



# Information

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# Azarith Healer

by [Rhaegar](#)

Original STUB  [LitRPG Female Lead Action](#)  
[Adventure Fantasy 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): [Book Two - Ebook/Kindle Unlimited](#)

Audio: [Book Two - Audio](#) narrated by Andrea Parsneau

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 152 An Inn and a Boy

## Chapter 152 An Inn and a Boy

It took another half hour to find a road in the forest, a small one that didn't look to be in the best shape. Winter had recently passed which made it understandable but as little as Ilea understood of wagons, none would pass this road without a lot of difficulty. They followed the road for a while and came across a village soon after.

Ilea landed and summoned a hood. Looking towards the others, Weavy put up his black hood and covered most of his face again. The other demons would be hiding in the nearby forest.

“What happens when you fall asleep or unconscious?” Ilea asked, motioning to the demons clad in armor.

“The chance of that happening is very low...,” the mind weaver said but continued right after “The spell will hold for some time after I lose direct control. Some hours with these as I've become more familiar with them. In a couple weeks it will be a full night.”

Ilea nodded. “Then tell them to hide. You can come if you want to but if you'd rather stay out here that's fine as well.” the demons spread out into the forest with incredible speed as soon as she had stopped talking. Weavy didn't leave and so the three of them walked the last stretch towards the village.

An old withered sign read Fenhold. At least the village was big enough to put up a sign. The air was still a little cold, now that the suns were already setting. It wasn't an unreasonable time for a traveler to arrive in a village or

town. Smoke was rising from several of the buildings and Ilea heard her stomach grumble at the thought of hearty food. Perhaps a potato stew or a barley soup.

They walked through the muddy road until they came up on a small stone bridge leading over a nearly empty creek flowing through the forest. A man clad in leather armor not much unlike the one Ilea was wearing lazily sat on one side of the bridge, spear in hand and short sword sheathed. He noticed them entirely too late but sprang up when he did.

“Who goes there!” he shouted, his arms shaking a little as he pointed the spear towards them. Ilea casually walked up to him and stopped two meters before the man. It seemed he was much younger than she initially thought. She smiled though, realizing that he probably wasn’t much younger than herself.

“You should be careful towards whom you point your weapon.” Ilea said, having identified him as a level thirty warrior. Not much of a perceived threat but she herself had killed monsters and men much higher in level than her so she wouldn’t get careless. His eyes opened wide as he moved back the spear, nearly losing his grip on it in the process.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that. The monsters...,” he started but Ilea just held up a hand.

“It’s alright, we know. We’re looking for a warm meal and a bed. Ready to pay of course. Anything of that to have in your village?” she asked, waiting for his answer. Her voice seemed to have calmed him down considerably as he occasionally glanced towards the heavily armored Kyrian and the cloaked Weavy.

“I’m Harsh. We have that, yes. The pricas are high at da moment, winta been rough.” he said, now completely relaxed around the new people. Certainly trusts easily, Ilea thought and smiled. Maybe he too would find a hidden temple and lost class within someday.

“Thank you.” she said and motioned towards her companions.

“No worries madam. Always wanted to meet a noble.” he said and blushed but Ilea completely ignored the comment. A noble? The boy really hadn’t been around a lot it seemed. The three passed the bridge and entered the village. A bunch of houses built with stone and wood. A chicken ran across the street with a little girl following close behind, cursing like the best of them.

Ilea walked to the biggest building near the center of the village and as it usually was, there was a sign outside indicating it to be an inn of some sort. She moved to open the heavy door and stepped inside, holding it open for her companions who followed quickly. The cold harsh wind outside was immediately cut off and replaced by the hearty chatter of people and the warmth of a nearby fire. The smell of food was in the air and Ilea smiled as she closed her eyes, enjoying the haven as a shiver went through her.

‘I need a hearth in my place...,’ she thought and opened her eyes again. Some of the people looked at the newcomers but generally their entrance didn’t have much of an impact to the overall mood. There were around fifteen patrons, most of them armed. Three of them looked like soldiers, sporting the same crest on their gear. Ilea walked up to the counter, the wood creaking below as she saw through her Sphere that there were some rats working their way into a supply chest in the cellar, as did she see two people upstairs in the middle of some quite rough sex.

“Welcome travelers. More refugees coming from westwards?” the woman, apparently the inn keeper, asked them before she shouted behind her to hurry up with the food. Her stern look blossoming into a big smile immediately as she turned towards the new guests again. “I do hope you have silver.” she asked.

Ilea nodded and removed a couple coins from her pouch which held only silver. “Any free rooms still? Some food and ale as well, ale for two.” Ilea said as she put the money on the counter.

“There’s just one room left, the far right one.” the woman said as she took the coins and left a key on the counter.



Key in her pocket, Ilea walked to a free table and was quickly joined by her companions. She had chosen a table close to the fire and enjoyed watching the dancing flames.

Food and drink arrived soon after, nothing special but filling and hot. Thinking of, Ilea smiled at the two men walking down the stairs and seating themselves on a table to get some food as well, one of them with a little more difficulty.

“So who are the people we’re meeting?” Kyrian asked, breaking the silence. Weavy perched up, obviously interested in the place he’d likely be staying at.

“Bunch of renegades. Their magic is, well frowned upon by most I’d assume.” she said. “But you’ll see soon enough. I don’t think we’re more than a day or two of traveling away if we continue at the same speed.” Kyrian nodded at that and got up.

“I’ll sleep for two or three hours. We can leave again afterwards.” he said. Ilea nodded his way and lifted her mug. She’d join him in an hour or two.

“You plan on sleeping?” she asked the demon next to her. Luckily his robes, boots and hood were placed well enough to make it hard to see any specific features.

“No.” came the short reply.

“Don’t murder anything here.” Ilea said and pointed a finger towards him.

“What do you think of me?” the demon asked in a completely fake shocked tone. Touching the wood with his bandaged hands, he sent a curious emotion towards her.

“You don’t have any wood there do you?” Ilea asked after a while but he chose not to reply.

“The fuck are you talking to yourself for?” a drunk man said towards Ilea, three of his friends laughing. “Fucking freak!” The man didn’t bring out

another word as he suddenly hit the table.

The whole room quieted down quickly as the man slowly slid off the table and fell down. Ilea took another sip of her ale. “Did you kill him?” she asked the demon who was still just touching the table.

“No.”

“He’s alive guys, calm down.” Ilea said and lifted her mug. “Round on me.”

Someone cheered for the round but the guy’s friends didn’t seem too pleased with the situation. Ilea’s gaze turned cold as she looked at their stares as they dragged the man out.

A little while later a young man came up to them, obviously nervous as he constantly brushed away the hair on his face. “Ehm... Miss...,” he stammered out. “That... that was mind, mind magic?” he asked her.

“Ask him about that, not me.” Ilea said and motioned to her companion.

“I’ll be in bed as well, just be somewhere around when we leave.” Ilea said and got up, walking past the nervous boy who looked towards her and then to the cloaked demon sitting on the table. “Good luck.” she said in passing.

Kyrian was fast asleep already, of course still wearing most of his armor. ‘I could just stab you in the face mate...’ she thought and shook her head. With his level and defenses it’d probably be hard to get a knife through that skull of his but still. Why sleep in armor if your head is exposed like that?

She herself switched her clothes into a night gown and slipped under the covers. The bed was surprisingly big enough for her not to be bothered by his armor and the spikes coming out of it. At least the man had moved some of the spikes to not damage the bed, considerate as he was. A couple minutes later, Ilea too was asleep.

A light tapping on her shoulder made her wake up. Ilea sleepily turned around and saw a man clad in heavy and spiked armor carefully look at her. His gray eyes locked with hers as he smiled. "I didn't want to wake you up but you said a couple hours was fine."

"It is fine." she said as she slowly sat up on the side of the bed. A moment later her nightgown was replaced by nothing. The man stared for a couple seconds before suddenly jerking away. Ilea chuckled and walked up to him, touching his armor before she pushed him backwards and to the wall. "Maybe a little longer?" she asked with the cutest voice she could conjure up. Kyrian now looked at her and nodded a little. The intimidated man turned into something entirely different in the following half hour, as Ilea was smashed into the bed with a previously unexperienced vigor.

"That was fun." Kyrian said, lying next to her on the bed. Ilea could only produce a little sigh. It really had been fun. She quickly used her Hunter Recovery to check for any developments in her nether region but found nothing wrong with it. She did need to clean up though.

"I'll be right back, wait outside, I'll get Weavy as well." she said and blinked outside, still naked. The creek was only a minute away so she walked. The water was cold on her but she didn't mind as she watched the moon reflect off the surface.

Stepping out of the water, she summoned her leather armor and stretched her arms a little. She smiled, remembering Kyrian's stupid grin from before. 'Now, to find out little mind mage.' she thought and walked back to the inn. He wasn't inside but she picked up his scent easily enough. It lead her towards a simple house at the edge of the village. Behind she found them.

Weavy and the boy from before, with the boy holding his hands towards Weavy, a rune glowing on his forehead.

"Hey you two." Ilea said from the side and the boy immediately jerked towards her. She felt a small tug on her mind and then a push but it was nothing compared to Eve or Weavy. "Ah, found your teacher have you." Ilea stated.

“He is weak.” Weavy said to her and with the boy’s reaction, to him as well.

“Yea of course he is, never had a teacher it seems. You want to take him in?” she asked. “I’m sure having a human boy and disciple will be a good first impression on your new friends.”

The demon looked towards her and then towards the boy. “He does not know what I am.” he said.

“Well then show him.” Ilea said. “Boy. What’s your name?”

“Ein m... miss.” the boy said. He knew he had attacked her and it seemed he was in a bit of a turmoil about how exactly he felt about that.

“Ein, eh heard worse. Boy you are. Do you want to go with your teacher. He’s not a human and you’ll have to leave behind your life here in the village. Possibly forever.” Ilea said.

“I don’t have anything here. I don’t care what my teacher is.” the boy said, not a single stammer in his voice.

“Good, then remove the hood.” Ilea said and Weavy did just so. The boy’s expression turned from determined to scared, to unsure and right back to determined before he bowed in front of his new master.

“Good, you sold your soul now and your first three children.” Ilea joked but the boy looked at her frightened and then back to his master.

“Your soul is yours but the children are mine.” Weavy said in a completely serious tone. “They taste nice when they’re fresh.” Weavy said, looking towards Ilea who just put up her hands in defense.

“Hey, that one’s between you two.” she just said. “Now come, we’re leaving. Got anything you wanna take with you?” she asked and the boy shook his head, apparently done with this place.

“Come then.” she said, holding out her hand as her wings spread behind her, reflecting the light of the moon. The boy hesitantly got closer and grabbed her hand. Weavy grabbed her other arm before they flew upwards.

Kyrian saw them a moment later and joined, not even asking about the new companion they had made. The black haired scrawny boy named Ein.

The flight was mostly uneventful after that. The suns rose high and the weather was much warmer than anything Ilea had experienced in the past four months. They rushed over forests and lakes, over hills and marshes before they finally saw the mountain. “Karth.” Ilea said as they came closer. Of course she knew they weren’t anywhere near close to it but they had found their orientation. She chose to go directly to the necromancers and visit Riverwatch afterwards. There was no massive smoke coming from the general direction so she didn’t deem it a higher priority.

“We’re getting far into the west.” Kyrian commented.

“First time for you?” Ilea asked and he answered with an affirming grunt.

“I’m excited to see it all.” he said after a while. Both Ein and Weavy were training according to Ilea’s growing headache. A quick appliance of her healing magic helped out immediately.

“Me too.” she said and smiled. She had barely even started exploring in these lands. A lot of time had passed and she’d grown a lot stronger but still Elos just seemed so incredibly vast to her. Perhaps it was because of the absence of planes and the internet. Even though she didn’t travel much in her time on Earth, she still felt like the world had little adventure to offer. Of course there were many places that held adventures and a lot of unexplored nature left but nothing compared to the dangers and excitement of these magical lands.

Plus she was probably faster than a plane now, not that she knew how to exactly measure that. And she had a suspicion that at least the Taleen had some way of communicating over very long distances, even with Trian’s explanation of how difficult that was.

“We better move the last couple hours on foot, not to arouse any suspicion.” Ilea said, thinking more of her friends than herself. Suspicion was usually

connected to something dangerous. Nine times out of ten that was a good thing for her though.

It took them the better part of the day to run through the thick forest surrounding Karth. Monsters and animals were ignored, most of them fleeing long before the group even got close enough. They stopped near the Calys mine, the suns setting already as they neared the entrance.

It didn't look like the city was very interested in the dungeon yet. They'd act as soon as monsters spilled out but Ilea had killed the Alpha and thus the boss of the dungeon. It would probably take a while for it to recover and the undead wouldn't spill out as they're simply a guard to the order hiding behind.

“Why were there no monsters in the forest? The elders always said not to go into the forests because of all the monsters.” Ein said.

“It's because we are the monsters.” Ilea said and felt incredibly proud of her delivery. Kyrian just shook his head quietly as she basked in the boy's admiration. ‘God damn I'm cool.’ she thought and winked towards Kyrian who just chuckled.

“You damn idiot.” he muttered and followed her into the dungeon. There were even fewer hounds around this time, fleeing just as they had before Ilea had gone to the Hand. The undead looked at her but didn't attack. They had a certain fixation for Weavy though but his magic turned them away.

“What a peculiar presence...,” the demon said as he looked after a wandering undead. “Are these the friends you spoke of?” he asked.

“On one level with you you mean?” Ilea replied as they entered the Alpha's cave. “No, they're further down.

The group leapt down, Ilea's wings softening the fall. “Now you guys just let me talk alright.”

# Chapter 153 Friends

## Chapter 153 Friends

Ilea walked two steps before Walter showed up, black eyes staring into them as magic pulsed around him. Metal swirled around Kyrian as magic gathered around Weavy as well. Ilea stepped closer to Walter and held up her hands as she smiled.

“Walter man, it’s me.” she said.

“Demon.” the man grumbled and looked between Weavy and Ilea.

“Ah yes him, he’s alright don’t worry. Quite unlike the fucker we took out together.” Ilea said and clapped her hands together. The man seemed to finally calm down as the black in his eyes turned back to white. Kyrian and Weavy calmed down as well and Ein stepped back out from behind his master too.

“God what did you do this time.” Walter said after a while and then just shook his head. “Don’t tell me you brought this demon catastrophe upon us.” he asked, a tired look on his face.

“Ah no, I know the guy who did it though but he’s still in the demon realm. Most of it is cleaned up though.” Ilea said and went and hugged the man who was just standing there stunned. Indra and Harthome showed up a moment later, followed by Celene and Lucia.

Ilea let go of the man and walked a couple steps back before she motioned to her team. “You guys know me, I’m a member of the Hand now by the way. That’s Kyrian, he’s in my team. That’s Weavy, he’s a mind weaver slash demon we found in the demon realm. That kid there is a mind mage we found in a village a while away, he’s Weavy’s apprentice.” she blabbered out before Kyrian stopped her with a hand to her shoulder.

“You guys know Ilea. We’re all friends so don’t worry about your magic or hideout. We come with a request. One that might interest you as much as us.” the man said and walked closer to Walter. “I’m Kyrian, metal and curse mage.” he held out his hand and watched the other man who just shook his head.

“Next time she’s here she’s gonna bring a bloody friendly Basilisk with her...” Walter said and shook his head as he shook Kyrian’s hand. A gesture both of them knew thanks to Ilea. It was more common in Lys but neither of them were from there.

“That would be cool wouldn’t it.” Ilea said, stepping up before she greeted everybody else.

“You seem to know a whole lot about this demon infestation, why don’t we discuss everything over a pint of ale.” Walter suggested and Ilea smiled a broad smile.

“That does sound like a good idea.” she said and walked towards the common room. The Vultures were a little apprehensive of the demon and the boy but both Kyrian and Ilea insisted it was alright.

“You want him to stay here?” Walter asked.



“Why not? You could learn a lot from each other.” Ilea said, drinking a sip of her ale. Harthome and Celene were engaged in a conversation with Weavy, the woman was surprisingly alright talking to a demon considering the experience she had summoning one of them.

“That we could but Ilea. That thing is nearly at level two hundred, it’d be dangerous to keep him around here.”

“He’s called Weavy and maybe you should talk to him first before you dismiss him like that. As far as I thought the Vultures Brotherhood wasn’t discriminating in magic and heritage, or was I wrong?” she asked.

The man grumbled and got up before he went and grabbed some food. “This is going to be a long night.” he said and sighed. “I’m too old for all this excitement and change.” he said but couldn’t help and smile.

“Demon.” Walter said as he put the food down. “Come, I have to talk to you.” Weavy looked at him and nodded before he got up and excused himself from the conversation. Celene gave Walter an annoyed look as she bit her lip, looking towards the demon. Ilea shook her head. Well at least Weavy didn’t seem like the worst guy. If he was a guy at all.

“Do you not hate the guy, with what has happened?” Lucia asked Celene but the woman just looked back confused.

“Do you hate all men because one of them did something bad to you?” she asked.

“Some people do.” Ilea said as she started eating. “And men don’t all look the same.”

“He doesn’t look the same as the one I summoned. That one was more blue. And his eyes were less kind.” she said. Ilea decided not to comment on the kindness of Weavy’s black holes.

‘Do what makes you oh so happy.’ she thought and shrugged.

“You’re with the Hand now, you did it! Tell us all about it.” Celene moved a table over to join Ilea and Kyrian. She gave the man a sideways glance and whispered to Ilea. “You two a thing?”

Ilea smiled and so did Celene. “Haha, good on you. He seems strong enough to take you.”

“We’ll see about that.” Ilea said. Kyrian remained quiet but his eyes didn’t betray the fact that he was listening.

“Yea tell us. What mighty beasts have you fought.” Harthome joined them as did the rest of the Vultures. Indra had started talking to the village boy at some point and Mr. Bones wasn’t anywhere to be found as was most often the case it seemed. The initiates had joined an hour later as well, preparing more food for everyone as Walter and Weavy were still talking somewhere else.

“That Sand fish was really hard to catch.” Ilea said and nodded, thinking back on it.

“Carrying it was harder.” Kyrian supplied as a couple metal spheres floated around, forming a miniature version of the support beams he had used to carry it. Ilea joined in as the monster came into existence in ashen form, floating into the support beams.

“You’re a creator?!” Lucia exclaimed before she took Ilea’s hands. “That is amazing, stay on that path my friend, you have to!” she said.

“I don’t plan to ditch the skills, don’t worry about it.” Ilea said and smiled, a little overwhelmed by the excitement around her.

“We hunted down a Queen Harpy as well. That all wasn’t much compared to the demon invasion though.” Kyrian took over as he pushed a little more food towards Ilea who gladly accepted the excuse to stop talking for a while.

“I’d love to see that whale or squid.” Harthome said. “As would most everyone in this cave.”

“I doubt it’s still around. The empire and the Hand would’ve been very interested in their corpses.” Kyrian said, dashing the man’s hopes.

“I was in one of them.” Ilea said with her mouth full.

“Eww, you’re fucking gross.” Celene said.

“Says the chick who’s into demons.” Ilea retorted and got a piece of meat thrown in her face. Harthome stopped the two before it got more out of hand. Neither seemed actually angry.

“Now where the hell are those two?” Lucia said after a while, getting up and going to look for them.

They returned ten minutes later with Weavy and Walter deep in conversation, literally dragged back into the common room by Lucia.

“Well I guess that’s a good sign.” Ilea said to Kyrian who just watched on in silence.

“It is indeed.” Harthome said. Walter stopped talking to Weavy a moment later and looked at all the others.

“Yea he’s gonna stay if everyone’s fine with it. As is the boy.” he said and got a couple cheers. None of the others were against the demon, some even very much for his addition to the Vultures.

“Can’t say I’m very surprised.” Walter said as he joined Ilea who was still eating.

“At the level of my food consumption?” she asked and swallowed.

“That as well of course, very impressive. No I mean the demon of course.” he said and sighed. “His magical knowledge surpasses mine in many fields. His approach is incredible, dare I say revolutionary. Incredibly archaic in other things, it’s refreshing to say the least. Indra will be pleased as well, as will Neeto Bones.” he relaxed in his chair and took a sip from his drink.

“I don’t think you’ll be staying long are you?” he asked after a moment of silence.

“No, me and Kyrian are gonna leave again tomorrow. Riverwatch and then back to Ravenhall.” she answered. “If you need anything let me know, gold, weapons, books.”

“We’re quite fine. Your new demonic addition will add more than enough for now. The same offer is there for you of course.” the man said.

“I can’t think of anything. Were the elven corpses useful?” she asked.

“Very, their physiology is incredible. Though they have expired by now sadly.” he said before Ilea dumped the rest of her elven corpses. She had been carrying them for a long time now and hadn’t found a use for them so far.

“How? Where?” Walter asked as he got up quickly and shouted for Indra who rushed towards them immediately. “Stop just dumping them in here.” Walter said as they moved the corpses away.

“You had them with you all this time?” Kyrian asked. “Why give them out now?”

“Decluttering, it’s the new me.” Ilea said as she got up and walked to the bar. “And now we have access to the bar.” she said, knowing full well that Walter was still in earshot. She could practically feel his teeth grind as she went and stored some of his self made ale in her necklace. It was probably a low price considering the elven corpses but she did love his ale.

She grabbed something else as well and went back to Kyrian, putting the bottle on the table. “Here try this.” she said as he sceptically opened the cork and smelled it.

“This seems nice.” he said as Ilea opened another one of the bottles and smelled it. Trying it she was sure there was no alcohol in it.

“Yea you’re fine, it’s like a lemonade but with honey.” she said and took a sip. It felt like energy flowed right down into her stomach. There was definitely more than just honey and lemons in this beverage.

“Come on, how are you still mad.” Ilea asked.

“You drank all my stamina potions. Ilea it’s... ah fuck it. I still owe you even after all this.” Walter said as he shook his head. “Next time maybe announce yourself though.” he said.

“How, you don’t have E-Mail.” she said.

“What the hell is E-Mail?” the man asked. “Another one of your weird comments from your home land? Are you sure you’re not a demon as well?”

“She might well be.” Kyrian said as he looked at her from the side. The three of them were alone in the common room at this time as the others had already left to either talk to the boy or Weavy and show them around their new home.

“Ah, so you truly are not from here. Interesting.” Walter said as he cleaned one of his glasses.

“No I’m not. But I was neither special nor powerful where I’m from. Became a god damn miracle here though.” she said as she sat down on a

stool.

“You sure did.” Walter said as he chuckled and looked understanding eyes with Kyrian.

“Don’t look at him Kyrian, I can feel your rebellion rise.” she said. The man chuckled and joined her as Walter shook his head again.

“You two are truly lost. Remember though that you’ll always have a place here Ilea. As in extension do you Kyrian.”

“Thank you Walter. I do appreciate it.” Ilea said as she got up.

“Are you staying the night?” he asked.

“I think we’d rather check out Riverwatch at this point. Their beds are nicer, no offense.” she said and looked towards Kyrian with a questioning gaze.

“I’m alright with Riverwatch, here is fine too.” the man said.

“None taken. The luxuries aren’t abundant here but I still love the place.” Walter said.

“Thank you for taking in Weavy as well. I don’t know what would’ve happened to him if he had stayed alone.” Ilea said as she shook the man’s hand.

“Nonsense, your decision to bring him here was sound. He fits perfectly, even if I didn’t realize as much at the start. I just hope he can control those demons now running around our corridors.

“Build cages then.” Ilea said and smiled.

“Maybe we will. Perhaps your metal mage friend could help us out on this?” Walter asked as he looked towards Kyrian.

“I can’t bend metal not bonded with myself.” the man said but Ilea held up her hand.

“I can.” she grinned and watched Walter close his eyes. “Told you I’m a miracle.”

Walter relaxed a little when he realized Ilea just literally bent the metal with her strength alone. The demons would find it quite a little harder to get out than she would. The cages were rudimentary at best but it would do the job of keeping in the demon spawn for a couple hours in an emergency should the situation require it.

“Listen to them and don’t do anything stupid. If I come back here and everyone’s dead or gone I’ll make you solely responsible. Understood?” Ilea asked the demon who just stood there and took in her lecture. “And don’t get manipulated into doing things you don’t want to. You’re a strong independent demon who needs no demon lord alright?” she went on and then touched Weavy’s shoulder.

“I understand Ilea. Thank you for working together with me and for bringing me here.” the demon said before she hugged him.

“I’ll come visit alright?” she said and let go. “Look at you, two hundred years old and you’re growing up so fast.”

The two of them said their goodbyes to everybody and were soon back in the caves of the Calys Mines where so long ago Ilea had fled, together with some adventurers from Riverwatch, from the clutches of an elf.

“Lots of talking today.” Aki said after a while of walking.

“Sorry about that.” Ilea replied and they continued on in silence.

It was raining outside as they stepped out of the cave, Ilea putting up her hood to shield herself against the water. Her wings spread as she watched metal spheres land in Kyrian’s hands. The two of them were airborne a moment later and bound for Riverwatch. The first city Ilea had found in this world.

The flight took a little over an hour and they landed a couple hundred meters away from the city, still hidden by the tree line. Walking out from the forest, they found only some few travelers walking towards the western gate, all of them looked like hunters or adventurers.

“Occupation and reason to be here?” the guard asked, completely unimpressed with their higher level and gear.

“Mercenaries. I’m here to buy stuff and visit a friend.” Ilea said.

“The fee to enter is ten copper if you don’t have a permit already.” the guard said and took the money before he let them inside.

Good thing she could ignore the fee the first time she had come here. Otherwise she would’ve already been stuck. Perhaps she could’ve just blinked inside, she did already have that skill back then.

“Hey guard, do you know Dale? He was a captain here around half a year ago.” she asked.

“I know four Dales, one of them is in fact a captain. How much is that information worth to you?”

“Ah fuck off.” Ilea said and walked off. She’d start at his guard station, perhaps he was still at the same one.



