckily two of their earth mages were architects, both having served in the imperial army at some point in their lives. A

sudden somewhat quiet whistling sound made Claire perk up, magic flaring up around her.

Damian smiled as he looked around the dark town, the sun nearly set as him and their whole group were wrathed in shadow. The guards had been reduced over the day as predicted. While the defenses had been build up again it seemed to be mostly focused on future demon attacks and not a team of rogues. Climbing the walls and killing off the two guards nearby had been trivial.

The boss determined the highest people in the city to be around seventy. Their strategic knowledge was certainly impressive, surviving such a massive demon attack but then again the beasts were stupid and uncoordinated. With the last night's battle they would be easy pickings.

Damian looked around and saw the only person able to spot them to be a guard at the top of a somewhat central watchtower. He would quickly take care of her before they would kill the sleeping people and tired guards. Most would be dead before they knew something was amiss at all.

He aimed his bow and activated three of his skills, the string extending just a little more, the arrow glinting in the moonlight, it's head sharpened by the magic of wind. It would kill or seriously injure and he was aiming for the guard's throat, right below the helmet. Damian never missed.

The arrow was loosed as he turned to the others with a smirk, motioning for them to continue onwards but the man next to him just lifted his arm and pointed towards the guard tower, a confused expression on his face. Damian turned to see the guard looking towards them, his arrow nowhere to be found.

“He deflected it with some kind of shield...” a mage in their group said.

“Guess we fucked up the stealthy route...” another one said as Damian

watched the guard jump down from the watchtower, landing on the streets around fifty meters away. No alarm was sounded, the guard simply approaching them with casual and slow steps.

“Wow that guy's an idiot...” he said as he got another arrow from his quiver. “Let him approach for a bit more and then take him out. Conceal yourself and surround him.” Damian said, a little vary at the unconcerned guard. The black armor reinforced a little of that feeling but the chance of an actual Hand member to be in this backwater village was close to zero. Likely some small town hero fancying themselves more than they are.

The group spread around him, weapons and magic at the ready when the guard stopped around ten meters in front of them. He gulped as his Identify spell was unable to determine his level but still the possible reward was worth the risk, looking over to the boss the man nodded and he hadn't led them astray so far. Twenty six people, all above level one hundred, some as high as one fifty against a single person.

“There is nothing here for the likes of you but death.” the guard said, the voice distinctively female. Damian noted the lack of concern she showed and again nervously looked towards the boss but it didn't seem like they would change the approach. As soon as battle was inevitable, they would attack without relent.

“Give up the town and we'll let you all leave, with some food and warm clothing even.” the boss said as he stepped a couple meters towards the woman, arms wide open in a gesture of peace. He had a calm and reassuring voice, a born leader. The evening wind blew through his short brown hair as they all held their breaths for the woman's response.

“You don't seem to be lying.” the woman said, scratching her helmet with an armored hand. “But if that's all you have, you're not bringing a lot to this negotiation.” she waited for a while before she continued.

“Now if you wish to trade information or goods, we might find an arrangement. Though if you continue with the hostilities, then my answer stands. There is only death here for you.”

Damian was full on panicking. He was good with people and her body language and voice made him rather sure she wasn't joking. The problem here was that he also knew their boss and if he knew anything about him, then that a statement like hers was a show of weakness to him. The confirmation he had sought. The next moments passed as if in slow motion, Damian opening his mouth to interrupt right when the boss gave them the signal to attack, clapping his hands together as he smiled.

The woman quickly moved her hands, throwing stones around her as she whirled in her long battle skirt. The rogues of their group stepped in, some appearing out of the shadows in the streets, others teleporting right next to the enemy, their weapons drawn and their eyes looking for death.

A shield materialized suddenly, all but one of the rogues caught within before fire erupted inside of it. "Noo!" Damian go out, his hand outstretched towards the dome. Now or never he thought and jumped through the window next to him, moving further along the wall as the street exploded in noise. Spells and arrows were shot towards the barrier, the rest of their group unsheathing their weapons. Luckily nobody went after Damian, focused on the enemy or thinking him to find an advantageous position. Which was exactly what he was doing. A position away from the others.

Looking out the window, he saw the group spreading out, their heavy steps leaving deep tracks in the dirt and mud, a light rain started to fall, dripping off their leather and metal armor while the last light of the sun left.

# Chapter 138 Upgrade - Cave to Sewers

## Chapter 138 Upgrade – Cave to Sewers

“Bunch of idiots...” Claire whispered to herself, very glad that the outlaws had decided to attack her on the tower. Hopefully not too many of the guards had been killed before. Having all their rogues spread in the city with the sleeping and tired defenders would have been the end of Vihal. She didn't know if this was the whole group but the leader inspired that belief in her. She had of course immediately activated the warning light runes placed in the armory and all the bigger barracks. They wouldn't get sleep again for a couple hours but at least they wouldn't lose many more.

Not something she could say for the enemy. Claire held the arm of her attacker, a rogue who had teleported into her inner sphere right before it came up. He was struggling to get the blade closer to her as she held on, her magic finalizing as she lifted her other arm towards his face, a barrage of wind blades coming to life, cutting into the fearful eyes before her. It was a shame, so many capable humans cut down because of their greed and stupidity. Blood sprayed onto the inner sphere and parts of her armor as the corpse in front of her fell down, the remaining pieces of the man's head falling to the ground the splatter of blood and mud.

Fifteen seconds later the explosions had come to a stop and she lowered the outer shield, the dust settling while the smoke dispersed. Seven scorched people remained inside, two of them still alive and whimpering. Two wind

blades swiftly ended their suffering, Claire scolding herself at the unnecessary caused pain and her mana management. Another set of explosions would've done it.

“Y... you monster!” the man who had previously talked shouted, a battle ax that had previously been on his back now brandished in his thin yet muscular arms. “You will pay for killing our people!” he screamed at her while a red mist came to life around him, tears in his eyes as the mages around him sent another barrage of spells towards her.

It had been their choice and it was too late for compromise. The spells harmlessly bounced off her shield before she lowered it, with a swift movement throwing a set of newly created runed stones into the group of men. They scattered, but not fast enough before a barrage of wind blades extended outwards from the stones, cutting through legs and bodies as if they were made from paper. Only the more heavily armored survived the first assault, now joining their leader who had already stepped up to Claire, his ax brought towards her in a horizontal slash, enough power behind it to cleave right through the trunk of a tree.

Her shield came up again as the ax crashed against it, rebounding from the resistance before the barrier vanished again, Claire using the opening to move into the man's melee range, the runes on her bracers lighting up before an explosion of fire and force sent the man flying, a chunk of his torso missing as he flew into the advancing armored opponents. Activating more of the thrown stones, the mud below their feet turned more liquid as their heavy gear made them sink rapidly. Confused and angry shouts reverberated through the street when the first defenders arrived, watching the scene from the nearby rooftops.

Each of the remaining seven enemies were killed by a wind blade to their throat or eyes, passing below their low end armor or through the slits in their helmets. One after the other they were executed by Claire, instilling fear and terror into the next target. Right until only their leader remained, his leather armor torn and battered, a bleeding hole in his chest he looked up to her with disgust and hate in his eyes. She lifted her hand and used a little more of her mana to finish him with a single blade of wind, cutting deep into his throat before he slumped down, the last spark of life quickly leaving as his blood



mixed with the fresh rain. Light flashed in the distance, illuminating the scene to all the bystanders, the light quickly fading as only the brought torches remained. The noise of thunder rolled over Vihal a moment later as the citizens and guards approached closer.

“She killed them all...” one of them whispered, Claire closing her eyes as she stopped the light shaking of her hands. The rain poured now, thunder rolling over the city again as Claire opened her eyes again.

“Get them out of the mud, strip them for their equipment and throw them into the burning pits. Scout the walls and look for survivors. And double the guard, as best as possible, only through the night.” she said and the people followed her command.

“We found this one trying to sneak away.” two adventurers said as they held the man between them, his face was bloodied by presumably a bunch of punches.

“P..leashe mish...” he stammered out and she just waved them away.

“Any more of your pals out there?” she quickly asked, grabbing the man's face to look him in the eyes.

“No... I shwear, you kllled everyon...p.. pleashe...,”

“Bind him to the guard tower I'm in. I'll question him later if there's no further attack in the next three hours.” she said and the two men nodded, dragging away the beaten survivor. Claire took a lost look at the lifeless silhouettes around her before she quickly left the scene and climbed up the long ladder on the inside of the stone tower. Reaching the top, she sat down on the small wooden stool, moving back the battle skirt to have enough space. Her armor scratched against the low wall behind her as she sighed, lifting her arm up to see a trembling hand. It was necessary, she knew but few minds worked purely rational. The pouring rain and thunder masked the quiet sobs coming from the top of the watchtower as night fell and the moon broke through the clouds to illuminate parts of the town and landscape beyond.

Four hours had passed and Claire had cleared her mind. The last week had taken a massive toll on her mental well being and as soon as the imminent danger was back to normal she'd sleep for a full day at least. The rain had stopped and the clouds had opened to reveal an early full moon, white light pooled in the sky and looking down on the flat landscape dotted with trees and small bodies of water in the distance. Claire preferred the mountains around Ravenhall, more easily defensible. The thought brought a smile to her face as she leaned out of the watchtower, getting up to stretch and to fight off the approaching sleep.

If only the demons had attacked Ravenhall from outside the walls. It would've been possible to stop that mess from ever becoming this big. At this point Claire was rather sure that even cities and villages outside of the empire had to deal with invading demons, the only positive thing was that the higher leveled ones were thinning out as time went on. As long as the mind weavers were removed. She just hoped none of the demons had the glorious idea to hide and snatch away small numbers of people and amass an army of demons.

Then again, worrying about possibilities without any external information wasn't a sane thing to do. Claire put on her helmet again and jumped down into the muddy street. The man resting on the side of the wall jerked up, startled by the sudden landing, trying to move even further back into the stone wall behind him as his dirty boots dug into the mud. It smelled faintly of piss, reasonable considering the time he had been there. Claire was over her sentimental phase, the stress and murders having gotten a bit too close to her.

“What's your name?” she asked, walking closer to the man and crouching down.

“D... Damian...” he said, fear in his eyes as he couldn't look away from her. At least he had stopped the frantic movements, now frozen like a deer looking at an approaching fireball.

“Damian then.” Claire said, looking down at the mud. “You and your crew made my otherwise shitty evening into something much worse. Tell me why I shouldn't kill you here and now.” she asked the man as she stood up again.

He thought for a moment, looking at her boots and then back up at her face. “I... I have information... on other cities and villages around here... and our camp! There's supplies, gold and food, clothes and horses... you'll want those, I can guide you. I can help fight as well... defend the city...” he spoke quickly and Claire was glad to find he valued his own life and well being more than whatever doctrine their leader had instilled on them. She doubted him to be able to fool her, he looked, talked and smelled the part. Plus he had been the only one trying to flee earlier.

“That all sounds useful. Start talking then, I'll let you know if you manage to convince me afterwards. Don't invent anything, just give me what you have.” she said. Hopefully she could at least spare one of them, they didn't seem quite as bad as the demons. At least they were human.

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Ilea raised her fist, took a step forward and rotated her whole torso a couple degrees to get the most power out of her attack, her fist impacting the heavy iron gate with a dull sound. “Not bad.” she said.

“Six out of ten punch.” Trian joked “Now come on, we want as much time as we can get.”

“Eh, the others start in seven hours, we'll have cleared the city before they even arrive.” she said but nonetheless activated her buffs, a dull blue hue formed on her skin below her armor and clothes, nearly overpowering the thin lines of red from her second class.

She breathed in deeply, the cold air reaching her lungs before it was once again released into the cool air around them. There was snow still but it was less than last month. The twilight broke through the trees and shone onto the warded metal door before them.

“Stand back you two, don't want to have you die to the defensive measures.” she said and got a grunt and a frown in response respectively, still her teammates stepped back. “You too Weavy.” she said, using a new nickname she thought of for the demon.

“Weavy?....,” the demon just looked at his hands and slowly floated backwards and away from the doorway, slightly disturbing the snow on the ground with his clothes, the Taleen clothes not exactly perfect fitting.

Ilea looked back to the door and this time punched with all her power. Her fist landed on the metal plate, immediately denting it as a wave of force pushed outwards from the impact, a sizzling sound was heard as her destructive mana flowed into it. The door started glowing a little before a single metal spike shot out towards her torso, Ilea moving to the side just enough for it to only scratch the armor protecting her chest. The force made her spin around but she landed on her feet, taking a step forward before the next punch hit the door.

This time a series of wind attacks were summoned, Ilea lifting her arms to protect her face. Part of one attack made it through both her defensive Veil and into the slit of her helmet, cutting into her eye and about five centimeters into her skull.

“Ah fuck.” she said as she took a step back, Hunter Recovery taking over as she waited through the dull pain. With her Resistance it felt more like stubbing a toe, definitely not like a fatal head injury. “Always the damn doors... why can't we just dig through further down...” she said as she made her helmet vanish and summoned a piece of cloth to clean up the blood on her face.

“Because then the tunnel collapses.” Trian simply stated.

“Well and it doesn't if the door is broken in?” she asked in return.

“No, the headquarters will be informed with some runed lights flashing but nothing else. They'd rather know from where an enemy strong enough to break into this door is coming.” he answered, taking distance again.

The next punch unhinged the door and a blue fire burst from around the entrance, engulfing Ilea who simply stood there, her healing taking care of the little damage the fire did. Nothing compared to the green fire that had nearly killed her in the Taleen dungeon. 'Fire categories by color... this world is so stupid.' she thought and laughed, shaking her head. To her teammates of course the scene of her standing in the midst of fire and laughing sent a bit of a different picture.

“How far can these runes go? Could be used for long distance communication.” she said.

“The alarm one you mean? Yea it's been tried. Depends on the magical power used but it's more difficult the further you go and the runes have to be undisturbed.” Trian said as the others walked up to her.

“Yea, earth magic and do it underground. Seems like an easy way to build a communication network.” she said and entered the darkness waiting for her beyond the doorway. Steps led downwards into the earth, connected with the sewage system of Ravenhall.

“I'm sure in some cities that's already set up but trust me it takes more than just a bit of energy to activate a light one kilometer away.” the man said and Ilea just shrugged, taking the next step downwards. She wasn't there to revolutionize anything. The people weren't stupid and without detailed knowledge she'd likely not be a big help, especially with electricity apparently not being a thing. Not that she was one hundred percent sure but with lightning mages around, they'd probably have found a way to power things with it.

Using her Sphere to see, Ilea walked downstairs with sure steps while the others either floated behind her or touched the walls for orientation. It took a little longer than expected to reach the deepest part of the spiral staircase, another door this one not warded opened up to Ilea's push, old and rusty metal croaking as she pushed the massive door outwards.

A dark tunnel lay beyond, the sound of flowing water clearly noticeable in the distance, giving their quite obviously artificial surroundings a more natural feel. Looking around, Ilea thought the place was definitely built for either a practical and fast escape or simply part of the infrastructure. They were still a while away from the actual city which spoke more for the first theory.

“How are the animals doing?” she asked as they walked through the corridor, Trian and Kyrian using their limited perception of the space around them, still training their eyes to perhaps receive a similar skill to their female teammate at some point. Behind the demon followed a crowd of all the monsters they had helped bring under his control in the time since coming back to Elos, the creatures shuffling in the dark, occasionally twitching and scratching a wall or the ground before them.

“They're doing fine. I talked to a summoner from the Hand and she said she'd take most of them, for a reasonable price of course. She didn't want the Silintis and suggested killing the monster. We set up a little cage in the armory. Cless likes to feed it and play with it but she's not allowed to let it roam around. They're mostly harmless apparently, if you don't hurt them. They love whoever feeds them so we're fine.” the man explained, their heavy steps echoing through the dark as they listened for enemies.

“Why did she suggest killing the beast then?” Ilea asked as she drove her hand past the wall next to her, the outermost layer crumbling and falling to the ground.

“Because its mind magic is useless for both fighting and performances. At least according to the expert. We checked it for a day and its harmless enough.” he said, Ilea grunting in response.

“Cold as fuck that summoner...” she murmured to herself as she opened another door. They had walked quite a distance already and were it not for her sphere, she'd probably have been surprised at the demon rushing towards her immediately upon opening the door. She simply jabbed it in the face, disorienting the beast before another two punches to its torso broke the bones and organs within, leaving it to slump down, dead in mere moments.

“Low levels down here...” she said. Likely the mind weavers pooled the stronger demons around themselves to ensure their safety and a tight grip on their minds.

“That's nasty...” Trian said as he entered the room, stepping over the demon corpse and holding his nose. The flow of water was closer now, and with it came the stench of a sewage system nobody had taken care of in more than a couple weeks.

“Welcome to paradise...” Ilea said absentmindedly as she heard the first screams of monsters. The stealthy approach was not going to happen. “Might as well start with the cleanup.” she said and put her fists together, behind her a series of metal spheres split into bullet sized and sharp projectiles as lightning sparkled around Trian.

“Calm down Thor, we don't want the ceiling to come down on us. Keep an eye on the shifty demon behind us instead.” she said and walked towards the noises steadily coming closer. Trian had a bit of a frown on his face but accepted, he wasn't unreasonable after all. The first demons were spilling out into the passage before them, nearly running each other over as they screamed towards the group of humans, teeth bared and spittle hanging low from their mouths.

# Chapter 139 Flying in the Dark

## Chapter 139 Flying in the Dark

Ilea appeared before them and crushed a head, the bone and flesh exploding like a watermelon shot by a ballista, her arms covered by the black obsidian gauntlets as she breathed out and turned. A sea of claws was before her, Ilea blinking upwards as ten demons struggled against each other in the small space to get to the human, shredded through a moment later by a multitude of metal spikes, organs and brains destroyed before Ilea landed, her fists reaching the demons still standing.

In her Sphere, she saw that the whole way up to the end of her range was full of the beasts. So far not a single one of them had been over level eighty, their bodies completely destroyed by the more and more seasoned warrior. Dodging the savage claw attacks and answering open maws with a fist let the warrior wade through her opponents like a tornado, leaving none of them intact while Kyrian advanced from behind, cleaning up the still living monsters and sending spikes towards both Ilea and into the mass of flesh trying to find the intruders to their newfound hunting grounds, the projectiles flying past her as she moved slightly in the last moments, even deflecting some of his spikes into the enemy line.

In the end the ones advancing weren't the demons themselves but Ilea and Kyrian as they massacred the opposition, leaving behind a tunnel filled with bleeding and destroyed corpses, the walls partially covered in red, only visible by the slight blue and red shine leaving Ilea's helmet when she turned.



“That's all of them for now. No mind weaver.” she said, walking back.

“No mind weaver, I agree.” Kyrian said as the bodies around them started moving slightly, the noise of metal piercing flesh resounded before pieces of metal flew back towards the metal mage, forming back into the spheres that continued to circle him afterwards.

“Ilea, about that night...” he started but she appeared before him and laid a finger on his helmet.

“We'll talk about it after Ravenhall, alright.” she said with a smile and he nodded meekly.

“We can move on!” Ilea shouted towards the others. “Trian will like this...” she said and smiled, seeing the carnage around her with her Sphere of perception.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Demon – lvl 74]'*

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Demon – lvl 62]'*

...

The list went on and on, each demon listed as Ilea skipped through the messages. Not a single level up to any of her skills or classes. Considering the ease of the fight it would take a couple more of those to gain more experience in her skills. At least it didn't seem like a complete waste, she would level eventually, even from enemies at such a lower level compared to herself. They would still manage to hurt her if they got lucky, the fight in Morhill had proven that. A part of her wanted to rush back up again and just invade the city with her teammates but considering Sulivhaan had planned it all through she would follow his lead, apparently it was too dangerous even for them to just move in and let their firepower speak for itself.

Guerrilla tactics, chaos from within and all that. At least she would be able to fight the beasts in the city itself soon enough, as soon as the actual assault

started. A small group like them would likely be ignored for the bigger threat coming from outside, even if they were discovered earlier. That was the hope at least. Otherwise they would at least take some of the enemy's resources off of the walls. With Ilea and Kyrian at the front, their own mind weaver would stay secluded and demon versus demon was the most cost effective way for them to go about the city retaking.

She would have to talk to Kyrian, maybe she'd go on a couple dates with him if that was even a concept here. Definitely no marriage, Ilea wasn't going to bind herself and settle down after getting wings.

“Oh my fuck, what is this...” Trian exclaimed, taking to the air as he floated half a meter in the corridor to avoid all the corpses. “Why again am I here with you?”

“I recommended you.” Ilea lied. “Come now, I'll let you know when I see more of them. Weavy! Follow behind and don't eat any of them, we don't have the time!” she shouted and heard the monsters advance from behind. It was certainly a risk to take the mind weaver with them but Ilea trusted him more than most of the members of the Hand she had met so far. Demons seemed a bit more straightforward, less time for politics and less castles to reign in their salt world. With time that would likely change but right now she was at ease. He also knew that they would target him immediately should any of his demons turn against them.

They walked or floated onwards through the dark corridors of Ravenhall's sewers, the dark and murky water streaming next to them reflecting the little light they produced from their skills. Ilea wondered how her self from two years ago would handle being in a monster infested sewage system without light. Adding to the sewage probably, she smiled and checked her status, the power that enabled her to be the hunter in this environment. Forty five stat points remained from the many fights she had had in the past weeks and soon she would reach level 220 of her main class and subsequently unlock another third tier point for her skills.

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 217*

- *Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 3*
- *Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Hunter's Sight – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 10*

*Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 213*

- *Active: Veil of Ash – 2nd lvl 15*
- *Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 16*
- *Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2nd lvl 10*
- *Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 15*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 7*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 10*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 16*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 11*

*General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 5*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – lvl 2nd 16*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 19*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*

- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 10*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Ice Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Veteran – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 600*

*Endurance: 320*

*Strength 251*

*Dexterity 350*

*Intelligence 515*

*Wisdom 385*

*Health: 6000/6000*

*Stamina: 2899/3200*

*Mana: 3592/3850*

Twenty each were spent on Wisdom and Endurance to increase the time she would be able to fight. Five went into Intelligence, giving her skills just a bit more throughput. A new noise in the distance made her close the list in her mind as she meditated to fill up the newfound pool of mana. It was time to take back a city, a place she had come close to call home.

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“The surveillance is complete master Sulivhaan.” a man in dark leather armor bowed to the mage after having placed a report on the man's table, Sulivhaan standing up and nodding to acknowledge the respect the scout had shown. The assault on the city was planned to take place in seven hours, the teams already preparing for the assault, sleeping or cooking while others sharpened their blades and prepared potions or bombs.

Moving fast was of utmost importance, more reports of previously unseen beasts filled his table. The demons had a way to summon more and already their numbers were exorbitantly high. Every minute, every hour their numbers would grow. The only light on the horizon was that for the most part, the demons remained in the city. At least the ones that hadn't left in the past month, that one was a completely different beast but Sulivhaan had to concentrate on the task at hand.

“We have the groups, the combination of skills, a couple healers in every group and enough firepower to wipe out an imperial army. I think we'll be fine.” Dagon said as he removed his glasses and cleaned them with a towel that had appeared in his hand.

