

Elfie twirled in the air and landed next to her, standing proudly with his full two meters on display. He straightened his hair with one armored hand, his eyes still focused on the ongoing battle.

“It is good to see you, alive and well,” he said.

[Mage – lvl 325]

“And you, Niivalyr. It’s been some time, I see you didn’t waste it,” Ilea said with a smirk, glancing over at the elf.

“Their teamwork and abilities have improved exponentially, as did mine. Yet I see that you have not slowed in your restless pursuit of power. You are far beyond even four hundred now. Did you reach your three marks?” he asked with interest.

“You’d see that, wouldn’t you?” Ilea asked.

“Perhaps. It’s unknown to me what trickery and power may be unlocked at such stages. Especially for a human such as yourself,” he said with a hint of played disdain.

“You called for me?” Ilea asked.

The elf smirked, showing off his sharp teeth as he glanced at her with his fascinating dark gray eyes. “Straight to business? That is not the Ilea I know. Perhaps it would be good for you to take a break, there is no rush.”

Ilea watched the battle, Seviir struggling to get a hold of the Centurion as Heranuur rushed it with reckless abandon. As the fight went on, she realized the latter wasn’t exactly true. Heranuur took calculated risks, letting himself get injured whenever it provided an opening in return. His explosive blades and fire spells just weren’t quite powerful enough to take out the enemy quickly.

Neiphato waited behind, vigilant and ready to intervene when the situation demanded such. He did a few times, with good timing and calm motions.

He’s grown quite a bit, hasn’t he, Ilea thought with a warm smile.

“You’re not wrong. But Catelyn told me you were quite insistent on me meeting you here. I thought it was something at least somewhat important,” Ilea said.

“Ah... yes... well,” Elfie said. “The situation has somewhat, calmed, in the last few weeks,” he said. “I apologize for my insistence.”

“Apologize to her, I came as soon as I had time and considered it somewhat safe,” she said.

“Your expedition into the depths of the Descent... I had heard something had happened, yet the details were not shared with me, only that you were safe,” he said. “Did you perhaps try to mate with the Trakorov?”

“No... though he was a charmer, wasn’t he?” Ilea said.

The elf looked at her for a full two seconds, confusion apparent on his face.

“I was joking,” she said.

He coughed, looking ahead. “I have much to learn.”

“How would that even work... his p-” Ilea started, the elf interrupting her.

“Please. Let us not get into specifics, Ilea. It’s good to see that you’re alive,” he said. “And apparently consider this place safe enough to come.”

“I’m glad you lot didn’t get slaughtered either. Quite a few levels for you, I see,” Ilea said.

“Not just me. My students have improved considerably too. As did you. Far beyond what I thought possible,” Elfie said. “What did you fight this time?”

“Astral Spirits, in another realm,” Ilea said.

“Hmm. Yes, that is a logical explanation,” the elf said and chuckled.

He licked over his teeth and lips, Ilea giving him a glance.

“Oh... apologies. Old habits,” he said.

“Don’t mention it, you don’t have to change something like that for me,” Ilea said.

“And yet I don’t want a... friend, to be uncomfortable when around,” Elfie said.

Ilea smiled. “So what happened on your side? You seem to be handling the situation well enough on your own. Not that I mind visiting.”

“We have cleared much of the facility. There are however many halls in the lower sections protected by Praetorians or variants of them that we cannot yet face reliably. That is however not the reason for calling you,” Elfie said.

The last two Centurions were getting demolished by now, the two elves with support from Neiphato slowly overwhelming the machines.

“We found teleportation gates. Several of them,” Elfie said.

“Good for you. Did you destroy them?” Ilea asked.

“No. Not all of them at least. The Taleen don’t seem to have realized our intrusion, or they simply do not care. One of the gates leads into the Izla dungeon. A facility that we assume produces Praetorians. In time, I’m sure we would reach sufficient strength to overwhelm it but every day that we wait, more of those machines are produced and sent to kill our brethren.”

“I see. And you want me to help?” Ilea asked.

“I want you to introduce me to the Cerithil Hunters you have met. Isalthar specifically. He may be the only one on our side able to face what we found,” Elfie said.

“You’re underestimating me,” Ilea said with a smile.

“I simply don’t want to involve you. You have done enough for me, for us,” he said.

“I’d be excited to help. Destroying ancient machines with a high enough level to both challenge me and be beneficial to my Classes? Sign me up,” she said.

Elfie looked at her. “I... I would be honored to have you at our side. But... I’m not talking about normal Praetorians.”

“Hunters? Or Executioners?” Ilea asked.

His eyes widened. “You know of them? Wait Executioners?”

“I’ve fought a few, briefly. Their numbers overwhelmed me then but I’m not exactly the same anymore,” Ilea said. “Executioners... well I only saw one. Silver with void magic blades or something. The thing was definitely quick and could move on air.”

“I... that’s even worse than the Hunters,” he murmured.

“I’ll set up a meeting if I can. We’ll get the group here and try to infiltrate and destroy Izla,” Ilea said. “I don’t know how long it will take however. Maybe I should check it out myself first.”