“He’s out hunting with some of the recruits. I can let you know where exactly. Ilea was it?” the man asked, remembering her. Ilea had to admit that she had no recollection of ever meeting the man but he did help them out which was nice. They flew eastwards, towards the supposed goblin infestation in a small settlement that had stood abandoned for several decades.

The rain was pouring but Ilea could make out the smell of a burning fire. Sure enough they came upon a dilapidated house near the settlement with a fire burning inside. Ilea stepped in without warning and blocked the sword coming her way with her hand. The spear one of the people threw towards her was stopped by her Veil without doing any damage. Dale looked towards her and prepared to fight before she took down her hood.

“Damn weather. Fucking wet I swear.” Ilea said and saw the expression on Dale’s face turn to relief.

“Ilea can you still heal? One of my men is dying.” Dale said and she nodded immediately.

“Where.”

Dale pointed down some stairs and Ilea rushed in, blinking twice and seeing the men in the deep cellar a moment later with her Sphere.

“I’m a healer!” she shouted and rushed into the room, finding the man in question right after. He was weak, had lost a lot of blood from several small wounds inflicted by small weapons. Worst of all he was poisoned. Whatever the goblins had used, if it was the goblins, it stopped him from recovering.

The two men standing nearby were a little overwhelmed with the situation and just watched on as Ilea used her healing skill to care for the man.

Dale and some of his men rushed in a moment later, joining her side as they watched her work. Kyrian stepped up as well.

“Poison.” he said as a small sphere of metal floated over the man, splintering into dozens of needles that floated down towards his skin. Some of the recruits wanted to interfere but Dale stopped them. The needles dug into the man’s skin and Ilea watched as the poison was expertly removed from the wounds. No, it wasn’t removed. It was destroyed.

“Are you cursing the poison? What the hell...,” Ilea said to him but continued to heal.

“I am.” Kyrian said and they continued for three more minutes until the man was perfectly healthy again. Likely exhausted as he was still asleep but he looked much better.

“Thank god you came. Damn goblins. Why do I always underestimate the little buggers?”

# Chapter 154 How much we grow

## Chapter 154 How much we grow

“I’ve never fought them really.” Ilea said as she got up again from her crouched position.

“They’re nasty, evil and breed like nothing else I’ve seen. Good thing the usual monsters around here tear them to shreds. As do we.” Dale said and sighed before he leaned on the wall of the underground cellar. Looking around, Ilea realized it must’ve once been a crypt.

“I guess they are, caught you unawares it seems?” she asked.

“They did, some of them are higher leveled than expected. It’s mostly the bad weather though, spotting traps is harder like this and they’re small.” Dale said and then looked at her. “I didn’t even greet you yet. It’s been a while Ilea. You’ve well changed as expected.” he said and sent a meaningful look towards Kyrian.

Most of the soldiers were in the crypt now, somewhat apprehensive of the newcomers but seeing that their captain knew at least one of them made them ease up a little bit.

“A lot has happened, joined the Hand and fought some demons. What about you? I can see you’ve been taking the training seriously.” Ilea asked after she had identified him to be at level 121, considerably higher than last time they had met.

“And every week brings more reason to do so. First the elves and now the demons. I heard rumors about the Hand being involved in all of it, I do hope you’re still on our side.” he said but didn’t seem to put a lot of faith in such rumors considering the casual way he talked about it.

“The Hand was involved but we cleaned it up again, at least in Ravenhall, at the core. I’m sure it’s gonna take a while to kill all the remaining demons but in time it’ll clear up.” Ilea said and looked upwards, hearing shouts from the room above.

“Goblins?” Kyrian asked and Ilea shrugged.

“Let’s go check. Or do you want to let the recruits deal with it?” Ilea asked as she looked around, finding the eyes of young soldiers staring back at her.

“Today is not the day for that, I’m not going to lose anybody here. Let’s finish them.” Dale said and unsheathed his sword, an aura of power forming around him. Ilea nodded and blinked upwards twice to find herself in the room with four soldiers. There were a couple small green creatures, most of them naked and armed with crude weapons running around and attacking the taller soldiers who used their weapons to keep the monsters at bay.

Ilea kicked one of the creatures and blinked to one of the soldiers who was getting cornered by two of the goblins. She grabbed their heads and smashed them together, creating a sickening crunch of bone as blood splattered on her veil and the soldier before her. Another blink and a kick killed another goblin before the remaining ones scrambled to flee.

“Any of you hurt?” Ilea asked as she looked at the fleeing goblins. The creatures were between level five and twenty. Weak to be sure but she had seen the tactics they employed. They weren’t stupid, not something as easily dealt with as a Drake or demon spawn. Dale rushed out into the room at that moment, sword in hand and looking around to find a couple dead goblins and Ilea looking out into the rain.

“You killed them already?” he asked and sheathed his sword. “Still like to put up a show don’t you?” he asked and shook his head.

Ilea didn't reply. It was less about the show and more about simply using her abilities but Dale wasn't like her in that regards. The man had something to protect and a lot to lose. A more careful approach was reasonable for him, plus not everybody loved fighting as much as she did.

"Someone's coming." Ilea said as she watched a man approach through her Sphere. Kyrian had joined them as well by that point. They all looked towards the entrance when a warrior clad in full plate armor entered and looked around, mostly ignoring the people and focusing on the goblins. He walked up to one of the corpses and stabbed his sword into its chest.

"They're quite dead mister." Ilea said but the man simply continued to do the same thing to each goblin before he looked up.

"Where did they go?" he asked and Ilea pointed the way.

"I see." the man said and left back into the rain, towards the indicated direction.

"Hunting goblins I guess." Ilea said and shrugged.

"Yea, seen him around. He's capable enough but there won't be any more goblins here for us to train the recruits anymore." Dale said.

"Back to Riverwatch then?" Ilea asked.

"We're going to venture further north tomorrow. For now we'll stay here. For some of them it's the first time out in the wild." the man explained and sat down next to the fire. "You and you," he pointed to two guards who stood at attention immediately. "Clean out the corpses and the blood."

The men confirmed their orders and went about their business as Ilea joined Dale at the fire. Kyrian leaned on one of the walls and looked towards the rain. The other guards in training warmed themselves on the fire or stayed down below.

"Expedition tour for the new trainees. Isn't the experience somewhat bad if you're with them?" Ilea asked as she summoned a meal. She didn't deem

the people around her dangerous enough to do anything stupid with the information on her necklace. The stares were getting a little annoying though, as if she was some rare breed animal. Then again if the guard was anywhere close to the military on earth these guys probably haven't seen a woman up close in weeks.

“Levels aren't everything Ilea. I forget that you're pretty new to all this yourself. At least your growth is ridiculous. Surviving in the wild, knowing what beast to approach and what not to. Learning to track and finding abilities you're talented in. This is a good way to start. You can always go out and kill monsters, being as prepared as possible is key.” the man explained and she had to agree. If she didn't have her healing and blink abilities, she'd be dead fifty times over. Good thing she got lucky with her class.

“Agreed.” she simply said before she started eating in silence. The recruits were looking at her still and Dale seemed to be mulling over something.

“Guys, I get that I'm really really nice to look at but stop staring or your heads will be the next thing to be scraped off those walls.” Ilea said with a mouth full of food. They all looked away rather quickly, some of them changing their focus to Kyrian instead.

“You've fought demons then? Only a few have reached this far west but I wasn't involved in any of the encounters. They sounded terrible.” Dale said. “We lost ten guards two weeks ago. Took a group of adventurers and guards four hours to hunt and kill the responsible monster. Above level two hundred. And we had to burn the corpses.”

Ilea swallowed. “I'm sorry.” she simply said and waited for a while before continuing to eat.

“We lost many as well.” Kyrian said from the side. Dale looked downwards a little before he chuckled.

“Crazy world isn't it?” he asked. “Elves and demons, the past year has been rather turbulent around here. I wish we could just stick to wolves and goblins.”

Ilea didn't say anything. She didn't agree with the man of course but seeing how much they lost she understood. Having lived the past year in this exciting and dangerous world made her unable to return to the boring and safe place she grew up in. Would she have realized that something like a professional kick-boxing career was what she truly wanted? Probably not. She lacked the talent as well and the means to focus on the sport enough.

One unlucky fight could've ended her aspirations as well. Here she could heal even a lost head when she took her skill descriptions seriously.

"You came here just to see me?" Dale asked after a while.

"We had something to do nearby. Thought I'd check in." Ilea said and finished her meal, making the plate vanish into her inventory again. Dale nodded and got a ration from a nearby pack.

"I hope you get a break for a while, with the elves and demons I mean." Ilea said.

"Me too. The refugees are still coming from the west and soon they'll come from the east as well. The cases of murder and theft have gone up and we barely have enough cells to keep all the people we catch. It's not going well, I tell you." the man said.

"Didn't a lot of people leave after the elven attack. There must be plenty of space in the city." Ilea said.

"Space? Yes, there's plenty of space for people to hide. For people to form gangs and try to take over the bloody city." the last words were spoken in a hiss.

"And there's nothing you guys can do about that?" Ilea asked seriously.

"We tried. Looking for the leaders but every time we got close, we simply lost more people. There's some high levelled assassin or rogue class involved I'm sure. We simply don't have the resources to deal with something like that. We train to fight monsters and keep the peace with

citizens and normal adventurers, not trained murderers.” Dale spat. Power flowed around him.

“You must have some adventurers who can deal with that? What about all the strong people I saw when the elves were around? You managed to defend against them, I doubt a human as strong as that would target Riverwatch.” Ilea said.

“We're an independent city Ilea. It's the exact place someone like that would target. Though I agree, he or she is likely weaker but the people you saw weren't from here. You remember the Hand was around as well when the elves were here.” he explained and smiled at her.

Ilea sighed. “Yea alright, I can weed them out and bring them to you. Or outright murder them if that seems like the best option.” she said. “Alright with you?” she asked towards her companion who shrugged.

“Why not. I assume we get paid?” he asked.

“I didn't intend to ask for payment. I'll invite you to a nice dinner if you join me.” Ilea said and smiled. Kyrian nodded two seconds later.

“Are you sure you're up for something like that?” Dale asked. He had been there after all, when Ilea had her first experience of a battle involving humans as the enemy. “And we could certainly pay you.”

“Don't worry about either. What info do you have on them? We can leave right now.” Ilea said.

“We don't have a name and most that likely got close enough were taken out by something that burned their insides, others simply had their throat cut. Likely they're stationed in the northern part of the city, where the rebuilding from the elven attacks hasn't been finished yet. They're organized enough and some of the guards already avoid that territory. It's not gonna be long before half of us are paid by them.” he said and shook his head.

“Alright, northern part it is. I'll do it my way Dale and I don't want to hear shit from you afterwards. If someone attacks me not clad in your guard



outfit, I won't guarantee their safety.” Ilea said.

“Don't worry about it. There's no empire here. I have enough influence to keep this quiet.” he said and looked towards the recruits. “If any of you go missing suddenly I'll personally hunt you down.” he said offhandedly.

“Aight, we'll be leaving then.” Ilea said and put up her hood. Kyrian pushed off the wall as metal spheres floated out from behind him. “I'll find you in the wild.” Ilea said as her wings spread to raised eyebrows from Dale and a smile.

Blinking outside, she flew upwards into the rain, followed by her companion. It seemed the rogue in Riverwatch was a little unlucky that she had made friends with Dale of the Guards and not the local representative of the thief's guild, if such a thing even existed. 'Who am I kidding, of course it does.' Ilea thought and smiled as they rushed towards the city with terrifying speed.

Dale breathed out as he noticed the ration he had put on the fire was burning. Getting it out quickly, he looked at it and sighed. This wasn't like him at all. Wasting food was not a good thing to teach his recruits. Seeing Ilea was a little much for him to take after the goblin disaster. She had bloody wings. And her companion looked positively murderous. He smiled, thinking that perhaps his sleepless nights would finally have an end, at least for a little while.

“Why are the goblins not cleaned up yet? I think I remember giving orders.” he said a moment later, calming himself down. He couldn't quite

wipe the smile off his face. Helping people all the time had paid off again, he thought as he remembered the weak healer he had found in the forest near a rogue adventurer convoy. The archers next to him had asked to take her out but he wanted to make sure. A healer so far away from the main group didn't make sense.

He got up and brushed off his armor. "Now get some sleep, three guards at the top, four hours per group." he said and walked down into the crypt, his hand steady and his breathing even.

Night had fallen as Ilea and Kyrian entered Riverwatch from the air. Rain was falling and the clouds were dark, barely any light making it through the thick veil of black. Two iron clad warriors landed, their black armor reflecting the lantern light coming from the street below.

"Now what exactly are we looking for...," Ilea said out loud, looking around.

"Want to lure them out?" Kyrian suggested.

"And how would you do that?" she asked, sitting down on the ledge.

"Perhaps a fair maiden such as yourself could pose as a virgin alone and scared in the city streets?" Aki suggested which got a snort from Ilea.

"You know they can use identify. Maybe if I still had the healer tag but an unidentifiable warrior posing as a target is a bit hard to pull off." she said.

“I think it’s the easiest way though. They avoid working in the open according to your guard friend and I don’t know if you want to start an investigation from scratch.” Kyrian said and Ilea had to agree.

“Hire someone then?” she suggested to which Kyrian shrugged.

“Maybe. If you’re willing to lose money on this mission.” the man said though he didn’t seem to judge one way or the other.

“I don’t mind really, I have more gold than I could spend in a decade.” Ilea said and summoned a gold coin which she moved around between her fingers, not a simple maneuver considering the gauntlets of her Juggernaut armor.

“Life is sometimes longer than ten years Ilea.” Kyrian said.

“I’ll get a savings account, alright? And it’s not like I’ll suddenly become jobless. I’m a healer, fighter, adventurer, scout and possibly aerial carriage. Plus I have a house, that has to count as an investment?” she asked seriously.

“Ilea I don’t know much about finance. I agree that with even just my set of skills it’s simple to make a living.” the man explained.

“You’re drifting off.” Aki casually interrupted.

“Do you have history in banking Aki?” Ilea asked, baiting the dagger but he didn’t bite to her disappointment.

“There’s a bunch of people in the house below us, maybe we can ask them. One of them is a good looking woman, at least it looks like that through my Sphere.” Ilea said.

“Wanna go knock?” the man asked and jumped down from the roof. Ilea followed a moment later and watched as he knocked. Kyrian had gotten considerably more social in the past months. She couldn’t have imagined him to walk up to a stranger’s door and initiate a conversation when she

remembered the man she had met in the training room of the Shadow's Hand.

The knock had a reaction inside immediately. Ilea smiled as she watched on from outside, explaining everything to Kyrian and Aki.

“The woman and her husband perhaps... well they woke up immediately and took charge. He is hiding the kids in the basement and the woman is helping an elderly man down. Dale wasn't exaggerating it seems, if this is how someone reacts to a knock on their door.” she said.

“It is the middle of the night, not a time you expect visitors.” Kyrian said.

“They're arguing now about what to do it seems. He wants her to hide as well it seems. The rain makes it hard to hear anything.” she said before Kyrian knocked on the door again, with the same intensity as before.

“I don't think it'll be an issue but they armed themselves. She's hiding a dagger in her sleeve and the guy put on chain mail, probably a mage that one.” Ilea said right before the door opened. Kyrian had stepped back far enough not to seem threatening, their armor didn't help much of course.

“Good evening. I apologize for the late visit and the disturbance to your home.” Kyrian said and waited for a moment. The man opened the door a little more, revealing the woman behind him. She really was quite beautiful, her hair a deep black and her eyes a shade of green. The man looked good as well Ilea thought, perhaps they should take him as the bait. They both looked somewhat thin, not malnourished but it was noticeable.

Identifying them she found the woman to be a warrior at level 39 and the man a mage at 68. ‘Perfect’ Ilea thought and smiled under her helmet.

“It is no issue. What do we owe the visit.” the man said yet neither let them inside nor opened the door any further.

“Well we are in a bit of a pinch you see. We were asked by the authorities of Riverwatch to look into a certain group in the north of the city.” Kyrian started and Ilea focused on every little change in the people's faces she

could notice. The man seemed to relax a little immediately, as did the woman. The latter less noticeably.

“And how can we be of assistance. We’re not involved in any way.” the man said, glancing at Ilea who was standing a step further back.

“We don’t believe that you are. Are the streets already dangerous enough for you to walk outside?” Kyrian asked. The man looked at him confused but the woman raised her eyebrows.

“I’m not su...,” he started but the woman interjected, pushing past him.

“No, neither of us will be coming with you to lure them out.” she said, her shaking voice betraying her resolve.

“I see.” Kyrian said and looked towards Ilea who had looked through the house with her Sphere in the meantime.

She looked at the woman and summoned a gold coin that she moved through her fingers again, plain for them to see. “Your stocks seem to be rather low, even with the hidden sack of potatoes behind the third cupboard in the kitchen. Additionally I doubt the coins below the floorboard upstairs are golden.” she said and watched both of them widen their eyes. “Six mouths are not easy to feed and I doubt the situation in the city will improve much in the coming months.” Ilea said, flipping the coin up into the air. Two sets of eyes followed the shiny coin. She had them already, money really was a powerful tool.

“Can we discuss quickly.” the woman asked and Ilea shrugged before they closed the door. It took barely ten seconds before it opened again and the man waved them inside.

# Chapter 155 A Night of Investigations

## Chapter 155 A Night of Investigations

“You want her to get kidnapped basically?” the man asked, nearly with a hiss.

“Dear it’s alright, we don’t really have a choice.” the woman said but Ilea interjected.

“I will leave a bit of food with you one way or the other. You do have a choice but we don’t have all the time in the world. She’ll go out, get kidnapped hopefully and we’ll see where we go from there. Her safety is guaranteed of course.” Ilea said.

“If they don’t kill her immediately... I’ve heard what they did to people who oppose them... what if you lose her?” he was obviously worried.

“You’re not opposing them, are you? I won’t lose her.” she said with somewhat faked confidence. If Eve could get away from her then the people here could have a way as well. It was unlikely but certainty wasn’t something she could guarantee.

“What if she gets hurt then?” the man insisted.

Ilea sighed and unsheathed Aki, making them tense up before she grabbed the man’s arm and cut him.

“What the h... aaah!” he exclaimed but she didn’t let go and look into his eyes as she healed the wound again in mere seconds. “aaa... wh.. what.” he said as the woman tried to get Ilea away as well, shouting for her to stop.

“You healed... “ he exclaimed as she let him go while he looked at his hand.

“Yes, I healed. And I will heal her, at least if they don’t take her head in a swing. Even then I might be able to prevent the attack. We’ll wait outside for two minutes, if you don’t come the deal is off. Dress in something cheap, look desperate.” she said and summoned enough food to last the family a couple days. “That’s yours one way or the other.” Ilea got up and walked outside, Kyrian followed right after.

“What do you think?” he asked her when they stood outside again.

Ilea looked at him with a smile. “I don’t have to think, I can see her getting ready.” she said as she held Aki into the rain to clean off the blood a little.

It had been a long day, another one after many. No sleep had found Michael for a week already, his magic fueling him to stay awake and aware of both his work and his surroundings. The small stack of documents and letters in front of him was nearly dealt with, the final thing before he’d get at least some rest.

‘Another three towns have fallen to the demons...’ he thought, marking them on the massive map of Lys behind him with floating pins of gold. His office was richly decorated, as decadent as his very image. Not many knew of his magic and the fact that the supposed decadency was what brought him the advantage on his territory, at least in his personal quarters.

A knock on the door made him perk up. It was his butler who entered a moment later. "Sir, you've been working for fifteen hours without eating or drinking. Would you like some refreshments?" he asked. Michael smiled and sat back.

"No, I'll get some rest soon. You should too. Be back again tomorrow morning." he said and the butler bowed and left the room again.

The remaining documents were worked through in the span of forty minutes and Michael finally sighed and stood up. He teleported next to his bed in the room over and switched his beautiful red and gold suit to a night suit, still partially woven with gold.

A small plate with egg, bacon, cheese and bread stood next to his bed on a table. Michael smiled as he walked closer. Taking the plate, he smelled the simple yet beautifully prepared food. "That old man, just c...", he stopped in his tracks as he looked at the shelf above the table.

The plate shattered on the ground, food spilling onto the expensive carpet as Michael stepped over the shards, crushing them below his bare feet as he extended his hand towards a particular glass container on the shelf. The man carefully touched it.

Inside was a wilted flower, only a hint of the beautiful purple remaining that had so strongly sang with life just the day before. His breathing picked up as mana gathered around him, the air in the room feeling more dense as the walls started to crack, the interwoven gold pushing at the foundation of the room itself. It lasted only a moment.

When the butler rushed into the room, magic flowing around the man as well, Michael's breathing was steady again. "Have the room repaired Teris. I will be gone for a while." he said and walked to the door, his night suit replaced by intricately designed golden armor, the helmet resembling a stag. "Prepare a funeral ceremony. Prim has died." he said and the butler bowed before he went to clean up the food.



“That was easier than expected.” Ilea whispered to the man next to her.

“Are you sure it’s them though?” Kyrian asked “Could be anybody for all we know.”

“There’s fifteen armed people in there and the place doesn’t exactly look official.” she said. “If it’s another group then we’ll find out more about them as well. Plus they seemed too professional to me to be just a bunch of thugs. They’re organized at least. One of them is writing letters as we speak.” she said and the man nodded at that.

“Then how do you want to approach this? Just go and knock again?” he asked.

“They haven’t hurt the woman, they’re just talking to her. Even got her a blanked. I think I’ll go in there and talk to the guy who’s interviewing her. He’s probably the one who knows the most in there.”

“I’ll wait here until a fight breaks out or you get me.” Kyrian said.

“Alright. Wish me luck then.” Ilea said and smiled below her helmet. A moment later she appeared inside the room twenty five meters away, where a small table and two chair stood, occupied by the woman they had used as bait and a man in light metal armor. Ilea immediately grabbed his throat and pushed him to one of the walls. He was only at level one hundred and the identification informed her that he had a rogue like main class.

He was powerless to oppose the sudden appearance and the strength of her arm. The woman in the room managed to at least not scream, knowing that something like this was about to happen.

“If you don’t want to die in the next seconds, I suggest you don’t do anything stupid. Alright?” Ilea asked, looking deep into the man’s eyes

whose adrenaline was likely pulsing at a high. He hadn't used any skills or attacks on her immediately which meant he either simply wasn't fast enough or he was smart enough to know when he was beaten.

"Now I'm here to talk and if we can find an arrangement suitable to all parties involved, we can all leave happily without anybody dying. How does that sound?" she asked, lessening the pressure on his throat a little.

"Go.. ood" he squeaked out.

"Good." she said and smiled, though he didn't see that through the metal of her helmet.

"Now I've learned that a certain group of outlaws has taken it upon themselves to try and take over Riverwatch. I am told that there is a certain individual orchestrating the whole thing and I'd like to meet said individual. Now please don't try to bullshit me here because I have developed a somewhat small tolerance for that in the past year. Are you a part of said group?" she asked.

"Ye.. s." the man supplied, either willing to cooperate or more interested in his own life.

"Good, then is your leader around?" she asked and lessened the pressure even further.

"I'm afraid not, no. She's out of town at the moment and I doubt I could get you an audience." the man said.

"That's a bummer. I specifically forced this bitch to bait and find you and now you're telling me my target isn't here?" Ilea said, looking at the woman who nervously moved on her chair.

"Why don't we turn this around then." Ilea said. "How much time do we have?"

"Nobody will bother us for at least an hour." the man said as Ilea let him go. He coughed a couple times and held his throat before he looked at her and

gulped.

“For the H... Hand to get involved... I never... “ he said before Ilea grabbed him and pushed him onto a seat. She walked over to the woman, grabbed her and roughly shoved her to the ground, hopefully not injuring her too badly. She’d heal her afterwards, it was part of the deal and the only way they could at least somewhat protect the family against a possible retaliation by the group in question.

Ilea sat down on the now free chair. “Now I’m glad you’re not quite as stupid as I expected a random member of a gang of outlaws to be. First tell me about yourself and your group, who is your leader and what does she want with this city.”

The man looked up for a moment and started speaking right before Ilea wanted to push again. “I’m Trevor. Born and raised in Riverwatch. I was...,” he stopped and sighed, lost in thought and then locking eyes with Ilea who patiently gave him his time. “I was the leader of the Riversong.” he said and waited.

The moment stretched on before Ilea finally reacted. “I’m sorry I have no idea who you are, is that a band?” she asked. The man smiled and held a hand to his face before he chuckled into his fist.

“Do I have to remind you of the position you’re in?” Ilea asked, though she found the whole thing somewhat amusing as well. This reminded her of a movie where a guy gets killed because he laughed at the wrong moment. She liked the guy already and hoped that she could somehow not kill everyone in this building.

“No, I’m aware that you’re perfectly capable of killing everybody in this building.” he said as he worked hard to turn serious again. It took him a moment but he was back to his calm self from before again. The scar near his eye and the beard gave him a viking like look but coupled with the laughter from before it was difficult for Ilea to take the man as a threat.

“It’s just that you’re ridiculously uninformed for teleporting straight into our stronghold and expecting me to just talk about everything. Now before

you interject I'm quite happy without any torture so I'll spare us both the trouble. You don't seem like the kind but I can tell you're ready to kill. I'll make it quick then." he sighed. "A drink would be nice." he said and continued talking, interrupted again at the sudden appearance of two mugs and a bottle of ale in front of Ilea.

"Today might be the lucky one." he murmured and poured himself a drink after Ilea nodded at his questioning look.

"The Riversong is an organization founded several hundred years ago. An honorable organization of mercenaries..."

"You're criminals. Murderers, thieves, rapists?" Ilea interrupted and took a sip.

He sighed again and smiled. "Thieves, yes. Criminals, yes. There's little money in raping and slavery will bring too much attention on us. Aye, I have murdered people but your shining order isn't exactly the brotherhood of paladins either." he said to which Ilea didn't visibly react.