“There are too many variables we don't know.” Sulivhaan said as he leafed through the latest report. They knew the terrain, the city and at this point most of the enemy troops. Removing the ranged units from a distance will open complete air control for their mages, allowing a continued bombardment

while funneling the demons below through the gates where their most resilient warriors and barrier mages will be stationed.

Experience was their main advantage against this savage enemy. While the mind weavers were smart and likely had some innate talent to lead their troops in organized maneuvers, they lacked the ingenuity and diversity of magic the Shadow's Hand had at their disposal. Without the initial chaos and surprise factor of the summoning, the wars and dungeon explorations nearly each member of the human force had been a part of was unreachable for the enemy.

“There is much we don't know but my trust is with the Hand. We're not soldiers Sulivhaan, all this planning isn't necessary. Each and every one of our members could take out hundreds of those demons on their own. With the backing of the whole organization, we'll be unstoppable.” he smiled and put a hand on Sulivhaan's shoulder.

“And they will have to kill hundreds. Thousands even.”

“And they will. Now come, I haven't seen you even eat since we came.” Dagon said and Sulivhaan agreed. The librarian wasn't known to be optimistic but it seemed this whole mobilization had given him a bit of his youth back, his step a little lighter. Perhaps he had simply been too occupied with books and the trade of knowledge that he forgot the thrill of the hunt.

It was early morning as the two stepped out of the inn, the previously deserted square returning to near the same activity it had when Morhill still stood strong as a city of the empire. Though the scene reminded more of an adventurer camp before the exploration of a dungeon would begin, new lands to be discovered. Cooking stations and fires were burning as people trained their skills, talked and worked together with people and teams they hadn't been in contact with for years or never at all.

The air was fresh still, the sun not yet reaching the horizon as the fires provided most of the light, the snow in the square was walked into the earth by the many people occupying it, turning the ground to mud. The smells of different exotic and regional food filled their noses as they advanced to one of the tables set up outside of the inn. A bard was working on his lute, toning

the different strings before he started playing, the thick mana streaming from his magical weapon penetrating the surroundings.

No wild beast or demon had come close to the walls of Morhill in the past day, many of the members having gone out to hunt and clear the surrounding villages or further away small towns, finding many of them occupied by demons but no mind weavers. A select few had even managed to withstand the assault, quite impressive so far outside the empire's main military bases and so close to the demon summoning in Ravenhall. Sulivhaan was already planning resupply missions for the members who were available for work and didn't have to prepare longer for the assault. They would wait with clearing the smaller towns and villages of demons to his annoyance.

Should a mind weaver escape, they could easily find another group of monsters to command but right now he had to focus on the main target. Dagon came back with two plates of steaming food, placing it down on the table. The stew was comparable to what an experienced cook in Viscera would produce, perhaps someone had brought one with them.

“How do you feel about Strand?” Sulivhaan asked, influencing the space around them a little to make it harder for sound to travel. Dagon looked at him and then back to his plate, poking around in his food for a moment before he answered.

“I knew he'd vanish at some point. There were clues even years ago. I didn't think it would come to something like this. Hoped he had more left in his stubborn heart for us, you know?” the librarian answered. Sulivhaan stayed quiet, the man would talk if he wanted to, there was no reason to push. It was no secret that the librarian and the elder had known each other for more years than others even lived.

“We did manage to bring the Hand back on track. That's why I didn't lose all my respect for him.” Dagon added.

“What do you mean?” Sulivhaan moved in a little closer, the magic around him thickening. Dagon sensed it and looked around.

“Wallace Urn was taken care of in the confusion of the summoning.” he said.

“So that's why you didn't grow suspicious of Strand's behavior...why Urn?” Sulivhaan asked. He knew that the elder wasn't exactly similar to the other leaders of the Hand but at least he was in Ravenhall sometimes. Two didn't even show up when the city got destroyed.

“No, Adam Strand was always scheming, planning and being a suspicious character. That's why I didn't think this one was different. All his experimenting with animals, monsters and demons. It's led to this. Urn wanted to change the Shadow's Hand, wanted to change who we are. I have reliable sources and evidence pointing to a cooperation with Baralia.” the man said, sharing information for free, not something he was known to do regularly. Sulivhaan just shook his head. Just like the empire, the kingdom of Baralia had their hands and eyes in everything. At least they tried but to think they had come so close as to plant an elder into the Shadow's Hand was definitely concerning.

“There will be a vote you know?” Dagon said. Sulivhaan knew what he was talking about and he had already considered it.

“Maybe a couple years off the field would be good. My age is a bad influence on the team.” he said and smiled as he continued eating.

“Verena isn't exactly good with people.” Dagon said “It'll be good to have you.”

Sulivhaan finished his food, a single thought on his mind as he looked at the friend sitting opposite him. There were two elders dead or missing, not just one.

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“Fuck... fuck, this is bad.” Eve's hand was steady as she read through the content of the letter before her again. She sighed and placed the documents



into her pouch. 'Should've stolen that necklace...' she thought but then again Ilea probably needed it more with her food obsession and heavy armor.

The woman expertly walked over the cold corpses around her, doing her best not to leave any tracks or disturbances behind. Even more important knowing that she wasn't the one responsible for their death. Her target had again struck before she had managed to find him but this time she at least was here before the man she had fought. The golden lily was in reach, she had a name and possible sources. The problem was that one of them had nearly killed her and the other didn't seem any less capable.

For once she wasn't happy for the bad news that would reach Trian. Knowing her own family it might not come as a complete negative but she doubted they had that in common. Leaving the building through the roof, she breathed in the morning air. She wouldn't waste too much time on this but she owed the man at least some Lightning Resistance, already worth sending a letter.

One of her information brokers was in his usual spot, Eve jumping up to the bar built on top of a big building's roof. The woman had exceptional magic to prevent eavesdroppers but one could never be too sure. She checked around for familiar faces but found the place rather empty.

“It's you.” the woman said, not looking at Eve as she sipped a little of her drink that looked more like a drowned salad than anything else. The nicely carved wood around them brought a charming feel to the locale, intertwined with the ivy and plants growing from the roof and specific containers placed all around. Scents of dozens of herbs and plants permeated the place, their unnatural growth rate at the end of winter leading Eve to believe the owner's magic was quite involved. A good defense for sure.

# Chapter 140 Infected City

## Chapter 140 Infected City

Eve knew the woman and trusted her. The owner that was, not the informant in front of her. Trusting an informant was not something one did. You simply entrusted them with only the information that you were sure wouldn't cost you dearly. And some risks had to be taken. In dungeons as much as here.

“It's me, yes. Empty today, is there a tournament or is everyone shitting their pants about the demon invasion.” Eve answered, sitting down opposite the woman in a casual way. She didn't plan to drink anything.

“You shouldn't talk too loud about demons, shadow. I heard some interesting tales regarding your involvement. Perhaps the imperial capital won't be just as safe for you in the coming years.” the woman replied, looking around and increasing the magical barrier around them.

“If someone has a problem then let them come and talk. You probably know more about what the hell happened back in Ravenhall than me at this point.” Eve answered.

“They left you know. There was a big demon horde taken care of yesterday and all the members of your order left after that. Perhaps that's why there are fewer people here today. Rather I think it's the increased shifts for everyone, there's war, and where there is war, there's gold to be made. Why waste your time on drinking?”

Eve didn't say anything about her lack of association with the Hand, that information the broker would have to get from somewhere else. So the Hand left, all of them? Perhaps to retake their fallen capital, there was little else she could think of. At least she knew now where to send her letter, not that many a courier would bring it into the south east mountain chains.

Eve casually opened her pouch and removed some of the documents she had found before, handing some of them to the broker who read through them and stashed them quickly. The woman took a deep breath. "That's quite valuable." she simply said, leaving other interpretations open. Eve knew that she'd paint a target on her back for having those documents, perhaps some people would assume she was involved with the killings which considering her past years wasn't too far of an assumption to make.

"There are some people I'd like to know something about. Tell me if you have anything significant." Eve started and proceeded to ask about the man she had fought, Edwin and the people she had taken out a week ago. The informant only had something about the woman who had managed to injure her. Not much but probably enough for Eve to continue her search. Running after Edwin didn't seem reasonable after the killings she had heard about. He was moving too quickly, so the next logical step for her was to continue her search with more stationary individuals.

Individuals that were a little less alert than the man she had fought.

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"Are we lost?" Ilea asked, punching through another wall and stepping into the dark. "I think we're lost." demons screamed as they ran towards her but she simply turned around again. "Trian!" she shouted as the demons in the next room over clawed at the stone walls, trying to get to the noise they had heard.

“Yes yes, calm down. We have another two hours until the attack starts.” the man said as he floated into the room. “Stop destroying walls, it's gonna be even more confusing.”

“Sure. Let me just go up, I'll let you know where we are in a few moments.” she asked, for the third time in the past hour. The man had previously insisted on using his map to navigate the tunnels but it was getting more and more clear that they had lost their way. Either the map wasn't up to date anymore or he wasn't the best navigator. Fighting hordes of demons and listening to Ilea's room descriptions were certainly a part of the issue as well.

“Alright, just make sure not to break into the city itself.” finally the man resigned, Ilea smiling and thanking him as her wings spread before she blinked upwards a couple times. The underground network of Ravenhall was certainly bigger than she had ever expected but then again with earth mages it was likely much easier to build something like this compared to what something like a big metro on Earth would've cost.

She thought about why more cities she had previously visited didn't have something like that but it might simply be too dangerous, having children with explosion or earth magic around. Plus most of the rooms didn't look to have been used recently. 'For storage or dungeons perhaps...' she thought as she finally saw something different through her Sphere. No further ceiling was beyond the next layer of stone, she was standing right below the city streets.

'That's a little concerning...' she thought, looking at the scene as she blinked around in the infrastructure below the city, looking for the right way to go without losing herself as well. Two minutes later she was back with the others and pointed in a specific direction.

“We're four floors deep and Viscera is that way. By the way the streets are full of demons, half of them consisting of beasts I've never seen. Thousands, the streets are packed. The mind weavers certainly didn't just enjoy their newfound castle.” she reported and started running, the others followed.

“Sulivhaan was right then, good thing we're already here.” Trian said as he followed behind her. “Demon. The mind weavers seem to be working together, or do you know of someone able to control thousands of other

demons?” he looked back to the monster floating behind them, his group of demons following him.

“I do not know...” the demon answered, a little out of breath at the speed Ilea set. “Some circles exist but this level of cooperation, I have never seen.” Ilea started simply crashing through walls head on, her Veil protecting her face from any damage. There were simply too many levels of the complex for some simple walls to cause a cave in.

“What if we just have the whole city collapse from below?” she asked, smashing through another wall, feeling like a certain red liquid man in a big jar.

“Would take too long, even if we used more firepower than just us. Plus how do you suppose we protect ourselves from the cave in?” Trian asked as he lazily floated through the hole she had produced. Ilea wanted to ask if he had ever heard of controlled demolition but then again she didn't know enough about it either to make much of a difference. Claire might've been able to help, with her remote explosion runes.

Then again they likely had the skies, and artillery against infantry was more than just a little effective, especially if they don't have trenches.

The levels ended in unchanged rock from the mountain and the group had to go upwards more and more until Ilea stopped the others. “We're right below the entrance. You guys are ready?” Trian and Kyrian nodded and the mind weaver was actually smiling, at least the closest thing he could produce with his hideous excuse for a face.

“Weavy, you sure you don't want to join the demons? This is your last chance I bet but I hope you know you'd die in the process.” Ilea said, reminding the monster one more time of his position. He had only his life to lose.

“Your concerns aren't unfounded but my kind has not informed me of this alleged alliance. I have spent over two hundred years in the salt lands and you have so far shown great hospitality to me, something your kind normally considers something to be destroyed on sight. I have not sat idle since coming here, Ilea. And I don't plan to find an early death like the others of my kind.

Make sure to give them a painless death if you can.” the demon had talked more than he usually did, into their minds and completely without the pressure he had used in their first encounter.

“I like you more and more, sure you don't want a real name? And sure, I don't really kill anything not fast, if I can.” Ilea said. “We'll follow the plan then.” she said to the others.

“Weavy is a suitable name as any.” the demon said, only to her. She smiled under her helmet but didn't respond.

“Will do, good luck Ilea. Don't die.” Trian said.

“We'll wait for you inside.” Kyrian added, nodding towards her.

“I'm the healer so it's you who shouldn't die.” she added and shook her head, silly mages and their arrogance. She walked to Trian and put a hand on his shoulder before she slapped his helmet with quite a bit of force. “Your reflexes are shit mate.” she said and stepped to Kyrian before she hugged the man. Ilea wasn't quite sure if anything came of their hookup but she liked him well enough, as a friend and possibly more.

Ilea left them behind and motioned for the demon to follow her. He hadn't been informed about anything. Even the attack on the city was only communicated after they had started their travel from Morhill to the outskirts of Ravenhall while mind magic savvy members of the Hand had kept an eye on the demon during their stay.

“Alright then Weavy.” Ilea started after having ran for a couple minutes. “Your goal is to send up your demons and cause as much havoc as possible from the inside as soon as the attack has started. Take over demons as you lose them if possible. I suggest keeping a group of your highest leveled ones with you to avoid any retaliation. If you're in trouble just send out a pulse and I'll come for you, just don't move away too far so I know where you are. Oh and use the gullies and other sewage exits to enter the city, I don't think you can easily destroy the ceiling.” Ilea explained.

“Understood Ilea.” he simply said as his demons spread out. She walked up to him and used the same gesture as she had for Trian, without the head smacking.

“I like you, so don't go fucking it up right now alright? I'd hate to have to kill you. Thinking off, afterwards the humans will probably hunt down the rest of the demons for a couple months or longer, I think I know of a place that would welcome you with more than open arms.”

“More than open arms? I have thought about the after, where is this place?” the demon asked.

“Open bones even! And I'll tell you after we survived this battle, alright?” she asked and the demon nodded, imitating the gesture he had learned from the humans.

“Where will you be?” he asked.

“Around, I have my own part in this. Now just do what you can and don't die, I'm sure you'll get some levels out of it as well. Put that into Vitality and Strength, you really need it.” she said in a serious tone, worried about her newfound alien friend that had been on a meat only diet coupled with mind powers for two hundred years.

She left him there, more or less right under the center of the city. The mind weavers hadn't detected them yet or simply ignored the few pests hiding right under their noses which made Ilea worry a little. Either they simply didn't have the detection skills or didn't care. More likely they were arrogant or preoccupied enough to not at least send some of their own controlled demons down into the sewers. There were demons down there after all so they must know about its existence.

'They've probably never seen a city before... maybe the demons hunted down humans who fled into the sewers and the mind weavers don't even know about it?' she asked herself as she rushed through the broken walls they had left behind, quickly finding her way back to the entrance outside of Ravenhall. With her full speed it took barely five minutes, her Sphere making the darkness around her more into a friend than an enemy.

The sun blinded her for a moment as she rushed out into the snow covered surroundings, immediately alerting the group of people standing around, different skills and magic flaring to life as they prepared for the enemy who had suddenly approached. Ilea dodged an arrow that scratched against her helmet, having pushed through her veil with ease. An invisible barrage of blades pushed towards her from one of the mages, only visible in her sphere as she blinked upwards to avoid the attack.

Some of the people were shouting already for the others to stop attacking while Ilea twirled around in the air. “Yea guys, friendly here.” she said, motioning to her own black armor.

The two who had attacked seemed a little embarrassed. “Sorry, usually more safe to attack and ask questions later.” the bow wielding rogue said. “I owe you one.” The mage in the meantime was being scolded by one of her teammates, seeing her level at 202, Ilea thought she must've joined the Hand even more recently than herself. Might have gotten a lucky class to level easily and not actually seen much action.

“Don't sweat it guys.” she said as she landed, her wings crumbling and fading away in the wind.

“You're with the rogue group? With that approach I doubt you even know the word subtlety.” a man in light black leather armor answered, two curved blades on his back as he commented from a crouched position.

“Well I might've not been placed here if any of you had any healing magic Slavic Deadpool. Plus my glorious approach will hide you even more. I don't mind the demon attention.” she said, the man just shaking his head.

“Now come, we have barely an hour to scout out the city from below and find all the mind weavers.”

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“Everyone's in position. The demon scouts have been taken out, they know something's coming but their troops aren't moving.” the warrior said to Sulivhaan who just scratched his mask.

“Well any surprises they have left we'll find out soon enough. Everyone has the time so we'll proceed as planned. Keep scouting around the city to see if anything changes. The man teleported away and left Sulivhaan to himself.

The man sighed and took out the amulet around his neck, looking at the picture inside. A small smile spread on his lips as he prepared himself.

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“I'm pretty sure that is one of them.” Ilea said but the man next to her disagreed.

“Doesn't look like it. The mana signature feels wrong.” he shook his head. Their group had different spells to detect and find the mind weavers in the massive city but it seemed they disguised themselves better than expected, either it was a normal practice for them or because they knew an attack was coming.

The mind weavers they could find were all surrounded by strong looking demons and there were many more than anybody had expected. Weavy hadn't even known about just two or three mind weavers working together so closely.

“Well fuck it then, you go and find one. I'll stay, the hour is nearly up. Once the chaos starts we can continue the search. Good luck.” she said. The man nodded and vanished.

Ilea prepared herself. The house above her was packed with demons, as were the streets around it. She couldn't identify through walls but was pretty sure they weren't the low leveled monsters she had fought in Morhill and outside of Varilya. This wouldn't be an easy fought battle. She waited for a minute, then two, humming the theme song of her favorite red haired spy's TV show. The demon in the house above was undoubtedly a mind weaver, his scrawny figure a nearly mirror image of Weavy and the monsters surrounding him were twitching with the urge to tear into fresh meat. She didn't quite understand the last scout's detection skill but to her own Sphere her target was clear.

Three minutes passed, only her humming heard as she created some ash that twirled around her, forming tendrils to touch the walls and the ground before they surrounded her armor and vanished again, an exercise she was slowly getting better in. She suddenly felt a light tremor through her feet, her Sphere confirming that the earth had been shaken from an impact quite a distance away.

"We're starting..." she said but waited for another minute as more and more tremors formed, the demons above her moving towards the northern gate where a big chunk of the Hand's forces would be stationed. Quickly tapping on her feet, Ilea prepared herself as she cracked the bones in her hands and neck.

"Shit one-liner..." she said and vanished, appearing in the second floor of the building above her, bladed gauntlets lightly reflecting the magical light illuminating the monsters who had taken residence inside of the house built from stone. They were quick to react, on guard after the impacts from magical missiles in the distance but Ilea was quicker, her blade already past the mind weaver's neck as she turned to kick one of the surrounding demons.

A claw cut through her Veil of Ash, crashing into her side and making her unable to blink away. Truly these weren't the average demons she had come to know in the past week, these monsters had survived the great salt plains.

Though as she landed hard on the ground and felt more claws cut through her defenses, blocked by her black armor, she promised them that they wouldn't survive Ravenhall.

# Chapter 141 Green, the not so stupid demon

## Chapter 141 Green, the not so stupid demon

A surge of ash spread around her as the demons tried to get through her armor, scratching at the metal with their savage claws. Ilea used each impact to send a destructive Wave of Ember through the attackers combined with Destruction and reversed Reconstruction. The damage was enough to give her a minuscule time frame where none of them touched her, letting her blink away. The mind weaver was dead and her task was to focus on more of them.

The reason this city wouldn't be taken by their small group of seven with Sulivhaan at the lead was because the enemy had leaders too. 'One down...', she thought as she stood on top of the house, moving to the side to dodge a bone projectile flashing past her. The sky was burning with fire and ice, magical explosions destroying walls and parts of houses as they impacted into the demon masses and their stolen defenses.

Another four projectiles made her concentrate on her surroundings, blinking to the next house as she looked for mind weavers in her Sphere. Finding nothing, she spread her wings and flew to the next building, continuing to ignore the growing number of both ranged attacks towards her and demons chasing her as they tried to climb the buildings or rushed after her on the crowded streets.

Someone in the distance must've taken notice as a massive rock flew her way. Ilea smiled on top of the building and stopped her search, waiting for the demons to flock towards her before she blinked away right before the projectile landed. The piece of rock clipped the side of the building, taking a big chunk of it down with it as it smashed the demons below into a bloody paste before it rolled further, taking out even more of them.

The streets so far back weren't as crowded anymore as the northern part of the city, where the demons tried to attack the enemy but Ilea didn't have to try hard to have a large demon following. The long ranged mages in the distance took notice as they shot projectiles her way to avoid trying to hit the front lines of demons protected by the city walls.

“Another one...,” Ilea said as she appeared inside a house built a little higher than the ones around it, bladed gauntlets slashing through the thin mage's body as ash entered the space around her. She pushed through the demons in front of her and right through the wall of the house to avoid a similar outcome as her previous target. Cutting off the arm of a demon hanging onto her leg, she blinked upwards when a fireball landed in the crowd below, the fiery explosion heating her back as she continued running over the rooftops.

She could see another warrior mimicking her behavior a couple hundred meters to her left, the two working as beacons for the artillery to attract demons around them. Killing the controlling mind mages brought chaos to the monsters around them and Ilea started to see some of them attacking each other as time went on. An effort by Weavy to be sure but soon enough the monsters would do so on their own volition with all the spells flying around and no clear target in sight.

A third mind mage was found when Ilea saw the warrior from before fly through the window of the house in front of her. Certainly an unorthodox approach, she thought. Especially head on but she wasn't one to judge. Seeing the demons in the house cut into the man left her with more than just a bit of doubt towards his approach. She appeared inside the stone house, her bladed gauntlets cutting through the monsters occupied with the warrior's body. She could see his eyes staring at her from behind his horned helmet. The monsters hadn't managed to rip open his chest piece but the cuts were getting deeper

and deeper while his arms and legs were bleeding profoundly from wounds near his elbows and knees. Ilea created ash around them as she grabbed the man, and ran through the house's wall, seeing the screaming demons below her as wings spread and carried the two through one of the neighboring building's windows. She landed on her feet and felt his vitals with her healing skill, pushing some mana into the man. He was stable but it would take another couple minutes to get him up to fighting strength again.

“Go for the demon...” he said, blood spurting from his mouth as his wounds slowly closed. She nodded and blinked into the other house again where the monsters were scrambling towards the opened wall to get to them, jumping out and into the masses below while screaming. The mind weaver had four high leveled demons right beside it, knowing the imminent danger of the human warriors. Ilea dodged the claws of the first one and let two others cut through her Veil as she delivered a blade into the mind weaver's head and continuing forward with the force, the demon behind the mage falling down as she got the blade out, blinking out of the building and back to the wounded man.

“He's dead.” she simply said and pushed healing magic into him while the demons on the ground floor finally managed to break through the building's door and started scrambling up the stairs. She knew she had around seven more seconds to heal the man and would take every moment she could get while he was still stable on the ground. Moving him while injured was bad and it was reasonable to avoid it for as long as possible.

“Not the mage...” the man said as he coughed again. Ilea saw that above the building a demon had landed but it didn't look different than the ones coming up the stairs. Perhaps a little more muscle but its actions spoke more than its looks as it looked around, walked to the edge of the building and looked over to the other house before it looked down. Ilea saw its hideous mouth curl up a little into the resemblance of a grin. She grabbed the warrior below her and used her full strength to jump out of the building.