“The gate is active. If a real threat goes through, I doubt they’d let you flee so easily. Nor would they only send normal Praetorians in pursuit. I think we were very fortunate. We might not have many more chances with that gate,” Elfie said.

“I see... that makes sense I guess. I destroyed the one that lead me to those Praetorians,” she said.

Neiphato landed nearby, blue magic wings disintegrating. “Greetings, Ilea. It is good to see you well, and powerful.”

[Mage – lvl 306]

“You too. Nice wings. Your magic looked quite impressive from here,” she said.

The elf blushed and looked away.

“Don’t encourage him,” Heranuur said and jumped up to join them.

[Warrior – lvl 308]

“He’s been annoying enough as it is,” he said and stretched, pieces of steel falling to the ground.

Ilea was unsure if they had belonged to his mangled armor or the enemies.

“Goliath will not be happy,” Elfie said.

“He’s a smith. This is what smiths do,” Heranuur said.

“The human returns, still very much alive,” Seviir said as he walked up the stairs. He grinned, a menacing look in his eyes.

[Mage – lvl 297]

Do I have to remind him where we stand?

Ilea didn’t exactly feel like another bout. Beating down poor elves wasn’t on her to do list today.

“Up to Goliath then?” she asked.

“It seems like a visit is necessary, yes,” Elfie said.

Seviir and Heranuur looked at each other before they vanished.

Ilea saw them teleport up and away.

“What’s that about?” she asked.

“A race,” Neiphato said. “Their rivalry has only strengthened over the past months. It can be troublesome in their approach to our foes.”

“They’ll learn, don’t worry too much,” Elfie said, touching the other elf on his shoulder.

Neiphato glanced at Ilea before he went for the door.

“Terok isn’t with you?” she asked.

“Not anymore. He returned to Hallowfort after some time. I believe he talked about putting together a team,” Niivalyr said.

“I see. I’ll meet him at another time then,” she said. *He’s going to freak out when he finds out I know the Meadow*, she thought with a smile.

“Elfie, something else,” Ilea said.

He turned to face her, a smile on his face. It still looked downright predatory but at least his eyes seemed somewhat joyous.

“I have a skill, to mark people. It lets me find you, and it lets you call for me in an emergency. Just thought I’d give you one while I’m here,” Ilea said. “I you don’t object to the idea.”

“It seems like a useful ability. I don’t mind carrying such a mark, if there aren’t mind magic or other sinister properties bound within,” he said.

“There shouldn’t be. Not to my knowledge at least,” Ilea said and chuckled. “I didn’t expect you to take it. Goliath refused.”

Elfie smiled. “Both him and I, are prideful beings. Yet I trust you, and while he works in relative safety, I fight machines made to destroy my kind. I am not above admitting that a way to call for you would bring me some form of calm,” he said and hesitated. “Don’t... mention that to other Elves.”

“Of course not,” Ilea said and smirked, taking his hand into hers.

Mana flowed into the mark, the power settling quickly before she let go.

“That was... unobtrusive,” Elfie said, looking at the runes on his hand after he stored the gauntlet.

“I guess. I have little experience with marks like that,” Ilea said.

“There are... a few rather... powerful experiences every elf goes through after birth. But let’s not delve into such topics now. Astral Spirits you said. Do tell me more,” Niivalyr said as he walked towards the exit.

Neiphato waited for them near the stairs, the three of them making their way back up towards Goliath.

Ilea talked about her adventures in Baralia and Erendar, not mentioning that she got the Meadow out with her quite yet. She wanted to let the tree settle in before it got flooded with requests.

“Another Elemental,” Elfie commented as they reached the upper floors, the three of them now flying up through the open space in the center of the facility.

“Just one more for the triple,” Ilea said. *Might become an Ash Elemental by that point.*

“I’ll try to set up a meeting then. Or should I just get them here?” Ilea said.

“The latter would be easier, yes. Though my confirmation may be necessary to convince them,” Elfie said.

“Either way, I’ll have a look and get back to you,” Ilea said.

“I appreciate it, Ilea. Thank you,” Elfie said. “Oh, and about that Taleen artifact.”

“When I’m back, alright?” Ilea asked.

“Of course,” Elfie said. “Safe travels.”

Neiphato waved while the others argued with Goliath.

Ilea blinked away and activated her third tier, waiting a few minutes until she vanished.

Ilea appeared in her home, cracking her neck and knuckles before she blinked onto her balcony.

She looked at her hands and smiled. *At least this war is beneficial to my own advancements. And we're fighting machines.*

Her clothes disappeared into her necklace before she jumped over the railing, plunging down until she reached the water.

A quick swim later, she found herself flying again. *I'm just a glorified messenger girl by now, with the flight speed of a fighter jet.*

The journey to Riverwatch was a familiar one by now, Ilea rushing past the few landmarks on the way she had memorized until Karth came into view. The marks she had left on both Walter and Dale helped of course but they were hardly a necessity at this point.

Ilea flew low past Riverwatch, stopping along the treeline overlooking most of the expansive town. Hundreds of torches and lanterns illuminated the streets, light pushing through many of the windows.