"Focus." she said and poured herself another drink.

"Yes. We were perfectly interwoven with this town until the elven attack nearly a year ago. It was a feast right after but many smaller groups popped up and many questionable people from outside came here. The refugees haven't stopped coming and every day it gets harder to keep people from murdering each other. There's a balance you see, a balance that has to be kept up, otherwise we become just another bandit camp which will be eradicated by someone like you, or by themselves as is more often the case." the man explained.

"Well the new leader of all the organized crime, both old and new, doesn't quite share my outlook on this topic. Melian is her name and she's from some backwater shit town in the west. I heard it got wrecked by the elves and I hate the fuckers for leaving her alive." he said and spat on the ground. "I can tell you where she is, you take care of her and we can all be on our merry way. How does that sound?" the man asked.

“Tempting and easy.” Ilea said. “How can I trust you?” she asked.

“I’ll come with you. I have no doubt that even should an elaborate trap get you, you’d manage to get my head in the process. I want to see the bitch die, she’s killed many of my best.” he said and drank his ale, pouring himself another one. “I’m not a good man you see. But I don’t torture people for the fuck of it, I don’t enslave people and break them as a sport. She’s twisted, the worst kind of psychopath and she’s powerful. She’ll take what she wants and Riverwatch will be just one of many destroyed places before she finally fucks with someone too powerful for her to take. The Hand...,” he gestured towards Ilea “... might be just that someone.” he said.

She moved back in her chair. “Sounds like a cunt to me but I’ll make my own picture when I meet her. Any idea to her level and skills?” she asked.

“Her lightning magic is displayed openly for all to see, as an example mostly but also just because she loves to use it. No idea about her second class. She could be two hundred or five hundred for all I know.” he said.

“Lightning, well I’ll meet her one way or the other. We’ll see then if I can take her or not. You’d probably die though if I have to flee.” Ilea said.

“Worth the shot, trust me I tried to undermine her. The only reason she hasn’t taken over the whole city already is because of the coordination of me and two other bosses, one of them dead by now or still being fried by her.” he said and spat again. It really irritated Ilea for some reason.

“Stop spitting, that’s the first thing. I could find her anyway, without you it’d just take longer. I prefer quick. I know a captain of the guard, you’ll meet with him as soon as this is over. You and those bosses. You’ll find some sort of agreement that will allow you to coexist with the city at least somewhat.” Ilea said.

“We already have something like that. It’s not written down but the guard isn’t the only party defending this town. We live off it too and when the elves attacked we lost our people as well. I will meet your man and at least I am willing to reduce our influence if the city is still standing in a month’s

time and that bitch is dead.” he said. That was good enough for Ilea. Criminals wouldn’t stop to exist, especially in a world where people could literally damn near turn invisible. Perhaps someone like this man would at least adhere to a certain codex.

Of course he could still just be fooling her but Ilea has developed at least a certain feel for people in the past year. Alice had fooled her but she had been a trained noble and what she considered a friend, this man certainly wasn’t either of those things.

“Then let’s not lose anymore time.” Ilea said and got up.

“There are spies from her in here as well. Can you follow me if I leave later?” Trevor asked her.

“Sure, when are you leaving?” Ilea asked.

“Half an hour.” he said.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” Ilea said and vanished. She doubted he had made up the whole story from scratch, he was too emotionally invested in all of it. If he didn’t betray them, it would mean a rather swift lead to the person responsible. The man was rather open about his personal interests as well but in this case it would have a positive result for all parties involved.

“We’re waiting for the boss of a local gang to come out and then lead us to the supposed mastermind of this fuckery.” Ilea explained to Kyrian who nodded.

“You’re watching him?” he asked.

“Yes I am. He’s currently talking to the woman we employed, helping her up and checking her injuries. Criminal but he doesn’t seem like the worst.” she said.

“Many of them aren’t.” Kyrian said absentmindedly. She looked at him for a moment and then focused on her target again.

Michael stored his helmet as he came up on the corpse. She was beautiful as always, a beauty like few others, so young and pure. He knew of course that Prim was neither of those things but he remembered her from back then. She was a strong human, twisted and burdened with a terrible childhood. He didn't want to know about her desires but had kept a tab on her. She killed peasants and nobles alike, for her own enjoyment and, other things. Never in excess and never in increasing quantity. The beautiful garden that surrounded both her mansion and the caves below outweighed the deaths with its artistry alone.

Closing her eyes, he cleaned up the wounds on her body. Curse marks ran through most of her skin, originating at the wounds. Daggers most likely. Her foe had been efficient, all the cuts in critical positions. Having sparred with Prim before, he knew it wasn't easy to get an opening on her. The dead and corroded ground covering most of the cave told him that she had been pushed to the limit. It wasn't an assassination, it was a hard fought battle and Prim had lost.

Michael wouldn't underestimate whoever had done this. He activated his blood magic and looked around, checking both the corpse of the deceased Prim and the surrounding ground. It didn't take long for him to find what he had been looking for. He sighed and shook his head. Two capable humans would die tonight. Truly, it was a shame.

# Chapter 156 Electric boogaloo

## Chapter 156 Electric boogaloo

Trevor had done exactly as he promised. He had left the building nearly exactly half an hour after their talk had ended and walked towards the northern gate of Riverwatch. Ilea and Kyrian followed above the roofs and soon enough found that they weren't the only ones. Two people followed Trevor as well but they were following on the ground and in the shadows. Ilea had spotted them through her Sphere and pointed them out for Kyrian.

Following Trevor for another ten minutes, the man soon stepped into a house, his followers waiting outside.

“You take the one on the roof, you see him? Over there and behind the chimney.” Ilea explained to Kyrian who nodded and flew upwards in complete silence. Ilea herself focused on the figure leisurely leaning on a wall in a small side street, the house in view.

She appeared in front of the man when she saw Kyrian descend upon his target and quickly jabbed his throat. It was a woman after all, she realized and watched her start to cough and lift her weapons. Ilea quickly grabbed both of the woman's arms and kicked her knee, hard. The bone broke and ripped through the woman's trousers, blood smearing on the wall behind her as she started screaming.

The weapons were ripped out of her hands and thrown away by Ilea before she held the woman's mouth to stop the screaming. “Shut it or you die.” she said and felt the woman punch her side.



“Do that again and I’ll punch you too.” Ilea said and felt the woman go limp as she whimpered at the pain of her broken leg. She grabbed the woman by the neck and rushed to the house. She was followed by Kyrian who had bound both hands and legs of the man he had captured, a metal gag placed right in his mouth as he tried to produce noise.

Trevor was standing upstairs, blade ready as he relaxed at them coming into the room. “Who are those two?” he asked, glancing at the woman’s leg.

“They were following you since you left.” Ilea said and turned around the woman to look at her. “Who are you working for?” she asked before the woman spit on her helmet.

“Why do people do that?” she asked and let the woman drop down. She landed on her leg and started screaming again when a sphere of metal entered her mouth, a metal strap closing behind her head, muffling the noise. She moved on the ground, only intensifying the pain.

Trevor watched the whole thing in silence when Kyrian made the man float before him. “Are you more cooperative than this one?” he asked and waited for the man to look down at the woman who was writhing in pain. He nodded a moment later.

“Good. Who are you working for.” Kyrian asked and removed the sphere from his mouth.

“Melian, she’s told us to follow Trevor and report any weird movements directly to her. Please don’t kill us, we were recrui...,” he was muffled as the metal sphere went into his mouth again.

“Well that was a given. Good thing you didn’t try to meet me more openly. I’ve seen those two before. From the West I think.” Trevor said.

“We’ll leave them here then, let them live if you can.” Ilea said and turned the woman around on the ground to look at her. Lifting her helmet up a little, she spat in her face. “You need the power to back it up.” Ilea said and smiled. The woman scoffed but calmed down a little, looking at the man lying next to her.

“Anybody got some rope?” Ilea asked.

“Here we are. At least that’s where it should be...,” Trevor said as they looked out from the woods towards a lonesome farm east of Riverwatch. Barely an hour’s flight from the city. A big campfire was burning in the middle of the land. At least thirty people could be spotted from their position, most of them dancing, fighting or drinking. Only a few single ones looked like they were actually guarding the place.

“There’s no cover around here.” Ilea said.

“I agree, it’s gonna be difficult to approach.” Kyrian said. “From above maybe.” he added and Trevor looked at them sceptically.

“Yea, that’s the best bet. The fire is a little annoying. I’ll get in and check it out. Join me when it looks like there’s no other way. Trevor, you stay here.” Ilea said and the man nodded, rather happy that he wouldn’t have to walk into that camp.

Ilea moved back into the forest, deeply enough to be sure nobody without incredibly keen eyes would spot her flying upwards. She rushed into the clouds above, the dark night helping her tremendously in this endeavor. Flying right above the farm, she looked for all the guards. She could tell with her enhanced senses that not a single one of them was looking upwards. Neither did any of the people fighting or dancing. A moment later she dropped down and increased her speed to the maximum.

Next to the main building there were two barns, one of them open and with people coming and going. The other one was her target as she blinked right before entering, both stopping her momentum as much as possible and appearing inside the barn with as little noise as she could produce.

She activated the third tier of State of Azarinth to enhance her cognitive abilities just a little more and took in everything the twenty four meter

radius of her Azarinth Hunter Sphere let her perceive. Nearly all her senses were enhanced and the first thing she noticed was, as was rather often the case, the smell.

This barn was used to keep the prisoners it seemed, more likely the slaves these people had captured. Ilea checked to make sure and blinked downwards, sacrificing fifty health to give her a little push as she punched into a man's back, closing her hand and ripping out his still beating heart before she threw it away. Moving on to his body, she grabbed his neck and pulled him backwards, away from the bound and crying woman in front of him.

He looked at her with a confused look on his face as she jabbed his throat, destroying the organ before she kneed his genitals. He choked and teared up as he bled out and died on the ground a few moments later. Some people in the barn looked at her. He wasn't the only corpse inside.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Soul of the Ax lvl 83 – Berserker lvl 79]'*

She checked the woman in front of her and healed what she could before she ripped away the rope that bound her. "I'm sorry." she said and carried the woman towards a group of people huddling together in a corner of the barn, all bound in various ways, looking towards her with differing expressions. "Stay fucking quiet." Ilea said as she brought the woman to them. Two of them nodded towards Ilea and took the still crying woman. They didn't have blankets or anything else to cover her. Filth, shit and piss were on the ground around them. Ilea quietly walked through all of it and checked each and every one of them quickly, especially the people lying on the ground. She had to stabilize three of them though it was food and water they were lacking the most.

She summoned crates of it on the other end of the barn before she removed all the ropes in silence. Many of them had burns, scars and other fresh wounds, some more serious than others.

"Tha...", a young boy started before a man put his hand over his mouth and looked at Ilea apologetically.

“Thank me later, if you survive this. Now go get some food and stay fucking quiet.” she said as she walked to the front of the barn, followed by a bunch of uncertain people of differing ages, levels and genders.

“Was this all that lightning mage, Melian?” she asked two of the older people who seemed to be somewhat alright. Both nodded in response, fury in their eyes.

“Be careful...,” the man said in a somewhat fearful tone.

“Where is she now?” Ilea asked.

“We don’t know...,” he answered and Ilea nodded before she summoned a bunch of the remaining Taleen weapons she had kept with her, throwing them onto the hay on the ground. “Arm yourselves, the ones capable at least. Don’t come out if you don’t have to.” she said and changed her armor to the leather kind. She checked the man she had killed and found no indication of a faction, hopefully the drunk people wouldn’t realize she wasn’t one of them. Her armor looked similar enough. The standard leather kind. Luckily hers wasn’t exactly in the newest state either.

Ilea checked the surroundings of the barn, summoned a bottle of mead she opened and poured on the ground before she moved the barn gate a little to slip out. It was dark outside, despite the massive fire. She pretended to take a sip of her mead a couple times as she casually walked towards the main building, taking in the scenes around her, the positions of all the people and the weaponry and levels of everyone present.

She hoped nobody would identify her and get confused at the question marks. Perhaps they would mistake her for a newcomer. Nobody rang an alarm in the time of her walk to the main building. The second barn held a couple tables, bedrolls, more people and chests. Outside were wagons filled with stuff, animals bound to posts, some of them dead already. Whatever this camp was, it was not sustainable. Ilea watched as two men fought each other while everyone else cheered on.

She watched until one of them was beaten to death. Right at the cheers, she blinked into the main building, the farmer’s house. The attic was devoid of

people and she stood quietly, checking in her Sphere and with her ears to see if anybody reacted to her sudden disappearance. Nobody did. One good thing about this situation was that the time of their attack was ideal.

Ilea switched her attention to the ground floor of the house she was in. A fire was burning in the fireplace, the stairs leading to the attic were closed off behind a door. A lot of the furniture had been destroyed, singed it seemed. In the middle of the living room was a massive bed. There were no people present on the ground floor. There were however people in the basement.

A woman specifically, presumably her target. She was dressed rather flamboyant and she was quite obviously in the process of skinning an old man. Behind her stood a mage, likely the reason the screams didn't reach outside the cellar.

Ilea focused inwards when she realized that she knew the man. Breathing out calmly, she opened her eyes. Her skills came to life as she sacrificed two hundred points of health. Ice in her eyes and ember in her body, she blinked next to the woman and punched her head with all the power she had. Her fist reached the target, a beautiful young woman with brown hair and a twisted smile on her face. The impact released a shock wave of lightning that sent the mage backwards a meter and stunned Ilea for a split second.

The woman smashed into the wall from Ilea's punch but vanished right after. Ilea looked to the mage who was confused before she reached him and slammed her fist into his face, knocking him out or killing him, she wasn't quite sure as she blinked to the man who had endured the shock wave as well. He was close to death and she poured healing mana into him. She had forgotten his name but it was the same old man that had let her use his carriage so long ago when she came to Riverwatch for the second time.

She healed him until he was stable and then some before she ripped off the chains that bound him. Carefully she moved him to the ground and touched his head. Maybe he would survive. It did not matter. What mattered was that She died.

Ilea blinked upwards and into the middle of the yard. People stared at her and the lightning woman in a confused manner, some prepared to fight while others were still dancing or drinking. The punch definitely left a mark as the woman's chin didn't look quite alright.

*[Mage – lvl 210]*

Ilea smiled as she switched her armor to the rugged black Juggernaut one.

“Who are you?” the woman asked as more and more people focused on the two of them, confused to see their boss in the middle of the yard. “Tell me and ma...,” she didn't get any further when Ilea appeared in front of her, ready to deliver another punch but the woman vanished. Ilea looked around, concentrating as she remembered the bouts against Trian. This one wasn't any different and she could beat him too.

The woman appeared and Ilea followed, a punch finding only air as they appeared and disappeared around the field. The shouts and confusion increased in the meantime, people preparing their weapons and spells but none of them could follow the two teleporting mages.

Melian the lightning mage appeared next to one of her subordinates and used the man as a shield against the appearing Ilea, her punch destroying the man's unprotected chest as the bones broke and shot inwards, piercing his organs and killing him nearly instantly.

“You will die.” Melian said as she unleashed lightning towards Ilea. She didn't dodge but advanced through the element, her Veil blocking the first blasts before she reached the woman who promptly disappeared again, hiding behind her men. “Attack her! She's an enemy to our cause!”

Ilea watched as the people around Melian looked on confused and frightened towards the bloodied warrior before them.

“Everyone who attacks me dies.” Ilea said as she advanced, dodging a lightning blast directed at her with a sidestep. An arrow was fired at her which she caught before she appeared in front of the ranger, catching his

arm before she broke it with a swift movement, breaking his neck right after. She flung the corpse into the fire and locked eyes with Melian.

Most of the people in the yard were below level one hundred, seeing their likely terrifying boss hide against the warrior who just easily killed one of theirs was more than a little intimidating.

“Kill her!” the mage shouted and sent another stream of lightning Ilea’s way. This time Ilea used the people around the mage to her advantage as she appeared in the crowd, getting closer to the mage with every blast of lightning that shredded through one of her own.

“Kill her!” Melian kept shouting as Ilea got closer and closer with each blink. Finally after five consecutive teleports, she managed to grab on and clenched her teeth at the current of lightning flowing through her. Ilea answered in kind as her reversed healing flowed into the woman. She pressed down on the mage’s arm and broke through the magical shield of lightning, releasing another nova that in turn broke through her Veil of Ash, unleashing the full power of the lightning current flowing through her.

Melian slipped away and teleported as Ilea healed herself and built up her Veil again, following the mage a moment later. She held her broken and mangled arm, the bones had not just been broken, Ilea had crushed them.

“You will die for...,” Melian screamed and vanished when Ilea reached her again.

She ground her teeth when she saw where the mage was going. She had a higher reach with her teleportation than Ilea’s blink and reached the barn a moment earlier. When Ilea appeared inside, Melian was holding a naked woman by the neck.

“I’ll kill her! Leave!” Melian shouted, tears streaming down her pain stricken face as her arm twitched occasionally, blood dripping down where the pieces of bone had pushed through her skin. A little bit of lightning flowed around her again, the defensive shield incredibly efficient.

Ilea nodded and held up her arms. She was standing in the barn and all the naked people distanced themselves as far as they could from Melian who was still holding onto the woman. The woman had fury in her eyes and Ilea saw that she had dropped a dwarven weapon she had been holding previously.

She locked eyes with the woman and they both understood. Turning around, Ilea prepared to leave when Melian moved her broken arm to send lightning towards Ilea who disappeared and appeared right behind Melian. She felt lightning discharge into the woman held by the mage and steeled herself as she grabbed her around the chest from behind. Her wings spread as she pushed herself and the mage backwards out of the barn.

The two tumbled on the ground as lightning flowed into Ilea. Her Veil was broken as she sacrificed health to activate the third tier of State of Azarinth. All her skills worked overtime as she pressed her arms together with all the strength she had. Sparks of Lightning burned the field around the two, Ilea's armor lighting up when she broke through the magical barrier. More health was sacrificed as she felt the woman's armor give in. More and more she pushed as her own healing mana repaired the constant damage of the electrical current.

The woman struggled until all the air had left her chest. She started hyperventilating and punched at Ilea's hands and her body with her arms, still releasing lightning strikes directly into her adversary. But Ilea's grip was relentless, her strength overwhelming. The woman's throws became weaker and weaker until even her lightning strikes didn't hit the target right behind her anymore. Her armor was pushed inwards, her ribs breaking one after the other, piercing and grinding through her organs.

Ilea kept on pressing long after the electric current had stopped, long after the woman had stopped moving altogether. Blood came out of her mouth and was soon joined by the smell of shit and piss. Not a pretty death to be sure. Ilea let go a minute later, making sure she had gotten the relevant notifications. Her healing had already gotten her up to eighty percent of her health again. She had never dipped below sixty. The result of this fight was clear from the first lightning bolt that hit her.



Melian wasn't a vampyr like Trian. In a battle of attrition Ilea doubted even Trian would win against her, let alone this psycho mage. She let go of the corpse and stood up, making her helmet vanish before she spit blood on the ground. Ilea looked at the woman before she stomped onto her head. Three times until the bone broke and the head caved in. She lifted her armored boot from the bloody mess before she looked up.

Kyrian was floating above the group of thieves, murderers and rapists. She could hear him talk and grabbed a leg of Melian, dragging the corpse towards the group as some of them watched on, horror in their eyes.

# Chapter 157 Judge and Executioner

## Chapter 157 Judge and Executioner

“If you move you will die.” Kyrian said, loud enough for all of them to hear but not shouting. Some of them were still confused. The whole fight between Ilea and Melian had only taken a couple minutes after all. Most of them were drunk in addition. They looked towards either Ilea or Kyrian, the armored man floating with metal spikes next to him. The black armor was known in Riverwatch as well and they could make their assumptions.

Ilea put on her helmet again before she reached the group, dragging the destroyed corpse next to her as they stared at her in silence. She walked to the bonfire and flung the corpse into it. Watching the fire for a moment, Ilea sighed and turned towards the barn where the prisoners had been held.

Blinking towards it, she reached the people inside mere seconds later and checked on the woman as they all parted to let her through. She was dead and Ilea closed her eyes with her hand.

“I’m sorry.” she said, to the dead woman and not the people around her. One man was crying, his hand held in front of his face as he looked at the corpse. Ilea looked at him. “Carry her.” she said. “It’s safe now.”

Walking outside, she saw the man nod and clean his face of the tears before he carefully grabbed the corpse. The others were watching on and most of them followed.

“Bury or burn?” Ilea asked without looking at him. He was quiet, a man in his late twenties, his hair disheveled and his body covered in filth. He smiled as he looked at the woman’s face.

“She was so brave.” he said. “E... everyday, she was so brave.” he said again as more tears streamed down his face. “I’d like to burn her. But not here.”

“Do you need help?” Ilea asked but he shook his head.

“Don’t move too far away for now, I don’t know if some of them might’ve escaped.” she said. “Who feels capable to move clothes, food and water to the rest of the group?” Ilea asked. Five people stepped up and she nodded. “The rest, stay here. We’ll be back soon.” she said and walked towards Kyrian who was still floating. There were two corpses lying near the big group that hadn’t been there before.

Ilea spread her wings and joined Kyrian. “They raped and killed a lot of them. Most were tied up and living in their own filth. This is scum.” she said to the man.

Ilea floated for a while and looked into the fire. “I need some time. Do what you want but I’m not in a state to judge them.” she said, feeling the rage inside of her. It was cold and deep. She wanted to simply rip off each and every one of their heads.

“We have time. Help the survivors, it will help.” Kyrian said calmly before he carefully moved his hand towards her helmet. He hesitated but then touched it gently.

“Thanks.” she said and floated down, joining the people who were ready to help.

“All of you undress. Everyone who isn’t naked in the next two minutes I will kill.” Kyrian said to the outlaws in front of him but Ilea focused on the survivors.

They looked through the wagons and the used barn, finding different sets of clothing first for the people that helped and then for everyone else. There were twelve survivors in total, all of them soon clothed and fed. They had moved the survivors into the barn and gave them all food. Ilea watched a girl not older than sixteen unable to stop her shaking hand before an older man helped her eat. Not a word was spoken and Ilea was glad she had her helmet on, tears dripping down onto the metal from within.

She checked on the man in the basement. His condition was stable but he was still knocked out. She moved him upstairs into a small bed still standing in one of the side rooms. The mage who had helped Melina was taken outside as well, gagged and bound just as all the rest. All of them were naked and kneeling on the ground. Some shivered from the cold, some from fear.

‘Is this what I have to do now?’ Ilea asked herself as she dropped the mage next to the others, grabbing his head and slapping him awake. ‘Fighting and killing, that is one thing...’ the mage woke up and gasped through his gag, looking at her with wide eyes and then his surroundings. ‘Passing judgment on men and women like these.’ the man in front of her closed his eyes before Ilea felt mind magic try to enter her head.

She slowly walked behind him and grabbed his chin, her buffs activated and she ripped his head off. Kyrian walked up to her. “Mind mage? I felt it too.”

Ilea nodded and threw the corpse into the fire. She smelled some of the people around her pee themselves. This work was dirty, there was nothing good about it. The survivors were traumatized, never able to completely return to their own lives. She would fight on and perhaps at some point lose her humanity as well. But she would do it. Get stronger to protect her friends and their families. Dale, Kyrian, Trian, Eve, Claire and all the people she had met, the people she had fought with.

She would inspire both them and the survivors from this fucked up side quest to get stronger, to fight for themselves and she would strike fear and terror in those that opposed her, those that would torture and kill the people she cared about. She was no shining paladin, no bastion of good morals. She was a monster, to all the monsters out there, human or not.

“Tomorrow we will find out who of you will live.” she said in a calm voice. “I need a god damn shower. Can you watch over them?” she asked Kyrian who just nodded.

“I’ll keep watch. Can you get Trevor, he’s still hiding.” he said and she nodded before flying off towards the forest.

Trevor was in the same spot. “Did you get her?” he asked.

“I did. Come, you can help as well. There are survivors.” she said and flew back without waiting for the man.

There was sadly no shower to be found on the farm but there were some water runes and a tub she found in the farm house. She filled it and removed her clothes, sliding into the cold water before she started scrubbing.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Lightning Valkyrie lvl 210 – Sorceress of Storms lvl 203]’*

There were no level ups from the kill and Ilea thought the information away a moment later. It left a bitter taste in her mouth. Drying herself up, she stepped outside again, in leather armor and a hood. Just to make sure her face wouldn’t spread too much among random people and criminals. She had calmed down considerably. While the bath hadn’t been warm, it had

been relaxing and her thoughts had drifted away from the filth and death surrounding this bloody farm.

Kyrian was sitting on a stool someone had brought him and moved around a sphere of metal. Over twenty people were kneeling in front of him, gagged and bound still. Most of the survivors had found a bed and at least tried to sleep at this point. Ilea saw through the closed barn gate that many of them couldn't quite sleep yet.

“How are you doing?” the man asked her.

“Better.” she said and sat down on the ground next to him. He nodded at her reply and formed a metallic flower that he moved into her lap. It bloomed as she held it up and smiled.

The barn gate slowly closed behind them and Trevor walked up to the two, an expensive looking bottle in hand. “God damn that woman was worse than I thought. I mean I saw some of it first hand but this place is horrible.” he said and held the open bottle towards Ilea. She took it and sniffed on it. A wine but she felt more like juice right now. Handing it back to the man, she shook her head when he looked towards Kyrian.

“Where's her corpse?” he asked.

“Burned.” Ilea said.

“Damn, I'm sure we could've sold her equipment.” he murmured.

“If anything survives the fire, we will. The rest of that monster should turn to ash.” Ilea said as a bit of the element formed in front of her, twirling in the air and carrying the metal flower towards Kyrian.

“I... I don't know if you want to hear this but I know some of these people.” Trevor started.

“We will decide when the sun rises. At least I will gladly listen to what you have to say. Kyrian will decide for himself.” Ilea said. She felt drained but

looking at the naked and scared people in front of her she felt not a shred of pity.