The two flew out as her wings spread from her back and the demon previously standing on top of the building was now standing on the ground floor, two huge holes above it, one of them right where Ilea and the warrior had been. She flew upwards, holding the man under his shoulders as she

pushed more healing mana into him. Ranged demons shot their projectiles towards them as she flew through the city, low enough to stay below most of the building's roofs.

Three streets later she saw movement in her sphere behind her, the demon from before running on the ground and catching up quickly before it jumped, a clawed arm aiming for her back. She managed to move to the side quickly enough to change the direct hit to a glancing strike. The force was still overwhelming and sent her spiraling into a nearby stone house, her armored body breaking through the wall before she rolled on the ground, dust whirling around her as she stopped on her knees, turning around to find claws heading straight for her face. Ilea blinked a mere step backwards before she answered the now open demon with a hard punch to its stomach.

The impact felt more like she was hitting a punching bag in the gym and less like her overpowering strength that usually straight up demolished the enemy monsters. She barely managed to stop the monster's approach as it swung at her again with its free hand. Ilea moved her torso backwards, aided by the backlash from her previous punch and the strike missed but it was followed by a kick of the monster too fast for her to anticipate. The foot landed on her chest and she flew backwards and through another wall, several ribs broken and her spine at least injured.

Landing hard on the wall behind the building she had just been in, Ilea started to circle healing mana through her body as she slowly staggered away from the wall, expecting the next move of the enemy to follow right after. Luckily the demon had stopped its attack for a moment as she didn't see anything in her Sphere, looking towards the hole in the wall where the monster was slowly walking towards her, in its right hand the warrior she had tried to save before, his neck broken and bleeding as his corpse was dragged on the ground with the sound of screeching metal.

A quick motion from the demon sent the heavy corpse flying towards her, the body spinning twice before it impacted the wall behind Ilea who simply stood there, mending her broken bones and the internal bleeding.

“Throwing not good.” the demon snarled in a barely comprehensible voice, already an impressive feat considering the zombie like state of most of its

bretheren. Not even the mind weavers had the ability to actually talk using vocals.

“Throwing not good.” Ilea mimicked, remembering her own attempts at the form of attack, though she deemed herself at least better than the demon before her who was now standing in the hole of the wall.

*[Demon – lvl ??]*

At least it wasn't more than two question marks but still, it had taken out the warrior who was at least healed enough to react and it had broken her hardened bones with a simple kick. She was wary to say the least, her initial plan to find and kill more mind weavers left her mind as she thought of more possibilities. If there were hundreds of demons capable of what the monster in front of her displayed, they might be in trouble.

More likely was that the enemy was an anomaly, and who better to distract this monstrosity from slashing through their long ranged artillery than herself, she was durable at least. Seeing the man behind her slid off the wall, his armor the only thing keeping his corpse in a presentable state Ilea prepared herself, clearing her mind.

“I healed the man you know?” she said, the edges of her mouth tugging upwards as her eyes turned to ice.

“Heal?” the demon asked, its head cocked to the side before its muscles tensed, the claws on its feet cutting into the stone below before it rushed her with explosive acceleration. More used to the monster's speed, Ilea changed into a more defensive style of fighting as she dodged backwards, avoiding the three quick strikes from its claws. Ash spread around her as stopped five meters further back, waiting for the demon's next move.

“Hmm...” it gurgled out, its claws wading through the floating ash created by her before it sniffed at the substance. It reminded Ilea of a puppy confused at its first experienced snow fall. Her body was healed and ready by that point as she tensed her muscles and felt the power of her skills flow through her, a dim blue and red hue lightly illuminating the inside of her armor.



A deep breath left her and the moment had passed, the demon focusing on its prey again, Ilea blinking upwards, wings spreading on her back as she summoned her bow. The monster looked upwards and turned its head when her arrow was loosed, the beast simply catching the spear like object out of the air, looking at it before the arrowhead exploded in its face.

A snarl was heard from inside the cloud of smoke without any indication of injury. An instant later the demon shot out from the ground, leathery wings of flesh had appeared on its back. The monster looked towards Ilea and closed half the distance between them with surprising speed before it suddenly turned and rushed into the buildings below, smashing sideways through at least six walls before it came to a stop outside the last house, even smashing a couple normal demons in the process.

“What are you doing?” Ilea simply waited in the air, her bow stowed again after the underwhelming impact it had on the enemy. The demon stood up slowly, dust and stone falling from its body as the leathery wings spread again. Quickly finding its target, it shot out towards her, big spells of fire, stone and ice falling around as they slowly approached the northern wall.

As much as Ilea wanted to keep the demon away from the bulk of their forces, she wasn't exactly in the controlling position. The monster was fast and after that initial blow she didn't quite plan to get hit again as she used her higher experience in aerial combat to outmaneuver the demon as it desperately tried to get to her. It had the advantage in speed and impact, that was for sure as Ilea felt herself dragged towards the beast a little as it shot past her.

Turning towards the northern gate, Ilea shot out as the demon repositioned himself a couple dozen meters behind her, the woman moving towards the masses of demons behind the high walls of Ravenhall that somewhat protected the monsters from the artillery coming from the snowy fields outside. The mages didn't dare come much closer as the ranged attacks from the demons were nothing shy of a rain of bones.

Ilea blinked backwards in the last moment as she approached the ground, some of the monsters already shooting projectiles towards the black object advancing on them. Her timing adjusted to the enemy's speed, she found

herself right behind the monster as it rushed towards the screaming demons below. The impact was lost in all the noise and elemental explosions of all the other spells in the surroundings as Ilea watched the demon smash into and killing at least a dozen of its brethren.

In the meantime Ilea dodged some of the ranged attacks and moved into the chaos to take out as many ranged demons as possible, not aiming to kill as a single blow was usually not enough. She simply grabbed onto the monsters and threw them into the mass of demons below, the raging sea barely controlled by the hidden mind weavers she had yet to find. Occasional bone projectiles scratched on her Veil or broke through and failed to penetrate her armor as she continued her approach to destabilize the enemy ranged forces.

The flying demon was nowhere to be found anymore as she spotted a group of rogues coming from further in the city and mimicking her approach, systematically slaughtering the demons positioned on the roofs and high floors of buildings. The enemy mages responded rather quickly as groups of demons from the streets below rushed upwards through the buildings or across roofs to try and protect the ranged demons.

The experience of the Hand showed quickly as their mages and rangers started concentrating fire on said groups of demons, both eliminating the ranged opponents and clusters of melee variants. With the chaos planted inside the enemy lines, less and less of the monsters were focusing on the distant group of mages, allowing them to fly closer to deliver their destructive spells nearly on top of the masses behind the wall.

A sudden strong magical field was felt by Ilea as she finally found one of the mind weavers, resisting his mental magic as she blinked closer, her blades sinking deep into the frail body of her enemy. The demons around her screamed but didn't attack as everyone including Ilea looked outside, the latter quickly blinking up onto the roof of the building as a big rip in space formed right above them.

“Again?” she simply said as she tried to find the runes responsible for the summoning. She couldn't find anything immediately when something broke through the roof of a nearby building. The flying demon floated above it and laughed, its hands held up towards the fissure when a massive whale like

creature broke through, its heavy nose smashing into and through the city wall. The loud noise and rumble rushed through Ilea's bones as she braced herself, a wave of wind, stone and snow followed.

"Green brought friends!!" a sudden shout was heard from next to her before she blinked a couple meters back, the demon's claw smashing into the roof she had been standing on a moment earlier. In the corner of her vision, she could see another massive beast slowly wiggle through the fissure, this time it reminded her more of a squid.

'If this goes on...' she thought but concentrated on the demon before her. With it focused on her, she wasn't going to move anywhere. All she could do was trust her companions. The demon rushed her again, Ilea blinking backwards four times quickly, the demon closer after each blink before it finally managed to close the distance. Its claws were blocked by Ilea's arms, the monster's hands reaching around and pressing down hard. She could feel her bones slowly giving in before a kick from the beast send her torso backwards while it still grasped her arms.

Blood and air rushed out of her mouth as she felt her organs smash together and the tendons on her shoulders rip. 'Not again...' she thought as ash spread around her, shrouding both the demon and herself as it still held onto her. Her wings pushed her forwards as strongly as they could before she delivered a buffed up headbutt right onto the deformed nose of her enemy. The impact made the monster release her for an instant, Ilea immediately blinking upwards as her wings carried her further away from the disoriented demon, her healing taking care of the imminent danger to her life.

The squid like monster was now out of the fissure with most of its body as it screeched, the wave of sound pushing Ilea backwards in the air.

*'You have heard the Alizoss' Scream. You are paralyzed for five seconds.'*

*'Veteran reaches level 2'*

'Finally, some competition.' she thought, a smile coming to her face as she spit blood out of her mouth and onto her helmet. The demon hadn't come

from below yet which either meant her hit had done a little damage or it too was paralyzed. Perhaps it didn't have the Veteran skill yet.

# Chapter 142 It's just a Fleshwound

## Chapter 142 It's just a Fleshwound

The five seconds passed as if in slow motion, Ilea's organs and tendons healing at a fast pace, the injuries less severe than she had previously though. The world was frozen, all the beings who heard the monster's scream stood unmoving as with the complete lack of sound the fissure in the air vanished. The massive squid like monster was parted as its noises turned from anger to pain, tentacle like extensions flailing around wildly as they tried to find the missing part of its body.

Ilea's smile widened as she watched the monster slowly die as it fell downwards with almost magical slowness. She didn't know if the Hand could've taken that one but now they didn't have to worry about it anymore. The wale like monster was starting to move again though so they weren't quite out of trouble. Of course she didn't forget about the monstrous demon below her and the army of a couple hundred thousand standing inside the city of Ravenhall. It could be worse, she thought.

"One step at a time." she said to herself as the five seconds came to an end, Ilea blinking downwards immediately, finding the demon falling slowly, its face and body still frozen. Another blink brought her behind the beast, quick punches delivered to the spine and neck, she tried to inflict as much damage as possible.

Sped up by the attacks' impact, the monster flew downwards and landed hard on the cobbled street, stone crumbled below the two as more flew outwards

and into the frozen demons. Ilea's black obsidian gauntlets formed around her arms before she started her assault again, each punch pushing the demon further into the ground. A satisfying crack could be heard with the last punch before a kick from the beast made her blink backwards, her gauntlets vanishing again as she prepared for its assault.

Ash formed around her already, spreading into the surrounding immobilized masses of demons. The monster she had assaulted slowly got up before it walked sideways into the building next to them. The whole street was covered in ash by that point, Ilea using the moment to blink next to the monster, kicking at its leg before she jumped away again. The fight had been going on for quite some time, each time they touched she had pushed destructive mana into the beast and each minute let her become stronger thanks to Form of Ash and Ember.

The monster turned, sluggishly this time, the broken bone in its back giving it at least some trouble. It still stood and Ilea used every second to gain back some of her mana through Meditation. It had at least some difficulty locating her in the mist of ash as she appeared next to it occasionally to deliver single blows, the second stage of Wave of Ember slowly stacking as she started to hear a sizzling inside the demon.

Several big impact spells landed on the demons just a couple streets over as some of the Hand's members likely had the Veteran skill as well. Slowly the world began moving again as the demons twitched and started screaming. Ilea weighed her options before the demon in the mist of ash spoke.

"Boring fight, coward. Green is tired." the monster said and jumped up one of the buildings before its wings spread and it flew towards the south. Ilea blinked up and out of the ash, the masses of demons behind her starting to flow towards the northern gate as she looked at the already distant demon, its wings carrying it upwards towards the high mountain top overlooking Ravenhall.

'It just left... Green was it?' she thought and shook her head. First that assthat of an elder and now some shit demon. Both had overwhelmed her in power somehow. She had managed to stand against them but this wasn't exactly a testament to her own power. Ilea was annoyed to have been overpowered

again. With cunning and her skills, combined with the luck of having a beast like that squid use its paralyzing ability she had managed to gain at least even ground with the demon but she had to get stronger. Putting those thoughts on hold, she focused on the present again, especially the massive whale now floating above the city.

“Time to get some experience...” Ilea said as she turned around, bladed gauntlets materializing around her hands, her grip tightening as she focused on the whale. Shaking her head, she flew towards the next building as she continued her search for mind weavers hidden in the enemy forces. It would be easier to slaughter the demons and then focus on the massive magical whale if at least they weren’t coordinated.

Appearing in one of the houses, her blades cut through two demons’ throats before she ducked, claws flying past her head as she cut through the legs of her enemies, blinking behind the mind weaver before she slashed through its head. This time she didn’t vanish but faced the demons scrambling to their feet as her Meditation skill brought back the mana she had just used. Ilea stood still before she dodged the first attack, a small kick sending the demon stumbling before she caught the next enemy’s arm, a fist to its chin sent it backwards.

Two minutes later, Ilea was standing in the room surrounded by twelve demon corpses, all of them having been above level two hundred. A bonus of going after the mind weavers. Both something suited to her set of skills and the most efficient for leveling. They would take this city back. Her eyes were cold as she blinked outside again, looking for her next prey.

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The enemy forces were destabilizing more and more, Sulivhaan ordering their mages further and further towards the city walls to deliver spells right into the clusters of demons huddled behind the protective stone barrier.

“Preparations ready boss.” a team leader said next to him as he turned towards the man.

“It doesn’t seem interested in us, are you sure we should engage it?” the woman next to him asked but Sulivhaan wasn’t going to change their plans.

“That monster was born here in Ravenhall, and this is where it will end.” he simply said as he took to the sky, his eyes fixed on the flying whale, its blood red eyes looking towards the Hand’s forces as it slowly floated towards them.

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‘And another one...’ Ilea thought as she made her gauntlets vanish, looking around the room of dead demons. Looking outside, she saw that the demons in the streets were already fighting each other, confused at the magic coming from above and the chaos around them.

“Guess we’ve managed to break through...” she said as she got closer to the window, looking up to see the whale covered in explosions of differing elements. “Time to join in the fun...” she uttered before looking through the messages she had received since coming to Ravenhall. Her Meditation skill ran at top performance. Ilea wouldn’t want to engage that flying monster without a full stock of health and mana.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has killed [Striker - Demon – lvl 58]*

...

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have killed [Claw Master - Demon – lvl 207]*



*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 218 – Five Stat points awarded.'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 219 – Five Stat points awarded.'*

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Body of the First Hunter reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Perception reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 214 – Five Stat points awarded.'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 215 – Five Stat points awarded.'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

The twenty stat points were quickly spent on more Wisdom, Ilea's new mana capacity now at 4050. With the low cost of her spells and her ability to regain some mana with each punch of reversed Destruction, she would be hard pressed to find herself completely empty. At least in a normal fighting situation. Finding herself in a battle with a couple hundred thousand demons and a giant beast of a whale, perhaps then even she might find herself relying on her Meditation skill as much as some of the long ranged and flashy mages.

Ten minutes later she was as prepared as she was going to get to face a monster capable of breaking through a city wall with its sheer weight. "Let's see what kind of magic you can do..." she said, lifting her helmet to brush out some of the already dried blood. Luckily her Healing magic had the side effect of creating new blood and tissue, otherwise she'd be fucked by this point. Or half cyborg. Thinking on the possibility of Alchemy and science in this magical land, Ilea blinked outside and flew towards the demon in the sky, the beast feeling much more approachable than Green who had been a little much in terms of speed and strength.

Next time they met, it would be a great fight. Ilea promised herself as she rushed towards her target. Fire rushed towards the whale as spikes of ice flew downwards from above, enhanced by gravity magic it seemed because Ilea had never seen ice magic move that quickly. Could also simply be a higher leveled ice mage, not like she had seen many of the Hand's members in action. She regretted a little at not becoming a long ranged mage, must be fun to throw around flashy spells that explode in the enemy's face.

'A bow is nice as well...' she thought as she rushed closer. It crossed her mind to talk to Sulivhaan about her implementation in the strategy, seeing him floating in the distance with other people distributed around the sky let her know it was likely him coordinating the attack. Then again he knew her and

probably had her eventual joining planned in. So she smiled and rushed towards the ever growing whale. Not literally, no but getting closer and closer let her realize just how big that thing actually was.

Considering it was straight out of another dimension or whatever the fuck on the other end of that portal was, Ilea was a little more cautious at her approach. There was a high chance of random teeth and bone spikes appearing all over that monster.

[?? - ???]

“Well that’s bloody informative isn’t it? Why even have this skill...” Ilea said out loud as she smashed sideways into the beast, all her offensive skills activating as she ripped into the beast’s flesh. A big opening was the result but there was no blood coming out, either her attack was too shallow or the monster’s body was built differently than more normal biological entities.

‘Maybe go for the eyes or just dig in...’ she thought and rushed towards the monster’s front, big spells landing around her, making her dodge under and over them. A massive wave of magic came from the whale’s head before it opened its mouth. Ilea kept going closer when a wave of sound ripped through her body, she braced against it and pushed with all her power as healing magic started repairing the building damage from the attack.

Seeing the landscape in front of the whale made her realize that the attack was mostly focused on a line before it. The snow had parted, simply pushed away towards the mountain nearly a kilometer away. Trees were snapped like twigs and the unfortunate members of the Hand who were caught in the wave were pushed away with it, most of them likely dead seeing their uncontrolled flailing bodies.

Ilea grit her teeth and pushed forward until she came up on one of the monster’s eyes. It moved and looked at her as its attack came to an end, the mouth closing slowly before Ilea used her bladed gauntlets to slash into its eye. That definitely got a reaction as its mouth opened again in a wail. The monster’s eyelid closed shut, pushing Ilea’s blades downwards, an enormous weight hitting her arms as the blades came to a stop at the bottom of the eye.

Her arms held as she ripped out the blades, the beast still in pain from the precise attack.

‘Might as well...’ she thought and rushed towards the mouth. The mages had done some damage but it would take quite a while to whittle down the monster’s health against the tough hide. And what was a tough hide against a downright suicidal bladed warrior with a high defense?

Ilea blinked inside the mouth before it closed, hopefully no magical sound attack would be unleashed in the next ten seconds. She rushed further in, seeing through her Sphere while looking for any weak spots or organs. The good thing was that she found what she was looking for. The bad news on the other hand was that there were simply too many things that could constitute as a weak spot.

‘To work then...’ she thought as she decided on her blades to do the job. Causing internal bleeding was likely better with such a big monster compared to the blunt trauma she could inflict with her heavy gauntlets or the magical damage with her fists and spells. Blades on hands, Ilea started to slash away at the whale’s flesh inside of its mouth. Being a butcher wasn’t on Ilea’s list of things to do in life to begin with but her current predicament pushed the profession even further down on it.

The wall of flesh was tough, even with her high strength and high quality blades. She had to cut into it bit by bit to get to the organ placed further in. Luckily there was an opening running behind the two meters of flesh she was working on that would lead right to her target as soon as she managed to break through.

And break through she did, blood rushing out at such a high speed and with such heat that her defensive Veil of Ash nearly broke down. Her sense of smell reduced to its utmost minimum she hoped that Aki would stay as mentally absent from this ordeal as he had been all day. ‘The fucker probably likes this...’ she thought and smiled before she pushed into the torrent of near boiling blood, her blades cutting into the flesh to stabilize herself as she pushed onward.

At least air wasn't much of a problem as the blood only reached to her knees after a couple seconds. The boiling was more of a problem as her Veil slowly broke down. Good thing she had her old friend, a lack of pain perception.

The organ was massive, at least two meters high and wide. Then again she had heard a blue whale's heart was as big as a car. That internet fact didn't really help her in the moment as she slashed into the piece of important looking biological infrastructure to cause as much damage as possible. After twenty slashes, the thing exploded in a shower of blood and yellow mucus, causing Ilea to puke into her helmet. An experience generally reserved for soldiers and apparently adventurers.

Ilea stumbled backwards and out of the opening again as she made her helmet vanish to puke again, this time not back into her mouth and nose. "God FUCK!" she shouted when a magical surge ran through the whale as it opened its mouth, the light of the sun illuminating just how disgusting her current environment was.

Helmet back on, to her displeasure, Ilea rammed her blades into the ground of flesh before another sound wave came from deep within the being's body, ripping through her as Hunter's Recovery worked overtime to keep her brain and organs alive. Her health was down fifty percent after that attack. Standing in the middle of it might actually kill her immediately.

At least there weren't smaller mouths and bones trying to kill her inside this massive scrotum. Ilea healed herself as she continued further in. This time she made sure to brace herself for the next organ's explosion which incidentally didn't come. At least waiting for the next sound attack was worth it as she could hide in the crevice where the organ had been, not sustaining much damage from the attack.

'Doesn't seem like this is doing much...' she thought and considering there had been three attacks from the whale already she didn't know how the Hand's forces were looking out on the field. Hopefully they had distributed enough to cause only few casualties. She steadied herself as the whale moved around in the air before continuing, this time ignoring the organs she saw through her Sphere and simply going further in.

At least she could try to find and destroy whatever enabled the monster to use those sound waves. 'Wait, can I...' she thought and used her healing skill to check on the monster. As expected she could determine a little about the beast's condition, being in direct contact with it. The damage inflicted by her was potent but with the size of the animal still minor. The mages outside were apparently working overtime as the hide was pierced in several dozen places and the monster was bleeding profoundly, its eyes both already blinded, one of them by her.

# Chapter 143 Bloody Entrails

## Chapter 143 Bloody Entrails

Perhaps it wasn't quite an impossibility to beat it and maybe not a lot more people had to die to accomplish it. Ilea pushed on deeper and deeper into the beast before she felt mana gather again, this time much closer than before. She quickly found the best cover she could find and cut into the flesh to keep herself more steady. The sound shattered her freshly healed eardrums immediately, as her whole body shook from the vibrations running through it.

Ilea felt her bones slowly crack at the sheer intensity of the attack. She gulped, thinking that perhaps it was a little too brave and stupid to simply rush into the monster's mouth. One thing she had realized though was that the beast could only use its sound attack every minute, or simply chose to only do it that often. Looking back she also saw through the closing mouth that the target this time had been a big part of Ravenhall itself. They had managed to turn the whale around and used its attack against the demons now splattered in the rubble of the once proud human city. A big chunk would be destroyed and it likely wasn't the last of its attacks.

Ilea was back at nearly full health as she pushed further, too far to turn back now. At least she could use Meditation whenever the monster attacked so her mana was looking fine still. She could take another one or two attacks before it became too much to recover. At least as long as one of them didn't outright kill her.

Another attack later she had found it, the source of the vibrations and the monster's attacks. It was a massive red organ with hundreds of holes, held in place by dozens of tendons. So Ilea got to cutting. The minute was barely

over when the organ started vibrating, Ilea having cut through around half of the tendons connected to it. Sadly she needed around ten strikes to get through just one of the thick connections.

Being in the same place as the organ allowed her to blink behind it where the force of the spell was considerably lessened. She breathed out, having thought that being this close might've been enough to kill her. Her recklessness prevailed, perhaps it had been inflated by her inability to win against the demon and the elder. The sound attack wasn't enough to kill her outright from further away and with her safely cutting through more connections behind the organ, it was now irrelevant if it would've had killed her had she stood right in front of it.

The attack ended and Ilea finished removing the last three connections at the top of the massive ball like object which fell down with a loud squelchy noise. "Absolutely fucking disgusting." she said.

"Indeed. Good job on not dying." Aki commented, finally saying something.

