

*“Thanks for the time,”* she sent to Claire, the woman gone from the terrace as well.

*“Thanks for the food. I should eat more often,”* Claire replied, her mark moving towards her office.

*Could hunt this guy, or go visit the boys. Ah, I’ll let them have their fun. I’m sure they’re very impressive to the Sentinels with them.*

She didn’t care much about the spy but it was just plain rude to try and listen in on a conversation between friends.

Eternal Huntress wasn’t the most potent tracking spell but Ilea managed, mostly thanks to her space awareness and broad spherical magic perception. It was just another puzzle, this time against a mind much less developed than that of the Meadow. Admittedly, the latter did dumb it down enough for her primate brain to understand. And here she had to find a single man inside of a city full of people. People, magic, enchantments, smells, and sounds. With her ordinary senses, even enhanced, she would’ve already lost him. Teleportation was just too good of a tool to make a quick escape, and so widely available.

To deal with it, one required something rare and powerful like space magic. It just so happened that Ilea was one of the few high level space mages around. At least she thought as much, the possibility of perfectly hidden space mages watching everything from some hidden pocket in the fabric an option she neither thought likely nor entirely implausible.

There were various lines in the fabric but only one that continued with a hint of sound magic. An aura perhaps. She followed and found herself on a busy market. More lines were visible here but nothing recent. Ilea appeared on top of a nearby house overlooking the square, plate in hand. She took a bite and watched over the busy area. *Hiding stationary or in plain sight?*

She teleported down and through the crowd until she found him in her dominion. His hood was gone and his clothes had been replaced by a set of worn plate armor, a helmet now covering most of his head. *Same height, same calm movements.*

There were a few other possible options but he felt like the one. When she moved closer, Eternal Huntress confirmed her suspicions. *Same scent. And now I had a close look,* she thought with a slight smile. His gait was the most prominent thing she noticed with her highly enhanced perception. *And he nearly got away.* Out of the five people she had noted among the hundreds around her, he had been the one not producing any magical effects. Someone trying to stay hidden.

That changed when he reached the other side of the market, another teleport moving him away.

Ilea simply latched on, herself appearing next to a wall at the proportional distance. She latched on to the next six teleports as well, seeing his clothes change with every move. *He’s really going all out. I mean you really should, if you have the balls to spy on Lilith. Probably would’ve learned more if he had just sat down and struck up a conversation.*

The man continued onward and entered a building. He greeted a kid playing with a wooden toy on the stone stairwell before he entered a small apartment on the second floor.

Ilea waited for him inside, gaze out through the window.

“And who might you be?” the man asked in a calm tone.

She could hear his heartbeat waver ever so slightly. Experienced, but even he hadn't expected her to follow so easily.

“Lilith,” she said, a wave of monster hunter going through the vicinity. A grin spread on her face when she noticed his body did not freeze.

**[Scythe Master – lvl 228]**

*A scythe master... not just a flair for danger but also one for the dramatic. Smart I guess, to keep your spy related class as the lower leveled one.*

“The savior of Ravenhall. You must've seen me watching,” he said with a smile, taking off his hat as he closed the door.

“You weren't particularly subtle,” she said, turning around to look at him.

Slight stubble, black eyes, black hair, muscular build. Nothing out of the ordinary, in any way. He could pass as a Shadow, a random adventurer, an officer of one army or the other.

“Are you a distraction of sorts?” Ilea asked, checking the marks nearby. *Weird though, how would he have known I came back today.*

“A distraction? No. I've been waiting near that terrace for a few months already. Been talking to people, looking for anything about you. Your alias isn't exactly the most subtle, Ilea Spears,” he said.

“Should I be impressed?” Ilea asked. The benefits of an alias were good in a general sense but she had made it up on a whim, not to hide from powerful people looking for her. She had hardly been known by anyone just a few years ago.

He smiled and summoned himself a bottle half full of a light brown liquid. The man poured himself a glass that stood on the small wooden table, the only piece of furniture in the room besides the simple bed. “I had hoped for a little, I suppose.”

“Look, I'll be honest. I just followed you because it seemed a little more interesting than the alternatives,” she said.

“A blow harder than any punch,” he said and sipped from the drink.

“But I'm less sure of that with every word you speak. Who do you work for?” she asked.

“I've been looking for an employer. But my previous one spent a lot of gold to make that quite difficult. So I came here. To the mystery called Lilith, the woman so untouchable, even the Heavenly Sweets seem to fear her,” he said and drank from his whiskey.

“So you waited for months to what... get a job interview?” Ilea asked.

“I don't do job interviews. I talk to people. And if I'm interested, I offer my services,” he said.

Ilea smiled. “I see. And why should I be interested in you?”