“Trevor, come.” Ilea said and whispered to Kyrian “I’ll be back in a couple hours.” the metal mage nodded and moved the flower into a strap of her leather armor.

“He should be around here somewhere...,” Ilea said as she flew over the dark landscape. Trevor held onto her harder than anybody else who had flown Azarinth Air previously. Fear of heights she supposed.

“There it is...,” she said a couple minutes later as she dove down to the little village where she had met Dale around six hours earlier. The sun was rising already and when they landed, the fire was out and there were no guards to be found. The trail was fresh though and with her Hunter’s Sight, it was easy to start following the trail.

Twenty minutes later, they found the guards moving through the forest in formation. Ilea allowed herself a little joke and smiled, moving silently through the forest, appearing behind one of the recruits and whispering into his ear. “You’re already dead...,” she said and brushed the side of his face.

The scream was surprisingly feminine and Ilea laughed as he swung his sword in her direction. She dodged it and jumped backwards, not to embarrass the man any further. This was exactly what she needed after last night.

“Hey don’t worry, it’s your local healer.” she said and put up her hands in defeat. Most of the others had noticed the commotion and rushed towards the scream, most of them smiling at the result and deducted events that had occurred.

“Thanks for not picking me.” Dale said as he joined the group as well.

“We’re gonna pause for a while, secure the perimeter, I want a report on wildlife, trees, tracks and possible points of interest and tactical advantages and disadvantages of the surrounding hundred meters in half an hour. Get on it.” the captain said, the recruits spreading out immediately.

“Come out!” Ilea shouted towards Trevor’s position, where he came out from behind a tree and waved towards them.

“Riversong...,” Dale was immediately on alert but looked at Ilea with a confused expression.

It took them a while to explain the whole situation but in the end Dale and Trevor begrudgingly respected each other. They were already talking about how to cooperate in secrecy without having to alert the higher authorities or other criminal organizations. One thing was sure, Trevor wouldn’t sell out anybody and neither would Dale let anybody go from imprisonment. Other avenues could be explored though, like the regulation of certain drugs or a network of healers and doctors independent of each group.

“You’re getting along then?” Ilea asked after a while, interrupting the talk between them.

“I wouldn’t say getting along.” Dale said, grinding his teeth.

“Better than murdering each other.” Trevor said and winked towards the guard captain.

“Good, we’ll be off then. Let me know whenever you need help with anything else Dale.” Ilea said.

“Ah yes, the prisoners...,” Trevor murmured as he prepared to leave, scared of flying as he was.



“I will let you know. Ilea, thank you. Truly.” Dale said and bowed.

“Hey, thanks for giving me a chance back then. And give your family my greetings.” Ilea said.

“Appreciate it but they will remain as ignorant of your existence as ever. Otherwise I’ll have children running off to become adventurers...,” the captain said and shook his head. Ilea didn’t comment further and just waved as she ascended. She heard Dale shout for the recruits right after. Half an hour hadn’t passed so she hoped he’d go easy on them.

The way back to the farm was faster than before and Ilea landed close to the still sitting Kyrian who had a dozen or so small spheres of metal floating around him in an intricate manner. ‘Maybe we should train together...,’ she thought, looking at the metal flower still placed on her leather armor.

“Welcome back.” the mage said as Trevor let go of Ilea.

“Hey, I’d rather get this over quickly. Trevor wait here.” Ilea said and walked towards the barn. The survivors were all up already, quietly talking or sitting on the table. Opening the gate, some of them flinched at the sudden entrance.

“Who is the leader here?” Ilea asked and waited for a couple seconds as the survivors looked at each other, in the end focusing on a man who looked to be in his forties. He was around that level as well and walked up to Ilea with an uncertain look on his face.

“Come outside quickly.” she said and walked out. The man joined her a moment later and following Ilea’s line of sight, he looked at the still bound people in front of Kyrian.

“We will judge them. Each and every one of them.” Ilea said. “They all looked on, they all didn’t do anything so they’re all criminals. I believe not all of them deserve death though. Do you disagree?” she asked the man.

“I know some would disagree but...,” the man started “not all of them were as bad. Some even came to apologize, saying they’d be killed if they

helped. So no, I agree with you.” the man answered. Ilea kept looking at their prisoners.

“Can you get everyone who can stomach seeing them into the main house. I’d like to bring every single one of them inside. I want to know what they did, the good and the bad.” she said. The man looked at her from the side and slowly nodded.

Ilea waited for a couple minutes as around half the survivors walked out of the barn, led by the man. He nodded towards her and walked to the main house.

The campfire was reduced to embers and ash. Ilea waited for the survivors to enter the house and then walked over to Trevor and Kyrian. “You go inside as well, perhaps you can speak for some of them.” Ilea said. Trevor gulped and nodded, leaving to go into the house.

“How about you?” Ilea asked, after a minute of silence.

“What do you mean?” Kyrian asked, looking up towards her.

“What do you think we should do with them?” she asked him, looking into his eyes behind the metal helmet. The suns warmed the yard slowly, the smell of burning flesh still in the air.

# Chapter 158 Loose Ends

## Chapter 158 Loose Ends

“I’m with you on this one. Perhaps some of them can redeem themselves, or they already have.” Kyrian said to her and she thought about it.

It would be much easier to just kill all of them now. She sighed and walked up to the first person. A young man, early twenties it seemed and he looked at her with fear in his eyes.

“Can you remove the gag?” she asked and promptly the behind the man’s head opened up and the sphere moved out of his mouth. He coughed a couple times before he looked up to Ilea again. She was surprised that he didn’t chose to talk immediately.

“Why should you live?” she asked the man. He looked at her for a moment and then turned his attention to the ground before him.

“I... I shouldn’t...,” he said and opened his mouth again but nothing came out. Ilea grabbed the man and moved him towards the farm house. Entering, she watched the survivors and Trevor turn towards her as she dumped the man in front of her.

“All of you, tell me what you know of him. What did he do, what did he not do.” she said and leaned on the wall behind the man. Getting closer to his ear, she whispered. “If you talk without me allowing it, you’re dead.”

“I don’t know him.” Trevor said. Some of the survivors shook their heads. One of the women looked to the ground.

“You, can you speak? You don’t have to.” Ilea said, pointing at the woman who looked up, tears forming in her eyes.

“He... can he say a few words?” she said in a quiet voice.

“Go on.” Ilea said, kicking the man lightly. He looked at the woman as tears formed on his eyes as well.

“I am so sorry. They made me...,” he said but stopped again, looking at the ground.

“It’s him.” the woman said as she looked at Ilea. “He... he violated me.” the woman said and Ilea went to grab the man again but stopped when the woman continued. “He came back in the same night... to clean me up and bring me food. He apologized. He was scared...,” she said and Ilea lifted him up with one hand.

“He did what he did. You always have a choice.” Ilea said. “Do you wish for him to live?” Ilea asked, locking eyes with the woman. “Decide in the next minute.” she said and walked outside, throwing the man on the ground before the house.

When she returned, the woman had tears in her eyes. “What... what will happen to him if he lives?” she asked.

“We will bring them to Riverwatch, where the guard takes over. After that, I don’t know.” Ilea said.

“Let him live then.” the woman said, looking into Ilea’s eyes. She nodded and walked out again, grabbing the man and throwing him next to Kyrian. “Can you prepare a wagon or something? We’ll have to move all these people and I doubt you can do that much with your magic.”

“It would be too much, yes.” Kyrian said as he got up and went to the wagons. “I’ll keep an eye on them, go on.” he said, looking back at her.

The next prisoner was taken and his gag removed by Kyrian. He started smiling as he looked at Ilea.

“You fucking bitch... we could’ve had the whole city if it weren’t for you...” Ilea crouched down in front of him and sighed. She unsheathed Aki and swiftly moved the blade across his throat. The cut was so deep she nearly took his head. He gurgled and died as she looked into his eyes. The man slumped down a moment later and Ilea moved on to the next one.

It took them two hours to go through all of them, Kyrian took over after ten people and Ilea did the last three of them. They killed eighteen out of the twenty two that were there, most of them because of their actions against the prisoners. Three didn’t do anything and even smuggled in food and water from time to time. Two of them tried to save the people even, going as far as planning escape routes and preparing supplies. They thanked Ilea for intervening and killing Melian. They’d still go to the guard with the evidence and the witness reports that Trevor begrudgingly wrote down.

“Any fire mages among you?” Ilea asked the survivors and one of them lifted their arm. A young woman with a scar running across her face. “Good, we need to burn the corpses.” she said and walked outside, the woman following.

“Kyrian, can you dig a big hole?” she asked the man who had finished preparing three wagons, no horses had been prepared but he probably didn’t know how to do that. Neither did Ilea. “I’ll go ask them if anybody knows how to saddle and strap horses onto the wagons...,” she said as he started to form metal plates to cut into the ground in the nearby field.

“How recent is that scar?” Ilea asked as she passed the waiting woman.

“Two months... I think.” she said.

“Let me try...,” Ilea said and carefully touched the woman, using her healing mana to work on the scar. The color around the scar turned a little more healthy but she couldn’t remove it completely. “A little better at least.” she said and smiled to the woman.

“Any of you know how to prepare horses?” Ilea asked the survivors who came out of the farm house. Two nodded and walked over to the animals.

“The old man woke up.” one of them said to her as he passed.

“Thanks.” Ilea said and walked to the house, entering and going to the room where the old man sat in the bed, a woman sitting next to him and talking about a knight saving them. Ilea smiled as she entered, a knight out of all things?

“You woke up. How are you feeling?” Ilea asked.

“Did you kill that monster?” the man asked as he looked at her.

“I did. Remember me? I think I know you.” Ilea said and watched him thinking. She motioned for the woman to leave and removed her hood afterwards. Recognition dawned in his eyes as he started laughing.

“Fate has brought you here.” he said after a while. “I am forever in your debt young woman. I feel like last time I could see your level though.” he said with a grin that missed more than one tooth.

“You could. You seem oddly happy, I remember you being tortured...,” she said and his grin vanished.

“I am happy it’s over. Experienced worse, though old wounds have reopened. I don’t think I can stay on this farm anymore.” he said and she nodded.

“I can see that. Well you were nice to me back then so why don’t I buy you a house in Riverwatch, how does that sound?” she said and he started laughing again immediately.

“I died didn’t I?” he asked, touching his face.

“Maybe we’re both dead.” Ilea said in a quiet voice, leaning on the wall next to her.

“I forgot your name I’m afraid.” she said and he smiled.

“Old Greg didn’t leave enough of an impression it seemed. I must admit the same, knight.” he said and laughed.

“Greg, it’s nice to see you alive. I’m Ilea.” she said and smiled, putting her hood back up and covering her face.

“To know the name of a Shadow. Now I do not want to be rude but I feel like I haven’t pissed and eaten in a week.” he said.

“Need help?” she asked as she pushed herself off the wall.

“Ah don’t mock me woman. I look older than I am.” he said and hopped out of bed. She nodded warily and quickly touched the man who walked past her to check him for damage. He spoke the truth though it seemed.

“Wagons are prepared.” Kyrian walked up to her when she exited the house. A fire was burning in the field, a thick black smoke rising and the smell of something akin to pig spreading in the vicinity.

Ilea nodded. “Let’s get out of here then.” she said and sat on the wagon with the survivors. She’d find Dale in a couple hours to rendezvous in Riverwatch, both to report back and give over the survivors and criminals.

It took them half a day to finish everything up, most of the time spent on getting the house for Greg. The prices were rather low apparently because of all the people leaving the city. The refugees still didn’t have enough money to buy houses but for Ilea it was a good time to do so. Twenty five gold, she spent and the man got a rather nice and spacious place. That left her at 2369 gold coins left, nearly all of it from the Taleen dungeon still.

She had spent quite a bit of it but not enough to really make a dent into her retirement savings.

Perhaps she should invest though. In Riverwatch and Ravenhall maybe. Not like she really had a reason to keep all of it but she didn't really want to bother with administrating all of that either. Owning some restaurants would be cool though. Maybe she could ask Claire to do that for her. She doubted Dale wanted to do something like that and she didn't trust Trevor enough for such an endeavor.

She had informed the criminal to let the woman they hired go. She at least trusted him that much, though she did mention that his head would be the one to roll should anything happen to her.

“Thank you so much again. You won't get the recognition for what you did but I know that the survivors will at least tell the tale.” Dale told her as he shook her hand.

“Gladly, just find me if you need something else but don't advertise it too much, especially my name. I have enemies in the west and maybe here too.” she said and he nodded.

“I assumed as much. You're not the quiet and complacent type.” he said and chuckled. “But hey, you managed to save a city.” he said with a smile.

“Stop it, I helped out a friend.” she said and turned around. Kyrian waited near the gate already.

“Goodbye Ilea.” Dale said and waved.

“Bye Dale. See you around.” she said and smiled before she put up her hood and flew upwards and towards the eastern gate.



The two of them ascended over the city of Riverwatch, the weak light sources from below soon fading into the rainy clouds. “Wanna speed up the way back a little?” Ilea asked the man.

“If I can keep up.” Kyrian said and Ilea nodded, her wings flapping in the wind before she accelerated upwards and to the east. The wind smashed into her face immediately as she sped up from a floating position to her top speed in a matter of less than ten seconds. Her body didn’t give in though, the wind and needle like rain barely a distraction to her now natural defenses. Activating her Veil of Ash, she found her speed barely decreasing while the experience turned from a windy flight to cruising in a luxury airliner.

Looking back, Ilea found her teammate slowly falling behind. She turned around and flew backwards, doing twirls as she formed a vortex of ash around her, trying hard to keep its speed up with her own. It didn’t quite work but she did manage to form little balls, spears and tendrils of ash she shot Kyrian’s way who in turn dodged or blocked all of it with quickly forming metal shields.

The man responded in kind as Ilea saw metal needles fly towards her through her Sphere as she slowed down a little to match his speed. The two twirled around each other in the air, shooting projectiles towards each other. Ilea found her quickly created ash to disperse after a couple dozen meters already but with the speed they were traveling at, she couldn’t condense it any more in the air around her.

Stopping her attacks while still flying, Ilea formed a ball of ash in her hand and kept it there to avoid it falling behind in the air around her. The ball condensed further and further until she couldn’t get it any denser. She felt that she could go further but her understanding of the related skill simply wasn’t great enough yet. The ball looked more black than any of the previously created projectiles and Ilea released it towards Kyrian, not with her manipulation skill that allowed a somewhat fast propel, instead she used her arm to throw the ball.

Kyrian barely dodged and answered with five metal spears, two of which Ilea caught while the rest were dodged with a small turn of her body. The ashen sphere flew farther than Ilea imagined, vanishing into the clouds behind the metal mage.

The two of them continued their bout as they progressed further towards the east, high up in the air as they attacked each other, Ilea getting more and more quick with the sphere creation. She still had to use her hands to stop the ash from simply flowing away but she felt that should she be standing still, she could do the same in the air around her.

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

The sudden message had her tumble in the air and barely dodge the most recent metal spears sent her way. Kyrian caught up quickly, metal spheres floating around him, easily keeping up with him.

“You alright?” he asked.

Ilea nodded “How do you get the spheres to match your speed?” she asked as they continued on.

“They are what carry me. My speed is directly related so all the other metal is the same. Even faster really because it doesn't have to carry me.” the man explained.

“Interesting... what about the needles you shoot towards me, they're faster than you are.” she said.

“They're smaller as well, lighter and I allow my control over them to lessen when they shoot towards the target, otherwise they'd rather easily be dodged.” Kyrian said.

Ilea twirled around herself, their bout continuing. “But...,” she said, dodging three projectiles “... you can still turn them around again...,” she finished as she concentrated on the needles through her Sphere.

“I lessen my control, I don’t remove it completely. They slow down a lot as they turn.” he said and she could see exactly what he meant as the needles changed their course and rushed towards her again, speeding up as soon as they pointed towards her body.

‘Interesting...,’ Ilea thought as she formed another sphere of ash. She didn’t really have the need to even keep the ash with her like the metal mage who couldn’t simply create new metal.

Testing it, Ilea used her manipulation to shoot the sphere towards Kyrian but pushed it away with as much speed as she could, feeling her control over the element lessen and then completely slip as it sped up. It was much faster than before, not quite as fast as her simply throwing it but more accurate by miles. Kyrian lifted a metal plate to deflect the attack and followed her.

The two travelers paused a couple hours later to meditate and restore their strength. Ilea offered the man some food as she sat down on the ground and let the rain fall on her armor. It was already late in the afternoon but the suns didn’t quite manage to push through the dark clouds above. Still it wasn’t very cold, winter having passed at least in the plains.

“Why don’t you give up control over the spheres that carry you? You’d be faster...,” Ilea said as she turned to look at Kyrian who had removed his helmet to eat.

He looked at her and swallowed. “I’d be a much easier target. And it’s not as easy for me to fly as it is for you. Maybe you noticed my lacking maneuvers compared to you. You’re moving like you’re on the ground...,” he said and continued eating.

“Yea my wings are pretty cool. Then again at least you can fly and you’re pretty quick.” she said and ate as well. He grunted at that as they sat in silence, the rain dripping off their armors.

Ilea remembered the caravan travel to Salia from long ago. It really was a difference now. Even running was back then but now she could literally fly. An improvement to her life she didn’t really expect when she landed in this world in the first place. Kyrian soon got up again and started floating. She looked at him and blinked upwards, her wings spreading right after as they continued on their way towards Ravenhall.

It took them a couple more hours to reach the mountain chain and the city within. There was still some snow but at least the weather was much clearer up near Ravenhall.

“Wanna go back already or stay home for a while?” Ilea asked. The man shrugged in response, looking at her.

“You wanna stay home don’t you?” he asked.

“I do.” she said and smiled at him, changing into her leather armor. Kyrian just nodded and started flying again, this time towards her house. She’d finally get around to read at least a little bit again.

Edwin’s sword slashed through the neck of the kneeling man before him. Blood started exiting the wound before the body fell down, the head rolling a little further, its dead eyes staring into his. A moment passed before he looked up again and around the room. His old training hall. The man sighed

as he repressed the memories that floated up in the back of his mind, concentrating on the task at hand and the danger they were currently in.

Another scream filled the richly decorated hall, now joined by the corpses of trainers and nobles alike. ‘Slavers...,’ Edwin thought as he walked towards his companion. Maria looked into the woman’s face as her magic slowly removed more and more parts of her body, her hate filled eyes focused on the trainer’s face.

“You’re going to alert the whole city if you continue this.” Edwin said. A sudden burst of magic later, Maria threw the now heartless corpse to the side, a tear rolling down her face. She brushed it away and looked around the hall.

“What should we do with them?” she asked after a moment, motioning to a group of young children, not even in their teens yet. Their expressions were mostly dominated by terror as they pushed against the wall behind them, stumbling over each other. It had only been a couple minutes since the two had infiltrated the training grounds of the Redleaf family.

“Leave them, they know who we are anyway.” Edwin said. “We’re not here for them.” Maria nodded and suddenly jerked her head towards the stairs.

“Someone’s coming.” she said, magic flowing around her.

# Chapter 159 The Hunted

## Chapter 159 The Hunted

“Good thing they took so long.” Edwin said as he turned towards the stairs as well.

Two people were walking downstairs and entered the hall, looking around. A man looking to be in his late twenties, brown hair and a black coat. He looked at the corpses and then focused on Edwin, a grin forming on his face. His companion, a woman looking to be not a day older than twenty, wearing beautiful silver armor with a perfect face and black hair, ignored both the corpses and the two people standing in the middle of the hall.

“Brother, welcome back! It’s been too long.” the man said and opened his arms, magic flowing into the room. The corpses slowly started to move as the blood around them started swirling, their bones breaking with a sickening crunch as they rose up.

Edwin ignored the man and prepared his swords. He didn’t need to tell Maria how dangerous the two individuals were. They had discussed a possible encounter with enemies they wouldn’t be able to stand against. Considering their specializations it’d be hard to get away unscathed. A smirk came to his face as he prepared to fight. He worried too much.

“Hello Tiana.” Maria said as her magic condensed. The black haired woman bowed a little in response but didn’t say anything.

“Let us dance!” the man in the black coat said as the unnaturally standing corpses suddenly lurched towards the two intruders. Edwin chuckled to himself, which got him a look from Maria right before his skills activated. This wasn’t only his enemy’s domain.

He had grown up here. The first reanimated corpse with no head reached him as Edwin’s swords moved, his body one with his classes, his skills and his instinct. The blades slashed through the corpse with ease, cutting through its torso and legs before he twirled around the still moving flesh, only the momentum remaining as his enemy’s control was ripped away by his own magic. An eyebrow rose on the necromancer as Edwin’s blood magic settled in his bones and muscles, his step sure and heavy on the stone floor as he advanced, blades flashing as they reflected the candle light in the room.

Both the necromancer and Tiana vanished as the air around them rushed inwards where Maria’s magic had activated. Edwin didn’t see her anymore but he concentrated on his enemies as his blades slashed, his body dancing as blood sprayed through the room, each cut ending the movements of a corpse trying to get to him. The air froze before he teleported away, appearing again and slashing at the spikes of ice coming from his previous position.

Some of them came through and clashed against his defensive layer of blood magic. He knew Tiana’s magic wasn’t as simple as that, dropping the layer and teleporting away to see the explosive expansion of her ice magic as it cut into a corpse and the ground below, freezing flesh, bone and the very stone beneath.

It would be unwise to keep their fight in the training hall, there simply wasn’t enough space to have an ongoing battle with the ice mage. He rushed forwards and watched the woman hold up her hand, a rose forming between them. Edwin could see more roses around the woman but he rushed on as the rose before him suddenly vanished, in addition to another one to Tiana’s side. He reached her and his blades moved to the undefended spot on her right.

The impact of his blades was too early. Ripping out the blades he moved backwards as red projectiles smashed into the stone where he had just stood. On Tiana's side was a flowing mass of silvery liquid, two cuts slowly repaired themselves as he watched on, dodging more blood projectiles coming from the other man.

Maria had finished the rest of the zombies in the meantime, removing their arms and legs while Edwin had tested Tiana's defenses. The ice and apparently silver mage looked at his blades with interest as the silver remaining on them dripped to the ground below, sizzling into the stone. Metal mages of all kinds were rather rare and certainly dangerous but he had fought enough of them to be prepared for the most obvious tricks.

Good thing he was trained to be a blood enhancer in these very halls, Edwin thought as he whipped his blade to the side, removing the remaining silver from them. He noticed the smile on his face as four spears of blood closed in on him, making him dodge to the left. Expecting the spears to follow his movements, he teleported upwards to avoid the likely counter of Tiana that would wait behind the blood spears.

The air below him cooled, confirming his decision as he at his enemies. Maria was out already, he knew it because of the lacking void attacks in the last three seconds. The corpses were dealt with and she too understood the disadvantage they were in in the enclosed space. Tiana wasn't the real danger here and should Kyle stop fooling around, it would be a massacre down here. He locked eyes with the man, both of them with a smile on their faces, both for their own reasons.

They only had to get away and today would be a great loss for the house of Redleaf. Perhaps they should've killed the children as well but then again, what would be the difference between himself and his father? The moment passed as Edwin reached the highest point of his teleport, the momentum stopping as projectiles of ice and blood reached him. His teleportation skill activated once more and brought him not closer to his enemies but upstairs, signaling their intention of retreat.

The real fight would start now. Edwin started running, confused servants around him looking at the sudden commotion as a monster like scream



came from below, making the hairs on his neck and his arms stand up.

The night had nearly passed outside as he rushed into the beautiful garden surrounding the Redleaf training mansion in the outskirts of Virilya. It had taken days to find its location. Luckily one of the nobles they had hunted down had been responsible for delivering promising children to the estate. The forests and hills around the terrain had come back to him immediately as soon as they had reached it but the children were never allowed further out.

He stopped his run, feeling the heavy mana in the air around him and the feel it had. Running wasn't an option. No, they had to injure their hunters. Enrage them and then injure them. Edwin smiled at the thought of having his self proclaimed brother fail and his father rage. He calmed the shaking in his arms, his breathing steadying as he felt the power within himself and his surroundings. His eyes closed as he took a deep breath, feeling the air flowing through his hair.

Another monstrous scream resounded and he opened his eyes, the corpse of a servant flying out of the door, rolling on the floor a couple times before it came to a stop. Her stomach had been ripped open and her blood was staining the dirt road leading to the mansion. A moment later the hinges of the big entrance ripped apart, the wood splintering outwards, revealing the form of the transformed Kyle, his father's best hunter. 'Now let's see if we're truly ready for this.' Edwin thought as he locked eyes with the beast, the grip around his swords growing lighter, the weapons becoming one with his body.

Kyle advanced, his clawed hands digging deep into the dirt road and the field beyond as his three meters high form, now moving on all fours rushed towards its prey. Truly, a monster. Edwin stood his ground and watched the half wolf, half elk like beast close the distance in mere seconds by the sheer strength of its body. His own limbs started moving as he dashed towards the beast, watching as its clawed prank slashed at him with lightning speed.

Only a part of the arm suddenly vanished, sucked in by a small space in the middle of it. The half removed arm flopped forward, allowing Edwin to cut deeply into the side of his adversary. He moved backwards immediately, holding out his blades to block the second strike, the monster injuring itself on the blades as Edwin was blown backwards, his arms barely holding against the savage strike.

Landing, he watched Tiana fly upwards from behind the monster, a shower of ice spreading into the field, covering at least half of the huge space. Edwin moved backwards, dodging the spears and subsequent explosions of shards coming from the growing flowers. Kyle roared as some of the shards slashed into its flesh. The closest roses vanished into nothingness as Edwin ran through the field, away from the now frozen terrain. They wouldn't grow overconfident and while Tiana was almost unbeatable in a one on one fight in a tournament or a small space, avoiding her magic outside and getting away from her was possible.

A good thing that the two had either not worked together a lot or simply hadn't faced an enemy strong enough for them to learn to fight together efficiently. More shards of ice hurt Kyle as he ran after Edwin, making the sword dancer's smile grow.