"You alright? Didn't know you slept in the day." Ilea asked.

"Oh I was awake but you get easily distracted. And I believe you did a good job there. This last one might've been a little risky but hey, it paid off. There's a reason for your fast growth after all." the dagger said and Ilea found herself agreeing. Though others might deem it stupid or too risky, the feeling of pure adrenaline, sheer power and bliss of overcoming something this gigantic and overwhelming was worth every bit of risk involved in it.

"Now let's finish this beast." she said and worked her way back, this time taking care of every single organ she could find. It was a hard and long job to do and the whale moved around much more by now, reduced to using its body to smash the opponents. Its speed was surprising for the size but likely not enough to catch any of the flying adventurers off guard. Ilea didn't feel a heavy impact at all, so the beast probably wasn't intelligent enough to smash the people on the ground who couldn't fly.



A whopping twenty minutes later, Ilea got a message in her head and the whale started sinking down towards the ground. A big grin spread across her face before it vanished just as quickly as it had come. “Probably need to leave.” she said to herself as she rushed towards the mouth of the beast. Ilea nearly made it before a heavy impact went through the whale and Ilea found herself on the monster’s throat as the full weight of its upper body pushed downwards.

The only saving grace was that this wasn’t a cave coming down on her but a body of flesh and blood. Considering the monster’s size, a lack of air wouldn’t become a problem either for quite some time. Ilea got up again after the corpse had settled and started making her way outwards.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Rel Kazuuk – Bane of the deep – lvl 823] For defeating an enemy six hundred levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 220 – Five Stat points awarded.’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 221 – Five Stat points awarded.’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have gained one 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill point in [Azarinth First Hunter].’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 216 – Five Stat points awarded.’*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

'Hmm, something good after all...' she thought after reading through her messages. Choosing the next third tier skill to advance would probably be difficult but she had a favorite already. For now she wanted to check on the situation outside. There was still a demon horde waiting to be destroyed and possibly survivors of the Hand to be healed. Ilea sang a song in her head as she pushed through the flesh and blood of her fallen enemy with closed eyes, using her Sphere to navigate as she tried to not burn the slimy experience into her brain.

"Aaaaaah, air." Ilea exclaimed as she came out of the whale's mouth, covered nearly completely in blood and pieces of flesh.

"God you stink." a man said who was standing at least four meters away from her. "Larina, can you spare one of your spells?" he asked and looked over to a woman dressed in shiny blue armor that sparkled where the sun hit it with its light.

"We have more important things to consider than smell." she said as magic gathered in front of her hands. "Oh goddess of water and rebirth, send thy power through me." she exclaimed before a torrent of water shot out with the speed of a flying arrow. Ilea watched as a charging group of demons was pushed back, their bodies smashed as if hit by the weight of a metal hammer. Ilea was pretty sure the prayer like line wasn't really needed.

"She survived, we can go back now." the woman said which got a nod from the man who unsheathed a curved sword before he vanished, appearing near the stragglers of demons still approaching. Ilea watched as the demons suddenly fell apart, their limbs removed by slashes nearly too fast for her to recognize. She summoned some ash to try and clean herself, surprised that this time it actually worked. Well it did somewhat, removing a big part of the mess, leaving her presentable enough for a battlefield with thousands of demons and seasoned adventurers.

“All forces unattended should find a team leader or the commander.” the woman said towards Ilea who nodded.

“I’ll find him. Thanks for checking on me.” she said, receiving a nod from the woman who started floating upwards as small spear like objects of water formed in front of her before they were loosed in a high arch towards the city. What remained of the city at least. Ilea was standing on a small hill outside Ravenhall, still mostly covered in snow and with the corpse of the whale to her left. Wings spread behind her as she slowly ascended, Meditation flowing through her and helping her recover her mana more quickly.

Ravenhall was demolished. A big chunk of the city had been completely mowed down by the sound attacks from the whale. Sulivhaan had likely considered its destructive capabilities sufficient to attack both the city and the demons while placing a smaller priority on the infrastructure. They could rebuild it, of that Ilea was certain. Where the town had been hit, a massive breach opened the walls and demons were pouring out in the thousands, loosened by the death of likely most of their commanders and not caged anymore by the city’s high buildings.

A second breach where the whale had initially landed showed the same scene, thousands of monsters pouring out and running into the destructive spells of dozens of high leveled mages. Ilea ascended higher and found a big part of the city burning. The Hand had moved closer together and with the enemy command crumbling, they could show their true capabilities. A fire storm was unleashed, its light bright enough to blind Ilea for the fraction of a second as it incinerated hundreds of demons in the blink of an eye. Above the seconds breach a mage unleashed a storm of wind, cutting apart several dozen running demons who fell down, bleeding from hundreds of cuts each.

The demons already had difficulties funneling through the two massive breaches, so high were their numbers. The building corpses on the ground combined with all the blood, ice and other elements still lingering from spells made the run even harder. However few demons made it through to the defensive line of warriors, rogues and rangers were completely demolished by an assortment of teleporting monsters of men, blades flashing as everyone displayed their skills honed with years of experience.

There were fewer members than had initially gathered in Morhil, that was for sure but Ilea was glad the casualties hadn't reached higher numbers. She flew over and quickly found Sulivhaan flying somewhat behind the defensive line while occasionally using a spell to slow down parts of the enemy hordes.

“Guess I'll join the defensive line?” Ilea asked, really wanting to join in on the fun.

“Ilea, you survived. Of course you did. No, our healers are doing all they can, I want you to help.” he pointed towards a small group a little behind the line of melee fighters and Ilea nodded.

“What about Trian and Kyrian?” she asked as she flew backwards towards the few healers they had.

“I sent two teams in already, a scout should return in the next hour. We got most of the mind weavers, good job out there.” he said and nodded before turning back to the field of death where an endless number of demons rushed through monstrous magic before they came into a grinder of blades.

Ilea looked away and increased her speed, her mana was at around sixty percent as she landed near the supposed healers who looked tired to say the least. Around them were around twenty injured people, some screaming, their bodies showing wounds that no human was supposed to survive.

Ilea joined in without a word, checking on the six people immediately around her as she stabilized them one by one. It took a while with her somewhat secondary healing spell that worked best on herself but she managed. With the slow movements she could at least use Meditation while she conducted her work. “Any more critical?!” she shouted as her group stopped slowly dying, each stabilized.

“I'm done here.” a man in robes said, sweat, blood and dirt covering his face. He removed his hand from the inside of a woman's chest as the wound quickly closed. Ilea watched on as a magical pulse left his hand, his eyes focusing for a moment before the woman gasped. “You're fine.” he said, holding a hand out towards her.

“Thanks, put it on my tab.” the woman said, ignored his hand as she jumped up. She spit out some blood before two blades appeared in her hands before she started running towards the defensive line again. Ilea smiled at the scene as she looked around. For now at least the situation seemed in control as the robed man joined another healer who was clad in armor, not a primary healer either it seemed. They were only six people, three of them likely pure healers.

“We’re fine for now. You can fly right? Some were thrown towards the mountains from the first couple whale attacks.” a woman in a perfectly clean white dress said towards Ilea while pointing towards the mountain top to the north. Ilea nodded and flew off.

The country side was devastated. The whale must’ve hit that part at least twice, two lines cutting into the ground for at least five meters as all trees had been cut down. “Aki help me spot.” she said and unsheathed the dagger as she flew towards the several hundred meters long devastation covered in broken trees, rubble, snow and earth.

Five minutes she searched until she recognized a human form through her Sphere. The heart was still beating and Ilea sheathed Aki and started moving away the tree trunks and rocks covering the woman, likely a mage who seemed to be unconscious. Twenty seconds later she got to the woman, a touch revealing that she was close to death but not quite there yet. Mana was still flowing through her and quickly it was joined by Ilea’s helping hand.

It took nearly four minutes for her to fully heal the woman. When her body seemed fine, Ilea slapped her lightly. “Come on, wake up.” she said and the woman opened her eyes, a deep brown staring back at Ilea in disbelief.

“Whale is dead, you got hit. More people might be buried here, can you help me look?” Ilea quickly said as she helped the mage up who shook her head to gather her senses.

“Y...yes, give me a minute.” she said and Ilea nodded, flying off again and over the rubble to spot any more people.

Two she found were already dead, one of them with all of his bones broken. Not everybody invested the same amount of skills and stats in defensive measures it seemed.

“Over here!!” the mage she had rescued shouted which made Ilea blink towards her, flying at her top speed before she landed softly next to the woman who was using her magic to fling away tree trunks as if they were mere sticks. Ilea found the injured man lying below them and blinked towards him before she started pumping healing mana into him.

“God...,” the man said and coughed up blood. “Finally... I’m fine, I’m fine.” he said, stopping Ilea and getting up. He wasn’t quite fine but certainly better than most of the injured people Ilea had treated previously. “I couldn’t lift up those trees. Next twenty stats are going into Strength, I swear to the Mother herself.” he said as he looked away, obviously a little embarrassed.

“Got any spotting skills? There might be more people here.” Ilea asked but he declined.

“I’m more help at clearing those demons, there are still some left are there? The whale is dead?” he asked as golden light came to his eyes.

“The whale is dead. And there’s plenty. Leave some for me.” Ilea said and watched him get up.

“Good, good. Just do your work healer.” he said before teleporting at least fifty meters high into the air. The light in his eyes intensified before a small sun formed in front of his face, a beam of light shooting out a moment later towards the city. Ilea didn’t know how much damage it would do but she felt the heat from down on the ground.

“Another cannon back in action.” she said and nodded to the woman who had found the man before continuing her search.

The next twenty minutes were spent on scouring through the mess of a landscape the whale had left behind before Ilea was pretty sure they wouldn't find anybody else. In total they had found four additional corpses and three more survivors, two of them apparently just too weak to lift up the rubble on top of them. A trend with mages it seemed.

“That should do it, we'll send some rangers back here when the city is clear or if we can spare them.” the woman said to her before holding out a hand. “Can you take me, you're faster than me.” she said and Ilea nodded, grabbing the woman around her chest from behind, flying off a moment later.

The situation surprisingly hadn't changed much in the time they were away. There were less injured people near the healers and there was a group of resting people nearby, some even preparing food while the demons still spilled out of the big city streets and houses towards the opened parts. Spells continued to rain down onto the masses, each of the Hand's mages must've racked up thousands of kills by that point.

The defensive line was fighting just as they had before, their numbers thinned a little with some of them resting to gain back their resources. On the field outside the city, between the stand of the mercenaries and the enemy hordes massive walls of ice and stone had sprung up, funneling the enemy into concentrated spells from specialized high level mages who took turns burning through their mana before switching with another of their kind. It was not a battle anymore, it was an extermination.

# Chapter 144 Lakes and Crystals

## Chapter 144 Lakes and Crystals

“Any more help needed?” Ilea asked after she landed near the healers. Only six had remained.

“We’re fine, seems like people have become comfortable with fighting the monsters. Leave the rest to us.” one of them said as the woman Ilea had rescued flew over towards the group of resting fighters. She too followed and took a couple minutes to gain back her full mana. She watched as the woman talked to some of the people around them, three of them leaving right after towards the rubble Ilea had searched for the past half hour. They probably had some way to detect people in that mess, better than her Sphere which already was doing a wonderful job.

Sulivhaan was still floating in the same position as before, still using his spells as people occasionally joined him before they nodded, having received further commands. It seemed everyone accepted him as the strategic leader of this operation, at least enough for them to have a working structure.

Ilea moved back to the healers and past them where around eight corpses were laying on the floor, covered by white cloth. She continued the line with the dead they had found in the rubble, placing them as well before she closed their eyes, saying a small prayer to whatever gods cared before summoning a bed sheet she had and ripping it apart to cover the people. Each of them was geared with expensive and high quality looking armor or clothes, each one a



human strong enough to face a hundred high leveled demons on their own. Each one dead.

She flew towards Sulivhaan and waited as two others received further orders from him, flying off afterwards.

“Healers are fine, rangers are looking for more survivors but we’re probably done searching. Five survivors and six dead.” she reported.

“Thank you. You can join the defensive line then.” the mage said without looking at her.

“I’ll go find the others if that doesn’t fuck into your plans.” Ilea answered.

“Do as you will.” Sulivhaan answered, not further concerned with her as Ilea flew off towards the city at top speed. What was left of the city at least. The damage on the surface was somewhat in control, only about thirty percent completely destroyed but the attack from the whale had come from above and it had cut deep.

Most of the sewers and several levels of the underground probably had to be rebuilt completely. Fires raged in the more intact parts as well, caused mostly by the Hand’s mages who had initially fired into the city itself to score some lucky hits into the demon masses. Initially with all the mind weavers still alive it had been much more difficult to hit as the monsters had used the abundance of cover quite effectively.

Some solitary ranged attacks were fired at her, making her use her bow to kill the mostly lower leveled demons. A trickle of damage in the enemy forces but the ranged monsters were somewhat rare by now and the only thing that would stop the Hand’s mages advancing on the city and unleashing death upon the melee variants.

“Now to find a lone demon...” she said to herself as she dived downwards. ‘Let’s hope he was as smart as I think he is.’ Ilea thought as she blinked through a mostly intact part of the underground infrastructure before a minute later she appeared in a room she had been in before with a smile on her face and a startled demon surrounded by other demons.

“Weavy, you did it! Glad you survived. Now come with me, we have to find the others. And you better stay close to me or the other mercenaries will cut you down.” she said.

“Ah miss Ilea. I am also most grateful to the red death for your survival. What about the spawn?” he asked and gestured around him.

“Whatever you want, I’d kill them now so they don’t become a problem. If you want to look for them later you can but it’s gonna be hard getting them all out of here.” Ilea explained and watched into the deep black holes of Weavy’s eyes as the monsters in the room methodically cut their own throats before falling down in nearly a single splat.

“You’re fucked up mate.” she said and held out her hand. He stared at it confused before she just went and grabbed his arm before flying upwards, smashing through any floors in their way.

Ilea reached her next target two minutes later, landing before the entrance to the Hand’s headquarters. Demons screamed around her and started running towards the human and mind weaver as she ignored them and continued towards the entrance. The demons who reached her were cut down, none of them above level eighty, the ones further away simply stood frozen by Weavy’s influence. The main hall was collapsed in parts, rubble covering most of the ground. Hundreds of corpses were lying on the floor, some even stuck to walls and the ceiling. Ilea found a single mage and dozens of dead demons stuck inside a massive crystal in one of the corridors.

The woman was alive but had her eyes closed. Ilea took the minute to cut off big chunks of the crystal until she reached the woman. Touching her, she found her to be in perfect health. Reaching her hands inside the small enclosed space, Ilea pulled with her full strength and heard the crystal crack. A moment later the prison was forced into two, both sides smashing into the partially damaged furniture around the room as Ilea caught the unconscious woman, pushing some healing mana into her.

She continued on towards Viscera with the woman held in her arms, finding a similar scene as in the main hall. Demon corpses covered the ground even more densely here which made her fly over them with her ashen wings. No

human corpses could be spotted but any dead Hand members, merchants or trainees had probably turned into demons themselves by now.

The crystal mage stirred and slowly opened her eyes. “Hah!” she exclaimed as a crystal shot out from her hand right towards Ilea’s head. It was stopped by her ashen veil before it dropped down into the woman’s hand again. She was out of breath already and Ilea doubted the level 205 wouldn’t be able to pierce her veil at full power. Ilea stopped Weavy from doing anything stupid as he closed in.

“Calm down, I’m not the enemy. And neither is he.” she said and continued onwards, mentioning the gist of what was happening outside the city. The woman had apparently been caught in her crystal prison for the past months, her skill attacking any demons who stepped into the room. Mind weavers either couldn’t attack her inside or they simply didn’t find her. A miracle she had survived really. She shot glances at the demon a couple times but seemed to trust Ilea for now.

“I actually survived...” the mage said as she closed her eyes and relaxed in her savior’s arms.

“You have two more minutes, then I’ll drop you.” Ilea simply stated in a quiet voice. The woman gulped but didn’t answer, her face reddening a little as she realized the situation she was in. She stayed for the full two minutes though, her joy at surviving stronger than the embarrassment.

There were no surviving demons inside Viscera, at least not as far as Ilea could sense. The woman decided to follow as well, probably feeling a little bad at having done exactly nothing in the past months.

“This is horrible... I never imagined the attack to be on this scale...” the mage said.

“You should see outside, the mages are dead but thousands of demons remain. The Hand is cleaning up rather efficiently though.” Ilea explained as she looked down into the hole where the main elevator leading to the Haven had been. It wasn’t there so she decided to jump down. A surprised noise left the mage before she followed, Ilea already reaching the bottom of the

elevator shaft. Her buffs surged as she landed, bending as the force of gravity went through her body. She smiled as the fall of over a hundred meters felt more like jumping down a small flight of stairs. Weavy followed behind as quickly as he could, at least faster than the other mage.

The rubble of a destroyed elevator platform was spread around the bottom and dust filled the room. It reeked of blood and rot. Here too, corpses were piled up but they had been moved to the corners of the room. She continued onwards to the elevator that would lead to the Haven. It was still in working order she found so she activated it, looking at the demon next to her. The female mage managed to jump onto it right before it started moving. Ilea didn't look at her but saw through her Sphere that her legs were shaking.

“We're not the first ones down here, don't worry.” Ilea said as she gripped the hilt of her dagger tightly. The elevator shaft opened up as the environment of Eregar's Haven spread before them, Ilea immediately grinning and loosening her grip as she saw the spark of well known lightning in the distance. She jumped off and flew into the direction of the magic.

A bizarre scene showed itself as she got closer, the mage following a little behind with slower speed. A lake had formed where there was none before. It wasn't big, not quite big enough to call it a lake really but bigger than a pond. On a nearby hill eight people resided, some sitting, others standing. Trian was one of them. The man lazily lifted his hand before lightning flashed and struck into the lake.

The group tensed before they looked towards the approaching woman but relaxed quickly after realizing it was one of their own. Ilea closed in as Trian got up and waved towards her. Kyrian turned his head and she saw his posture relax a little.

“Hey all, guess my help isn't needed here. Don't mind the demon coming, he's with us.” she said as she landed. Most of the others ignored her while looking for the mentioned demon but soon faced the lake again. “The Hand is exterminating vermin and you just enjoy the new seasonal addition to the Haven?” she asked and grinned as the men of her team joined her.

“How’s it going outside? I heard some pretty huge monsters were summoned.” Kyrian asked.

“Yea, we took down most of the mind weavers, two huge fuckers were summoned, one dying by the closing of the portal. The second one we took down and now it’s more or less just killing a flood of demons. What about you guys?” she asked, looking to the lake with interest.

“I’m glad it went so well. There were demons down here, rather high leveled compared to the ones in Viscera. We cleaned up but it seems like more are coming out of the lake.” Trian explained and motioned towards the water.

“Aaah, a dimensional spawning pool. Impressive.” Weavy beamed into their minds, still it felt like he was talking to himself.

“You know about it?” Kyrian asked. His helmet was off and he glanced towards Ilea a couple times.

“Yes, I read about this ritual but you need an incredible energy source in the surroundings to create it. Afterwards it can sustain itself for years if not longer.” the demon communicated and continued. “It’s a direct connection to another plane and it attracts spawn to it. The ones coming out are the ones that found it on the other side.”

“Can we use it to go there?” Ilea asked, now more than eager to find that elder again after she saw the damage he had caused.

“No. Only spawn and only one way.” the demon dashed her small hope. Ilea sighed but ultimately didn’t care much. People have died, yes but none of the few she actually cared about. The man was a mass murderer at this point but it wasn’t like she went after dictators back on earth. With his power he wouldn’t be easy to fight either. Ilea thought that perhaps she should focus on her own power first before she undertook operations like that.

‘Speaking of...’ she thought and brought up the relevant information in her head.

*‘3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points available [Azarinth First Hunter]: 1’*

*‘Skills available for third tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:’*

- Hunter Recovery*
- State of Azarinth*
- Azarinth Fighting*

Apparently neither Destruction nor Hunter Sphere had fulfilled the requirements to become a third tier skill. Ilea thought about her choice while the others were talking to Weavy about the ritual and the lake. Her healing spell was the first choice immediately, considering the losses and near deaths she had experienced in the past months it seemed vital to get some sort of edge in her healing.

*‘Then again I’m not getting stronger through that, simply less killable. Whatever that third tier might give me it probably wouldn’t help much again that demon, Green was his name, or against the elder Adam...’* she would reach level 240 at some point where she could still choose her Recovery spell but for now Ilea decided against it.

That left State of Azarinth and Azarinth Fighting. Both of them had been used by Ilea near constantly since getting them so long ago but somehow the decision was easy for her. The flashy glow was a better sell than a simple improvement to her fighting skills.

*‘ding’ ‘State of Azarinth advances to 3<sup>rd</sup> tier’*

*‘Active: State of Azarinth – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1:*

*Your body glows with the power of Azarinth, increasing your resilience, speed and strength by 55% [Effect after bonuses 220%].*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: Your sight, hearing and sense of smell is also affected by State of Azarinth*

*3<sup>rd</sup> stage: You are one with State of Azarinth. The skill's upkeep has been removed. Instead you may overcharge it with your life's energy. The amount depends on both skill level and health used.*

*Category: Aura – Body Enhancement'*

Ilea hoped she didn't make the wrong choice as she read through the new information. The upkeep removal was nice and with her long fights it would ease down on her mana consumption considerably. The overcharge thing was ambiguous at best. A life for skill effect. Ilea thought that she could only use the overcharge ability while her Healing spell was taking care of her at the same time.

She shrugged and used the new ability. Her mind raced as she instinctively decided on a number, one hundred. The murky question in her head asked for a level of power and Ilea chose at random again. A split second had passed as Ilea activated the skill before a wrong feeling coupled by a weird pain shot through her body. One hundred points of health were ripped from her being before a light red glow shone from the inside of her armor.

Ilea looked at her hands as she removed her gauntlets. The runes were still there, slightly changed in form but recognizable to her still. The difference was that these runes shone red. Much more subdued than her previous blue shine but she attributed that to the low level of the skill, at least in its third stage. She felt more powerful, not comparable to herself with all her buffs active but certainly stronger than with just State of Azarinth before.

As quickly as the moment had come, it vanished again and so did the shine. Both her teammates had stopped talking to Weavy and were instead looking at her, specifically her arms. State of Azarinth was still active, Ilea found but there was no glow anymore. Apparently the *You are one with State of Azarinth* meant more than just the removal of its mana cost.

It made her a little sad that the shine was gone, it was after all the edge it had on Azarinth Fighting when she chose it over the other skill. At least it would

be less obvious that she was using a skill now and she could have it active at all times without any cost. She wondered if it worked while sleeping as well but considering she didn't have to consciously hold it active, it was possible.

“Whatcha got?” Trian asked as he nodded towards her.

“I'll tell you later.” she answered. “What are we going to do about the lake?” she asked, not interested to share her newfound power with the people not part of her group.

“Well as far as the demon says, theres little we can do to stop the spell now. It's self sustaining, all we can do is kill the demons that come out of it.” the lightning mage answered.

Ilea nodded. “Use it for training then? Like a dungeon or something.” she said.

“A level two hundred dungeon.” Kyrian supplied as Trian nodded.