He raised his eyebrows. “You're part of the council. As is your good friend and former team member, Claire. Dagon and Elise... they know a lot, but they're librarians first. Sulivhaan is a paranoid old fuck. A smart one at that but he... can lose sight of the bigger picture. This city has gold, technology, the Shadow's Hand, your Sentinels, defenses that could withstand the combined

efforts of Lys' military divisions and generals. What you lack is information. You have what you buy, and what is available to those who dig a little deeper, what you need is people like me, people who tell you who's a threat before they even think of becoming one in the first place."

"You want to spy for me? I'm not exactly paranoid but you're not the most trustworthy person I've ever come across," she mused.

He smiled. "No. Of course not. I want out. I'm tired... of running, of hiding," he said and sat down. "This city. There's an energy here, like nothing I have seen before. Hope. Perspective. Maybe I was infected during my stay. Refugees from all over the godsdamned plains. I don't know why. Because the people who lived here were wiped out by demons? The Shadows? Or because of you?" he shook his head and paused. "I can teach your people what I know. I can teach them what I do. And in return I want to be paid, I want a place to stay, and I want those fuckers to know that if they kill me, they'll have you on their asses." He finished with a grin, downing another glass of liquor.

"And who would that be?" Ilea asked.

"Nipha. One of the more influential families there but I suppose Nipha would accurately describe my previous employer," he said.

"Hmm. I don't really care about Nipha. How important are you exactly? Would they start a war to kill you?" she asked.

"A war? No. I would be long dead if that was the case. Assassins usually. They might even try to buy me back, claiming whatever they would to convince you," he said.

Ilea sighed. "Yeah, so either way I don't know if I can trust what you're saying. And I really don't feel like spending days to figure you out," she said and tapped her lip. *Contacting Verena is still on cooldown.* She focused on the Meadow instead. *Ask Verena and Pierce to come to Ravenhall. Need assistance.*"

"It was worth a try," he said. "City's better than most others already. Affordable housing and food, thanks to you I hear, or was it the Head Administrator who championed for such measures? Miles better than whatever the previous Elders did with the town. But they had Adam Strand, which would've made me irrelevant. Now that he's gone, the position seems vacant."

"He was the spy master around here?" Ilea asked, thinking back to the man she briefly fought in the Great Salt. Kohr as it was.

"That he was. And he was good. Large part of the Hand's reputation, at least in the last four decades. Brute force was always there too of course, Berserker mostly, but the Shadows would've long lost their pseudo independence without the efforts of Strand. Funny in a way, that you managed what he failed to do for so many years, but who knows, maybe that was part of his plan as well," he said with a chuckle.

Ilea raised a brow.

"I'm joking. Nobody could've predicted you. Lilith. Shot up out of nowhere. Battle healer, indestructible, a hundred levels stronger with each story, more ludicrous feats added to her name with every song. At the right place, at the right time. Almost makes me take the people seriously who claim you're some kind of god," he said.

"What do you think I am?" Ilea asked, seeing the mark of Verena appear a few kilometers outside the city.

“I haven’t made up my mind. Many options are gone after this talk. What I know is that you care for the people here, that the Sentinels seem a genuine effort to provide the world with healers. Your actions in Baralia confirm that, though war is chaotic and I tend not to trust even the better sources. I don’t think you’re a god. What I think you are however, is not from this realm.”

Ilea smiled ever so slightly. “How come you think that?”

“Nobody just springs into existence. Even the least important peasant in the history of man was known by someone, left some traces of their existence. Traces that might vanish in time, but twenty years and more? Not a single soul knowing you? A level thirty healer that is found by a guard Captain of Riverwatch, panicked by the reality of battle. And less than five years later she’s supposedly a triple mark human, a very exclusive club. Elusive to the point where even I question their existence. So you’re either not human at all, or you’re not from this place. I don’t know what it is, but all traces and stories I’ve come across speaking of people from other realms show them shining bright with knowledge, strange magic, or technology that changed entire nations, none of course who would admit to such,” he said.

“You think that’s true? That there are people from other realms with strange magic?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t think it’s true, I know it is. Cless goes to various Classes with the Shadowguard and even some with the Shadows. William does his best but she remains a child. What she can do with her divination. It’s far beyond anything I’ve encountered. Both at her age and at her level,” he said.

“I don’t like you creeping on a kid,” Ilea said.

“I took Classes. I’m technically a shadowguard in training. And I talk to people, and I listen. And even if you don’t believe me, Cless is safe enough. A spy from Lys was killed trying to apprehend her a few months ago. I don’t know who protects her but they’re more than capable. But herein lies the problem. Ravenhall knows how to protect and intimidate, but your people don’t even know which country sent that spy and how she found out about Cless,” he said.

“So you think I’m some special realm traveler?” Ilea asked.