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Ilea sprawled in her bed, yawning after a deserved two hours of sleep. She would've like to sleep more but her mind was set on improving her magic. The flight back with Kyrian had made her realize what potential power she was sitting on. Considering the reactions she had gotten from the people who knew about her Ash Creation skill, there really was no reason to ignore it any longer. It was nearly at 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20 as well after all. She didn't quite know what she had to do to actually use her 3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points in her

second class but getting more skills to the current maximum level certainly wouldn't hurt.

'What should I do after I reach the max level on all skills... Azarinth is nearly there already...', she thought and looked through her skills. Not being able to level her skills anymore would be frustrating but there really wasn't anything else she could do but to find stronger monsters or people to fight and kill to advance her levels. At least if she did want to improve.

Ilea looked at the books around her and sighed. There was nothing on the Azarinth class or her Inheritor class. Humans really should start sharing their knowledge more. The thought was interrupted by Kyrian walking upstairs and waving at her. He wasn't wearing his armor today, finally comfortable enough to put it down for a while.

"Good morning." he said, looking outside and smiling. Probably because it wasn't morning. "You look beautiful." the man added and stared at her.

"Are you perhaps here to inform me about a prepared meal?" Ilea asked, sitting up on the side of the bed and stretching.

"There is food, yes. I also wanted to ask if you wish to train together." he asked.

"Perfect and yes. Manipulation skills?" Ilea asked and received a nod before she blinked downwards, sitting on the table to eat. There were plates with cheese, cold meat, fruits, nuts and even tomatoes.

"Thanks." she said with a full mouth as he walked down to join her.

"It's your food." he said and shrugged, metal starting to float around him.

"You prepared it." she said, ash coming into existence around her. She started forming a table behind herself, the same size and form as the one she was sitting at. Afterwards she formed bowls and all the food that was on the real table.

“What you need is stability, not detail.” Kyrian said, a metal sphere rushing into the table of ash, pushing through and creating a path as it moved around to destroy the whole picture, stopping in front of Ilea’s face as she continued eating.

“I know.” she said. “Any tips on making it more dense? You don’t really have that problem with metal...”

“True, I don’t. I’m sure we can find some tips in Ravenhall. Fire or Wind mages are probably your best bet but I’d go for the latter, they actually have to make their magic more dense for it to work.” Kyrian explained.

“Wind magic... what if it’s just, feel the magic, feel the wind. I’m really not good with that stuff.” Ilea said and shook her head.

“Maybe it is. That’s how my magic started to manifest. I could feel the metal around me you know? Did you always have an ash related class?” he asked and Ilea shook her head, putting her legs up on the chair as she pushed her knees to her chest.

“I didn’t, no. I started with Fire.” she said, remembering her conversations with that fire mage in the Calys mine. She chuckled, remembering the name of the mine but not the name of the mage. She thought about the people she had met there for a moment.

“Daydreaming?” he asked, smiling at her as he ate a piece of cheese.

“Yes. The guy did tell me to feel the fire. I walked around burning myself with a torch for the remainder of that day...” she said, smiling at the memory.

“That’s one way to go about it. Fits you I suppose. High pain resistance?” the man asked.

“I do, took me a while. That wasn’t pleasant...” Ilea said and shivered. Burning alive was not something she’d rate high in a review of life experiences.

“Well then I think you should repeat that. Class evolution changed the Fire to Ash?” he asked.

“It did, yes. So just get ash around me and feel it? I don’t know. Fire at least did something.” she said.

“Real ash does as well. I mean yours is real as well but the way you create it is magical. Not the way one normally gets ash.” Kyrian explained, drinking from his mug.

“Since when are you a magic scholar.” Ilea asked.

“I’m getting better at reading.” he said after a moment of silence.

“You do? I haven’t taught you anymore...,”

“Cless. She’s... she’s good at explaining. And I don’t feel like an idiot with her.” he said.

“That’s great. I mean I hope I didn’t make you feel like an idiot.” Ilea responded.

“No you didn’t but you’ve been rather busy, in the demon realm and all. All I did was take care of Cless and killing demons here whenever I could.” Kyrian said.

“Now you can read without help?” she asked, eating a tomato. The man nodded which got a smile from her. “I’m proud of you.” she said.

Kyrian just looked into her eyes for over ten seconds before he smiled a little. “I don’t know how to react to that.” he said.

“You could say thanks.” she said and got up. “Now where did I put my lighter...,”

“Thanks then. There is one in the kitchen.” Kyrian said as he also got up. “I’ll get some wood up in the forest.”

“Thanks, I’ll join you outside in a moment.” Ilea said.

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Blood dripped down from his shoulder as he slowly closed the wound with blood magic. He wouldn't be able to hide for long. Explosions of ice rang through the forest as he again checked his shoulder. A good thing he had more than enough finesse in infections and poisons to counteract Kyle's downright disgusting claws. The necromantic curses didn't help. Edwin sighed as he meditated, regaining some of his strength.

The sun was already hanging rather high and the four of them had moved further out into the wildlands of the east, their game of cat and mouse leaving behind a path of frozen death and blood. Edwin rolled forward as massive claws ripped away the tree he was hiding behind, the man standing and turning around in a single motion as he regarded the massive monster of bone, flesh, fur and claws.

"I can smell you...", Kyle said in a low and grumbling inhuman tone. His breathing was heavy. Edwin was impressed the man had kept this form throughout the past hours but he didn't have this reputation for no reason.

He could smell the monster too, he could smell the festering blood of its hastily healed wounds inflicted from his blades, could smell the spittle falling down to the ground, its acidic odor as it burned through the first green of spring.

"I will tear you apart...", Kyle said again as Edwin rushed closer, his blades parried away by a massive arm. The small wounds had added up and Kyle had become more and more defensive as the hours moved on, Edwin not slipping up a single time and he didn't plan to start now.

‘She’s here...,’ he thought and dashed backwards, a lance of ice shattering into a thousand shards as it impacted the ground, the pieces spiraling and rushing towards him as he moved behind a tree, hearing the ice impact and cut through the old wood. He teleported further as the tree broke. As soon as Kyle had to give up his transformation, they’d make their escape. He had grown and he was glad that Maria had kept up. They had luckily had enough time to get used to fighting together after he had finally managed to break into the prison.

A roar resounded through the forest as he looked past the tree, seeing the bleeding monster lash out around it, tendrils of blood destroying the trees and the ground around it as a rain of ice came from above. He moved, dashing through the trees with his full speed, blood magic enhancing his movements as he focused on every noise and movement in his peripheral vision.

“He’s transforming back. Let’s move.” Maria appeared next to him and said. “I need a break.” she said and fell where she stood, her consciousness leaving as Edwin caught her and started running. His eyes narrowed as he started moving through the forest, not on the ground but on the trees, his steps improved by his blade dancer skills, leaving behind only the faintest traces of a touch, easily mistaken for a wild animal. It would take them a while to follow though he doubted either Kyle or Tiana had the required skills. Both were likely excellent trackers but neither blood magic, nor silver magic would work on them.

They’d have to use more conventional means to find them an Edwin doubted a skilled tracker in the Redleaf’s employ was an hour or less away. He had succeeded. He winced as his magic failed against the festering curse in his upper arm. It had to be removed, or there was a chance for them to track it.

# Chapter 160 Ashen Afternoon

## Chapter 160 Ashen Afternoon

Edwin stopped on a big stone and moved the unconscious Maria onto his left shoulder, pushing some mana into her to wake her up. He had no other choice.

“What... Edwin...,” the woman said as he unsheathed one of his swords. Moving his right arm towards his mouth, he bit down hard and slashed his blade upwards. Wincing at the pain, at least his bite didn’t cause any more of it as he used his blood magic to close the wound on his partially removed shoulder.

Dropping the arm on the ground, he looked to Maria who was barely awake, stroking his cheek as tears streamed down her face. She looked to the ground and activated her magic, the arm vanishing with a chunk of the ground and all the blood that had dripped down.

“Now s... sleep.” Edwin said and sheathed his sword, holding her with one arm as he continued his dash.

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Ilea felt the embers tearing at her skin, the heat merely a slight distraction as she held her eyes closed and concentrated on the feeling on her body. The ash was warm and comfortable, her Heat and Pain resistances making the torturous experience much simpler compared to the acquisition of her Fire Mage class.

Kyrian had looked for a cave with a metal vein inside to train his magic after they had cut down enough wood to burn ten or more bonfires for Ilea. She was lying naked and covered in the burning ash as she breathed in and out calmly, trying to feel the magic in the elements around her. It had taken her hours to even prepare the fire and now she was in the ash for at least as long. They had decided to build the bonfire in the forest half an hour away from her house to not arouse a monster's or person's suspicions. A big pile of wood was stacked ten meters away from the fire, neatly cut and placed by Kyrian whose metal magic really made the process as simple as one could wish for.

Ilea wasn't exactly spiritual but in this world, magic truly existed. That fact made it easier to justify her current position and not think of herself as some crazy cult member sacrificing themselves to the gods of fire and pain. Her resistances made it easier for her to concentrate on the magic, on the feeling on her skin and the itching she felt that wanted her to use her Manipulation skill to connect to the ash. She didn't allow it, wanting to understand the connection and the element beforehand.

It felt like the opposite and yet the same as her training with fire. More difficult as her body and mind wanted to simply touch the ash and move it around her, becoming the master of the element. And yet she wanted to understand it, just as she had forced herself to understand fire. Not its chemical or scientific composition, no, its magical nature. Something she was sure by now existed on earth as well, just to a much lower degree.

The way she had stared into the fire in a hearth, or the way the ocean made her feel, the waves moving up and down as they crashed into the earth and sand of the beach. The way they clashed against the boat in a fury and. She stopped her thoughts, concentrating again on the now as she tried to catch

that feeling again, the feeling that made her mana and spirit connect to the very elements around her.

It felt stronger. The feeling of fear and overwhelming power she felt when she looked out into the ocean was real, graspable and true. The feeling of a roaring flame, consuming houses and living beings alike, the feeling of lightning, coursing through her.

The feeling of embers, the last sparks of life burning away, glowing in a sea of gray and black flakes. The last remaining life before it returns to nature itself. Flakes of black and gray as it floats upwards, carried by the wind.

Ilea opened her eyes, her hand moving upwards into the air, the ash on her body trembling at the sudden magic released by her. Not the usage of her skills but raw magic that exited from her body as she accepted the elements around her. Its magical nature and unlimited potential. She smiled as the particles of ash danced a little on her body.

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

She stood up and lifted her arms, feeling the ash around her as it moved upwards, her connection to the element established as she allowed her magic to take over, to become one with the ash. She studied it with her Sphere, with the feeling in her magic as she held her eyes closed and the vortex of ash around her intensified, speeding up and cutting her body where it grazed her.

It had been a long journey to level her Manipulation skill and she truly felt like she had made a breakthrough now. She was at the highest point the skill would allow her to get, for now at least. Still she felt small, she felt that while her understanding had made a big jump, she was still just grasping at a sea of knowledge, a sea of power. Ilea understood then and there that in the long run, this would be her most powerful weapon and her most solid defense. The possibilities of her manipulation and creation skills combined meant the control of an element. Not the use of it, like her fire magic had been, it meant true control.

Time passed and Ilea felt her magic drain as she refused to activate her Meditation skill, allowing her body and mind to fully focus on the ash around her, as it cut into her body, the ground below and now even the trees further back. The stack of wood was covered in flakes, as were the trees and the snow still clinging to life in these high altitudes. An unknown time later, Ilea collapsed.

She coughed and started meditating, having lost the connection she had felt until but a moment ago. The ash that had been swirling around her fell, covering herself and the ground in a sea of gray and black. There was too much of it, way too much to come from the amount of wood she had burned. The answer lay in her mind as she checked the notification.

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19’*

‘Nearly there as well...,’ she thought and smiled before a shiver went through her. Not because of the cold. The connection to the raw magic and the element of ash was an experience incomparable to anything else Ilea had ever went through. Perhaps a spiritual awakening as she had seen portrayed in movies or books was the closest she could think of. She didn’t feel spiritual, nor did she feel enlightened, no Ilea felt powerful. She smiled as she held out her hands and made the ash rise once more, her control having increased a non proportional amount to the few levels she had gained.

There were things in this world not represented by numbers alone. Or perhaps numbers unseen? She asked herself but was happy non the less. Dale had taught her to trust in her skills more, to let them guide her. Perhaps this was similar. Still she had refused to use her skill while she was lying in the ash so her interpretation might be wrong. The ash still swirled and as Ilea lifted more and more of the element, she realized just how much there was around her.

The trees bent downwards by the sheer weight of it and the snow was gray instead of white for farther than her Sphere portrayed. In the midst of the gray vortex was Ilea, standing steadily as she ignored the small bleeding cuts on her body. In her hand was a sphere, a small black swirling sphere of

ash. More and more of the surrounding element joined the small sphere as it got darker and darker, its form solidifying more and more.

She didn't force it to become more dense, more solid, it felt to her as if she simply asked it to do so. The approach of her manipulation chanced from a forceful one, one that required her understanding, to a more passionate and trusting one. A weird feeling, especially now that she had come to accept the mathematical system in this world governed by skills, levels and stats. Again, she thought about the possibility of displaying emotions and feelings in numbers but ultimately gave up on it. She was neither an AI, nor was she a philosopher.

What she was, was a friend of ash. The thought was a little embarrassing, even to Ilea. Something near childlike but it was the closest she could describe the feeling as. The sphere in her hand was solid by now, easily mistaken for a black pearl or ammunition for a rifle. It was still around five centimeters in diameter, quite a big rifle that would be. She let the sphere become as small as possible before she opened a tunnel in the vortex around her, letting the little ball flash forwards.

She watched on with full attention and interest as the ball smashed into a tree with a thud. The vortex continued as the still naked Ilea walked through, moving the vortex to ignore her frame. The sphere was stuck in the tree, at least ten centimeters deep and to her surprise, still solid. This would easily be enough to kill a small animal or a human on Earth. And it was a ranged attack that used nothing but mana. Her bow, Ilea had learned, was a little inefficient to use in the midst of a fast paced battle. She needed time to summon it, to draw it and to shoot it. Of course with her necklace it wasn't as big of an issue but something like the spheres of ash would be preferable against an enemy as quick as that demon or Trian.

Now it was simply a learning process to become able to use them in the midst of fighting a battle. She'd fight Kyrian whenever they had the time. For now Ilea felt like she could advance her control or rather cooperation with the element quite a bit more, even though the skill wouldn't level again, at least until she could advance it to the third stage. Checking for third tier options left her with the expected result. None were ready to be advanced.

Maybe Dagon could help her with that. She decided to check out Ravenhall later and meet up with Claire as well. Maybe she already had some jobs prepared. For now she'd enjoy her little vacation but it wouldn't hurt to snatch the good missions when they were available.

Looking at the sphere of ash in the tree, Ilea pushed at it a little harder, starting to spin the sphere where it had gotten stuck in the tree. A minute later she found her sphere actually getting further, the scent of burnt wood spreading into the vicinity. It was a slow process but Ilea did manage to break through the tree ten minutes later, the sphere of ash coming out on the other end and floating back towards her. The possibilities were certainly unexplored, she thought and slowly reformed the sphere into a small spike.

It was harder to reform the object as it was already rather solid. She felt that this would change as her understanding grew, regardless of her actual skill level. While the potential of her manipulation was capped for the moment, she knew for a fact that she hadn't yet reached that cap in her practical appliance.

The range was another issue and Ilea decided to test it immediately, shooting the reformed spike forward with the highest speed she could muster right now. Her buffs at full power and her wings spread, she followed the projectile and found herself easily able to do so. A disappointment to the usage of her ashen magic yet a testament to her own power and speed. The spike slowed down after a while, Ilea having given up her control over it right after sending it out.

Still it moved for an impressive forty meters before noticeably dropping down and finally hitting the snow below. Ilea hovered it upwards again and spun it around with the power of her magic. One thing that was rather cool to her was the fact that she didn't have to move her hands to use her control. Neither did she have to shout out any ridiculous sounding skill names to make it work. 'It could be somewhat intimidating but *Ash and Ember Manipulation* doesn't have the right ring to it...', she thought about possible new names for her attack as she created ash around her, forming new spikes and comparing the process to the original one formed from a mix of magically and normally created ash.

It was the same, at least as far as she could tell. The feeling both her five senses and the Sphere of perception gave her, indicated no differences between the now five spikes. She did have to create a substantial amount of ash to form the rather dense spikes but it took her less than ten seconds to form one. Plus she could form all of them at the same time. Ilea tested a little and found that she couldn't form more than four of the same sized spikes in ten seconds, her Ash Creation skill limiting the process. Only forming one didn't reduce the time either as it seemed her Manipulation skill was the bottle neck.

It was not possible for her to push more ash into the single spike in the same time frame. Again, Ilea felt like this wasn't yet the limit and simple training and exercise could make her reach the actual cap of her skill.

Sitting down in the snow, Ilea sighed and lied down on her back. Arms moving to create a snow angel, she thought about all the growths she had managed to achieve in the past months. How many of her skills had yet to reach their actual cap. Putting her hands to her face, she put on some leather armor through her necklace. It wasn't the newest anymore. Looking down on it, she decided to get a new set soon enough. Maybe there were traders in Ravenhall as well. Ilea was glad that at least Kyrian had stayed with her. He'd be great to train with and gain some experience with all her skills, especially the ash related ones.

"I'm back and still alive." Aki commented, ignored as per the usual by the former healer.

Kyrian would be back again at her house when the sun would set. Flying upwards, Ilea looked back and found that she hadn't caused a forest fire yet, deciding that she'd bath in ash again tomorrow. Maybe later if Kyrian didn't show up, she after all had no idea how he could tell the sunset from the inside of a cave.

"Some breakthroughs with your ashen magic? Didn't think you'd EVER focus on that one." Aki said.

"Why the hell can't you be useful before I discover something....," Ilea mumbled but smiled, knowing the answer before it came.

“That would be terribly boring dear, wouldn’t it?” the dagger said as the two continued their way towards Ravenhall. The rest of the way in silence.

She did decide to keep the five spikes of condensed ash with her. They didn’t dissolve when she removed her control but after a while of travel Ilea found that they were crumbling a little. Storing them inside her necklace wasn’t possible either, likely because they were a magically touched element. Maybe if she put them into a box first, something to try in the city as well. If it was too much of a hassle, she’d simply create them on the go. Ten seconds wasn’t much, even in a dangerous fight. Summoning and opening a box was faster for sure but Ilea didn’t know for how long that would stay true.

She reached Ravenhall soon after, landing in the city directly. Repair works were in progress as mercenaries and soldiers of different specializations worked their literal magic to lift rubble, burn corpses and move stone. A squad of soldiers reached her just after landing, the leader with her hand on the sheath of her sword.

Ilea had her hood up and looked at the woman with a bit of a crooked head. ‘Ah yes. Where did I have it...,’

“You just landed right? State your name and business here.” the woman asked with a tense voice.

‘Didn’t we get a badge or something... all I have is this silver adventurer thing. I guess the armor is the usual tell of a Hand member...,’ Ilea thought as she looked through her necklace in her mind. She’d have to ask Claire about that as well. Being a member of a prestigious order and not able to identify as one is kind of useless. At least the soldiers were somewhat respectful at her high level. None of them could likely identify her, seeing their levels below one fifty.

“She’s with us.” a voice rang out from the top of a nearby building. A mage in black robes looked down on the group and continued his work right after.

“You’re... with the Hand then?” the woman asked, her hand still on the blade.

“Yea. Glad you didn’t attack.” Ilea answered, showing her smile below the hood. The woman gulped and let go of the blade, the others in the squad not looking much more relaxed than their leader.

“Cheers then.” Ilea said and walked off towards the center of the city, rather close from where she had landed.

“This job is killing me... one wrong word and we’re all dead...,” she heard the woman complain in a grumbled and quiet voice behind her.

“I heard a whole squad just vanished from the third company just yesterday...,” a man in the squad said. “... we’re bloody scouts for fuck’s sake...,” he finished and shook his head. Ilea wondered who they might’ve offended but having seen the power of the Shadow’s Hand and their warriors and mages when they faced the demon hordes, she could rather easily see some of them being offended enough to wipe out a squad of soldiers. Pricks were everywhere. At least not the whole order was full of them, she herself the shining example, the squad behind her alive and healthy.



# Chapter 161 #Economics

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Ravenhall looked a little better already. It had been a couple days but Ilea was still surprised at the progress. The Hand or the empire must've put up some rather good pay to entice all the workers that busied the streets. Not just soldiers and mercenaries, she noticed. Many of them of a level much lower than usual for the Scouts or the Shadow's Hand and their gear specialized for construction, not for adventuring or war.

Ilea reached the central government building a couple minutes later. It was busy. Much more than it had been the week before. The square was bustling with people going their way. A destroyed city with a mostly dead population combined with the funds to rebuild left a lot of economical opportunities. Ravenhall would stand again and the first people to realize that and invest would be the ones to profit the most.

Walking into the building, Ilea was glad to find that the Hand's leadership was still there. Thanks to her Sphere she didn't even have to ask anybody and simply blinked into Claire's office, putting Aki into her necklace an instant later. A nicely furnished room greeted her, with a big wooden table, shelves and a red and gold carpet, an intricately woven design woven into it. An oil lamp was burning on the table, unnecessary with the light outside but then again Ilea didn't know how good Claire's eyes were.

“Oh hello Ilea. Back already?” Claire asked, looking up from the document in front of her. One of many that cluttered her table. With her spherical

perception, Ilea could tell there was an order to all the paper. Much more than one would assume looking onto the scene from the middle of the room.

“Yea, put our demonic friend in good care and even wiped the floor with a sparky bitch. The worst kind.” she said, getting a stare back from Claire.

“Well, you do you Ilea. What can I do for you, you can probably see that I’m rather busy. Anybody else I’d have already blown out of the room.” Claire said with a smile. The scorch marks on the floor, hidden below the carpet, and the neatly repaired window were proof enough of the woman’s words.

“Ah yes, well there are a couple things and I won’t be busying you for long. Any idea where I can find Dagon? I can’t see him in this place. Are there merchants in town who sell leather armor or maybe there’s a store open already? Ah and are there good jobs in already, me and Kyrian would love to get some good ones while they’re fresh. And can I have a badge or something? I don’t want to wear my black armor all the time. It’s kinda busted anyway.” Ilea monologued while walking around a little, picking up random documents and books before placing them back neatly into the exact same spot where she took them.

Claire listened intently and answered as soon as Ilea stopped speaking.

“Dagon is either here or in his library, he got rather angry when he found out some of the Mind Weavers tried to get in there. There are merchants though no shops have opened yet, let me get to that after I answer you. Out on the square or near the northern gate you should find what you need.” she paused, signing the paper in front of her and putting it into a pile.

“We have an all time low for jobs at the moment. Everybody’s busy with the demons and people have just received news that the Hand still exists. Most places I assume think Ravenhall is destroyed and the Shadow’s Hand gone with it. Come back in a couple weeks and I should be able to get you some good things. Many of our members are helping with the rebuild and trust me, the pay isn’t worth their ability. Better for the city though. And for your last question. You should have a badge. We all got one. Did you lose it? It’s a black metal with, you guessed it. A hand on it.” Claire finished, looking at Ilea as she leaned back in her chair and sighed.

Ilea just shrugged in response. She had no idea where hers had gone, not remembering receiving one in the first place.

Claire stood up and got something out of a pocket in her pants. “Here, take mine. I’ll get a new one.” she said and handed Ilea a black piece of metal. “Touch it while it’s on top of my hand and accept. Otherwise you’ll get burned.” Claire said and showed her hand. Ilea did as was asked and got a noise in her mind in response.

*‘ding’ ‘Would you like to claim [Shadow Badge – High Quality]?’*

‘Yes I would, thank you oh dark one.’ Ilea thought, hoping that if there was an entity in control of this world and its magic, it understood sarcasm. If not, it would have to rip it away from Ilea’s cold corpse.

*‘ding’ ‘You have claimed [Shadow Badge – High Quality]’*

“Thanks Claire, I owe you. How much does one cost?” Ilea asked the woman who slowly walked to the window. A sudden feeling of spreading magic made Ilea alert, looking around the room and beyond as her buffs heightened.

“Don’t worry, it’s me.” Claire said, looking out the window before she turned around, a sly smile on her face. “The necklace you can have for one question of mine.” Claire said, holding up a finger.

“Sure, you can ask whatever, I can’t promise an answer to everything though.” Ilea said, intrigued by the weird behavior of her friend. She walked behind the desk and sat down on the comfortable leather chair. ‘I have to get one of them too...,’ Ilea thought and smiled at the small twitch she could see on Claire’s mouth.

“How much gold do you have?” Claire asked, making Ilea turn with her chair towards the woman.

“How much gold? Why?” she asked in return.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me. The room is sealed, even you wouldn’t be able to hear through this.” Claire said.

“Well if there’s anybody I trust with information on my money it’s you. Lemme check... I have 44 gold, 29 silver and a whole two copper coins...,” she said, watching the smile on Claire’s face flatten a little and the spark in her eyes vanish.

“... not counting the 2325 gold coins I found in a dwarven mine. Don’t worry, they didn’t belong to anybody anymore.” Ilea added with a dumb smile. She could see Claire actually getting close to throwing a runed stone towards her. The woman managed to stop herself though, likely because of the documents on the table.

“You... fuck.” Claire uttered but the tone implied a different feeling. “Ilea, this is just between me and you. You saw all the people outside. This city is a gold mine but it won’t be for long. The power, especially economic is a complete void. Most of the Hand’s members are too occupied with finding new jobs or their funds too far away to make deals right now and the imperial soldiers are simply not allowed to. Most of the rich merchants are yet to come here and the empire itself is too slow in its bureaucracy to allow fast acquisitions of their own. I’m sitting at the source and would be able to push through a ton of deals but I don’t have any gold Ilea. Damn I came here to get gold and influence, now I just lack the former.” Claire explained in a rush, nearly running over her own words. She was excited to say the least.