“Perfect for the Hand then but also a responsibility. If one of these gets out a whole city could fall.” Kyrian added.

“Ah, let's not overdramatize it. At least now the human cities now how to handle them.” Ilea said. “Now this is getting boring, we have three mages and one fucked up demon here to thin the enemy numbers and get some more experience out of this mess. The rest can handle the situation here I assume?” Ilea asked them and Trian nodded.

“Fine with me. Hey, we're gonna get some fresh air.” he said, the last part directed at the others standing on the ledge. Complaints were ignored as the four flew back towards the exit of Eregar's Haven. Demons would be an interesting addition to this place, now truly only an environment for level two hundred people.



# Chapter 145 Horde mode is exhausting

## Chapter 145 Horde mode is exhausting

The crystal mage was a little confused when her savior and the others suddenly left but her indecisiveness cost her the opportunity to continue with the group as she moved back and forth until they were too far away.

Ilea had Weavy on her back as the three rushed towards the elevator too fast for the demon to keep up otherwise. “Are you getting more bulky Weavy?” Ilea asked, feeling his arms as she held him on her back. The demon shifted a little and didn’t initially respond which got a chuckle out of her.

“You know it’s not a shame to invest in Strength, I did it too...” she said, Trian looking at her a little perplexed. Speaking of, Ilea thought and invested her remaining fifteen stat points into Endurance, bringing it to 335 and a respective 3350 points of Stamina. ‘That’s enough to masturbate for three days straight...’ she thought and smiled, maybe a bit of a vacation was in order soon. Then again why should she rest when so many meaty sacks of skill and class levels were waiting outside?

The three reached the top of Viscera and the exit of the Hand's Stronghold a minute later, Trian already frying demons as soon as they stepped outside. "Save your spells and follow me." Ilea said and flew off towards the defensive line of the Hand.

The demon hordes were flowing just as they did before. Looking into the overfilled northern part of the city where demons were already fighting each other, she realized the flow would continue for more than just a couple hours. At least the Hand was already taking turns in fighting to keep it going. Worst case they could retreat but that would create a whole lot of new problems when the demons dispersed, at least until now they had been held back by the mind weavers in the city.

One lost demon at level eighty could perhaps take out a whole human settlement. Ilea was certainly not in the business of saving everyone but if she could protect kids and elderly just wanting to live out their lives on a farm while she could rake in experience for herself, then that was a win win situation to her. She remembered the old man who gave her a lift to Riverwatch. Maybe he was still alive after all the elves and demons, though she doubted any demons had made it that far through the human kingdoms.

"Now Weavy I want you to hold tight and stay calm, we'll let everybody know you're not part of the enemy. I'm sure your control over the demons will win over some hearts rather quickly. Hopefully nobody cares enough to kill you instantly." Ilea said to the demon on her back as they approached the front lines, streams of running demons below them, screaming at the enemy in the sky as they were scattered and destroyed by the many spells and obstacles on their way.

The three reached Sulivhaan a couple minutes later, none of the long ranged mages had attacked them on the way.

"You found them and the demon. Good. I informed everyone beforehand just in case he'd show up again on the front lines. You two are long ranged mages right?" the commander asked as a couple people around them gave Weavy and their group weird looks, one of them was smiling at least.

“Yea, well Kyrian, Trian go have some fun and take care of the demon. I’ll be down in the slaughter. Cheers.” Ilea said and let go of Weavy before she waved to Sulivhaan and let herself fall downwards.

The snow had melted around them, too many hot spells had taken the life out of the element. Ilea landed in the mud and looked around, in front of her a group of around forty people were fighting against the oncoming horde, each person occupying a rather large space for themselves while some people grouped up with two to four others to more effectively use their skills.

She was certainly interested in seeing them all fight but seeing the sheer overwhelming enemy numbers she’d probably get enough time to do so. It was good training for all of them and somewhat easy and safe experience from the many kills. Although most of the remaining monsters would likely be below level one hundred, only a trickle to their levels.

‘Good way to test my new skill...’ Ilea thought as she breathed out, her breath not visible as fires burned in close proximity. The power of State of Azarinth flowed through her as it did for the past fifteen minutes, no glow was visible and no mana was removed from her store. Form of Ember joined the skill as small lines of red formed on her body, only visible where no armor covered her. A moment later she equipped her gloves as well, the dim color of fire only shining lightly through the holes in front of her eyes.

The horns on her helmet reflected the different colors of spells unleashed in front of her as she slowly walked to the front line. There was plenty of space in between the different warriors, the demons attracted to the humans like moths to light. A Veil of Ash shrouded her quickly as she prepared for battle, breathing in and out steadily as ash started to form around her, the world perceived through a Sphere of around twenty four meters around her.

The warriors on her left and right ignored her as the blade and axes flashed, the sound of metal cutting flesh a constant grind in her ears. A band to play some metal would be a welcome addition but then again the thrill of fighting

for your life was more than enough to keep the blood pumping. Ilea moved the ash in front of her to the side, alarming a couple running demons of her presence in the middle of it all.

She continued to move the ash around in more and more intricate forms and motions to boost the skill as much as she could while she prepared all the others. The first demon arrived, a level ninety monster of claws and teeth, pure muscle covering its legs and arms as it screamed towards the human prey in front of it.

Ilea stepped up, dodging the clawed hand by a couple centimeters before her fist landed in the demon's abdomen, her skills sending mana through the beast combined with the kinetic force of her heavy and enhanced body and bones. The monster was stopped in its run immediately, the woman standing like a rock against the sea as the enemy's limbs moved around her before they fell onto her Veil and dropped down a moment later, the corpse of the demon following a second later.

Ilea breathed in and closed her eyes, concentrating on the Sphere of perception and the ash around her as it twirled and moved, allowing the enemy to see her as she prepared the next strike. Perfectly timed, her kick came to a close on the demon's head, cracking the skull in a satisfying crunch before it was sent to the side, Ilea recovering from the motion almost immediately before the next demon was upon her.

'Ten.' Ilea thought as a flash of pain and wrongness went through her, her health reduced by the thought of amount as a light red light joined the fiery color on her skin, runes and lines of molten fire branching into each other as newfound power flowed through her. The next monster was hit in its chest, its ribs breaking as its thorax was pushed inwards and back out of its back, its spine broken just the same.

Ilea breathed out again as she stopped the motion, ripping her hand out of the beast's corpse again as the power of her 3<sup>rd</sup> tier State of Azarinth left her again. 'Only three seconds...' she thought, analyzing the time the spell had held. The power chosen was neither the lowest nor the highest she could go at the moment. A middle ground.

For the next enemy she chose one hundred health again. Hissing in pain, she felt the power rush through her as her healing skill exchanged her mana for health again. The spell didn't hold for thirty seconds as assumed previously. Ilea's fists destroyed four demons with two expertly placed attacks each before the power vanished again.

'Diminishing returns...' she thought, looking at her hand as she sacrificed two hundred health. The pain was stronger this time, so much as to distract her from her surroundings. A claw hit her Veil, not managing to break through before she grabbed the hand and kicked the body, ripping off the clawed limb in the process. She chucked it away as she counted the seconds, realizing when the skill lost its power that the time was even lower compared to the three second usage.

It wasn't much that seemed lost but there didn't seem to be a reason for her not to just invest ten health in quick succession for the whole duration of the fight. Not until she noticed something else.

The power she could chose was directly influenced by how much health she sacrificed. She invested more and more until she sacrificed five hundred points of her health for a ten second boost, each punch literally ripping apart a demon as her fist traveled through their bodies like a blade through flesh. It was intoxicating but the pain was nearly unbearable at five hundred, her complete resistance not working on it either. It wasn't pain exactly, it was something in her mind alone, no nerves were affected. The wrongness of the spell flowed through her again as she used it, the strength she gained demanded a sacrifice and not in life alone.

Ilea's tests went on for hours as she lost herself in the process of controlling and moving ash around her and finding the new limits of her skill and the most efficient ways of using it. She knew that as it grew the numbers would change but some internal understanding of the magic let her know that the ratios would stay the same.

And so the corpses around her piled up as she moved further and further away from the line of defenders, more and more demons flowing towards her, only the ash in her vicinity allowing her not to be overwhelmed by numbers, still enough space for her to fight. Soon spells were hitting around

her into the demons as she reached the position where the mages unleashed their destructive elements. It added another difficulty to her fight, avoiding the deadly spells and using them to kill clusters of enemies she grouped up beforehand.

Some of the mages started working with her as time went on and the enemy lines started to thin somewhat, the big clusters from hours earlier not present anymore without external influence, their big area spells less and less effective against the sometimes even lone targets running towards them.

The horizon was on fire as smoke and ash moved around Ilea, all her senses focused on her imminent surroundings as she used every second of quiet between encounters to let Meditation flow through her as she controlled and moved the ash and prepared her next usage of what she by now thought of as blood magic. She was sacrificing her health after all, and the wrongness of it might be a clue as well. Though for magic itself to judge right from wrong, she wasn't sure. The thought came up in the back of her mind as she splattered another demon's head, dodging downwards and kneeling another one in its crotch, breaking the pelvis before a third enemy was simply grabbed and with the help of some health sacrifice, the limbs were torn out with a quick tug.

She had lost the perception of time as the smell of blood and fire filled her senses. Her body moved through the enemies with the grace of a veteran dancer and the efficiency of a car manufacturing machine as blood sprayed on her Veil and armor until finally her breath became heavy, each hit slowed down as she came back to herself and checked her resources. Her mana was down to one hundred but her Stamina was at ten, climbing each second and falling down again with each hit. Around her were the corpses of dozens of monsters, more coming from the unending numbers of enemies.

Ilea sighed as her wings spread and she blinked upwards to avoid the three monsters that were about to run into her. With a much slower speed than usual, she flew back to the defensive line which at that point was several hundred meters away from her current position. She saw some of the people nodding towards her and realized that a couple of them had tried the same, some more successful than others as they cut paths into the demonic lines and grouped up monsters for the mages to destroy.

It was a good approach tactically speaking and would save a lot of mana and energy in the long run but it wasn't without risks as she watched two warriors dragging out an injured woman from the claws of a dozen monsters. She was alive and would be fine but the risk was visible to all. Ilea wasn't worried though, her skillset allowed her just this kind of approach and she wouldn't have it any other way.

Flying back, she landed near where the members of the Hand were resting, getting two nods, and some stares. One guy was even clapping when she sat down and thought about summoning a meal. She didn't, seeing her nearly emptied state right now and the still high value of a storage item. Looking around she found a couple people cooking, a man near the pot nodding towards her as he filled a bowl with near boiling stew.

Ilea blinked over and grabbed the bowl with her bare hands, her skin too resistant at this point to be affected by it as she thanked the man and walked back to the tree trunk she had been sitting on.

"Your endurance is impressive." the female mage she had initially rescued had landed next to her and joined Ilea on the fallen tree. Someone must've brought it there to sit, Ilea thought. An impossibility on earth or at least an incredible effort just for a temporary sitting solution but here it was just the appliance of a bit of magic.

"Thanks, the only problem seems to be my lack of impact. You guys can just fry fifty of them with a single spell." Ilea said before blowing on the meal, an unnecessary gesture but still it felt right to her. It was good and she closed her eyes to appreciate the taste of the meal and the energy it brought back to her body, more than she felt any food she had ever consumed brought back. One of the best meals she'd ever enjoyed.

"Well I paused like ten times while you were out there so in the end the numbers are similar." the mage replied but Ilea knew that not to be true. She saw the devastation of the mage's spells. Trian alone burned through dozens of demons in mere seconds while she needed just as long to kill one.

"The ash control you have is impressive though, maybe you could do something there?" the woman asked.

“Yea, that’s the only thing I’m working on right now. I can’t really kill anything with it though.” Ilea answered. She didn’t want to look at any of her skill advancements yet as she ignored the messages in her head. The actual class levels wouldn’t be many as the demons were of a much lower levels bare some few. Ilea just hoped her skills would grow with this, especially from her second class.

“Not yet. Let me get some of that food as well.” the woman said, smiled and got up before she walked to the cooks as well. They were members of the Hand too it seemed, their levels all above two hundred as they fed the order before going back to fighting.

Meditation at its fullest brought back Ilea’s reserves in a mere ten to fifteen minutes. Her body was still sore from the expenditure and in the long run this wouldn’t be healthy, she knew and felt it to be that way. Still as it stood, she would invest as much as she could right now to advance her strength while there were still demons to kill.

“This food is amazing..” the woman next to her said as Ilea got up again. Around fifteen minutes had passed in the meantime. “Back already? You should give your body some more time even though your resources are full...” the woman said, a little worry in her voice.

“I’ll be fine.” Ilea said as she got up and walked to the bard nearby who had calmed her mind with his music.

“Thank you.” she simply said and flung a gold coin towards the man which he snapped out of the air before he bowed his head lightly.

“To hear praise from a warrior such as thee is prize enough. I’ll make sure to spend it wisely.” the bard replied before starting to play again. Ilea felt as her muscles relaxed and her mind focused, that music wasn’t just sound. Each member of the Hand it seemed, had more than just one trick up their sleeves. All of it was needed as this day would be a long one.



# Chapter 146 Night Shift

## Chapter 146 Night Shift

The night was bright, the moon shining down onto Vilirya as Eve ran across dirty rooftops towards her destination. She had made some progress in her search for the so called Golden Lily. The organization she thought to be behind a lot of smaller gangs and corrupt government in at least the empire and maybe even beyond.

To destroy the problem at the root was what she believed in. If she could find and kill a single high ranking member of that organization, she could destabilize it immensely. Some of the people she had met and worked with in the years would discourage her, another one would fill the spot. Eve knew though that people who held a high position had years of experience and organizational skills. If it took a month or a year for the replacement to become just as efficient as the one before, then hundreds if not thousands would be spared pain and suffering.

There were holes in her argumentation and Eve had learned enough to know it wasn't the right approach at all times but for the kind of work she did, it was necessary to steel herself. In the Hand she had finally gained the strength to face the people responsible and to become the executioner where no judge was allowed jurisdiction.

The sky was cloudless as she ran, only the sound of her featherlight steps on the stone and brick roofs resounding in the vicinity. Eve calmed her breathing and focused, thoughts would be distracting. She soon approached a small

patch of land in one of the noble districts of Virilya. Flowers of all kinds proudly looked to the moon, alive and eager to grow even as winter came to an end. Magic no doubt.

A small house compared to the big noble mansions usually built in the city stood to the side of the piece of land. Eve ran through the field of flowers, the rustling of leaves filling her ears as she prepared to kill.

“What do you mean, I’m not going to cooperate with these people.” Claire said to the man in front of her, the lord of Vihal. She had practically taken over the defense and lead of the city while the demons attacked and now again she felt as if her power was ripped straight from her.

“You saved this city, I know this and so do you. The people will remember you but I cannot risk it. Their influence is too great I’m afraid and you of all people should understand the politics involved.” the man explained. Claire understood. Her rational mind understood but still she rejected it. It was unfair. A betrayal right after she thought to have finally reached the status she needed.

“They ask for a dear friend of mine and I’m not going to cooperate. Those are my principles and I will not budge.” she said, her voice calm as she locked eyes with the lord. The two were inside his office, enchantments kept listening ears out. He looked down and sighed.

“I thought it would come to this. Claire I’m sorry.” he said and she already prepared to defend herself but his next moves surprised her. The man got up from his chair and moved to a bookshelf, removing one book in particular which he opened. Inside was a letter that he handed to her.

“I’m a simple lord in a small town but still my word should hold some meaning to those who would listen. You’ve already joined the Shadow’s Hand and I’m sure you will be able to advance quickly with your talents. This might help pave the way. I know Ravenhall is occupied but my sources

have brought information of the Hand gathering outside Virilya and moving out to take back the city. When you get there they will either be dead or back in power, likely more powerful than ever.” he started explaining with a quiet and fast voice.

Claire calmed herself again, he wasn't going to betray her, at least not yet. To think a noble house in fuck all Dawntree had so much influence in the faraway town of Vihal to control the local Lord's actions.

“It's the safest place I can think of for you two. If you cannot be convinced to talk about your friend then Vihal will not be safe. WE will not be safe here because of you. You have three hours until we will agree to cooperate with them, your house will be empty and you will be declared an enemy to this town. We will look for you but we will find nothing, you're a Shadow after all.” the man said and showed her a rare smile.

She had only seen him smile twice in the past weeks, once when they had rebuilt the city after the attack and it was safe enough again for people to resume their daily business. That was four days ago. Two days ago the adventurers hired by a noble family in Dawntree had arrived, asking for Claire and someone called Lilith. A name Ilea had mentioned from time to time.

“I need more time to prepare provisions...,” Clarie started, thinking things through, what to take and what to leave and how to transport her mother through the dangerous and still cold environment. The Lord stopped her with a move of his hand before he put it into his pocket.

“It's something I prepared. This town is old Claire and you know that. When you came here you were Claire Russel, part of a forsaken noble house from far away. Now you have to leave again, branded as a public enemy but you will be remembered by the people. This is the parting gift and something that will let you remember. An apology if you will and my family's biggest treasure.” he explained before he took out a small black ring from his pocket.

Handing it to Claire, she identified it and was prompted with the question to claim it as her own. Looking up to the man with a confused face, he just nodded. “Go ahead.” he said and so she did.

Tears nearly came to Claire's eyes as she allowed herself to smile. "Good damn I hate politics. I thank you Lord Felt. Rule this town well."

"Call me Damien." the man said and bowed, deeply and with meaning. Claire was out of the room a moment later, rushing through the dark streets with purpose and anger in her eyes. She would burn down the whole city of Dawntree. Not now, not soon but in time. She had worked for years to get to this position, to ensure her own and her mother's safety and she would work for decades to bring fire upon those that dared interfere.

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Ilea looked up and spread her wings, tired eyes glimpsed upon the moon while fires burned around her. The smell of blood lay thick in the air as she ascended, clawed hands grasping at her legs before she blinked away, nearly fainting as she wobbled through the air. Meditation took over as she slowly recovered but her mind was burnt through. The concentration required to keep up the style of fighting she had pursued was immense but so too was her growth, even with lower leveled enemies.

"God I'm tired..." she said as she flew back to the meal and rest station. Some of the people were already sleeping, others looked to the ground with cold eyes. Mages still unleashed their magic but as soon as this was done, more than one of them would drop unconscious for more than a couple days. A whole day and night had passed since their initial assault on the city and the mercenaries were tired.

Many were used to it, to fight for so long without much rest, to be stuck inside a dungeon or dangerous terrain for weeks or even months but the constant killing weighed on them, the seemingly endless stream of demons coming out of the city. At least their numbers were thinning, less and less clusters were seen in the distance but the work simply shifted from the long

ranged mages to the warriors on the ground as they had to take care of each demon individually.

Ilea grabbed a bowl of food and flew away, to a secluded spot near where the whale had destroyed the terrain with its sound attack. Sitting down, she crossed her legs and started meditating as she ate and concentrated on the food. The skill helped her brain relax after hours of constant fighting and killing. She would have to go back soon enough but this time she gave herself half an hour. Ilea thought of Earth, of mornings in her bed with food and shows.

After this was over she would take a week off, just relax in her bed, eat and read before she would get back out to get stronger again. Hopefully her team would still be with her then. They could just do jobs until she felt powerful enough to look for the demon she had fought. Maybe find Edwin first. She chuckled at the thought, maybe she should wait. Find him when she was much stronger to simply slap him around like a kid. The thought brought joy to her and a warmth spread from near her heart.

“This is unhealthy thinking...” she said quietly and sighed, the smile was still on her face though. “This newfound freedom hasn’t been exactly free these past months...” she added and remembered a certain spider’s uncle and his talks of responsibility. Well soon enough the demons would be destroyed and all she had to worry about were more of them being summoned, elves attacking the humans of this world, eldritch beings getting interested in this realm, dwarven machines coming to life in hidden chambers deep underground. She stopped herself and slapped her cheeks.

She was free and she could do whatever the fuck she pleased. Maybe any of those things would happen and maybe she would join the fights but she would do it for herself, not some misplaced sense of duty or responsibility. The demons had destroyed Viscera and Ravenhall, places she thought of close to home. The elves had attacked Riverwatch and Salia, she wouldn’t forgive them anytime soon. And the Taleen machines, well the fuckers are creepy and nearly killed her. Thinking of the curse and the Praetorians made her angry. She would find them again and she would dismantle them piece by piece. “And it will be fun.” she said and continued eating, Meditation working overtime to keep her calm.

“You’re freaking me out a bit there woman.” Aki commented.

“Oh yes, I forgot about my fucking talking dagger.” Ilea said quietly. “Don’t worry about me. Just been a long day.” she added.

“I know, just trying to help.” the dagger said and kept quiet after that as she sat and finished her meal while watching the faraway stars. Before she started thinking of aliens she got up and walked back, renewed vigor in her tummy and mind. A smile on her face, her wings spread and soon enough she was back in the thick of it, her sphere allowing her to operate just as effectively in the night as many of the others huddled around magical lights created by the mages.

An hour later four mages were following Ilea around in the dark, destroying the groups of demons she managed to bring together. Her loud movements, shouting and fighting attracted them quickly as she ran through the destroyed environment around Ravenhall. The city itself still likely held tens of thousands of demons, in buildings and cellars. It would be safest to get as many of them out but Sulivhaan had decided to first clear the city’s surroundings.

More people had been sent to Viscera and the lake in Eregar’s Haven to both investigate and take care of the monsters that came out. Weavy insisted that only spawn would make it through and no bigger monsters like the ones summoned by the mind weavers the day before would even be attracted to the connection of planes but Sulivhaan was cautious at best. A dimensional connection like that had to at least be monitored by a sufficient amount of capable mages and warriors.

Ilea didn’t mind either way, less people fighting around the city meant more demons for her to kill. Her newfound power in State of Azarinth was now already a part of her, used in quick succession and more and more efficiently right before a blow. The power was overkill against the comparably weak demons but she had to learn how to use it, learn to control it. She was getting used to the pain, more and more with each use.

‘Maybe my pain tolerance will even level... I wonder if General Skills can reach the third tier...’ she thought as her fist smashed through a demon’s skull,

the blood bone splashing onto her Veil before it fell down. A moving sea of ash followed her as she moved through the burning environment, four silent shadows following her in the air, waiting to unleash death and carnage.

A group of demons screamed as she approached the northern gate of the city, at least the place where it had stood before. Ilea focused her mind as she came to a stop, the four mages behind her powering up their spells as she moved the ash around her forward with the highest speed she could. The ash formed into sharp tendrils, condensed as much as possible at their tips before they reached the horde of demons. The impact was underwhelming but Ilea smiled as some of the demons' skin was lightly scratched.

Deafening sound and flashes of light followed as the mages unleashed their spells. Ilea watched as the monsters were torn apart and burned to ash as blood and guts splattered onto the Veil before her. "Alright, to work then..." she said to no one in particular as she blinked into the lingering flames and started picking off the surviving and approaching demons.

"Hey, look who we have here..." the voice of Rock reached Ilea before the man landed, flattening a demon with his hammer before he grabbed another one with his bare hand, smashing its body on the ground. Ilea heard bone cracking before he got up again.