“I think you’re from another realm. Do I think you’re special? Maybe. The magic you wielded back in Riverwatch and Dawntree was certainly unorthodox but not unheard of. The Foundation has records on various mana intrusion healing from ages past. The Veliran, Alrumen, Azarinth, Percunir, to name a few. You’re very easy to read, Ilea. Maybe cover yourself in that ash armor when you talk to someone that might sell your secrets to people who could exploit them. There are ways to hurt you besides physical injury, which at this point I think rather impossible for humans,” he said. “Maybe you were lucky, maybe where you’re from, people wield magic previously brought to our realm. Whatever it was, you survived, and now you’re here. I believe we may have mutual interests.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?” she asked, genuinely impressed by now. He had done his research.

He smiled. “I don’t know if you joined the Golden Lily. I don’t know where you vanish to for extended periods of time. I don’t know what you plan to do with all the metals that are being bought up throughout the plains. There’s plenty I don’t know, but I can’t be everywhere at once. For that you need more people, and so far you have none.”

“Alright. You’re impressive, I admit it. I don’t think anyone has known as much about me without being a trusted friend. But that’s where we have a problem. I don’t know you. So I’ll have a few

friends talk to you. They're a little more experienced when it comes to people, or so I hope," she said.

The man poured himself another bottle. "If you want me to talk to people, I will talk. And know that now, I'm interested in the job. If you are too."

"What's your name anyway?" Ilea asked.

"Friends call me Wayland," he said. "No many of those left."

*Yes. We get it*, Ilea thought and gestured him to wait. She teleported out and moved through the city, finding the two Elders already in the third ring. "Hey," she greeted from a side alley.

"What's so important?" Pierce asked. "I was just about to make a killing betting against the Meadow."

Ilea was stunned for a full two seconds. "Okay. Look. I can't even start to comprehend the idiocy of that statement. You two have time? A spy has asked to join my ranks and I'm obviously a little skeptical."

"Kill him and be done with it," Pierce said.

"We have time," Verena said.

"Sure, guess I'll get him to talk," Pierce mused with a smirk, a bit of lightning flowing through her eyes.

Ilea squinted her eyes at her before she teleported the three of them through the city and finally into Wayland's apartment. If that really was his name.

He raised his glass to the two newcomers and downed it, a magical shield forming in front of him when a blast of lightning slammed into it.

"Wayland! You sack of shit!" Pierce exclaimed as she charged up.

Ilea stopped her with space manipulation. "Please, Pierce?"

The woman struggled against it before she sighed, her magic dissipating. "I thought you were dead! Again."

The spy shrugged, not a word of apology. "It's good to see you."

"Piece of shit. He's the spy? Him!?" Pierce asked.

Ilea glanced at Verena.

"I don't know who he is," the woman said.

Pierce rolled her eyes. "I told you about him."

"I don't... always listen when you talk," Verena said.

"He's the fucking spy master of Nipha is who he is, and a fucking liar!" Pierce shouted.

Ilea noted the subtle sound magic that had spread through the room. Nobody outside seemed to notice the shouting.

"Was. Was the spy master of Nipha, though for the records, the position never existed," Wayland said. "What I told you, I said to protect you."

"I hardly need protection from the bloody fucking crown," Pierce snapped.

"Not anymore, no," he admitted.

The woman crossed her arms and looked at the wall. "Could've fucking sent a letter."

"You would've looked for me," Wayland said. "And you would've gotten us both killed."

"So what," Pierce said.

The words made him laugh.

Ilea wasn't sure as to their relationship. She assumed they had a thing a long time ago. A past lover?

The man put down his glass and walked to the Elder. He raised his hand and patted her head, himself just a little taller.

*Oh, bad move*, Ilea thought but against her expectations, Pierce just stood there and didn't say a word.

"You've grown. I'm proud of you," Wayland said and hugged her.

Ilea glanced at Verena with a confused look when Pierce sobbed into his shoulder, the flame Berserker looking on with wide eyes, a light shrug suggesting she was just as confused. "We can leave you two be. You seem to need some time."

"It's alright," Wayland said and gently moved the Elder forward. He wiped at her tears and laughed when she slapped his hands away with surges of lightning.

Powerful lightning too.

"No need to cry, little Dragon," he mused as he dodged another strike. His voice didn't sound mocking, genuine warmth in it despite the ridiculous choice of words.

*Shadow magic, and no injuries*. Ilea thought and checked with veteran. "Had me fooled. Three hundred on the dot. Or is that another hiding spell."

He smiled. "I haven't figured out a way to get around the third tier of Veteran. But who knows, that might be a lie too."

*Spirits seem up too*, she thought. *Good that I brought the only person from Nipha I could think of.*