“I won’t let you get out of this room without at least lending me a couple hundred gold coins. Do you have them in your house or somewhere hidden? I can’t squander this opportunity so I ask you to help me. I’d get you favorable jobs and anything you need from the Hand as is within my power. Personal advice or work is included as well of course, as is anything else where I can be of service. Anything.” she stressed the last word, looking deeply into Ilea’s eyes. This was a woman ready to do business, at all cost.

“Claire, as much as I’d like to see you naked in my bed, me and Kyrian are becoming a sort of, well thing.” she said, Claire just looking at her confused before her eyebrows rose.

“I didn’t mean that...,” she started but Ilea stopped her with a gesture, walking to one of the shelves. Next to it was a box with clothes. She took them out and placed them on the floor before she summoned exactly 2325 gold coins into the box, nearly filling it to the brim. Claire walked a step closer but stopped herself, her eyes fixated on the gold before Ilea closed it.

“I want you to take over as much of the city as you can. Understand me?” Ilea said, the woman looking at her dumbfounded. “Prioritize restaurants and any establishments that have to do with food, obviously. Then go for smithing, clothing, bed stores and anything else you deem useful or economical.” Ilea started, walking a couple steps in the room.

“Anything you can buy or build up. I trust you with this gold. I want Cless to have a school again where she can learn about the world. I want the guard and adventurers from around here to be equipped well and I want the whores to be treated right. Invest in political influence as well if you can. Unions for workers, is that even a thing here?” Ilea asked looking at the woman sideways who just nodded.

“Good. Stay economical though but you can invest long term. You know all that stuff better than me anyway, don’t do anything stupid and I want personal reports from you whenever I come back here. Make sure that the bosses and staff know of Lilith.” Ilea said and smiled. She really liked the idea of being this unknown owner of damn near a whole city. Claire seemed to like the idea just as much as her grin started to mirror Ilea’s.

“Everything to be co owned by me and you, contracts signed by both of us. Twenty percent you, eighty me?” Ilea asked.

“God you’re terrible at this. Good thing you have me. Ten for me, let this be the only horrible decision made with this gold.” Claire said, shaking her head as she started writing on a fresh piece of paper. “Come back in two hours.” she said, focused on the paper as Ilea shrugged “Even less sleep than...,” Claire grumbled before Ilea blinked out again.

She moved the new badge in her hand and looked at it. ‘Second necklace?’ she asked herself but then simply made it vanish into her existing one. There likely wasn’t frequent use for it anyway. Aki was summoned again

but didn't complain this time around. Jumping down the building, she bought some food nearby and walked around. 'Was twenty percent that much?' she asked herself as she checked the armors placed on a wooden table. The merchant was talking with another man while Ilea looked at the goods.

There was no set of leather armor that would fit her well so she continued her search. Ilea didn't find what she was looking for in half an hour of browsing but she did purchase a small wooden box, perfectly sized to store around twenty of her ashen spikes. Putting the five she still had with her inside, she successfully stored the box in her necklace.

Removing it again, Ilea found the spikes completely crumbled already. "Fuck. Well this isn't gonna work..." Ilea grumbled to herself and made the box vanish again. At least she had a nice box now.

Viscera looked spotless compared to the rest of the city and it seemed many of the Hand's members had prioritized its cleanup. Most of the previously damaged architecture had been repaired and the only visible signs of a battle were small scratches and scorch marks on a couple of walls. The elevators had been repaired as well and Ilea found herself in Dagon's domain soon after.

The man was nowhere to be found and even with her Sphere, she couldn't see him. Hunter's Sight activated and Ilea looked around again. This time she noticed a couple of things. One, that her senses were a little off in this room. She could feel the faint presence of magic. Her Sight and Sphere combining, Ilea could make out several traps in the room, all of them not active it seemed. She didn't know why and walked to an inconspicuous part of the room where she touched the wall, both her Sphere and Sight telling her that something was wrong with it.

Runes lit up on the wall, a complex magical construct activating before a beam of light shot out from the middle of the wall, burning through Ilea's chest and the wall behind her. She blinked out of the still active beam of scorching light immediately, her leather armor destroyed and a bleeding hole in her chest. The beam had nearly immediately burned through, activating too fast for her to react.

The second stage of pain tolerance was activated and Ilea used her Hunter Recovery to start healing the massive wound. The spell had taken around thirty percent of her health. Not as dangerous as the poison trap but then again her Heat Resistance and ability to blink out probably helped quite a bit. She was surprised that she could still stand and function as several of her vital organs had been completely destroyed. Additionally she had only lost thirty percent of her health. Losing one's heart should probably count for more but she assumed it would, if the wounds stayed uncared for. The bleeding alone would kill everyone not able to heal immediately.

*'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5'*

The wall opened up and an armored Dagon with his metal tome stepped out, magic flared around him as he prepared to strike. The sight before him stunned the man as the book was lowered. "Ilea! By the dragons what have you done!" he uttered, putting the book onto the table and walking up to her but the woman stopped him.

"I'm fine, just give me a minute." Ilea said and summoned the remaining tureen clothing she usually wore under her juggernaut armor. It was pretty beaten up as well but at least covered her chest. Dagon didn't get to see much other than burnt skin and well, the absence of a chest. The wounds slowly healed, slower than usual Ilea noticed. The beam seemed to have something that acted similar to Kyrian's curse magic. Additionally all the veins had been scorched and rebuilding a complete heart wasn't the simplest thing, even for her recovery.

Still just over a minute later Ilea rolled her shoulders before she summoned the destroyed leather armor. "Care to replace this?" she asked, smiling at the man.

"Care to re... you ignorant fool... do you know how much that spell... how did you sur...," she had caught him at a lack of words, uncommon to say the least for the head librarian of the Shadow's Hand. The man sighed heavily and walked behind his desk, sitting down on the massive chair as he removed his helmet.

“How did you even find the wall? How did you survive? Your recovery is incredible... even for a high end blood mage or dedicated healer that would be difficult to do. The pain alone should’ve rendered you immobile, in a complete state of shock. The spell has mana draining and recovery stopping properties as well. A masterpiece of runic magic. And a high quality mana crystal destroyed. Any idea how rare those are?” Dagon asked in quick succession as he opened one of the drawers in his desk, getting out a bottles and two glasses.

“About as rare as that one I suppose?” Ilea asked, motioning to the bottle and getting a chuckle from the man. “Or this?” she asked again and summoned the high quality mana crystal she had gotten in the demon realm.

“You cursed demon.” Dagon said and closed his eyes.

“I thought the spell should put me in a state of shock, not you.” she said. “Care to help me with a couple things? Take the crystal as repayment for fucking with your runes. I was just looking for you.” she said.

“Looking for me. You’re not the first who found that wall but you’re the first one stupid enough to fuck with a runic formation this complex. Why would you do such a thing? No, don’t answer that one please. My headache was strong enough already.” Dagon said, uttering the last bit to himself.

“Do you have more of those crystals? Most of mine have been drained because of the mind weavers trying to get in here.” Dagon said, having calmed down a little.

“I only have medium quality ones. Wanna trade?” Ilea asked as she looked at him.

“Sure, information or whatever else you need.” the man said as he returned to his normal self, pouring two glasses of the whiskey, going by the smell and color.

Ilea took her glass and leaned on his table sideways, a little annoyed that there wasn’t another chair. Perhaps she should keep one in her necklace as well. “I won’t answer the previous questions. Trade secrets and all. Now



that you destroyed my leather armor I need more. The Hand has a stock in the training halls? I'll just take a bunch if that's alright." Ilea said and took a sip. It was good, very strong though, surprising even her. The taste was likely lost on her but she wouldn't slap away the gesture of him pouring her the drink.

"Sure, take however many you need." Dagon said. "That's still for the high quality crystal. I'm sorry you got hurt, I can be a little paranoid at times." the man said but Ilea shrugged it off.

"It's alright, I got some resistance levels out of it." she said and got a nod from him before he took a sip of his drink.

"Is that all you needed?" he asked.

"No, some other things." Ilea said and summoned a mana crystal of medium quality.

# Chapter 162 Contracts, a Guide to Bland Titles

## Chapter 162 Contracts, a Guide to Bland Titles

“Alright, first thing. I have a third tier skill point in my second class, can’t use it though. Why?” Ilea asked as he took the crystal.

“Normally you need five skills in the class to be the maximum level before you can unlock a third tier. As soon as you do that you’ll have to have five again for the next one.” Dagon said and Ilea nodded. She had two so far at the maximum level but many more were very close. So it wouldn’t take long.

“Why normally?” she asked after looking through her skills.

“Well there are outliers from time to time. I’ve heard many different things over the years. Level twenty skills that would simply advance to the third tier, skipping the second entirely. Classes giving two third tier skill points at level two hundred and one specific case where no third tier points were rewarded even though five of the class skills were at second level twenty. It’s incredibly rare, so much so that I’ve only ever read about them but the sources seem trustworthy. Just know that I believe some abnormalities might exist. Specific classes perhaps or hidden requirements.” the man explained.

“Interesting. Well I’ll find out one way or the other I suppose. Ever heard of the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class? I’m paying for the answer and anything related with the name of it should it be unfamiliar to you.” Ilea continued.

“No, I haven’t. An Ash Wielder evolution then?” the man asked and Ilea nodded. “Care to share the requirements?” he asked and Ilea shrugged. Knowing about the requirements didn’t really change how difficult it was to obtain.

“Can I somehow find that information again because I don’t remember all of it.” she said.

“You should be able to focus on the class for the additional information you received when it evolved.” the man said, poised to start writing, his tome open. Ilea nodded and recited the information from her mind.

“You have three resistance skills in the second stage? I would be very interested to find out more about them if you’re willing to share.” Dagon said, his hand quivering a little as he finished writing down Ilea’s information.

“First answer the question, I’ll think about it.” she said.

“Let me check then. There are a couple mentions of classes with the name of Inheritor in them but the records are not conclusive. The sources are stories and songs, nothing from someone I or a predecessor actually met. All sources speak of a specific element and its destructive capabilities wielded by a single man or woman. Two of them mention the creation and control of said element specifically, one talking about a man imprisoned in the highest mountains, covered in ice. Yet still he manages to spark a flame strong enough to burn his way out through the runed chains and walls. It ends with him facing a dragon in battle, matching the legendary creature’s flame.” Dagon paused for a moment before he turned the page on his tome.

Ilea was quite sure none of that had been written on that page but she wasn’t about to question the librarian’s magic. “I’m sorry, it seems to be a rather rare thing but I don’t doubt some high leveled elemental mages have obtained similar classes. At that level it’s simply quite rare for them to share

it with anybody else but their pupils, family or their order.” the man said, shaking his head.

“Well that brings me to the next thing. I’ve reached the second stage and level twenty in many skills already but I am pretty sure that I’m not using them to their fullest potential. Am I just dreaming?” Ilea asked.

“No, even I still discover new depths to the skills I’ve long since maxed out. The level simply sets a hard cap on your skills but this is actually studied and known rather well. At least in the Shadow’s Hand. Most people don’t reach the maximum efficiency long after reaching the maximum level. There are specific records of mages with the exact same skills testing them against each other, objects and other... well subjects.” Dagon said. “The mages with more experience, not the leveling kind, usually had better results. Sometimes clever ways to use the spells enhanced them as well. The same applies to melee combat but it’s harder to measure there.”

“If two master swordsmen face each other, both at the maximum of their skill level. One will still come out on top, wouldn’t they? If you would assume that the maximum skill level meant a specific ability, then it would be a tie always. The same applies to magical abilities, elemental spells for example. There is more than raw power and potential. My theory is that much of this is also governed by numbers though we cannot access them.” Dagon explained rather thoroughly. Ilea nodded as he pretty much confirmed her assumptions.

Her skill levels would stagnate for a while it seemed, at least the ones already maxed but using them wouldn’t be stagnation after all. The world wasn’t quite as simple as some of the games she had seen back on Earth, at least when it came to the details.

“I’ll tell you about the second stage of Lightning Resistance then.” Ilea said and smiled.

“There are records on it but it would be nice to get another confirmation.” Dagon said and she obliged.

“... that’s all that I can reasonably explain about the creation and manipulation of elements. I don’t think much of it applies to ash but maybe it helps a little.” Dagon finished the lengthy explanation, having cost Ilea five mana crystals.

It seemed the manipulation of different elements, be it light, shadow, sunlight, fire, water or earth, they all held their intricacies. All records were different, different mages talking about completely different approaches, feelings and strategies. Dagon had concluded that the advanced stages of element manipulation were intrinsically individualistic, reflecting the mage’s personal connection, experiences and the flow of their mana.

“So basically, find your own way?” Ilea asked, a little annoyed that that was all that came out of the over an hour long discussion.

“Yes and no.” Dagon said. “Test the examples I’ve given you, perhaps some might fit you, perhaps you will as you say, find your own way. I’m interested in your approach though so come back if you advance more. The way you learned to be a fire mage has never been confirmed but I trust you as a source.” he added and wrote down something in his tome. Ilea caught a glimpse of the words vanishing after being written.

“Oh I did do it by burning myself. Having a healer nearby is elementary to be sure.” she said and smiled. Talking to Dagon had helped her in some way. She knew that at least she wasn’t likely to be wasting her time working on her ashen skills even though they’d soon hit the max level currently possible. Additionally there wasn’t some way to do it the proper way.

Well there probably was but the internet didn’t exist here and if someone died testing their methods, well there was no respawn. At least she was pretty sure there wasn’t.

“Hey Dagon, are there resurrection spells or skills?” she asked suddenly, summoning another mana crystal.

“Hmm, that’s a tricky one. There are stories of healers who could recreate near completely destroyed bodies. There are somewhat reliable sources telling of recoveries a couple hours after heads were removed, bodies nearly completely burnt or drowned. We don’t know of any specific classes or spells that could achieve such a thing but what at least all sources have in common, including the more unreliable ones, is that the recovered person loses a lot of their personal power.” the man finished.

“You mean levels, skill levels or whole classes and skills?” she asked and the man shook his head.

“No records, sorry.” he said. The man didn’t know as much as Ilea had hoped he would.

“Alright. Well my time is up, at least you know your rune is working.” she winked at the man and got up.

“Not well enough apparently.” he said, lifting his glass to her and finishing the drink.

Ilea strolled through Viscera and summoned Aki after storing him for the duration of the visit. She wanted to keep at least some of her personal information away from the dagger as she still didn’t know anything about his origins. He didn’t talk much either, their relationship having stagnated in the past months due to their ironically unspoken agreement of silence.

“Hey Aki, how are you doing?” she asked as she exited the Shadow’s Hand headquarters and entered the city.

“In an emotional mood are we?” the dagger asked and she just shrugged.

“Mate we don’t know each other very well for the fact that we’ve been traveling together for half a year.” Ilea said and nodded to a group of three

Hand members who greeted her. The dagger waited until they had passed and answered.

“I don’t exactly feel trusted if you put me away every time you talk about anything deeper than your bloody porridge.” Aki said and Ilea stopped, unsheathing the dagger and looking at him.

“It’s been pretty busy in the past six months. Plus I haven’t exactly made the best experience with trusting people for no good reason.” she said.

“You trust your team mates. And I’m not people, I’m metal.” the dagger argued. “I do enjoy the ride though so this is fine for me, better by bloody miles compared to sitting next to a dusty skeleton for a thousand years.” a chuckle came from the dagger.

“I’ve fought with them you know, trained with them. Makes it a little easier. Maybe it’s hard to trust you Because you are metal. Then again there’s little reason to mistrust you either. Except you’re something like the one ring, corrupting all.” Ilea joked and continued her walk.

“I’m no one ring, whatever that may be. Maybe there is some manipulative purpose imbued in me but I don’t see how that would be a problem for you.” the dagger said.

“Fuck, I forgot the leather armor.” Ilea said and turned around. She didn’t quite know how to handle the dagger. Sure, he would enjoy the ride and she didn’t think he had any evil intentions with her but it felt more like a colleague than anything else. She didn’t mind him and neither did he mind her.

Ilea reached the training halls soon after and went to get a couple sets of leather armor from a storage room. Nobody was guarding anything, there was even another member casually looking at some of the swords. There was nothing special down here for anybody at their level, nothing they couldn’t buy with a somewhat small investment. Ilea got three sets of fitting armor, which would probably cost around one to two gold coins in a shop.

Thinking on it, she would have to be a little more frugal now. With her near infinite wealth invested, her actual cash was reduced to 44 gold. Still plenty to go around and she had a house and enough food to probably last her a year or two. And she could hunt. Ilea shrugged at the thought, actually glad that her money will be able to help build up the city again. Plus she made a friend very happy, Claire would be busy enough with her responsibilities at the Shadow's Hand but now she had a hobby as well.

“What if I can become useful in some way.” Aki said suddenly as the newly clad Ilea walked out of the headquarters again.

“I mean you're my pocket knife.” Ilea said and made her way towards the government building.

“Yea but you don't exactly fight with daggers or knives. With your ashen shit you probably won't be needing your bow for much longer either.” Aki said.

“Well what do you have in mind? Any skills you didn't mention? You managed to burn my hand a little when I first met you but that won't add a whole lot to my arsenal.” Ilea asked as they reached the building, getting some glances from people who overheard. “Let's talk later.” she said. “Gonna store you again.” she added as she blinked into Claire's office and made Aki vanish.

“Oh finally. Welcome back, here's the contract. Let me get you through it so you can sign. I've already prepared seventy four purchase contracts that I need you to sign with your mana and signature.” Claire started talking immediately, sorting the papers in front of her.

“Isn't that a little much. I mean it's a bunch of gold but seventy four shops? I assume it's shops.” Ilea asked.



“Shops, houses, inns, streets, land, also in other cities nearby and further away. I don’t plan to sit on this but you’ll have to give me time. Plus not all of these will come through, this is simply because you’ll be gone to who knows where soon enough and I won’t be able to reach you anymore. Now come, sit down.” Claire said.

Surprisingly it only took forty five minutes for her to go through the main contract and explain the gist and setup of all the purchases. Ilea waved her off on the third one already, telling her that she should do as she thought best before she read and signed all the purchase documents. It was impressive that Claire could create so many documents in the little time.

“I’m so excited to start Ilea. Thank you so so so so much for giving me this opportunity.” Claire was brimming with joy while having a scary look in her eyes. Ilea wasn’t sure if she’d invested in a super villain. The thought of her own lair like house near the ocean made her relax though, she already was one.

“Thank the Taleen for their contribution.” Ilea said with a smirk.

“Yea but I mean you went there and got it out. Do you think I would’ve managed that?” Claire asked and Ilea thought back on the Centurions and the green fire, then there was the acid coming up in the dark hall. Maybe not. She wiggled her hand in an uncertain gesture.

“Exactly. Next time though you offer at most 15 percent for the manager. I made it 30 because I’m your friend.” Claire said proudly, lecturing Ilea.

“How does that make sense?” Ilea asked but smiled.

“You can’t be trusted with too much gold.” the woman said. The contract included that as soon as 250 gold coins was reached in winnings, all additional money earned could be reinvested in new projects. Ilea was to return sometimes to sign new projects but should the contracts and the

purchases be similar enough to a previously signed purchase, Claire was allowed to do everything on her own. She basically had full control other than going completely against Ilea's wishes and having the buffer of the 250 gold coins.

"Well then I hope you have fun with this, I'll be back training. Don't forget to do that either, if you find any time. I might visit again soon. When do you think the jobs will come in?" Ilea asked.

"Come back in a week and I'll have some ready for you. Two weeks might be more reasonable for better paying missions but I doubt you do it for the money. I'll look for dangerous targets in hard to reach places." Claire said and sighed, glad she put in the death clause wherein Ilea's half would be split between Kyrian and Claire. It would be a bureaucratic nightmare to explain a suddenly dead partner.

"See you then." Ilea said and blinked out of the room, glad that was finally done. Claire would've done well on Earth. She did well even here. Shaking her head, she walked out into the square and stretched, the hood of her leather armor up, making her a rather unimpressive figure other than her identification that outed her as a level 224 warrior.

"That's her I think, new armor but yea. I'm pretty sure that's her." A soldier nearby said while pointing at Ilea. He looked away and gulped as soon as she looked his way, surprised that she could hear him from the distance and with all the noise going on in the square.

The suns were setting, their last rays breaking through the cloudy horizon as a figure in light armor and a dark hood nodded to the soldier before walking over towards Ilea.

She looked at the figure with interest, noting the simple short sword on his waist and the casual confidence he held himself with. A rogue at level one twenty. At least he wasn't likely to be here for a fight.

"I have a delivery to make for a black haired and blue eyed member of the Shadow's Hand." the man said.

“That’s oddly fitting isn’t it? I know of at least three people fitting that description.” Ilea said, knowing of none.

The man chuckled in response and put his hands together. “Well I have two additional descriptions that should set you apart, at least if that soldier is to be believed. That is black wings of ash.” he said and smiled.

“Well I’m not gonna show you anything here.” she said and he nodded respectfully.

“Reasonable of you. Then the second piece of information I received. It stated that you would be able to find me.” he said and walked off, his figure suddenly shrouded in a mist of shadow. Ten more meters and he vanished. Ilea knew that he had teleported away as he was still in her Sphere’s range.

‘A game of tag then. Or a trap. Well either way I’m intrigued.’ she thought and followed the man as quietly as she could. He had moved below the city and into the vast system of underground hallways and sewers.

# Chapter 163 Bad News

## Chapter 163 Bad News

Ilea followed as quietly as she could for the next five minutes. The man tried not to touch anything and teleported several times while masking his scent and presence in some way. He was good, certainly but Ilea found it hard to even compare him to Eve. The woman had taught her to look for even the slightest disturbances in her enhanced perception and Ilea's Sphere was nothing to scoff at.

When the man finally stopped and leaned on a wall, Ilea appeared right next to him. His relaxed composure was broken immediately as his short sword flashed her way. Ilea's arm moved and the blade was deflected a split second later by the leather bracer, the angle not allowing the blade to cut into it. She moved her torso and head to the right, the blade passing harmlessly past her shoulder before she moved her left arm upwards again, catching his hand and gripping tightly.

"Wait! Wait..." he said, gulping hard as the tension in his arm lessened. He hadn't meant to strike at her, of that Ilea was sure. A grin was on her face because the situation meant he hadn't at all expected this to happen.

"You don't deliver to a lot of Hand members, do you?" Ilea asked, letting go of his hand. She could sense nobody else in the vicinity, so it seemed the man was really just a delivery guy.

"I do from time to time..." he said, wincing as he sheathed the sword again with his injured arm. Ilea would heal him again depending on how this

exchange would go. She did think his reaction was the right one, as her approach had been incredibly aggressive. Still he had attacked her.

“None have found me this quickly so far. Not that many had to try at all. It’s easier to identify a red eyed man as big as a bear with four swords on his back than somebody like you.” the man explained. “I’ll still have to see those wings.” he said and looked at her.

“Really? Seems a bit risky to ask for something like that so far away from people. What if I decide to just take whatever you have?” Ilea asked with a joking tone.

“I don’t have it on me. The reputation of a high class delivery service wouldn’t quite be the same if I let myself be intimidated.” the man said, Ilea feeling the tension in his body. His heart rate was accelerating and with the second stage of her Hunter’s Sight skill she could feel he wasn’t at ease at all.

“Good acting.” she said with a smile and activated her ashen wings, levitating a little over the ground while they flapped lazily behind her. The man gulped and nodded.

“Alright, follow me then.” he said and vanished, deeper underground. Two floors further down and a hundred meters away, the man activated a hidden rune under some rubble. Magic activated and a letter appeared on the ground.

“It’s for you. The seal makes the letter dissolve after thirty minutes once you open it. If you don’t trust me you can have it examined by a rune mage around here. I’d pay the cost for such an endeavor should you choose that.” the man said, still a little uneasy. His voice and face of course gave nothing away.

“I won’t kill you man, stop worrying.” Ilea said and got the letter. “Do I need to pay you?”

The man opened his mouth but quickly closed it again, probably not wanting to take the risk of trying something stupid. “H... How could you

tell?" he asked, not the thing Ilea assumed at first.

"Heartbeat and a certain skill I have. I'm not sure if you could ever fool that one." Ilea said and the man nodded.

"Thank you and no, I've already been paid. I'll leave now if you'll allow it." he said and Ilea nodded, the man vanishing immediately after the gesture concluded. She felt a bit bad. Ilea only wanted to fuck with him a little, not scare the shit out of him.

'Comes with the power I suppose...', she thought and blinked upwards, back to Claire's office immediately.

"Back already?" the woman asked. "Second thoughts?" she asked.

"No, here for a small favor. Can you tell me what the rune on this does?" Ilea asked, handing Claire the letter. The woman looked at it for barely two seconds and handed it back.

"High end delivery hmm? It destroys the letter within thirty minutes of opening it. Of course you could write it down after reading it but then there's nothing to deliver. Most of these have a mana signature from the sender so you'd be able to tell if it was forged." Clarie explained.

There was quite a bit more thought put into something like this than Ilea had assumed. So the man could've simply fooled her and forged the letter. Good thing she asked Claire. "How do I tell from whom the signature is?" Ilea asked.

"If you've ever felt their mana it's usually simple. But you do have to know from whom it is, otherwise it's hard to tell." the woman said and Ilea nodded.

"Alright, thanks. Sorry for bothering you." Ilea said and bowed a little.

“You’re going to make me rich, come whenever you need anything.” Claire said and smiled, copying Ilea’s gesture. They said their goodbyes again before Ilea blinked upwards. She had everything from Ravenhall for now and decided to go train some more with her ash.

First things first though, she got the letter and opened it as soon as she was far enough out of town for nobody to bother her. A bunch of wild direwolves ran away at her approach. She hadn’t seen any so close to the city but the demons must’ve fucked with the food chain and territories around here.