"Surroundings clear then?" Ilea asked as she brushed away the sweat on her forehead, Meditation working as she looked around to find the gap in the wall devoid of any demons, at least living ones. Hours had passed and the mages had left one after the other to regain their resources. Right now there was only one remaining who was refilling his mana while sitting on the broken off wall. The man's shiny coat reflected the moonlight from above. It was a cloudless night, good for the Hand as not everyone of them could see very well in complete darkness.

“More or less, yes. I can’t believe how easy it became to kill them after the mages left, could’ve done this all alone.” Rock said and smiled. The man had apparently rested long enough, Ilea thought as she smiled a little at his carelessness.

“Well while you slept I’ve been clearing out the city, though I haven’t gotten very far.” she said, looking around the rubble of the once big square. They were standing barely twenty meters away from the wall.

“You should rest as well Ilea.” the man said, his face turning serious as more members of the Hand entered into the city.

“We’re supposed to form teams and start clearing out the buildings and streets one by one.” Rock said as Ilea spotted Navalis landing on the wall.

“I’ll be fine, go on then. You’re wasting time hammerman.” Ilea said as she walked to a piece of rock and sat down, removing her helmet, a tired smile on her face.

“Gods you’re beautiful, you know that?” Rock said as he shook his head and motioned for Navalis and presumably the hidden rogue of their team who was hiding somewhere to follow.

“Thanks.” was all Ilea could answer, she really appreciated the honest compliment though she had little interest in the man, not anymore. She sat there for a couple minutes, twirling around the dagger in her hand as more and more teams of mercenaries entered the city. A long night following a long day. She put on her helmet again and looked at her hands before they were balled into fists.

The Shadow’s Hand worked for three days and four nights straight to clear out every cellar, every house and the whole underground of Ravenhall.



Demon corpses littered the streets and occupied nearly every house, it reeked of rot and blood. Curses, the undead, spirits and other monsters would appear soon enough. Ilea didn't mind as she strolled through the city streets, more monsters would mean more experience, more strength and at least a small piece of revenge.

The Hand had repurposed some of the most central government buildings of the city to establish their command. People worked in shifts, some cooking, some sleeping and others scouring the beaten down city for any surviving demons. Ilea reached the gap in the wall where earth mages were already working on rebuilding it to ensure any surviving demons would be trapped inside.

Her wings spread behind her in silence before she took to the air, landing on the wall a moment later. The suns were coming up slowly, the horizon bathed in red and pink. Ash was created around her and clung to her battered armor, Ilea's growing control of the element allowing her to clean it from the blood and grime that managed to get through her Veil. The sunlight illuminated a part of the field in front of the once proud city. Fires were still burning all around as mages created holes in the ground to burn the corpses as others moved said corpses into the holes.

The work would take longer than even the fight had been but still the mercenaries worked tirelessly. Ilea would join them soon but first she would find something to eat.

# Chapter 147 Chaos is a laddah

## Chapter 147 Chaos is a laddah

Checking around the wall, she found that nobody was looking towards her as she crouched down and summoned one of Keyla's meals. She still had a bunch of them in store but she'd have to go back to Virilya to get more at some point. A horn sounded in the distance, not from within the city. Ilea put a fork of food into her mouth as she looked towards the sound, seeing a rider climb over a hill. Following behind were a whole dozen more. Soon the whole hill was filled with armored riders, flags of the empire fluttering in the wind.

Spring had come, Ilea thought as she enjoyed the food and watched the riders frozen atop their hill, watching the scene before them. The field of battle and thousands of corpses, the destroyed and smoking city, the corpse of a massive whale and half of a squid.

"A bit late, aren't they?" Kyrian said as he landed next to her.

"They can help clean up. How many came?" she asked as she glanced towards the man, neither wearing a helmet. The battle was over.

"Looked like a couple hundred from higher up." he said and Ilea shook her head.

"They would've been slaughtered..." she said and continued eating.

“I think those are scouts, should’ve been fine against the lower leveled demons but yes, it’s good we came.” the man said. “About...” he started and stopped again, looking away.

Ilea looked at him with inquisitive eyes. “I’m gonna take a vacation in my house after the cleanup is done, you’re welcome to join me.” she said and enjoyed the smile she saw on his face through her Sphere.

“Thanks, I like you... you know?” he said.

Sometimes Ilea thought the man acted a bit like a kid, or at least a teen. Well it was endearing in a way, compared to the politicians and strong willed schemers she had met so far, Kyrian was refreshing in a way.

“I like you too, mate.” she said and enjoyed the struggle on his face when she added the mate. ‘Ahh, the joys of playing with the hearts of men.’ Ilea smiled before she punched his shoulder.

“We can fuck again.” she whispered in his ear before she moved away and put on her helmet. “First we clean up though, let’s see who this company of late heroes are and if they can help.”

“You cruel woman.” Aki commented in a quiet tone. The dagger was quite glad her sexual attention had moved away from him and to the metal mage. He knew she was joking but deep down Aki feared her, her mad capabilities.

“Fu... ah... yes, let’s.” the man stuttered, quite differently than his initial stutter that seemed mostly gone at this point. His helmet appeared, faster than ever Ilea thought as she grinned under hers.

“Oh look, Sulivhaan’s already moving out.” she said, seeing the man fly up from the middle of the city followed by at least a dozen people behind him. She followed the scene as she put her empty bowl back into her storage necklace, her wings spreading behind her as Kyrian’s spheres hovered into his hands.

The Hand’s members from within the city and outside converged around their newfound leaders, Dagon and Sulivhaan walking at the front to greet the

imperial officers. Ilea and Kyrian joined Trian who was among the people who flew out with Sulivhaan initially.

“The city is cleared out then?” the officer in charge said, still on his horse.

“It is, though we would appreciate your help with the cleanup.” Sulivhaan answered.

“The Scout order cannot spare anybody for such a mundane task. Where is the current leading elder of your order, I’d like to discuss the reestablishment of the city’s governing body.” the officer went on. Ilea was already losing interest, political games already starting after hundreds of thousands had died, humans always found a way to disappoint her, time and time again.

“Why I didn’t want to study history...” she murmured to herself as she felt the tension around her rise.

“Will you truly not honor the contract between the Shadow’s Hand and the Empire of Lys?” Dagon started talking, taking a step towards the officer on his horse. “In the Third agreement the terms of cooperation in case of an attack on Ravenhall are clearly written down. Your so called mundane task is not beyond any one of your soldiers, it is in fact your duty.” Dagon said.

“I’m Dagon Keywire, the current representative of the Hand together with my dear friend.” he said and motioned towards Sulivhaan who stood next to him in a relaxed manner. “We may discuss the cleanup, rebuild and following reestablishment of government in the city center, if you and the other representatives may join us. I’m sure the long ride has tired you.” he finished. The officer was about to answer when a second one put a hand on his shoulder.

“We will gladly join you lord librarian.” the woman said, getting a smile and nod from Dagon. The mercenaries dispersed again, continuing their respective work as the Scouts entered the city on their horses. Ilea watched them go when one of the soldiers waved at her and rode closer.

“Hey, we managed to get some backup! Sorry for being too late.” the woman said and scratched the back of her helmet.

“Ah, you’re that scout from Morhil... thanks, the cleanup will take a while.” Ilea said and smiled at her before the woman nodded and followed her company.

“I’ll join the cleanup, let me know when you want to leave.” Kyrian said to her and received a nod in response.

Ilea looked at the company of riders as they formed a thin line and rode towards the city. Some things would change with the Hand, that was for sure. She sat down on the muddy ground and finally scrolled through the notifications in her mind. The past six days were long and she had killed more living beings than she had in her whole time in Elos combined beforehand. Most of them were much weaker than her, at least when it came to the numbers.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Bone Warrior lvl 74 – Demon]’*

...

The kill notifications were countless and Ilea simply skipped them and got to the juicy notifications.

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 222 – Five stat points have been awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 223 – Five stat points have been awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 224 – Five stat points have been awarded’*

‘Just three levels for the main class... guess I’ll have to find some higher leveled drakes soon... or dragons at this point.’ Ilea thought as she shook her head and continued.

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 217 – Five stat points have been awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 218 – Five stat points have been awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 219 – Five stat points have*

*been awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 220 – Five stat points have been awarded'*

*'ding' 'You have gained one 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill point in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash].'*

'Well at least four levels here and another 3<sup>rd</sup> tier point, just shit that I apparently have zero Inheritor skills to level up...' Ilea thought and sighed but she felt good, she was progressing again. At a somewhat fast pace but she planned to find higher leveled enemies again, killing hordes of demons was tiring, especially when you got a single level for a thousand killed. And boring, she didn't feel particularly in danger except when fighting the whale and Green, your lovable neighborhood demon.

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Body of the First Hunter reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Perception reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

A bunch of Azarinth skills had reached level twenty in their second tier, all Ilea needed now was to do whatever was required to unlock their third tier capabilities and then level up her class enough to get them all to third tier.

The next one would likely be at level 240 and she already decided to take Hunter Recovery after her earlier choice of State of Azarinth. Hitting the level twenty mark was nice but it was a double edged sword as she was now unable to increase those skills, at least until she hit a much higher level.

‘I do have enough to work on in my other class though...’ she thought as she looked through the notifications there.

*‘ding’ ‘Veil of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20’*

*‘ding’ ‘Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17’*

*‘ding’ ‘Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17’*

‘Well that one was effective...’ she thought and looked at the number again to make sure. Ash creation was nearly at level twenty as well, though she did use it through nearly all of the past six days while surrounded by admittedly rather weak enemies. Perhaps it was because the skill didn’t rely on fighting, so using it while fighting with another nearly twenty skills active and in a stressful environment made the leveling process more effective.

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 16’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 17’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 18’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 19’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 20’*

That one was a gamble. Ilea had simply activated the skill whenever her mana wasn't low. She didn't manage to damage any enemies with the heat itself but it might've helped in attracting more monsters towards her. Maybe reaching the second stage would make the skill more useful than it was at the moment. Anything it would manage to damage even a little bit would die by a couple of her punches anyway and against anything stronger it would simply be useless.

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

Again Ilea was happy she invested so much of her mana and concentration on the swirling pool of ash around her. The demons weren't dangerous enough to be defensive but still provided her with enough skill boost to level those skills up rather quickly. Against anything stronger she'd probably focus without using the manipulation and creation abilities a lot, other than blinding the enemy or hiding herself.

She held up her hand where a small swirl of ash came into existence and formed into a ball of ash, she concentrated and the ball condensed further and further until it was barely a tenth of its original size. Slowly she lowered the ball and closed her hand around it. It was solid and she had to use quite a bit more effort than expected to pulverize it with her hand. 'At least I can throw



these to attract enemies...' she thought and smiled before she moved on to the rest of the skills.

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

Ilea's second class was catching up with her first one and the skills finally closed the gap as well. She was happy. Checking for third tier skills to advance, she found that there was apparently none to use her skill points on. Veil of Ash at least was level twenty in its second stage but she must be missing something still.

Focusing on the positive, Ilea told herself that she'd get there eventually. The progress was fantastic and all she had to do was fight demons for six days straight. The Hand must've profited from this endeavor quite a bit when it came to personal strength. Their numbers were reduced by a tenth or more but in the end they likely were stronger.

Ilea saw that her Meditation skill had reached level seventeen in its second stage as well, pretty much the skill that let her fight for so long in the past week. She would consider its capabilities rather ridiculous if it weren't for

the fact that literally everyone had it. The skill just made her healing ability even more insanely good as she just needed ten to twenty minutes and she could go from literally broken and near death to perfectly fine again, at least physically.

Her newfound 35 stat points were put into Endurance, Intelligence and Wisdom. She checked her new status and was quite happy with the result.

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 2*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 224*

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 1*
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 5*
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Hunter's Sight – 2nd lvl 7*
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 15*

*Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 220*

- Active: Veil of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 18*
- Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2nd lvl 17*
- Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 20*
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 12*
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 19*
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 14*
- Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 19*

- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 16*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 15*

*General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 5*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – lvl 2nd 17*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 19*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 10*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Ice Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Veteran – lvl 2*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 600*

*Endurance: 350*

*Strength 251*

*Dexterity 350*  
*Intelligence 525*  
*Wisdom 415*

*Health: 6000/6000*  
*Stamina: 3421/3500*  
*Mana: 4128/4150*

‘I’m pretty damn awesome...’ she thought and grinned. The tiredness from the past days slowly caught onto her when she heard an explosion in the distance. Looking into the direction she saw a forested patch near a faraway mountain where a fiery ball slowly dispersed a couple dozen meters above ground. ‘A signal?’ she thought and narrowed her eyes. The slowly rising suns didn’t reach the specific part yet and Ilea doubted she’d have even seen the fire in complete daylight.

‘Ah what the hell, why not...’ she thought and spread her wings. A good excuse not to shovel corpses around and it was certainly more interesting than the discussions between imperial officials and the librarian.

It took Ilea a couple minutes at full speed to close the distance enough for her to make out more. Though the caster of the spell was still hidden inside the thick forest, she could make out the familiar light of a barrier. A lone barrier mage must’ve either wandered off or was it someone coming towards them?

Eyes stared back at her as another spell hit her barrier. Claire summoned a heavy blanket and put it on the hard ground before she moved her mother onto

it. The woman was quiet as always, her eyes absent just the same as if she were sitting in her room in Vihal. The last days were rough but they had made it so far, her goal so close. The smoke in the distance had made her cautious but having seen the imperial scouts ride by made her hopeful.

She smiled at her mother as she summoned another blanket from her new ring. The woman was clad in a warm cloak already and she wasn't known to get sick easily but Claire didn't want to take chances. Traveling this far in such a short time had to have an impact on her. The horses had been left behind, both of them too tired to continue after a two day's travel. There was no time to clear the trail and even an adequate tracker could've followed.

# Chapter 148 Bearded Follower

## Chapter 148 Bearded Follower

Claire just didn't expect the noble's hunters to actually follow and confront her. They must either be desperate, under some kind of spell or extremely well paid. None of them were above her level, the closest one being at one eighty. Still with the six of them standing around the shield and her mother within, it would be a difficult fight. The explosion she had sent upwards was meant for the imperials but none of them had even looked in her direction, preoccupied by whatever lay before them.

“Are you sure you want to die here, mage?” one of her enemies said, an older man, his ax laying lazily in his hands. The man didn't smile, his question not a mocking one but one filled with confusion.

“Protecting a friend shouldn't stand above your own and your mother's life. We're even instructed to pay you, though I doubt that will be an option after this unnecessary pursuit.” the man said as he dragged his ax across her shield, small sparks falling towards the snow before they vanished in the air.

“And really? Trying to alarm the army? Didn't you realize already that you're the one against the law?” the man asked and shook his head while another laughed. A sharp glance from their apparent leader shut the man up immediately.

“We'll wait her out, the trees are covering us but if we make a ruckus...” the leader said when Claire felt something and looked up. A smile tugged on her lips as she saw a silhouette against the sun. A moment later a figure in black

landed near their group and stood up. Dark wings of ash started floating away and vanishing behind the warrior, their armor black as the night, scratched and battered, one of the helmet's horns chipped. Blue eyes locked with Claire's before the warrior took in the scene with a curious glance.

Claire sighed and felt a weight leave her shoulders as she crouched down to her mother and brushed her hair. "Is she alright?" Ilea asked and Claire just nodded before she looked at her friend with a smile.

Claire stood behind one of her shields, surrounded by six people. The old woman below the blankets was apparently fine, so Ilea put her attention towards the others. A man with an ax walked a couple steps towards her and nodded.

"Greetings, warrior of the Hand. I assume Ravenhall has been retaken then?" he asked and put the butt of his ax on the ground.

"Greetings, warrior of? The city was retaken, yes." she said as she watched their movements through her Sphere. Claire seemed more relaxed now with her coming as she brushed the woman's hair. The shield however stayed up.

"You may call me Horrus, we're here with orders from Dawntree. This woman, a mage of the Hand has information on a dangerous fugitive." he explained as the others moved a little around Claire's barrier.

"Horrus then. From Dawntree? That is quite a long way to come for information on a fugitive. And why is it that she is protected behind a barrier?" Ilea asked with interest.

"It is a long way. The woman refused to cooperate, perhaps the persuasion of someone in her own order might help. We will reward you handsomely of

course. We're just here for the information, neither of them will be harmed, that is my promise to you." the man said. The five others were now all in attacking range, either they didn't share their leader's diplomatic approach or he was deceiving her. The annoyed glances he shot towards the people behind her made it seem like the former.

"What are you looking for anyway, depending on the situation I might want more to help." Ilea said, thoroughly interested in what Claire might know to cause hunters like them to come from Dawntree.

The man sighed and nodded before touching his bushy beard. "We're looking for a female healer with the name of Lilith. We know this woman has ties to her." the man said as Ilea tried very hard not to laugh. A big grin came to her face as she stayed calm.

"Lilith... I have heard of her as well. I think she tried to join the Hand a while ago." she said to them after a while.

"Impossible, she was nowhere near level two hundred." one of the mages said.

"She said the bitch tried to join, not that she did..." a warrior said, apparently he wanted to be the first one to be killed by her.

"So you know of her, then I will extend the rewards to you. Ten gold coins for information that will lead directly to her, descriptions, information on skills and classes will increase the rewards." the leader said.

"Hmm..." Ilea said as she scratched her illusionary beard. Not an actual magical illusion.

"I know all of those things, in fact I know where she is right now..." she said and saw the man's eyes light up. A long search it had been, that was sure. "I want to know something in return though, you may subtract the value of said information from the reward." she said and looked towards the man.

"What do you want to know? I'll tell you if we can't give you the information." he said, accepting to negotiate.



“Well it’s simple. I just want to know why you’re looking for her, when I met that girl she seemed to be on the run but didn’t want to tell me why...” Ilea said. The man seemed a little reluctant but looking at his men he shook his head a moment later.

“A girl ran away, a girl by the name of Alice. We believe she might be with the woman called Lilith.” he explained, sharing just enough to explain the situation without mentioning any family names or what exactly had happened. Ilea could think of the rest. Finally, the girl made one right choice. Running away from home to find her own way in the world, maybe it wasn’t such a bad decision to be nice to her. Only if she didn’t die of course. Ilea smiled under her helmet, knowing that the noble girl would have to survive in the wild. Perhaps next time they met, the noble wouldn’t be such a fucking twat.

“That’s awful. Well you convinced me. You know, the woman’s name isn’t actually Lilith. Neither is she a healer, at least not anymore.” Ilea started as she cracked her neck. “She did in fact join the hand, and in full capacity.” she said and looked towards the man who had called her a bitch.

“Her skills include mostly body enhancements. She fights with her fists and legs.” she said, as she lifted one fist. “I heard she can crush a man’s skull with her bare hands.” her smile got bigger as she felt the tension around her rise. “She’s clad in black, as most members of the Hand. To top it off though, she has ashen wings that carry her through the skies.”

“You...” the leader said as he lifted his ax.

“Me? Yes, welcome to Ravenhall Mr. Holmes. And now everyone, you’ll tell me what you did to Claire.” Ilea said, her eyes turning cold.

“Who cares about her now, we found you. Where’s Alice? The reward is still up for you to get, depending on what you tell us.” the man said, his ax angled more offensively now.

“Who cares about her? I do. And I swear if you don’t answer me now I will kill all of you. I don’t give a rat’s ass about Alice, she’s ran off from her shitty family, good for her. I hope she’s far away from here now and gets

strong enough to fight for herself. And to develop some bloody common sense..." she said as she locked eyes with the leader.

A moment later he relented, looking towards the ground. "So it was you? You got her to leave?" the man said before he looked at her again. "We simply asked her about you, nothing more." he added, looking towards Claire.

"They threatened my hometown, made me a fugitive and forced us out before they hunted us down and attacked us, several times until now. I would've killed them all if it wasn't for my mother." Claire said, not looking at them, her voice clear as it rang through her shield.

"Interesting. For you, I didn't make Alice leave, that was her own decision. As was it your decision to seek out Claire and treat her the way you did." Ilea said, a chunk of health leaving her as a red glow appeared to mix with her eyes' blue.

"She's..." one of them said when Ilea appeared in their midst, grabbing her first target by the throat and lifting him up. He would learn not to insult her, though that knowledge wouldn't impact his remaining life by much. Blood sprayed onto the snow below, the mage's throat ripped out as Ilea turned around, facing the incoming ax as a Veil of Ash stopped it in its movement.

"You fool..." the man said as the ax started burning and pushed through her defenses. She blinked and appeared next to a mage who moved further away, surely to attack her from a distance. Aki was unsheathed and stabbed into his heart. She felt his health drain as she grabbed onto his arm with her free hand, using reversed Hunter Recovery to speed up the process, destructive mana flowing into him.

The man was dropped to the ground a moment later, his eyes cold as blood slowly flowed from the wound in his chest. The rest charged, four warriors, their weapons drawn. Ilea sacrificed another two hundred health and advanced, the snow and dirt pushed downwards below her feet as she met the men. A sword was dodged before her knee hit a stomach, a wave of ember and destruction pushing into the man, destroying organs as the sheer force of her attack broke bones.

A dagger scratched at her veil as she grabbed the arm, breaking it with a quick movement before she grabbed the weapon and smashed it in the warrior's skull. The ax swing of their leader was blocked by her bracers as she stood, moving not an inch backwards to the man's surprise. Grabbing the blade of his weapons, she ripped it out of his hands and threw it into the forest. Metal clung against wood as the last warrior attacked her with a flurry of blade swings, forcing her backwards a couple meters. She danced and dodged around the weapon before she twirled into one of his attacks, coming face to face with him before a headbutt sent him staggering backwards with more than a broken nose. A hard punch to his chest dented his armor inwards, breaking a bunch of ribs. Blood shot out of his mouth before he fell down, coughing as tears came to his eyes.

A calm came over the surroundings as the leader walked towards his ax and Ilea waited, the warrior she had just fought quieted down slowly, more blood coming to his mouth with each cough before finally, he stopped.

“You will regret going against the Forkspears.” the man said, grabbing his ax from the ground as mana flowed around him, his muscles tensing.

Ilea just shrugged. “You will regret going against a friend.”

The man chuckled, the ax gripped even more firmly as he prepared his strike. “Yes I do.” he said before he rushed towards her, the blade coming sideways as Ilea blinked behind it. A sudden force changed the direction of his ax almost immediately, Ilea jumping upwards to avoid the strike. The momentum of his swing left him open to the kick she delivered out of her jump, sending him tumbling backwards.

His weapon flung towards Claire's shield and scratched against it before it landed in the snow with a thud. Slowly he got up, breathing heavy as he held his shoulder. His helmet had been flung off as well and he grinned at her. Ilea had considered letting him live, fuck the consequences. She liked the guy. Seeing him now though, she wouldn't insult him any further.

“I'm Ilea Spears, it was an honor fighting you. Sad to see you as my enemy.”

“As it was for me. Horrus Daemon.” he said, putting his arm towards his chest as Ilea blinked towards his weapon, flinging the heavy thing towards him as if it were a mere toy.

“Good thing I never had kids.” he said and rushed towards her. Ilea equipped her bladed gauntlets and let his strike rush past her veil. When it changed directions, she blinked next to him and slashed through his neck with all her strength, her overcharged State of Azarinth flowing through her.

Her gauntlets vanished again into her necklace as she turned around to see the man falling, his head coming off in the last second, blood coloring the ground. Ilea breathed out and closed her eyes. “Alright.” she said, five seconds later and walked towards Claire who hadn’t even been watching.