It wasn't Ravenhall but she had visited so many times by now, she could identify some of the larger buildings as what they were, even from outside the city.

Maybe some day, I'll be able to watch or even participate in a tournament here without an unexpected interruption.

She was glad to see the guards vigilant, patrolling with their eyes open and ready to face potential threats at a short notice. *Did I really save this city from a Baralia takeover?*

It felt a little like a hazy dream at this point. She had been in no major danger, and still, thousands now felt the impact of her actions. Both here and in the distant kingdom.

Ilea summoned herself a bottle of ale, raising it towards the city before she took a sip. *May your nights be quiet, and your days productive.*

Her wings moved, taking her into the western forest.

She quickly reached the Calys mines and blinked through the hidden passage, entering the hideout of the Vultures with displacement.

Do you have space magic detection? she asked herself and sipped on her ale.

Another two uses of the skill brought her into the common room.

Walter sat at one of the tables, engrossed in a few official looking documents.

“Hey there,” Ilea said and sat down opposite him.

The man didn't even wince, looking up at her with a sigh. “You disabled the runes?”

“No. Space magic,” she said.

“Ah. Makes sense,” he said and stood up. “Good timing. I’m starting to get a headache.”

“What’s going on?” Ilea asked.

“Alistair with his trade agreements. I hadn’t taken him for such a bureaucrat. This is exactly why I founded a hidden order of necromancers and dark magic practitioners,” he murmured. “What are you drinking there? That’s not mine.”

Ilea made the bottle vanish at his glare. “Oh nothing. Nothing at all. Drinking? I’d like a mug of your ale, if you would.”

“Good,” he said, the hint of a smile showing on his face.

“You weren’t even surprised when I showed up. That focused? Or are you just immune to a good scare?” Ilea asked.

“What do you think this place is? I’ve woken up to an undead sitting next to my bed with its face next to mine,” he said, bringing over two mugs.

“Why would anybody do that?” Ilea asked.

“To have a laugh? I don’t know. Ask them yourself if you want to. Also don’t just appear in someone’s room unannounced, it’s rude,” he said.

“I took a peak beforehand. Wouldn’t want to interrupt something a little more, private,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Peeking is rude too. Don’t let all that power get to your head, Lilith, savior of Riverwatch,” he said. “The song requests are getting to me by the way. Thanks for that.”

“I can’t help but watch my back, Walter. And no worries. I just helped against the Baralia forces to annoy you with the songs that would spring up from that whole affair,” she said.

He smiled. “I knew it. But seriously, helping would be one thing. You slaughtered their whole army.”

“It’s what I do now, apparently,” she said with a shrug, drinking from the mug. “Yeah, this is the shit.”

“I told you,” Walter said with a self satisfied expression on his face. “Here for a reason I suspect? Is another army coming or something?”

“Not exactly. I need to speak to the elves. When do you next meet them?” Ilea asked.

“I see. Two weeks from now I believe. I can give you the exact date but I’ll have to check,” he said.

“That’s good. Thanks. How have things been?” she asked and slid to the back of the bench, resting her back on the stone wall.

“There’s always something going on. Eyn is improving at an alarming rate. I wouldn’t be surprised if he joined your Shadows in another year or two. With how Alistair is treating us, and the brewery in town, I feel like we’re actually a part of the city,” he said.

“Sounds good. Or was that not what you were looking for?” Ilea asked.

“Not initially, no. But I suppose with the current leadership it’s better than just hiding, unsure how the locals would react if they found us. There’s just a lot more work on my table now,” he said.

“And nobody can help you?” Ilea asked. “You don’t have to deal with the elves or that brewery if you don’t want to.”

“Oh, the elves are little trouble. And I do like the work. The bulk is just dealing with all the requests from the others, and with the increasing communication from merchants and high ranking officials in Riverwatch. Craftsmen and women dealing in kind of maybe forbidden arts are very much in demand,” he explained.

“Hmm. Yeah I can see that. I got a request to help in the Baralia war by some high ranking secret order,” Ilea said.

“One upping me?” he asked with a smile.

“Oh not at all. I just get it,” she said.

“I know, I know. Sometimes I just wish we’d still just be an unknown group of lunatics hiding in a dungeon,” he said.

“Maybe you should take a vacation,” Ilea said.

“To Ravenhall?” Walter said and laughed. “It would be nice, but I can’t be gone for weeks.”

“That might not be a problem anymore soon. We’re working on a teleportation gate. You could even visit the north,” Ilea said.

“Many have tried to reproduce what the Taleen had accomplished. And to my knowledge, nobody has succeeded. What makes you think you’re getting close?” he asked.

Ilea smirked. “We have more artifacts, probably. And more importantly, the help of a four mark space mage.”

“A f... oh well, not that I should be surprised. That’s good to hear. Or bad, depending on how the gates will be used. Working long range teleportation would have a massive impact on humanity as a whole. To think the young woman who stumbled into our abode would have such an influence in just a few years’ time,” Walter mused, drinking from his mug.

“Well, it’s not just me. I do tend to find and harbor capable people,” Ilea said.