The enchantment activated immediately as she opened it and got the paper out. There was an identical enchantment on the paper itself that was activated as well.

*Dear Friend*

*I do hope you don’t think me dead, a bunch of demons couldn’t manage such a thing. Keep your mouth shut though or I’ll murder you in your sleep, if such a thing is even possible.*

*I wouldn’t contact you if it wasn’t somewhat urgent. As I’ve been looking for an organization called the Golden Lily, I’ve stumbled on some rather worrying information regarding a “friend’s” precious family. Sparky you call him I believe. They have all been killed though I do not know for sure who was behind it and why. Be Very careful should the previously mentioned organization be involved.*

*This business is neither for you, nor for the others but I did owe it to all of you to at least inform you.*

*E.*

Ilea's emotions changed drastically while reading the letter. Immediately knowing it was Eve who wrote the letter, she smiled but the information coming after had quite the opposite effect. She needed to find Kyrian and go find Trian, immediately. Her buffs activated to the max as soon as she came to the last part of the letter, feeling a little bit of mana within. It felt like Eve and she knew for sure now that it was her.

Rushing over the forests, the air clashed against her face as her eyes steeled. Her vacation would sadly have to be cut short. Trian talked little about his family but she knew one thing for sure, it was the most important thing to him. Whoever did this would pay. Eve, of all people, mentioning that Ilea be careful was especially worrying. She just hoped Trian hadn't gotten in over his head already. Ilea didn't know his family but she did know him.

Coming up on her house, Ilea blinked inside and checked. Kyrian was nowhere to be found but she did pick up his scent. Hunter's Sight activated, she rushed outside and followed the trail. She was much slower but it would be stupid to rush into this alone.

The trail led her up the closest mountain, her Sight allowing her to follow the small traces of the man. It was a good thing he had left just earlier that day, otherwise not even Ilea could've found him, he was airborne after all.

Finally, Ilea found a cave entrance, showing more visible signs of someone entering. Her target to be sure. Rushing inside, she discovered an artificially created hole going deep into the stone, at the end of it Kyrian. The man was sitting in a meditative pose, metal flowing and changing around his body.

"Kyrian!" she shouted into the hole. He shot up, hitting himself on the stone above. He looked towards Ilea while shaking his head and started running towards her.



“You didn’t laugh, what is it?” he said as he reached her.

“Read this, Trian’s family was killed. We need to go find him.” Ilea said, her words rambling out in a barely comprehensible jumble. She found her hand shaking a little as she handed the letter to him but she barely gave it any thought.

“This is bad. Let’s go then. The Alymie family have their seat somewhere in or around Virilya. We’ll start there.” Kyrian said, his voice steady as he handed back the letter. The paper started dissolving a moment later as they rushed outside. Ilea was glad the man didn’t even ask another question but she knew he’d stand behind them. She considered asking Claire as well but something told her that that would be the wrong decision.

Perhaps Ilea knew what would eventually have to be done or perhaps she wanted to protect a friend. What was important was that she now had backup. Because while monsters were usually predictable, leaving at least a way to escape, this one was different. They were likely dealing with people, the worst kind of enemy.

“Do you know where they live specifically?” Ilea asked as they rushed over the snowy forests and mountains.

“No, but the guard will know. The Alymies are not without influence as far as I know.” Kyrian said. Ilea wanted to speed up, seeing the man was a little slower than her.

“Sorry Kyrian.” Ilea said as she got behind him, grabbing him around the chest as she sacrificed health to overcharge her State of Azarinth. He didn’t complain as their speed increased noticeably, Ilea wincing a little every time she sacrificed more health to keep it up. Her healing was working to restore the lost health and Ilea kept a sharp eye on her resources to not suddenly burn out half the way to Virilya.

It was a long way but if anything, the woman had stamina. They reached the plains soon after and rushed over the barren flatland, the first signs of spring making their appearance.

Animals and monsters looked up as the black dot rushed past them with incredibly speed, the two of them completely disregarding stealth as they kept their altitude somewhat low. Ilea was still pushing Kyrian who helped increase their speed with his metal magic, shooting the harness he created around them forward again and again, giving up the control and trusting Ilea to maneuver them accordingly.

It wasn't the most stable flight but it was fast.

Night was falling over Virilya as Xaver looked out over the plains before the city. Fields of newly planted grain and small walled off farms lay in the distance as the wind pushed at him. It was colder on top of the high wall but he liked the calm and security the post brought with it. Aerial monsters were rare, at least in these parts and patrolling the city wasn't exactly safe either.

He watched a group of wild dogs stalk the road before the city, their figures illuminated by the last light of the sun. They would be left alone, engaging them too dangerous and expensive for the guard. The night was not meant for humans, not even so close to the empire's capital.

The guard sighed as he looked around the wall, the torch next to him flickering in the wind as he slowly opened a big pouch on his belt, taking out the book stored within. Another good thing about the wall was that on normal nights, few officers would come to control them, busy with their own stuff. At least the current officer for this section was incredibly lax.

*Lightning Blade – The complete Saga*

Xaver opened the book where he left off and started reading. Perhaps the next chapter would hold some more insight than the legendary babble so far. He had invested nearly half of last week's wage to get this one after all. At least it wasn't as poorly written as the last one.

A sudden thump noise behind him made the man whirl around, his book dropping to the ground as he focused his magic, a spark gathering around his left hand as he grabbed his sword with the right.

The book clattered on the ground as Xaver took in the sight of two people armored in black full plate. "H... Hand?" he asked dumbfounded, unsure how to proceed.

"You're lucky we're not elves." a woman said, stepping a little closer to him. "Where is the Alymie estate?" she asked, flashing a silver coin that suddenly appeared in her hand.

The guard didn't react for five seconds as Ilea held the silver coin in her hand. She would've used gold just a week ago but silver was enough for something so basic. He finally grabbed it and started talking. A guard so lax about his job, reading on the post, would likely be a good target to get information quickly. Ilea's suspicion had proven correct.

"Their estate isn't in the city. It's eastwards, two hours on a horse, just follow the main street. After coming out of the first forest you'll encounter, you'll see it. I've never been there but it's on the map." the man said, bowing down to grab the book.

Ilea and Kyrian were already gone as he got up again, rushing eastwards right below the outer wall, most guards not even noticing the flying duo.

The forest came into view a couple minutes later and they passed over it, the suns slowly setting. Ilea hoped it wasn't too late. She didn't know for what exactly.

The road through the forest was visible from above and the last light of the suns had set long before the two of them had reached the estate.

The mansion came into view a while later, Ilea letting go of Kyrian as they slowed down a little. Only faint light could be seen coming from the inside of the house. Behind it, Ilea could see a big pile of what she simply knew was ash. No smoke was rising from it. No torches around the estate were lit nor were any guards or other people visible.

Ilea landed on the gravel courtyard and rushed to the door. It was closed so she blinked inside and opened a window nearby for Kyrian to enter. Concentrating, she could hear voices coming from the floor above. The ground floor was dark but she could easily navigate with both her Sphere and enhanced sight.

The two made their way upstairs, following the wooden staircase. The many rooms following the long hallway upstairs were all open, light coming only from three of them. The voices were more clear now and Ilea felt a big weight fall from her shoulders as she recognized one of them.

“The traces are too old for me to work with..., I'm really sorry. You'll get the money back of course.” an unknown man said as Ilea burst into the room, seeing Trian and a woman clad in red light armor. Both looked at her immediately but she didn't stop, rushing Trian and hugging them man.

“I'm so sorry.” she said and waited a bit, Kyrian coming into the room as well. Ilea let go of him and locked eyes with the man. “We came as soon as we heard. How can we help.” she said.

Trian was confused at first but soon he just shook his head, sitting down on a chair in the room. "Leave us." he said to the woman in red who nodded and walked out quickly. Trian didn't say anything as Ilea and Kyrian looked around the room.

"Is she gone?" Trian asked after a minute.

"She's below us, not moving currently. It's hard for me to make her out." Ilea said, seeing the woman react downstairs, staying where she was though. "Who is she?"

"Hired adventurer, make her leave. I doubt she has anything to do with it." Trian said and sighed. Ilea nodded and blinked right next to the somewhat shrouded woman, grabbing her neck with a quick move and pushing her up the wall.

"He told you to leave. If you're not gone in two minutes I'll kill you." Ilea said simply and threw her a couple meters away. The woman tumbled on the floor before she got up, a little off balance, fear in her eyes as she rushed to the front door, jumping through the window Ilea had opened.

"They all can't find anything..." Trian murmured, getting up again as Ilea appeared back in the room.

"I got a letter from Eve, is it true?" Ilea asked. Thinking on the pile of ash outside, she knew but she wanted to be sure.

Trian gulped and nodded for a couple seconds, holding a closed fist to his mouth. He pointed to the two of them, his arm shaking a little. "I'll pay you, I'll give you e... everything I have left. Help me find them." he said, fire in his eyes as sparks scorched the wood and floor close to him.

"Trian you don't need to pay us anything, right Kyrian?" Ilea said, looking at the other man who simply nodded once. She walked up to Trian again, ignoring the lightning that shot off of him, damaging her armor further as she hugged him again. She didn't know what else to do for now. The man was in pain, that was for sure. He was angry, that she shared.

Ilea looked outside the window into the bright night as Trian calmed down a little. A sob left him a moment later before he pushed her away, his eyes teary. He looked tired, exhausted and angry, all of it more so than she had ever seen him.

“You need rest. What information can you give me, eat this.” she said and summoned a meal and something to drink, putting it on the table next to him.

“I don’t need shit Ilea, I need to find whoever did this.” he said, shoving the food from the table, all of it clattering on the carpet, joining the blood that covered it.

A loud clap resounded in the room, Trian stumbling backwards and falling into the chair he had previously sat in. Ilea moved her hand downwards again and summoned another meal.

“You’re out of it, do you think you can fight anyone if I manage to slap you so easily?” she asked, finding the man more focused than before. He took the meal and started eating quietly, blood dripping down from his cheek as Ilea healed the broken jaw, the bone cracking as he continued chewing.

“My... my family. They’re all dead. Someone had come here and they murdered everybody. I only found corpses, ripped apart by magic, swords, arrows and beasts. This was nothing small.” he said with a stuffed mouth, Ilea handing him another plate as soon as he was done.

“And I have no fucking idea who did it...,” he said, throwing the next empty plate on the ground, looking at Ilea, tears joining the blood on his face.

“Then let’s find out who did.” she said, her skills activating.

# Chapter 164 Estate Investigation

## Chapter 164 Estate Investigation

“Kyrian will be right there, now go to fucking sleep or I’ll have to knock you unconscious.” Ilea said, pushing the worryingly weak man into a bed. One of the few that wasn’t soiled by blood.

He had burnt all the corpses, which left only the house itself as an reference for their investigation. “We’ll find them, trust me.” Ilea said, standing right over the man before she walked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“You don’t have any investigation skills or anything right?” she asked Kyrian who shook his head.

“Well then I’ll have to be enough.” she said, smiling a little as she noticed Trian’s breathing steady in the room behind her. “Then stay inside, it’s possible that whoever is behind this wants him dead as well. It’d be easy for someone at our level to kill him while he’s like that.” she finished, looking at the hallway.

‘Now let’s see if my class can live up to its name...,’ she thought and looked through the room they had talked in, her Sphere, Hunter’s Sight and her enhanced senses working together to find anything that could lead to something.

She could tell that a battle between two or three warriors had happened in the room itself. There was blood on the carpet and some of the windows.

Likely someone had worked in here and was surprised by the attackers, trying to fight back but losing in the end, seeing the amount of dried blood on the floor.

She wasn't sure but the fight had probably happened more than two weeks ago. According to the small experience she had with rotting corpses and old blood. Trian had been too late and it didn't seem the city guard or anybody else cared much. The house was empty after all.

Any trace of smells in the air were already gone or distorted and mixed too much for Ilea to make out something specific. The blood itself was overwhelming and overpowered anything else she could've found right after the attack had happened. This room wouldn't give her any answers.

Moving on to the next one, she found just the same. Her skills let her see and recreate some of the things that had happened but it was simply useless. Whoever had done this was not an amateur, that was for sure. A team of specialized assassins perhaps or they simply had a cover up team that came in after them. Wiping out a noble family and not creating an uproar wasn't something a random gang of thugs could do.

'What the hell did they do to warrant such a massacre?' she thought as she finished looking through the last room upstairs. Walking past Trian's room, Kyrian was inside, metal whirling around him. The man was training in nearly every waking moment possible. Ilea was surprised she could even keep up with the guy.

The stairwell didn't show anything special as well, neither did the rooms on the ground floor. Most of the fighting seemed to have happened upstairs, likely because the attack must've happened at night. It was a little creepy, walking around in the dark and quiet mansion. Ilea knew she could trust her skills and power but the eerie feeling wouldn't simply leave. A noble house with its whole family murdered, corpses burnt leaving behind the husk of an estate, soon to either be bought or neglected.

The low walls around the estate were a testament to this family's power, building near a forest likely filled with at least somewhat dangerous wildlife. Ilea made her way downstairs, opening the wooden door in the big



kitchen that led to the cellar. She wasn't sure if it was the only cellar yet but it was simply the first she had found through her sphere.

Ilea decided not to try and find anything to light up the place, instead trusting her Sphere and the minuscule light that allowed her enhanced sight to at least make out the shapes around her in the nearly completely dark room. There were many crates down here, housing different foods and other goods. Some of them were already rotting but she at least couldn't make out any living creatures trying to get in. Runes or something else must still be keeping them away.

A weird feeling suddenly made Ilea focus on one of the walls in particular. Nothing suggested to her that it was special in any way, nor did her Sphere show anything suspicious behind it. Still she trusted her skills, specifically her Sphere that likely told her of either a trap or a hidden path ahead.

Blinking blindly into the wall, Ilea found herself not in the same cellar anymore. She hadn't triggered any traps it seemed but couldn't look back into the old cellar. A spell, rune or something else was keeping her perception inside the newfound territory. A new room, just as dark or even darker than the one from before. A door at the end of it and a stairwell leading downwards.

Ilea was starting to doubt that this would lead to anything, perhaps only uncovering a dark secret she really didn't want to know about Trian's family. The man was a vampyr after all and she had found him sucking out the life energy of what he told her to be employees. She trusted the man but that didn't mean everyone in his family was as morally acceptable a person as he.

Her steps resounded through the silent tunnel, her metal boots taking one step after the other until finally she came out into a new room. A bigger room than any previous cellars. She couldn't see the other side through her sphere so she simply continued forward.

Four steps later, Ilea noticed a very faint tapping sound. It was quick and it was closing in on her. Buffs activated to the max, Ilea saw a rather massive spider enter her Sphere's perception. A spider, of course, with scythes for

legs. Her surprise at the silent approach considering the metal was short lived, as the beast quickly found her and attacked.

Two blades flashed horizontally at Ilea who answered with a simply crouch, both weapons passing above her head. She answered with a fully powered punch to the spider's now unprotected face. A crunch could both be heard and felt as the monster was thrown backwards several meters.

*'ding' 'You have been poisoned by Toothnick paralyzer, -10 Stamina per second for two minutes, movements are slowed by 10%.'*

'A Toothnick?' Ilea thought, not remembering the name from any of her monster classes. The beast seemed a little disoriented by the punch but started to circle Ilea again, considerably more careful now.

*[Toothnick Spider – lvl 153]*

Looking down at her hand, Ilea found a tooth sticking shallowly in her finger. The reason for the poisoning for sure. She took it out and threw the tooth away, looking at the animal that approached her again, this time rearing up and using four blades to attack her. The only problem was that Ilea had fought Taleen machines with just as many weapons, both faster and with a higher level. 'And there were dozens of them at the same time...', she thought and stared at the almost laughable try of the monster to injure its target.

Ilea simply blinked behind the spider and kicked its back. Again the spider skidded forward on the ground, turning around again, visibly slowed down and injured. Blood dripped down to the ground from its maw, identified by the smell. Ilea didn't move immediately, thinking on what this animal down here might mean.

A possible answer presented itself to her when a sudden source of light entered the far end of the room. Two children, one holding up a torch and the other wielding a beautifully crafted curved sword. Ilea realized when the two came closer that the bigger one wasn't a child at all, just a very small woman.

“Toothie back!” the older of the two yelled and Ilea watched in amazement as the spider quickly made its way back to the humans. She didn’t move to intercept the animal as there weren’t many options as to who those kids were.

“Who are you!?” the older of the two yelled again as Ilea walked a little closer. The girl held the blade with trained skill, Ilea could tell as much already, having faced more than a couple of sword users. She could feel the small boy gather mana in his hand as well as he stretched it towards Ilea.

She stopped around ten meters in front of them and asked back. “And who are you two?” she said, identifying them to be at level 131 and 42 respectively, both very impressive for their ages she assumed. Then again the nobles had more resources to train them early and with a certain amount of safety.

“I asked you first! You’re intruding on our cellar!” the girl said, apparently not noticing that the boy had created a spear of what looked like blood.

“Your cellar? So you’re part of the family this place belongs to?” Ilea asked and let the projectile that the boy probably lost control over pass harmlessly next to her, showing that his aim definitely needed some more work.

“Samuel what are...,” the girl said, looking nervously at the kid and then back to Ilea with fear in her eyes. She didn’t back down and her stance indicated that she prepared for a fight.

“I’m here with Trian if you know him, he is part of this family as well. If you tell me your names I’ll tell you mine, ok?” Ilea said and smiled behind her helmet.

“Trian? He’s here... then.” the girl said and took down her sword, lifting it up again a second later. “You’re lying.” she said, her eyes getting teary. “Everyone died, I don’t trust you.” she said but Ilea simply appeared right in front of her, grabbing the sword by the blade and ripping it out of the girl’s hands. She was strong but not nearly as much so as Ilea. The sudden move was too much of a surprise for the girl to react in any meaningful way.

Ilea blinked backwards again and looked at the sword. “Would I have let you live just now if I was lying?” she asked, throwing the sword upwards and catching it again. “Your pet is injured, I can heal it if you let me. How does that sound?” Ilea asked, throwing the blade again as she slowly walked closer, catching it at the blade. She stopped two meters in front of them and held out the blade handle first.

The girl defiantly looked into her eyes but then she nodded her head. “Ok.” she simply said and walked towards Ilea, grabbing the sword in an uncertain manner. “Toothie come.” the girl said and the spider approached. “Sit.” the spider crouched down immediately, its fifteen eyes focused on Ilea.

Holding out her hand, she took small steps towards the animal until she touched it. Other than a low hiss, there was no reaction. Right until she started healing. Ilea never wanted to hear a spider imitate a purr ever again. She shuddered as she finished treating the injuries she had caused and a couple smaller ones that weren't on her.

“She's fine again.” Ilea said and stepped back.

“Can you heal people too?” the small boy asked and Ilea nodded.

“I can, do you have someone injured?” she asked, looking between the boy and girl. She was at least sixteen, Ilea guessed, maybe even older.

“Is Trian alright? Where is he?” the girl asked.

“He is and he is upstairs but I don't know how safe it is there for you. Your names.” Ilea stated and locked eyes with the girl again.

“I'm Aurelia Alymie and that is Samuel. We have someone injured but I don't know if you can heal him.” Aurelia said and sheathed her sword.

“Ok, Trian is sleeping at the moment so I can come and see if I can help. I'm Ilea, a friend of his.” Ilea said and motioned for the kids to lead the way. Aurelia still didn't seem completely sure but she did walk towards the other exit of the dark room, their torch still the only light.

“Did you hide down here during the attack?” Ilea asked a couple minutes of silence later. Without her Sphere she would’ve long lost her orientation in the complicated layout of the cellar. It was akin to a labyrinth but the kids navigated it with sure steps.

“We... we hid here often.” Aureila said but didn’t go into it further as they reached a worn down wooden door, behind it Ilea could see a bed with a man lying in it. The girl slowly opened the door and stepped inside.

“Orthan? Are you awake?” she asked and stepped closer to the bed, grabbing a towel from the small bucket on the ground. The water was dirty, even visible in the faint torch light. Samuel stayed near the door with the torch, likely to not irritate the man.

“Can I have a look?” Ilea asked, stepping a little closer to the bed. The smell of blood and sweat permeated the room, not the best sign for the man’s condition.

“He’s not awake...,” Aurelia said. Ilea stepped up and touched the man’s brow. A strong fever, that much she could’ve guessed back on Earth already. Activating her healing magic, she searched his body, finding a nasty cut near his stomach. Pus had formed on it but it looked like the girl had tried to clean it somewhat. It probably saved the man’s life.

There were other injuries and what looked like an infection or curse. Ilea mostly just pumped healing mana into herself or someone she treated but she remembered Dagon’s words. Perhaps she could learn something about her Azarinth skills as well, despite them being at the current maximum level. The infection looked dormant at least, burnt skin surrounded it.

She lifted the man’s shirt, making Aurelia look away for a second. The smell of the injury was bad but Ilea had seen much worse, on her own body none the less. Touching the injury directly, she started using her skill, grabbing the towel from the girl with her other hand. She cleaned and

healed the wound slowly, focusing on getting it right. She hadn't noticed any scars on her own body after healing but then again her Hunter Recovery seemed best suited for herself as well.

It didn't take long and the man's stomach looked good as new. Ilea felt like she did a good job but she wasn't sure if simply pushing mana into him would've had the same result. Testing it out on any living creature seemed cruel to say the least. Perhaps on her own, should she train her Resistances again in the future.

The man stirred a little and Ilea started focusing on the infection. Opening up his worn shirt, she laid his shoulder bare and looked at it. His flesh was burnt in a circle and in the middle was something black. It moved slightly, and not in the same beat as his heart.

“Any idea what that is?” Ilea asked, pointing at the injury.

“Poison or a curse, cutting it out would be best but I wouldn't be able to stop the bleeding afterwards.” Aurelia said.

“Are you sure?” Ilea asked, trying to affect the area with her healing magic but it didn't seem to have an effect. It would be quite a problem should she herself get hit by something like that. Kyrian's curse had a similar effect but not nearly as strong.

“I'm sure, I've seen something similar before.” the girl said and Ilea nodded. Ilea failed to wake the man, even with rather rough slapping.

“Well then let's go. Do you want to wait outside? I don't think this will be pleasant for him.” she asked but the girl didn't respond.

‘Oh well, guess they've been through enough.’ she thought and unsheathed Aki. “Are you ok with that?” she asked the dagger, getting a confused look from Aurelia.

“I cut things, at least I can be somewhat useful for once.” the blade said, getting even bigger eyes from the girl.

“Alright.” Ilea said and carefully cut into the man’s flesh, holding his chest down with her other hand. She could see exactly how deep the curse was through her Healing spell but after a while he started thrashing. At least his legs did as Ilea easily pushed his chest down. “Hold his head.” she said to Aurelia who reacted two seconds later as Ilea continued to cut.

The man moaned in pain as she finally cut out the piece of infected flesh, putting Aki away and throwing the skin to the ground before she healed him. It was quite a rough operation, not something he likely would’ve survived without her being a healer. Still it was a success in her book as she brought the man to his maximum health again.

Nearly there, he suddenly gasped, pushing against Ilea’s hold as his eyes shot open. “Aaaah...,” he exclaimed, magic activating inside of him as his arm shot out towards Ilea, a bladed weapon of some sort at the end of it. She blinked backwards, seeing that Aurelia too stepped back.

“Orthan, Orthan! Stop it!” the girl yelled, the voice calming down the older man immediately. He looked around with a confused look, his hand shooting towards his previously cursed shoulder.

“How...h...,” he got out before a cough got to him.

“Someone came to help us...,” Aurelia said, walking up to him and grabbing the man in a hug. Ilea watched on as she started crying and Orthan calming down as he put his arms around her as well. The bladed weapon looked like bone and she watched on in fascination as it moved back into his arm. Quite gross but certainly effective storage.

# Chapter 165 Silver Lining

## Chapter 165 Silver Lining

“And you are said help?” he asked, looking at Ilea with suspicion in his eyes. “The Shadow’s Hand. I must say I’ve had it with mercenaries. Who paid for this job?” he asked.

“If this isn’t the rudest welcome I’ve gotten in quite some time. First a spider attacks me and now I get interrogated by the man I just saved.” Ilea said and shook her head.

Orthan sighed, as he let go of Aurelia. “Look girlie, I don’t care who you came to save. I certainly didn’t pay for it and I want you gone off this property.” he said, looking at her.

Ilea cocked her head to the side and smiled under her helmet before her buffs activated. She was right in front of him barely a blink later, her hand on his neck as she pushed him back and over the table, smashing the man into the stone wall. A gasp left him as she kept the pressure on. The bone blade coming out of his arm was slapped away by her free arm as she looked at him.

“Don’t talk to me like that old man. And calm the fuck down, I’m here with Trian.” she said and let go, the man falling down on his knees, coughing as Aurelia ran up to him, prepping him up.

“This one has bite...,” he said after catching himself again, coughing a couple times as he let Aurelia help him up.



‘And now he respects me? Why can’t people just not be assholes?’ Ilea shout as she sat on the table.

“You’re with Trian then? His team yes, I did hope he somehow slipped out of this whole mess. The demons weren’t a good sign...,” the man said, mumbling the last part of the sentence.

“You owe me an apology.” Ilea said, looking him in his eye, her buffs still active and a light mist of ash coming into existence around her.

“Tsk, ok ok calm down. I apologize.” he said, the ash vanishing again immediately as Ilea got up.

“Then let’s go to Trian, I’m sure he’s gonna be happier to see you than I am.” she said with a smile under her helmet. “You’re alright.” she said, pointing to Aurelia who showed a weak smile.

The way back would be quite slow, considering the man’s recovering body. The curse must’ve weighed on him quite a bit more than it seemed to.

“What was that curse?” Ilea asked as they rounded another corner, the boy Samuel having taken the lead with the torch. She was a little unnerved at the spider literally following above.

“One of their mages, I managed to take his head but the curse stayed. Damn near killed me the fucker. Got four level in Pain Resistance at least.” the man grumbled.