The shield cracked and turned to small lights that vanished a moment later, Ilea appearing next to the two. “May I?” she asked and crouched down after not receiving an answer, touching the old woman lightly. She was a little cold but healthy. Her demeanor reminded Ilea of war movies and documentaries she had seen, an unresponsive state it seemed. Something had happened to Claire’s mother but Ilea wouldn’t ever ask about it.

“She’s fine.” Ilea said and got up again. “Ravenhall’s clear but we’re just starting to burn the demon corpses. There’s a bunch.”

“Tell me about it, we just finished burning them a couple days ago.” Claire said. “Thanks.” she added.

“No reason to thank me, we’re friends after all.” Ilea said and extended a helping hand.

“Go burn your demons, I’ll join you soon. Are the others there?” Claire asked.

“I came here to avoid doing exactly that. Trian and Kyrian, yes. And a new friend we made. He’s... well let’s say he’s different.” Ilea answered.

“A demon? Of course...” Claire murmured to herself as she put away the blankets again, helping her mother stand. “We’ll have to burn these corpses

as well, can you line them up for me, a concentrated explosion will do the trick.” Claire said.

“Sure, not the beard guy though, I’ll bury him.” Ilea said.

“Are you sure? They might find us that way.”

“They know who you are already and they know their team never came back. I’ll give him the respect he deserves.” Ilea said and she wouldn’t change her mind. “I’ll bury him a while away at least.” she said, throwing together the corpses. Her wings sprouted from her back as she grabbed the remaining head, the rest of Horrus’ corpse and made his ax vanish into her necklace.

“I saw you also got a storage ring, congratulations.” Ilea said.

“It’s not all happy... I guess this is better than what I expected though. I see you got a bunch of levels.” Claire said as she shouldered her mother, throwing a handful of runed stones towards the corpses.

“Yea, not gonna stop anytime soon. See you in the city?” Ilea asked as she flew upwards.

“Will do, after I took care of her.” Claire answered.

A row of five explosions could be heard ringing through the thick forest as Ilea flew high and far, holding onto the two pieces of a man she had killed mere minutes ago. A strange life she had come to live, she thought as she lifted the head up and looked at it. Not a bit of regret or fear on her mind, only respect for the warrior he once was and anger at the noble family that caused him to come here.

At some point she’d visit Dawntree again and she already knew of at least one person who would likely join her. Well two if Alice actually survived and reached a suitable level of strength for an undertaking such as she thought of.

Ilea flew for a couple minutes through the snowy mountains until she reached a small clearing inside of a patch of forest. The snow crunched as she landed

and took a couple steps to the middle of the clearing. Holding out her hand, ash came into existence. Ilea thought of it more like mana transforming into the element, almost like alchemy. She let the ash flow for a minute and then concentrated.

First she formed two big walls of ash and solidified them. The thin walls flowed downwards and cut into the snow before they pushed outwards, revealing the frozen ground below. 'Earth..' she thought and changed the ash into four separate tendrils ending in spikes. Hovering them over the ground, she used as much force as she could and stabbed downwards. The compressed ash smashed into the ground, breaking in the process.

Ilea lifted the ash up and compressed it again, fixing the broken parts. She saw through her Sphere that the spikes did have an impact. So she repeated it, over and over. After twenty times, the ground was splintering. After a hundred, she cut half a meter into the ground. Soon the patch she focused on was filled with cold but loose earth. Putting the corpse aside, she bent down and took a handful of the earth, moving it around in her hand.

Her ash manipulation skill was marvelous. She smiled at the success and continued attacking the ground with ashen spikes and other forms she deemed good. The spikes had the most success though and she soon found herself in front of a grave sized patch with easy to move earth.

Sneaking a thin layer of ash under the earth, she solidified it and lifted up the earth. At least she tried, finding it rather difficult because of the weight. Ilea's mana was dwindling fast as she concentrated on the hard magical labor. It took another fourteen tries and three sessions of meditation to move out the earth in one go.

She took the time to continue her training to keep the ash in the air next to her as she moved the corpse inside the hole. Putting the head close to the neck, she closed her eyes and stepped back. The earth moved over the grave and was slowly let down, covering the body of the deceased man.

Ilea stepped away a moment later, her wings forming on her back. Looking down she frowned at the state of her armor. 'Balduur better be able to repair this...' she thought. The set of armor really grew on her, even though she

already liked it a lot upon finding it. “Aight, back to corpsefield...” Ilea said and sighed. Maybe something else interesting would happen to save her from the work.

# Chapter 149 Reminiscing and Planning

## Chapter 149 Reminiscing and Planning

Sadly nothing big had seemed to have happened to the city or the field. Ilea returned and joined the working people outside Ravenhall. Several holes with burning corpses were spread around the country side and the imperial company had joined the cleanup. Ilea overheard someone grumbling about priests and blessing the city and the field.

She tried to continue her ash training but found the process of moving corpses incredibly slow compared to just chucking them into the holes. So she combined it and moved around the battlefield, falling into a sort of trance as she moved corpse after corpse. Still a mass of ash whirled around her at all times, at least pushing and tumbling the corpses towards the nearest hole as she grabbed and threw them into the pits of fire. Her Embered Body Heat worked overtime as well, now that she didn't have to keep all the fighting skills active and with State of Azarinth losing its usual cost, she could work on it with a little more focus.

The stink was bad, even with her reduced senses and a cloth bound over her nose. At least the monsters didn't have a lot of hair usually. That might've been a completely different beast to bear.



It took the good part of an afternoon to clean up just a part of the field. Ilea decided to pause for a while and flew to the city to eat. Smoke was still rising in some places and rubble covered many streets. The path of destruction left behind by the whale was a big reminder of what had happened here. More imperial soldiers were strewn around in the city itself, moving corpses and rubble away just like the ones outside the walls.

Ilea received nods from both soldiers and mercenaries as she made her way to the central square, where both the officers of the Scout company and the Shadow's Hand remained. Fires were burning in the square and several groups of people were eating, talking or sparring. Ilea passed tables with card games going on and bets were placed on two warriors fighting with their fists, perhaps something to join later.

“The architecture was marvelous, vast. Not something you'd see even in the capital. What did you say you called them? Old ones right?” Trian explained with an interested voice.

“Ah there she is, I'd probably still be there if it weren't for this reckless fucker. Not sure if I should thank or curse you for that.” the man said and waved towards her.

“You'd be dead and a demon by now Sparkly.” Ilea said as she sat down on the table with Claire, Kyrian and Weavy.

“Ilea, you have returned. We heard you have saved Claire.” Weavy said as he awkwardly lifted his mug of ale.

“Why was I the only one still cleaning up outside?” she asked and shook her head.

“You actually get paid for that you know, I think that's why so many of the Hand are still out there.” Trian said.

“Really? I just thought I’d help out.” Ilea said and took the meal Trian graciously summoned from his storage ring and handed to her. The man used his ring like a status symbol. The steaming soup was exactly what Ilea needed right now as she removed the cloth from around her mouth.

“Vihal was attacked as well, the reports are still unclear but it seems like a lot of towns and cities have been attacked by demons, not few of them falling.” Claire said as she played with a runed stone, scratching into it with a small knife.

“Creating more demons in the process. I just hope this can be cleaned up without completely destroying Lys...” Trian commented, summoning a notebook.

“Not just Lys, they’ve gone further as well. The impact will be less severe but we probably have the strongest military here, I don’t think the response in Kroll or Baralia came close to what the imperial army managed to do. And with the refugees coming from the west...” Claire stopped talking when Trian showed her the contents of his notebook.

“Are those?....,” she asked and took the book. Ilea recognized the design of the runes.

“From the demon realm?” Ilea asked and looked at Trian who nodded.

“Yea, we sketched most of them down as well as we could. Maybe you can find out something, especially with everything left behind in Eregar’s Haven.” Trian said.

“No, these are different. Intricate, yet simple. I’ll study them, what do you want for this book?” Claire asked as she looked at Trian.

“Take it, it has little use to me.” he simply said as she stared at him, opening her mouth before she shrugged.

“Thanks, it means a lot.” the rune mage said and made the book vanish, getting a raised eyebrow from Trian and a chuckle from Ilea.

“We’re advancing, soon we’ll all be noble families Trian...” Ilea said with a mocking tone and touched his hand.

“Oh god no.” the man said and leaned back. “Speaking of, I’ll go back to my family now that Ravenhall has been retaken. The Hand thing was a nice experience but it’s time for me to move on to the next chapter. You’re all welcome to visit me, even Eve...” the man said.

“Yea, where is she anyway?” Ilea asked and shook her head. “You don’t think she died?”

“That one? No.” Trian said and chuckled.

“I don’t think so, she probably vanished to avoid paying back the Hand.” Claire said in a quiet voice.

“Yea, that sounds like her. Well I guess she’s gone then one way or the other. Guess I’ll visit her at some point.” Ilea said and finished her soup with a slurp, the look on Trian’s face bringing her the crystallized version of joy in its purest form.

“What are you guys going to do now?” Kyrian asked, speaking his first words in the past minutes.

Claire sighed and leaned back a little on the bench. “I’ll stay with the Hand, permanently if possible. Do you guys know the mage and librarian who seem to have taken the lead?”

“I do, both of them. Don’t worry about it.” Ilea said, ready to put in a good word for her companion. The woman was capable after all, if she desired a position in the Hand’s administration or even leadership, that definitely wasn’t outside of her capabilities.

“Me and Kyrian will be at my house for a while and then who knows? Run more jobs for the Hand for a while and maybe go somewhere new. Anywhere dangerous with high level monsters you know of?” Ilea asked.

“Typical. Well if you stay with the Hand I’ll gladly manage your missions.” Claire said. “Randomly dangerous? The north is good, north of the Navali forest and over the Naraza mountain chain. Expeditions try to break through now and then, maybe you can join one. You’re sure to find danger there.” Claire explained.

“I hear none of the ships going east have ever returned.” Kyrian said, a small smile forming on his lips.

“Wait, you and Kyrian? Are you a thing?” Trian asked and chuckled. Ilea just looked at him before the man punched Kyrian. “Good job, if she remains unchained for much longer the nobles will soon appoint their daughters for succession.” he joked.

‘We’ll see who will be in chains...’ Ilea thought and looked at Kyrian who just gulped.

“You know women are in charge already in some provinces of the empire and the northern kingdoms have a long standing history of matriarchy.” Claire pointed out as Trian groaned.

“He was joking Claire, the guy isn’t a tenth the noble asshole he pretends to be.” Ilea said, not getting a response from the man.

“So that’s it then, the team breaks up already...,” Ilea said, leaning back. “I must say it was fun.”

“Well we’ll all be around.” Claire said. “It’s just safer for me and my mother to stay here. As soon as... maybe I’ll think about adventuring again.”

“I think you fit in perfectly here, don’t forget to hone your skills though, you’re falling behind.” Ilea joked and roughly grabbed the woman’s shoulder. Ilea suddenly froze.

“Oh shit, speaking of staying here. Kyrian I really didn’t plan on taking care of a kid.” Ilea suddenly said.

“You’re already pregnant? That was fast.” Trian said, summoning a mug of ale. “Congratulations.”

“Congratula...” Claire was stopped by a gesture of Ilea.

“I’m talking about Cless, the girl we found in that ruin.”

“Ah, yes. I’ll find a place for her if you find a place for me, deal?” Claire asked with a sly smile.

“That sounds perfect, make sure she gets strong enough to rip apart the best of men.” Ilea replied and shook hands with the woman.

“What about the animals?” Kyrian asked and Ilea just kept shaking Claire’s hand whose smile slowly waned.

“What have I agreed on...” the woman asked herself.

“It’s fine, worst comes to worst you have a couple nice meals.” Ilea joked and released the woman’s hand. The suns marked the passing of the afternoon as they moved on the horizon, smoke rising high from outside and inside the city where the pits were still burning.

“What about the demon?” Claire asked.

“I have a place for him, we can go there tomorrow I guess. I’m sure you’ll make marvelous new friends.” she said and smiled at Weavy who was apprehensive at best.

“The elves aren’t your friends you know... speaking of, that’s another dangerous place you could go.” Trian said.

“Nah, I’m not talking about them. And yea, at some point I’ll go there alright...” she said, her eyes turning cold.

“Hey, don’t look at me. Human right?” Trian said, touching his ears.

“You’re not the first who wants to face them, nor are you the last. Just be aware that only few have returned from the western woods. The theory going

around that the elves attacking us are mostly just their young seems plausible with the stories from the survivors. I even think they're let go on purpose to discourage our foraging into their territory." Claire said as she summoned a portion of cheese and bread, distributing it on the table, hesitating at Weavy but ultimately giving him a piece too that he started studying immediately.

"Yea, so everywhere outside the human plains is dangerous, got it. How come we're not destroyed already, it seems like humans are bloody weak." Ilea asked as she looked at her hand, nearly saying *here* at the end of the sentence.

"That is a good question, though I believe we're rare in a sense that if powerful enough we'd take over all we could and multiply until barely anything else was left. That's my theory at least. It doesn't seem like any of the other species we know of care too much about expanding their territory. Neither do we see a surge in many species of monsters if left unchecked. Some do of course and seeing the demons, some even more aggressively than us." Claire said, trying to explain the continued existence of their species.

"There are more powerful humans out there than you know. The Hand might be at the pinnacle but individual strength won't be bound by set rules. For example the guy who was in the same ruin as Cless. Or the Hand's elders. What I saw of them, some elves or other strong species would likely find it difficult at least to compete with them." Trian extended as he drank from his mug.

Ilea thought of Earth and how a lot of animal species were pushed to the brink of extinction, kept alive in zoos as humanity worked hard to destroy their own environment for nicer things to have in the short term. Maybe here it would be different where higher leveled humans had a higher lifespan as well. Probably not though. She was cynical already on earth and that didn't change with her experiences made in this place. In a way she loved it. This place didn't just lie down against human technology and exploitation, it fought back.

The human nature in her welcomed the challenge. And her individual wouldn't be enough to destroy the environment, or at least it would be left to her choice to do so. Her decision to chose Elos proved the right one, day in

and day out. She smiled and ate a piece of cheese, smiling at Weavy who was putting back the dairy product with wild ferocity.

“What is this made of??” he asked as soon as there was none on the table anymore. It took a while to explain to him that humans made the chunks of godly taste with the mother milk of other animals. A foreign and disgusting concept to him, yet he didn’t reject more cheese.

‘Perhaps our species is even more corrupting than his...,’ Ilea thought as she too continued eating. She hadn’t put on weight at all, on the contrary, she was fitter than ever. ‘I like this new magical ass.’ she thought, smiling as she enjoyed the last meal with all these people on one table for likely quite a while.

“It’s time. If I want to be there tomorrow I have to leave now. Claire I suggest not getting too involved in the politics, not while you have someone like her to care for.” Trian said and got up, the others following a moment later.

“Goodbye Ilea, you will always have a place in my personal royal guard.” the man said.

“You mean your harem? Thanks, same offer goes for you.” she said and shook his hand. Nothing else had to be said. The others said their goodbyes as well before the man took to the skies, lightning flashing around him as he accelerated.

“Well we better get going then Claire, perhaps one or the other is a little drunk now. The best time to go visit and talk about newly appointed leadership. Some of them must’ve died after all.” she said.

“Kyrian, can you bring weavy to the house. We’ll bring Cless and the animals here tomorrow if everything works out.” Ilea said.

“Will do, don’t be too stupid in there.” the man said, his statement entirely serious.

“I’ll try not to.” Ilea answered before the two of them flew off.

Laughter could be heard from a distant room as Eve made her way through the dark mansion. Flowers covered the ground even in here but compared to outside, the species she recognized were poisonous. Adding the high reaching roots with sacks hanging from them, the atmosphere in here was quite different than the quiet yet eerie feeling she got from the place outside.

‘It’s coming from below...,’ she thought as she jumped up to one of the roots, a dagger flashing before one of the cocoons opened up, a slimy substance coming out coupled with a half digested human corpse. Eve knew she had found the right place and moved down again, careful not to make too much noise. Cutting open the cocoon might’ve been too much already but she had to be sure.

Now she had reason enough to take out whoever owned this place already, any further information or an actual member of the Golden Lily would be a prize on top. Eve soon found a staircase and with what she found below, the realization that the whole property was much deeper than expected.

A cave like room opened up before her, the whole place covered in a field of flowers, magical lights coming from crystals above and on the walls. Trees blossomed as if it were spring. Colors from red to blue to green filled the place as Eve stood, invisible to most eyes and ears at the entrance of it all.

The laughter came from deeper within and so she followed. It seemed as if the plants below her grabbed at her feet, brushing towards the unseen invader to their sacred haven.



Moving further, Eve found a clearing at a lower stage of the cave, flowers of all kinds surrounding a small altar with a bleeding corpse on it. Small cuts had completely drained the body of all blood as roots pushed into the openings. A woman stood next to it, laughing. Now that Eve was this close she realized the woman had tears on her face, the laughter was joyous as the flowers around her seemed to move with similar enthusiasm.

The woman was naked, a thin but beautiful frame with a kind looking face. Her smile and the joy of her laughter reminded Eve of a mother giving birth to her child. If only the corpse in front of her wouldn't be there, the whole scene would change. Eve quietly made her way downwards, trying hard to not be noticed even by the very air around her.

“A visitor, and at such a late hour.” the woman suddenly said, her voice light and clear as she turned around with a spin, the flowers around her mimicking the movement. Her line of sight indicated that she didn't know exactly where Eve was, just that there was someone there.

“Your hiding skills rival the best. Were you outside my domain, I doubt I would've even noticed!” the woman said, her voice indicating both surprise and pride. Eve didn't know if the pride was meant for her own skills or the woman's.

“Did you come to play? To kill or to talk?” the woman asked and waited. A minute passed as the flowers around them moved quietly in the wind. Eve nearly forgot that they were underground, it seemed just like outside, even the light from above resembling the moonlight.

“It is not to talk then? So to kill or to play. What will it be visitor?” the woman asked as roots started to come out of the ground, Eve calmly moving closer to her target, her illusion spells removing the impact her steps had on the flowers from the woman's mind.

Four more steps and Eve found herself in front of the woman. A flash of steel later and her cursed dagger had pushed hard into the woman's skin and through her heart. The impact felt wrong to Eve and she quickly moved backwards, letting go of the blade.

Tears started forming on the woman's eyes. "To kill... it is always to kill..." she said, her voice breaking in the end, a sob flowing through her as she tried to rip out the dagger with her hands.

"You disturbed my routine. For that, you will take part in it as well." she said, her tone changing from sadness to anger, roots exiting the ground in a more furious manner as Eve determined the safest place for her to stand. 'It'll start in a moment...' she thought and prepared herself.

# Chapter 150 Politics, meh.

Chapter 150 Politics, meh.

“The cleanup of Viscera will fall onto our tasks.” Sulivhaan said as he wrote down the terms on the paper before him.

“Agreed. The requested purchases in the city should be fine, though we will have to request permission to accept.” one of the officers said.

“That is all for now?” another officer asked before yawning. The negotiations had taken hours already and they were barely through with the immediate necessities. The Shadow’s Hand would gain a lot of new power in Ravenhall, the contract accepted thanks to their independent retaking of the city and the empire’s interest in keeping in good relations with them. Considering the demon problem they could either blame the Hand or try to work together to resolve it.

The majority of the present officers luckily thought more of cooperation. They knew exactly what the capabilities of their army were and what the Shadow’s Hand could bring to the table. Of course the empire acted through the negotiations but the ultimately finished contracts painted quite a different picture about the balance of power.

The Hand had neither the resources, nor the desire to take over a kingdom or empire but they might have the power to weaken or even destroy one. All the present figures knew such and while the elders were preoccupied with other things, Sulivhaan and Dagon had plans for their order. Working together with the empire was in the interest of both parties.

“That is all for today. We can offer mercenaries to deliver the necessary documents by tomorrow if you wish.” Dagon suggested but the officer in front of him waved the man off.

“We appreciate the notion. Two squads of our fastest will build a constant communication network between the empire and Ravenhall for as long as necessary.”

Ilea quietly closed the door behind her as she and Claire walked towards the main table. Two imperial scouts stepped in front of them.

“The negotiations are ongoing, please wait outside for now.” one of them said, annoying Ilea already.

‘Don’t kill him, he’s just doing his job...’ she thought and felt like Claire was projecting the same thing into her mind with the stare she gave her.

“Sulivhaan, I need to talk, gonna wait outside.” she said to the man sitting at the table a couple meters further back. He looked at her and nodded. The wait wasn’t long as the meeting had just concluded for the day. The officers and imperial soldiers walked out, some of them giving Ilea and Claire looks. Most of them seemed respectful at least.

Sulivhaan opened the door a moment later and ushered them in. “Come inside.”

Sitting down on the table, Dagon was pouring himself a drink behind the bar. “For you guys?” he asked but they declined.

“What can I do for you Ilea.” Sulivhaan asked as Dagon came back and sat down, starting to read through the documents.

“Oh I’m just here to endorse my friend here. I’m sure she can speak for herself.” Ilea said, nodding towards Claire before she summoned a meal.

“Ilea please, can you at least move to another table?” Dagon asked, protecting the papers in front of him from the food. Ilea rolled her eyes and

leaned back on her chair, before hitting a supporting beam of wood. Dagon nodded thankfully as their attention moved to Claire.

“My name is Claire Russel, I’m in the same team as Ilea here.” she got out a letter from a pocket in her armor and handed it to the men. After they had read it she talked for a while about her home town and measures taken by her to ensure its survival. She went on to describe the current situation in Ravenhall and measures she would implement if she had the necessary influence.

“So you want a job?” Dagon asked.

“You got it.” Sulivhaan said. “Though I don’t think you can be an elder for now. We have no idea how that will go anyway. Verena still hasn’t returned but I’m sure she’ll have some plans in place. Maybe you’ll be able to work with her as well. I found it... difficult.” Sulivhaan explained.

“It would be my pleasure to try.” Claire said and smiled, as did Dagon.

“Great, the politicians have found each other. If you need anything else I’ll be at home. Oh Dagon, now that I’ve gotten you a capable helper, care to share some info on ash creation, element creation skills in general and their use?” Ilea asked, leaning back forwards as her empty plate vanished.

“You wanna know if you can fight with it? Sure, I mean most mages focused on one element or property have skills enhancing the power of it, not sure if you have that as a melee fighter.” he started explaining, quite open with information. Perhaps he really felt like he owed her something for bringing Claire to them.

“Your class is focused on ash though so there must be a way at some point. I have little information on ash related magic and skills though as I’ve previously told you. You should find more in the Foundation of Glass.” he finished.

“Ah, maybe I’ll go check it out finally, people have been talking about that one forever. Or I’ll just try and see where I can go with it.” Ilea said as she thought about the possibilities. One way or the other she had to increase her

levels and skills to get more usability out of them or perhaps something that would increase her ash's power.

"I think that's the better way for you to go. I find it hard to categorize either of your classes. With little external influence you might be able to go where nobody has gone before." Dagon said, looking at her with the creepy eyes of a scientist looking at a rare species of bird.

"Well you're the last one who will find out." Ilea told him and grinned at his disappointment.

"Suit yourself woman." he said but then smiled again. "Thanks for coming to find us in Virilya. Any more days of waiting and I don't know how this battle would've turned out."

"Elder Strand really fucked us eh?" Ilea asked and the two men looked at each other.

"He did, but perhaps for the Hand itself, it might not be so bad." Sulivhaan said and looked at the papers in front of Dagon. "You better have a look Claire, may I call you Claire?" the woman nodded in response and received the contracts.

"No shit this is good for the Hand. I suggest a change in paragraph six, both the third and fourth street house some very important stores that could easily be rebuilt and restaffed. Their reputation goes further than even the empire itself..." Claire started and Ilea found them lost a moment later, excusing herself to finally find her bed. It had been a long week, she wouldn't clean up anymore of the mess she made but she'd return to get paid for the already done work at least.

Stepping out into the open, she found that the sunlight had already left the city. The air smelled of smoke and death, something that wouldn't change for at least another week. Too much blood was in the streets, too many corpses.

Two near black wings formed on her back before she started ascending. The city's houses below her became smaller and smaller as she watched the mercenaries and soldiers work outside and inside Ravenhall to clean up the

demons. Perhaps it would be better to send those people out to defend and help other towns in the empire but she didn't know the situation and she was sure the people in charge would at least think of distributing their resources.

It wasn't her problem though. At least she'd check out Riverwatch after she dropped off Weavy but the possibility of any demons reaching that far north and west was small. She flew off towards the sea, her wings flapping merrily as she enjoyed the wind on her body and face. Her armor was replaced again by the more comfortable leather kind. A little wariness remained as she checked around to see if a flying demon by the name of Green was anywhere to be found but he didn't seem like the biggest planner. Ilea deemed it likely that the mind weavers put him up to keeping Ravenhall and summoning those beasts.

At least there wasn't anything she or the Hand could do now that he had vanished. She just hoped he was as simple minded as he seemed to her. The fucker was strong though and if she wanted to best him next time, more than just a bunch of stats in Strength were necessary. She doubted her newfound levels and the change to State of Azarinth were quite enough to overpower that demon, not with what he did to her in just a couple of attacks. Plus next time there probably won't be another lucky paralyzing scream from a nearby abomination.

Ilea landed quietly near her home. The cat was nowhere to be seen as she advanced on her house, a faint light coming from within. Opening the door, she stepped inside. No cleanup was necessary as all the filth from the past weeks was on her elven armor. A shower would be nice to be sure. Sighing, Ilea stretched and walked to the table.

"I'm back!" she greeted and heard scrambling feet coming from downstairs.

"Welcome back Ilea!" Cless greeted, an electric cat in her arms.

“I’m not sure if that’s the best idea.” Ilea said. The cat cuddled up closer to the girl when it recognized Ilea’s voice.

“They’re fine. I found a record in one of your beast encyclopedias. They make other creatures feed them, long term exposure is fine as well. Some people keep them as pets far in the south.” Kyrian stepped out from the stairwell leading to the kitchen, drying his hands with a towel.

“You look good.” Ilea said, trying to catch the man off guard. He did in fact look good though.

“And you stink. I didn’t see a bath in here but I wouldn’t believe you if you said there isn’t one.” Kyrian replied.

“Ah, you’re getting better at this. There is one. And yes, I’ll be there for a while. Did you prepare dinner?” she asked and walked past him, patting Cless on the head in the process.

“Currently working on it. Can I see the bath too at some point?” Kyrian asked. “I’ve been jumping into the ocean before.”

“If you behave, maybe.” Ilea played and blinked downwards into the big library. Several rooms had been placed and sealed off from the rooms accessible upstairs. Runes placed in the armory would open paths but it was easier for her to just blink into them.

One such room was the bath and Ilea removed her clothing with her necklace before stepping into the room and activating a couple runes on the wall. Steaming water started flowing into the big space before her as she smiled at her investment. “Aaaah, luxury that comes with wealth…” she commented and stepped into the already half full bath. Magic really was even more convenient in some places than the technology she had enjoyed on Earth.

Ilea relaxed into the bath and scrubbed herself clean of the dried blood from both herself and her opponents. She nearly fell asleep as she enjoyed the scathing hot bath that she doubted she’d even step into without her Resistances and the general defense she’d acquired in Elos.



Cleaning up twenty minutes later, she put on the black dress she had found in Morhill. Looking into the mirror in the bath, she was quite pleased with herself. A bit too much muscle to be the graceful noble that this dress would usually accompany but she did look good. Better than she ever had.

Blinking upstairs again, she was happy to find a marvelous smell going as far as the armory. Kyrian had even finished the cleanup already, the pots simmering on low heat.

“Sh...” he started as she stepped into the living room but stopped and just stared at her.

“Do you like the dress? Thank you.” Ilea said and sat down on the set table.

“Ilea is like a princess!” Cless exclaimed as she joined her at the table, the cat following her a moment later.

“Yes I am, a battle princess dear.” she said, mimicking an English accent as best as she could.

Kyrian had left to get the food and a minute later full plates were set before all of them, even the cat, which was sitting casually on its chair, eating the food with its paws. The illusion was broken a little and Ilea imagined the lightning tentacles sucking up all the food.

“Cless, tomorrow we’ll leave for Ravenhall. You’ll be staying with aunt Clarie for a while.” Ilea said and watched confusion come to Cless’ face. She didn’t know why she added the aunt part but it just felt right.

“You know I’ve barely ever been here and I won’t be able to stay in one place. I’ll come visit though. Aunt Claire will be able to train you and teach you about the world. We’re not in England anymore but I think you’re smart enough to have figured that out already.”

“So it’s true? I thought so... nobody knew anything about the royal baby. I just don’t understand.” the girl shook her head, apparently more disoriented by the lack of news about the baby than the existence of magic and literal knights.

“You will understand soon enough. Staying with Claire will be the best bet for you. Just promise me to keep drawing and work on your spells ok?” Ilea said and smiled as the girl lit up.

“I will!” she mimicked a salute, likely seen in a movie back on Earth.

“Are you from England as well hmm?” Kyrian asked as he continued eating.

“No, not England.” Ilea said and didn’t comment on it further. She was happy that he didn’t pry. Kyrian knew she wasn’t from around here, he must’ve realized she really wasn’t from around the whole realm even. Though it didn’t seem like he cared much.

“So what are the plans? You go to Ravenhall with her tomorrow?” Kyrian asked, having finished his meal. He got up and started cleaning up, Ilea joining a moment later.

“Yea, and I’ll bring Weavy away. The imperial soldiers already looked at him like he’s a monster.” Ilea said as they started to clean the dishes. A magical dish washer would be nice to have as well, she thought.

“I understand their sentiment. He’s up above, dunno but he seems to have an obsession with snow.” Kyrian said.

“I mean didn’t you? In your first winter?” Ilea joked.

They brought Cless to bed in the armory where she had built a nice little nest next to all the animals they had found in Morhill. Claire would think of something to do with them that didn’t involve living in a cage anymore. Ilea didn’t get her supplies of food just for a bunch of random animals they had found.

Both Kyrian and Ilea fell asleep on her bed pretty much as soon as they fell down on it. At least the man wasn’t wearing his armor anymore.

Eve grit her teeth and breathed hard as she ripped out the thorns in her arm, each one fitted with barbs that tore out a piece of skin as they went out, cutting deeper into her. She hissed and concentrated to keep her illusion spells going. Shakily, she opened her pouch and downed her third health potion, the last one she had. ‘Fuck that woman...,’ she thought and allowed herself to sigh as the wounds on her back and arm slowly closed.

The poison was strong, her foe wasn’t playing around anymore. Even for her, with a second stage resistance the substances used were potent and weakened her considerably. Her natural health regeneration was nullified at least but luckily it didn’t go further than that for now.

She was laying on rock, no flower or tree nearby as she waited. Eve wasn’t the only one injured but she had to move quickly, the woman had already regenerated a half removed head, three stab wounds to the heart, belly and neck as well as the curse that was still growing inside of her. Without it Eve didn’t think she’d still have a fighting chance.

“Where are you, damn cunt!!” the woman screamed as the ground was rolled through by roots and thorns, the beautifully placed flowers ripped apart in the process as the enraged mage unleashed her spells. It quieted down again as the woman started coughing hard, something wet hit the ground and Eve knew a chance presented itself again. She waited though, a full minute, even after the coughing had stopped.

And then she moved. Her body shot up as the pain of her foe’s poisonous mixtures flowed through her body and the half healed wounds ripped open again in some parts. Eve advanced at a terrifying speed, her remaining dagger flashing in the crystal light from above as the roots thorns around her started moving, responding to the attacking rogue.

A high pitched hum filled the whole cave like cellar and the roots aiming towards her shot into the ground around her target, some even injuring the caster herself. Only a moment, but a moment was enough for Eve as she dashed the remaining distance to sink her blade into her opponent's skull, using her other hand to rip out the second dagger that was still stuck inside of her. The curse would spread one way or the other and she needed a weapon to continue the fight.

Jumping backwards, she avoided the onslaught of roots forming a cocoon around her enemy, an attack that had nearly cost her life ten minutes earlier. This time she was prepared. She heard the scream even through the defense and allowed herself to kneel down. Soon it would be over.

# Chapter 151 I did this before but #traveling

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Eve suppressed her cough, focusing her eyes on the mage before her as the cocoon of thorns and roots opened up. The scene of a terrified girl, her hands clutched on the dagger's handle stuck in her head, opened before her. A moment later a cloud of pink mist exploded outwards and Eve ran. She ran for her life with all the energy she had left until she reached the very wall of the cave, crouching down and covering her face with her arms.

The mist still reached her, landing on her armor as a sizzling sound came to her ears. She had to wait still, the attack lasted for seven seconds before. Her armor was burnt through in some places and the mist landed on her skin. Eve screamed, she screamed to herself and to her enemy as she endured the melding of her flesh. The first time the woman had used her mist attack, she had taken it frontal and with full force. Her armor had been weakened but now it was getting dangerous.

The seven seconds passed and Eve turned around, shedding herself from the corroding armor pieces that were left as she used her dagger to cut out the parts of her flesh still covered in mist. Her tears and blood mixed as she grit her teeth. A cold fury burnt inside of her and all that remained of Eve in that moment was a deep desire to win, to kill her enemy.

Her clothes and armor in tatters, she advanced through the cave, the flowers and lush trees were dead or dying, their colors faltering under the mist of death and poison. Eve's feet were light as she moved through the dirt, her boots still held, her footing solid. Her foe was sitting on the ground, crying and still clutching the dagger in her head. She was beautiful, a lone figure previously surrounded by flowers but now she was no more.

Eve walked up to the woman while she hummed, putting pressure on her mind before her dagger was stabbed in the woman's neck. A gulp could be heard as Eve ripped out the weapon again and stabbed a different spot. Again and again until she ripped the woman's head off her shoulders, throwing it to the side as both of their bodies collapsed. Her breathing was harsh, her lungs must've been punctured at one point or the other.

At least she was the one still breathing. A small smile came to her as she ignored the notifications about her level rising. She had to move. If she stayed here without medical help, she'd die. The bleeding didn't stop, not a single one of them, the woman's poisons and weapons had ensured as much. Eve focused, all the remaining skills she could afford to keep active were burning through her as she forced herself up. Blood was coughed up but she continued.

Half a minute later, she was standing. Each step hurt her as she looked forwards through murky eyes. She would have to get back to a hideout. To get a potion. Her mind focused only on that, she ignored her desire to lie down, to sleep, to die. The pain was in the background now as she advanced slowly and with unsteady steps through the now empty manor. She won.

“It’s warm today.” Ilea said as she stepped out from her house. Cless followed behind, as did Kyrian back in his spiked armor. Behind them followed a bunch of cages floating on top of metal plates, the edges hooked to give them more stability.

“It’s warmer, yes.” Kyrian commented as Ilea held out her hand to Cless who smiled in response.

“Happy to fly again?” Ilea asked and smiled. She was clad in leather armor today, her Juggernaut one not clean yet from the past week’s battle. The girl nodded and grabbed her hand before Ilea heaved her up, ashen wings spreading on her back. Kyrian started floating as well, spheres of metal flying into his hands and forming around his boots to allow him more speed and control. He reminded Ilea more and more of a certain Metal man she had seen in movies back on earth. Though this one was still struggling to read.

‘I’m staring...,’ she thought and looked up before they ascended the cliff side. A lone figure was waiting on top, clad in a black robe and a hood. Not quite lone, as Ilea realized, seeing five more demons hiding in the tree line. He had managed to salvage some high leveled ones in the past days. Not enough for an army but enough to protect himself and possibly level himself up a little.

“Good morning Weavy. Did you sleep well?” Ilea asked as she landed near the demon shrouded in his hood, an additional piece of cloth covering most of his face. The spawn stepping out from behind the trees were clad in leather armor and metal helmets though it was quite noticeable by their stance that they weren’t quite human.

“I rarely sleep Ilea.” he said and bowed his head. It seemed Cless was quite comfortable with the demon too at this point as she waved at him. Weavy in turn didn’t wave back, contrary to his name.

“Well I do too at this point, not that I like it.” she responded. “Do you want to come to Ravenhall as well? We can leave afterwards.” she asked.

“I will, though my spawn will wait outside the city. Those... imperial soldiers? They are not fond of us.” he said.

“Yea, don’t take it personally. Just that your kind has recently murdered a couple hundred thousand of our kind. Most people will be holding a grudge, also why we have to get you somewhere safe. Not that you need much protection but I’d rather avoid a bloodbath caused by you.” Ilea said.

“Your warriors are too much for me to handle anyway, I don’t see how I might cause a bloodbath.” Weavy said, starting to float as well as they continued towards Ravenhall. The demons below followed by running.

“You’ll find most humans aren’t quite that strong. Still don’t start murdering them unconditionally. You’ll rouse the attention of stronger ones. That’s kind of how we work.”

“Understood, I’ll hunt for other species then.” the demon said.

“Close enough...,” Ilea said as they crossed the snowy mountain valleys, the demonic spawn hunting down and shredding the occasional wildlife or monster. Ilea wasn’t the one to be teaching the demon what to do and what not to, she did however consider him a friend at this point and to send a friend into a razor’s edge wasn’t quite what she considered decent.

“I’ll find a place for her, don’t worry about it, as will we for the animals. If we have anything in this city right now it’s space. We have plans in place that will allow people to populate both Morhill and Ravenhall again in around two months already.” Claire said to Ilea, turning towards Cless and kneeling down a little. “Until then you’ll stay with me. You can be my assistant, how does that sound Miss?”

“At your service!” the girl yelled and saluted. Ilea smiled at the scene. She was glad that Claire was not only unbothered by the child but seemed to actively enjoy her presence. The woman never seemed like the adventuring type, perhaps it’ll help having a kid to care for in the midst of all the serious



politics. Plus Cless was smart, she'd grow into someone rather scary in no time, of that Ilea was sure.

"You'll be off then?" Claire asked as she casually dropped a bunch of documents and books into Cless' arms. The girl wobbled a little but caught herself a moment later.

"Yea, bringing Weavy here to a safer location. Wouldn't want to have him here for any longer." Ilea said.

"As much as interrogating would help us, we've got enough new information to process for now and rebuilding the city will take a while as well. I trust you Ilea." Claire said, nodding towards Weavy. "Would you be willing to share information with the Hand at some point in the future?" Claire asked the demon.

"I don't see why not. In exchange for, goods and services. That is how you work here is it not?" the demon said directly into their minds.

"Of course, you'll receive fair compensation. Though I must ask, is there any greater danger at the moment coming from your realm? Like the two monsters that came out and do you know about the demon Ilea fought, Green?" Claire asked, irking Ilea a little bit but she didn't stop her for now.

"No, the summoning ritual is unknown to me. Likely another mind weaver had discovered or created it. Creatures like the ones summoned are no friend to us, too strong to be controlled. My theory is that Green made the mind weavers summon them. I believe he had an ability to resist our control as well." Weavy explained.

"And you think he used that ability to gather the mind weavers together to work for him?" Claire speculated.

"Yes, otherwise I doubt a possibility of such cooperation to exist among us. It is not our nature." the demon said.

"What about you then? You're cooperating with us aren't you?" Claire asked, the tone in her voice changing.

“He is and if you have more questions I suggest you’ll wait with them for the future, alright?” Ilea interrupted, stepping a little closer to her friend who shook her head.

“Of course, I’m sorry Ilea. Just, don’t be too trusting.” the rune mage said.

“Ah, I don’t care anymore at this point. At least he’s not human, to me that’s a plus. He know’s I’d take him down with me at least if he goes against me.” Ilea said and winked towards the demon.

“He’ll kill humans you know.” Claire said as a last try to convince Ilea to be more careful.

“Nothing other humans don’t do. We’ll teach him to kill the shit ones alright?” Ilea answered and watched the woman sigh and then chuckle.

“You are, one of a kind. Well do come back in at most a month, I’ll have missions for you. There’s enough to do in the city right now but I doubt you’d be the one to join the cleanup.” Claire said.

“Hey! I already did, where’s my pay for that anyway?” Ilea asked and watched as Claire looked through some documents she had summoned after her comment.

“Wow you’re right, as I said. One of a kind. Here, fourteen silver. It includes the services as a healer and your part in the fight.” Claire said and summoned the coins before handing them to Ilea.

‘Guess I really won’t be joining any cleanup jobs anymore...,’ Ilea thought, taking the silver and handing it to Weavy.

“Thanks, Weavy take this, it’s your starter kit. You can exchange it for goods and services.” she said and enjoyed the somewhat confused look on Claire’s face.

“I’ll make sure to visit again.” she said.

“Oooh, so this is the gold people have been talking about.” the demon marveled at the coins and Ilea just looked at him. Not her job.

“Well then I’ll be off, see you around Claire. And you Cless.” she said and shook their hands.

“Thanks again, for coming to help us.” Claire said and locked eyes with Ilea “Whenever you need anything just write me or come to Ravenhall. I’ll make sure to be influential enough to crush a country for you.” she said with a grin.

“Ah don’t worry about it Claire, I’ll make sure to become strong enough to fight a country by myself.” Ilea joked and smiled before the two parted. Kyrian said his goodbyes to Claire as well before he joined Ilea outside the Hand’s headquarters.

“Where to now?” the man asked as he put on his helmet. It looked like he had already cleaned his armor thoroughly. A task Ilea was still dreading. She spread her wings and motioned towards Weavy who walked up to her before grabbing her arm. They ascended together with Kyrian following close behind.

“Riverwatch, and some friends nearby. I’m sure they’ll like Weavy just fine.” Ilea said as they joined Weavy’s Spawn outside the city. Kyrian created little carriers with his metal that the beasts could hold onto.

“How’s your speed with all that weight?” Ilea asked the man.

“Slower? No idea honestly, we’ll see.” he said and Ilea shrugged at that. They weren’t exactly in a hurry so she didn’t mind. The flight would take a while as the city was at least three times as far away as the capital of Lys. Hopefully no elves would find themselves still hiding in the beginnings of the forest.

“Alright, let’s go then and see if Walter is still alive.” Ilea said as she increased her speed, the cold mountain air flowing through her exposed hair as a smile blossomed on her face. Flying would never get old.

They reached the outskirts of Morhill a couple hours later, Kyrian's reduced speed really put a hamper on Ilea's travel time. Contrary to her expectations, it didn't hamper her mood at all. The past months were packed with training, elven and demon invasions and a lot of talking. Flying over the mountains was beautiful, the feeling of freedom was nearly graspable to her and with her somewhat silent companions she felt joyous in her solitude.

Ilea noticed that the snow weighed less on the trees anymore. Winter truly had ended and soon spring would come. She knew it wouldn't affect the picture around Ravenhall and Morhil much, they were after all places high in the mountains. Though thinking of Riverwatch and the forest near the Azarinth temple, she couldn't help but smile and think back on her arrival to this place, her journey so far and the things still to come.

Ilea felt ready as she grasped the air before her with a tight fist, happy to find none of her companions commenting on it, not even Aki. The group found Morhil not completely deserted. Some members of the Hand were present, as were Imperial soldiers that didn't look like they were part of the same regiment stationed in Ravenhall. At least there were no demons around the city.

"Do you want to stop?" Kyrian asked, breaking the two hour long silence.

"No, not if you two can go on?" Ilea asked and got a nod from him in reply. Weavy sent a confirming feeling into her mind, something she'd probably not get used to. Then again she likely didn't have to.

"Then let's continue." she said, moving her wings to pick up the pace again.

Two hours later the group finally emerged out of the mountain chain in the south of Lys, flying out and towards the plains that stretched as far as the eye could see. There were patches of forests, especially to the West. The ocean was too far away to see already. The suns were still high, indicating that it was at least midday.

The three of them accompanied by Ilea's talking dagger and a group of demons hanging onto their floating metal frames flew over the plains where the first green was already showing itself in some places. More and more as they traveled away from the mountains. They flew lower than before and crossed the occasional road. Travelers were few and far in between though they did come across a caravan a couple hours into their travels.

The group looked to have more wagons than even people, some of the horses and oxes directly bound to the wagon before them.

"What do you think?" Ilea asked nobody in particular.

"They probably survived a demon attack. Not many it seems. Makes sense doesn't it? Demons don't seem to care much about anything else but killing and eating." Kyrian said.

"How did they get all those animals then?" Aki asked and Ilea shrugged. The man didn't have an answer and the group went on. The farther they would move away from Ravenhall, the more careful they had to be about the demons they had in tow, especially Weavy. Come to think of it, Ilea remembered the whole debacle with the summoned demon inside the necromancer den.

Perhaps they wouldn't be most happy about one of their kind asking to live with them but if anybody was tolerant enough to accept Weavy, then it was them.

"Weavy, right?" Aki asked, the wind flowing through them as they reached the beginning of the western forests. Ilea wasn't sure if this was still territory of the empire or if they were already in another kingdom.

"Yes. Enchantment." Weavy replied.

"I'm Aki. Did Ilea even ask you what you would like to do?" the dagger asked. Ilea stayed quiet, continuing towards Karth.

"Aki, it is a pleasure to learn your name. I am unfamiliar with this realm. Ilea has not yet killed me and now she is traveling a long way to bring me to a place I might be able to stay. I cannot form an opinion on what to do yet in

this newfound realm, not with my current knowledge.” the demon said. Ilea smiled, knowing that he was just a bit different than his kin.

“Eh, you sound way too nice. You’re gonna be abused if you stay like that. Don’t you demons just want to kill and conquer?” Aki asked.

“I indeed want to kill and conquer but how would I do that if I get killed immediately?” Weavy replied.

“I’m beginning to think this was a bad idea.” Ilea said though she still wore her trademark grin.

“Well no shit, he’s a demon you literal tree stump.” Aki said.

“You’re being racist.” Ilea said.

“Yea, because they’re a literal race of monsters.” Aki replied before Kyrian’s laugh shut them both up.

“What is it?” the dagger asked but Kyrian kept quiet. Ilea smiled as well and looked towards the man who kept his gaze onto the horizon.

“Exactly.” she said as her smile widened. “We should pause soon, maybe find a warm place somewhere to stay the night.”

“We should.” Kyrian confirmed though he didn’t sound tired. The Meditation pauses they did earlier were simply held in the air. Moving slower while airborne allowed for the skill to replenish their mana easily enough.

“A bed would be nice.” Ilea said and looked for roads and villages as they continued.