“Who’s their? Who attacked?” she asked but he shook his head.

“No fucking idea lassie. Capable people, that’s all I can say. Barely one below level two hundred. They were quick, had several areas of the house covered in curses, blinding spells and traps before most of us were even awake. We might’ve been able to win, no I’m actually sure we could’ve but with their preparation...,” he said and sighed. “They knew about everything, countered both heads of the house and their strongest abilities. I can only think of another noble house, either Carter or Birminghamale. We underestimated their resources. Still I’m not sure. For now we must protect

what has remained.” he finished, Ilea just listening to the names and theories.

She had no clue who the families were that he spoke of but she once again was glad not to be of noble birth. What she knew of history and any country’s nobles, their intrigues and murderous schemes, she now had one example of how that would play out in a world like this one.

“I agree. We will have to investigate but you surviving changes things a little.” she said, knocking on the closed of wall that was hidden in the cellar.

“The man inside his room is with us.” she said. “Can you open this?” she asked and the man nodded, walking over to the wall and activating a hidden rune. Suddenly the brick shifted and a small opening presented itself to the group, Ilea walking out first, knowing through her Sphere that there was nothing unexpected waiting for them on the other side.

They walked silently through the cellar and up into the mansion, before they stopped in front of Trian’s room.

“That’s not his room.” the man said.

“What are you their bloody butler?” Ilea asked. “The other beds were soiled in blood.” she said, regretting the comment a little as she saw Aurelia and Samuel looking down a little. Knocking on the door, she stepped inside.

A metal needle rushing towards her stopped right in front of her face. “It’s you.” Kyrian said, still sitting in a meditative pose on the ground. Were it not for the rather dark circumstances of their being here, Ilea would’ve commented on his impressive introduction.

“Yes, it’s us. How’s he doing?” she asked. “I found some survivors of the attack. His sister, a boy and some old fuck.” she said, stepping next to Trian. The others entered the room carefully but Aurelia rushed to her brother immediately, as soon as she saw his face.

“Trian, Trian!” she exclaimed, hugging his sleeping form that slowly stirred.

“What a cruel dream...,” he said, turning around before he suddenly jerked back to her, grabbing the girl in a hug. “You’re real... you’re real aren’t you!?” he said, tears forming on his eyes as Ilea leaned back on the wall next to the bed. The man seemed rested enough, even after just over an hour of sleeping.

“You should all eat and drink something.” she said a minute later. Samuel was still standing near the door and Orthan only moved a little closer to the bed.

“Orthan, you damn old hag. You actually survived.” Trian said, looking at him as he kept embracing his sister.

“And here I thought you might be some illusion. Master Trian, I’m truly sorry.” he said and knelt down in front of the bed. “I have failed in my duty.”

“You haven’t failed anything, stand up, I can’t bear to see you this way.” Trian said and slowly moved his legs off the side of the bed, moving his sister a little for him to be able to stand up.

“We have to discuss a lot.” he said, looking at the man with cold eyes.

“We do.” Orthan said and nodded.

“Yes, first though you eat.” Ilea said. “And I suggest we get the hell out of here. I doubt there are any leads to be found here, of course if any of you are master investigators or trackers?” she asked the three survivors, none of them responding.

“I agree, it might not be safe here.” Orthan said. “Where to?”

“There is a safe house twenty minutes from here.” Trian said. “It should be fine enough for us to plan the next steps at least.”

“We don’t have horses and you’re the only one with a flying skill. I’m afraid I still haven’t discovered one even now.” Orthan said and Trian just looked at Ilea. She shrugged.

“I can carry you, Kyrian can take one as well.” she said and opened the window, a cool night breeze flowing into the room. “Come on.” she said, holding out her hands to the kids. Both of them grabbed one arm as her Ashen Wings spread behind her.

“You know where to go?” she asked, looking at Trian who nodded.

“Kyrian can you carry me as well? My skill is a little too noticeable for this.” he said and grabbed the metal pole that formed from one of Kyrian’s spheres. Orthan did the same, looking at each of them before he nodded.

The flight was low and short as the group tried to stay as hidden as possible, even deciding to fly through the last stretch of woods instead of above it. Tracks left by running would’ve been too dangerous to leave behind. The safe house was nothing more than a hidden cave from outside. Upon opening it, a rather spacious and nicely furnished room revealed itself to Ilea as she stepped inside.

There were supplies, weapons and two beds. As well as a big map of the empire on one of the walls, their current location near Virilya marked with a pin.

Orthan, Aurelia and Samuel spent the next hour explaining what had happened in the mansion, forming a somewhat understandable picture of the situation. As mentioned to Ilea several times before, it seemed someone had caught the family completely by surprise. Poison, paralyzing spells, curses and an incredibly fast and efficient attack that took out more than half their forces before most were even awake.

They had fighters and mages with specialized classes ready to counter the strongest of the house’s warriors while capitalizing on the chaos and the will of most of the elders of the house to protect the younger generation. Orthan had succeeded and it wasn’t completely out of the question that some of the others did as well.

“The corpses and... pieces... that I found amount to most of the house, as far as I know. The festivities on the previous night made most members attend as well. I only know of three distant relatives that weren't here for sure but two of them I don't think we've heard of in years.” Trian explained. “Nobody of the core family either.” he added, shaking his head.

“Father tried so hard to keep the relations peaceful.” he said. “Why now of all times?”

“Exactly for that reason. With the elves half a year ago in the west and now the demon attack. Baralia is scheming as always but I tell you Trian, the empire will be at war again soon enough. This is just one of many. We should've moved immediately when the stream of refugees from the west started coming. I don't doubt many were involved with nearby countries.” Orthan said. “Now it is too late.”

“It is. We don't have the power to build up again. Not for now. The safe houses aren't going to be a solution and I want neither you, nor Aurelia or the boy out here.” Trian said. “Do we still have gold somewhere?” he asked.

“I didn't check the vault but I doubt there to be anything left. Perhaps some of the Guilds and banks in Virilya would still listen to you?” Orthan asked.

“Might be too risky. They'd know I'm alive.” Trian said.

“That's how we could get them out.” Ilea said. “Or we could go look for Eve.”

“She warned you with a letter? I thought she had died in the demon attack somehow.” Trian said.

“She did, so she knows at least something. And if anybody is a help at finding someone it's Eve. I'm sure her... background and her skills would come in handy. If she's willing to help of course.” Ilea explained.

“She's with the team isn't she?” Kyrian asked, hovering a sphere of metal in his hand.

“I don’t think the team still exists Kyrian. Especially her. Claire is staying in Ravenhall. I think it might be good if Aurelia and the others go there. She can get you a house.” Ilea said. “Maybe even a shop or something.”

“I doubt she has the money nor the influence.” Trian doubted her idea. “I’ll visit the Guilds first.”

“I have the money and Claire is managing it. Trust me. Can you help me write a mana signed letter for her and the three of them can be on their way by tomorrow.” Ilea explained. Her newfound property would need staff and at least the older two didn’t seem incapable in the least.

“That would be great. Are you sure Ilea? I don’t know if I can pay you back.” the man asked.

“We probably need more staff anyway and I’m doing it for you, not for them.” she said and looked at Trian.

“Thank you.” he simply said and opened a drawer in a nearby cabinet, getting out paper and a pen, as well as some weird looking devices. Ilea would’ve thought him rather calm but the light shaking of his hand when he began writing made her doubt his strong demeanor. There was only one reason she could think of for him to behave that way.

“I’ll make sure to pay you back if ever possible.” Trian said as he finished the first part of the letter, handing Ilea the pen. She added a couple lines, confirming the request and used one of the devices to push mana into her writing. Claire wouldn’t move to Virilya for Trian but perhaps she could pull some strings for them as well. Ilea felt a little bad for busying the woman so much. All she ever did was punch stuff with the occasional healing. Much more exciting.

The three survivors went to sleep soon after, having discussed the plan with Trian shortly and agreeing on the next steps. The remaining members of team 34 were either standing in the room or sitting in the big leather chairs.

“You guys don’t have to do that you know?” Trian said. “I doubt we can take whatever wiped out damn near my whole family.” he added. “My parents were strong. Perhaps not much stronger than I am now but their experience....,” he stopped, his hand starting to shake again.

“You don’t have to talk about it now.” Ilea said, leaning forward in her chair and putting a hand on his knee.

“You would find and face them one way or the other, would you not?” Kyrian asked after a while of silence. Ilea noticed in her sphere that Aurelia’s breathing wasn’t as steady as the other two’s but she chose not to say anything.

Trian sighed. “I would. Even if I die trying.” the girl stirred a little but stayed quiet.

“What about Aurelia? I know the old ass hat wouldn’t mind much but she’s your sister.” Ilea asked. The man looked at her thoughtfully and shook his head.

“She is strong. More talented than I ever was. Orthan is a good teacher and he knows the family, the two of them must survive. Me? Yes, I’m her brother and I’ll try my damn best not to die but I can’t leave this as it is. They killed my p... my parents.” he spoke the last word very softly. “Would you stand by and do the reasonable thing Ilea? Kyrian?” he asked them.

The candle light flickered as it moved in the wind, illuminating the three of them only barely in the dark safe room.

“Probably not.” Ilea said after a while. Kyrian stayed quiet.

“I don’t ask you to come with me, this is ridiculous and I know it. The danger is incomparable to any of the missions we’ve done before.” Trian spoke. “And I don’t have anything to pay you with.”

“Mate, we were in the demon realm. How much more dangerous can it get. We’re probably talking about shit old humans. That doesn’t sound scary, does it?” Ilea said, balling one of her fists.

“No, it really doesn’t.” Kyrian added and smiled a little as he looked at Trian. The vampyr mage stayed quiet, sitting in his chair as he looked at the two.

“You damn imbeciles. How did I ever end up with you.” he said finally and Ilea chuckled lightly.

“You were too much of an arrogant noble ass fucker to take anyone, don’t you remember?” she said and summoned something to eat.

“Ah yes, yes I was. I’m sorry for that.” Trian said, looking down on the carpet.

“Don’t get sentimental now, you’re still a fucking idiot.” Ilea said with a mouth full of food.

“You should sleep some more.” Kyrian said to the man who nodded in response.

“We’ll start the search tomorrow.” Trian said. “Thank you.”

Ilea just continued eating and Kyrian started leaning on one of the walls.

It only took a couple minutes for the man to sleep as well, he wasn’t entirely rested after all. The joy of seeing some of his family survive must’ve brought back some of the life in him.

“You should sleep as well little one.” Ilea said, feeling the heartbeat of Aurelia quicken. She too soon calmed down and slept, leaving only the two members of the Hand awake.



“What do you think?” she asked the man, playing with Aki in her hand.

“I think he is right, we might die on this one.” Kyrian said and sat down on the chair opposite her.

“Eh, I could’ve died the first day I came to this place. I didn’t. Could’ve died in the Taleen dungeon and I didn’t.” Ilea said, twirling around the dagger.

“Did you have a class already?” Aki asked and she stopped the twirling.

“No, level zero baby but I could still kick around some wolves.” Ilea said, not mentioning the fear she had felt, encountering her first Drake. Not that any of that wasn’t reasonable.

“Still, these aren’t thoughtless monsters.” Kyrian said.

“Neither were the demons, or some of the Taleen machines I’ve faced. Nor are the elves. I know it’s dangerous but all of us are rather resilient and quick to escape. If we get away the others, we’ll be free to move.” Ilea said in a whisper, motioning to the sleeping figures. Kyrian nodded and thought about it.

“We don’t have Claire and we have no idea where Eve is. Other than that Golden Lily thing she was writing about, we don’t have anything.” Kyrian said.

“So we find her, or someone else who can help us. Claire isn’t the only one capable of tactics. I don’t think we’re too bad as a team anymore.” Ilea said, stretching in her chair.

“We’re not and I’ll be with you guys no matter what.” the man said.

“Maybe you should get some sleep as well.” Ilea said as she started twirling Aki again. Kyrian nodded and soon tried to get comfortable in the chair. There wasn’t enough space in the beds for him, nor would he have likely wanted to join any of the others.

“What do you think?” Ilea asked in whisper after Kyrian had fallen asleep.

“Hmm, well you’re unpredictable at least. If anything they won’t see you coming.” the dagger spoke.

“It’s weird you know? Never thought to ever be in a position where my friend’s family gets murdered.” Ilea said, looking at the piece of metal. “Didn’t think I’d be the one to join his mad grasp at revenge.”

“We sometimes don’t end up where we expect it. I thought I’d be stuck inside that dungeon forever.” Aki said.

“I mean you basically were there forever.” Ilea joked.

“More or less. Thanks for not hiding me away during all this. Was that what you did in Ravenhall? Give all your money to Claire?” the dagger asked.

“I didn’t really think about it and yes, more or less.” Ilea said, not in the mood to hide anything from the dagger right now. Her day had been quite enough already.

“Well I’ll make sure to sell that information to an influential family. Perhaps I’ll manage to be placed into a beautiful armory.” the dagger said, and Ilea could tell he was joking.

“You can be rather dry.” she said.

“You never use me to stab anything so yes. And I don’t think I hold any water.” Aki said and Ilea continued to thoughtfully twirl the dagger around. He didn’t complain as they fell into silence, Ilea’s blue eyes staring at the entryway to their saferoom. They had chosen the wrong family to attack.

# Chapter 166 The Next Steps

## Chapter 166 The Next Steps

Ilea woke from her meditative state as a fox suddenly ran into her Sphere of perception, the animal rushing through the underbrush on its search for food, unaware of the hidden place among the bushes and rocks.

She could hear the faint sound of birds chirping outside as the suns were likely rising already. The others were still sleeping, no surprise considering what they had been through in the past days or even weeks.

Standing up, she put up the hood of her leather armor. She had switched to it at some point in the night, simply enjoying the more comfortable armor compared to her battered Juggernaut set. Balduur was somewhere in Virilya, perhaps a visit would be the right decision before they started their search.

Tapping Kyrian lightly on his shoulder, he opened his eyes immediately, magic flowing around him before he realized it was just her. “Could’ve killed you.” she whispered in his ear.

“That’s why I usually sleep with my armor on.” he said, his helmet summoned onto his head a moment later.

“You should get a storage item, one where you can put your whole armor inside.” she said and moved on to the others, touching them softly on their shoulders. “Time to get up.”

‘Now where is that damn spider?’ she thought and looked around the room, checking outside through her Sphere as well. It seemed the animal was out still, hopefully not creating too many tracks that would indicate their presence. The group was already getting up, getting on their boots and checking their weapons and armor. All of them looked terrible, their gear dirty and worn. At least their faces didn’t look just as exhausted as they had the day before.

“We’ll bring you a part of the way there, I think that would be best.” Ilea said, looking at Trian.

“I think so too. South west for an hour or two, the rest of the way they can go on their own. What do you think Orthan?” he asked the man.

“I think we can take it from here but if you insist on carrying us a part of the way I won’t say no. The Hand better make me grow wings as well.” he said, looking at Ilea with a crooked smile.

“I don’t like you.” she said and smiled under her hood, plainly for him to see.

“I know.” he said, mirroring the gesture as he cracked his bones. Literally cracking them apart. According to his frown, he didn’t quite get the reaction out of her that he had been looking for.

The others weren’t up for jokes, understandable considering the circumstances.

“We better get going.” Trian said and opened the pathway outside. Aurelia whistled and out of the thick forest a big spider suddenly appeared, moving with a creepy stillness over the terrain.

“Are they supposed to be this silent?” Ilea asked, feeling a shudder go down her back.

“That was my idea and training.” the girl said proudly, before her demeanor turned serious again.

The group flew upwards but stayed rather low, not to attract attention from too far away as they made their way first south and then west, rushing over the wild terrain as the winds pushed against them. Clouds had darkened the sky overnight and the light rain was clashing against them with their heightened speed and lack of windshields.

Ilea tried to shield her passengers with formations of ash in front of her, more for her to use the skill than to actually protect anybody from the water. Even Samuel was somewhat well trained compared to an average young adult one might meet in a village or small town.

The group luckily didn't encounter any other people on their way, avoiding any of the scarce roads that linked the cities in Lys together. The rare monsters that didn't immediately flee at their approach were ignored and left behind. Ilea pushed her speed a little when a rather massive snake started following them. The beast was too high of a level for her to identify but still only showed two question marks. Yet it wasn't an encounter they planned on having with the two children around.

A couple hours of traveling later, the group landed on Trian's signal, continuing through a small patch of forest until they could see a crossroads from within the thicket.

"This is as far as we go for now. I want to be back in the city as quickly as possible. We have no idea if Eve will still be there." Trian said to them as he rolled his shoulder. Hanging onto a flying bar of metal wasn't as easy as it looked.

"Well then we must thank you all for getting us this far, the rest of the way we will be able to protect ourselves." Orthan said and clapped Trian on his shoulder.

"You know? Your father would've been proud of you." he said with a grin. "And your ma would warn you not to take too many risks. Be careful out

there Trian.” he finished.

Aurelia hugged her brother, whispering some words to him. “Be safe, we’ll be waiting for you in Ravenhall.” the girl didn’t say anything else, nor did she ask for a promise or tried to stop him. Ilea thought it might have to do with the girl being awake the night before.

“Don’t worry too much, even if we get into a bad situation, we’re all masters of escape.” Ilea said, tapping her wings with both hands as they moved forwards a little. It was true, when it came to speed and maneuverability, all three of them were likely in the top, Kyrian a little behind the other two, lacking an actual teleportation skill.

Aurelia checked Samuel’s pack and made sure her own was safely secured before she joined the waiting Orthan. Other than the sword on her hip, the group looked like ordinary travelers. One identification would tell otherwise to any passerby of course but the way to Ravenhall wasn’t long from here.

“Come.” Orthan said, crouching down as Samuel got on his back. “We’re going to make good time. The weather will keep away both critters and people.” he turned around and looked at Kyrian once more. “Good luck kid.” he nodded and started running. Aurelia looked back as well, hesitated and then followed Orthan.

The remaining three stood partially hidden in the forest as the rain dropped from their armors. A minute later, Trian leaned on a tree before he sunk down, the metal of his armor scratching into the tree as he landed on his ass with a heavy thud. He stretched his legs in front of him and sighed.

“Are you alright?” Ilea asked and looked at him. The wind was pushing the rain sideways, making it especially annoying.

“Am I alright?” Trian asked and chuckled. “My family... my family was murdered.” he said, empathizing the last word. They sounded hollow, the man chuckling again a moment later. “Unbelievable... and I wasn’t even there.” he said and shook his head. “Couldn’t even see them. You know...,” he started but didn’t continue.

“There will be time to grief.” Kyrian said as he walked up to the man, crouching down a little and stretching out his hand. “Come.”

The simple word made the man move a moment later as he grabbed his friend’s arm and let himself get lifted.

“We need a rough plan.” Ilea said. “When Claire wasn’t here you were the planny guy weren’t you. So plan.” she said, pushing the task into his hands.

“Right.” Trian said as he tried to wipe his helmet with his arm, confused when he suddenly hit metal. “A plan.” he continued.

“Maybe we can look at the armory? Then maybe the contacts you have at those Guilds you mentioned?” Ilea asked as he continued to calm down somewhat.

“The armory, yes. And the Guilds. We also have to look for Eve, she’s one of the only real leads we have. Invading some random nobles will do us little good, as much as I’d like to just burn down the whole capital right now.” Trian said. Ilea looked at Kyrian who nodded towards her.

“Maybe we can visit Balduur if we find him, the smith who made Kyrian’s armor. I need something new or get mine repaired. Maybe you guys can get something too. I’m sitting at 44 gold right now but we should be fine.” Ilea added, getting a look from Trian.

“Yes, equipment is good. I can check if any deposits are still available. Let’s go to the mansion first then and move back into the city this evening. We need cloaks as well.” Trian said as Kyrian’s metal spheres moved out, forming a small frame for Trian to hold onto.

“Back to the mansion first then.” Ilea said as her black wings spread, the rain landing on the solid ash as she started moving them to ascend.

The way back was faster and in silence, three dark figures rushing over the countryside, turning heads of both monsters and animals. Most hiding away in whatever hole they lived in to not attract their attention.

The building was as they had left it. Beyond the pile of ash sitting in the back, it looked taken care of, yet not as lively as it would've normally been. Trian led them inside and walked straight to the main hall, opening a secret door behind one of the bigger paintings. Ilea's Sphere suddenly revealed another room but she could already tell that it would be fruitless. At least if there weren't any more hidden passages.

It was surprising that her Sphere hadn't alarmed her to the passage. Perhaps learning about runes would be a distant study for her as well. Or perhaps feeling mana? She thought about the skill she had exchanged a long time ago, mana sense. Still she felt what she had now was much more practical. If only she could get it as a general skill.

The passageway led downwards but the stairs already were bloody. Finally reaching the vault revealed an absolute mess. Surprisingly a lot of things were still there. No gold of course and any documents had been taken or burnt. Lower quality weapons, clothing and even some pieces of armor were still lying around.

"Some cloaks." Kyrian suggested, holding up a bunch of clothes.

"That'll do." Ilea said, switching to her battered Juggernaut armor and draping the black cloak over it casually. A small metal link attached to the cloth was used to fasten the cloak together around her neck.

"I've checked before. But they really took everything." Trian said, shaking his head.

"Then we'll take it back, and more." Ilea said casually, looking at herself in a big cracked mirror, dried blood present on both herself and the glass.



“Are you sure there aren’t any more hiding spots around here?” Ilea asked as she turned around. The man shook his head.

“Even if there were. I don’t want to destroy this place. You don’t feel anything?” he asked but Ilea’s Sphere gave her nothing other than the simple yet large room they were standing in. She shook her head.

“Let’s not waste more time then.” Trian said and walked upstairs. The others followed, heavy armor clinking on the stone steps.

“We’ll move on foot, circle around and go in through the northern gate.” the vampyr said as they came out of the mansion. The sky had darkened even more and while the rain had stopped, the winds were strong. Neither Ilea nor Kyrian had an objection to that and moved out.

The run including the detour took them around twenty minutes, making them faster than even horses. As soon as they came up to the main street leading to the capital, the group slowed down. Even here, travelers going in and out of the city weren’t filling the street. There were adventurers here and there, some merchants coming in late for the day and of course soldiers patrolling. In a couple hours all travel would cease, the night left to whatever may be out there.

“Sure we should wear our armor?” Ilea asked the others as they came up on the gate.

“It wouldn’t make much of a difference. The Hand is a better disguise for us than anything else I could come up with.” Trian said and waved to the guards who tensed up a little, seeing the black armored mages and warrior close in.

“Thought they’d be gone by now...,” one of them said to another guard, looking at Ilea who cocked her head a little, indicating that she had heard the man.

“Shadow’s Hand business?” the other guard asked as they reached the massive gate. It looked the exact same as the southern one did and still managed to impress Ilea. They weren’t exactly there for sightseeing.

“Yes. Ravenhall has been retaken. They’re still reorganizing. Figured we could get something good at the main guild.” Trian said and got three large copper coins from his pouch. The fee to enter the city.

“They’re swamped, the army might be a better paying alternative. Demons are harder to deal with than the usual monsters around here.” the soldier offered and took the money, waving them inside. Noticing the forms stored in a small guard house nearby, Ilea was pretty sure the entrance was usually a little more difficult. Trian had been right about declaring they were here with the Hand.

*[Warrior – lvl 81]*

She identified the guards, finding them a little lower than what she had seen in the capital so far. Perhaps they were short on personnel as well. Patrols might be a little lower then, she thought as they entered the city. Lanterns and magical lights illuminated the streets in a somewhat dim light. The sound of music and the smell of food pushed through the wet cobbled streets. Just another night it seemed.

The three of them walked through the city for a while until Trian nodded towards a tavern built into the cellar of a big stone and wood house. The entrance was a little hidden and the door a little low. Moss covered most of the building’s side and a singing voice could be heard from within.

Stepping inside, a swath of warm air full with the smell of beer smashed into her as she took in the scene with her eyes. There weren’t many patrons inside and the barkeeper just nodded towards them and to one of the room’s corners. Either he knew Trian or he had at least dealt with people from their order before.

They all sat down and Trian lifted a hand with three fingers outstretched. “We’re being followed.” he said and leaned back.

“They’re standing outside. One hanging around the side street we came from, one went up on a building, can’t see him anymore. The third one is coming in riiiiight now.” Ilea said and the door opened right after, a warrior in expensive looking armor entered and walked right to the bar.

“We each check the guilds and return here in, let’s say around two hours?” Trian asked and the others nodded. They had discussed such a possibility and each had been assigned different tasks to look after. Trian being the supposed last survivor of the Alymies would check any remaining connection, bank or guild to see if he could get anything out of it still. Any deposits, favors or information anybody was willing to share.

It wasn’t much to go with and seeing how effectively his family had been eradicated, there was little doubt they had at least tried to dry those sources up or take them over completely. At least if it had been a political move. Kyrian would stay with Trian, knowing that his mobility was much lower to the others. Plus Trian running into a trap wasn’t entirely implausible. Having another man shooting around curses could be rather helpful.

Ilea was tasked to find anything about Eve or Balduur. For now those were their only goals. They set three different inns as meeting points, depending on the time of day. This one wasn’t one of them. Ilea took a sip of the drink that had been placed in front of her and then downed the whole cup, blinking into the opposite house’s cellar and further away from there, her Healing spell having already removed the little amount of alcohol that managed to get through her Poison Resistance.

She smiled as already nobody seemed to be following her. Blinking seven more times, Ilea remained in the latest cellar, motionless and silent, simply feeling everything around her and looking for a hunter. She could only make out one of them, a rat hidden away under a wooden bucked in one of the room’s corners. Like herself it remained motionless, doubtlessly leveling up its sneak skill as it waited for the dangerous predator in its cellar to leave.

Splitting up would allow them to save time, each of them focusing on their strengths. None of them expected a big fight to break out in the capital. The empire had at least enough resources and people to shut the three of them and just as many attackers down. Of that Trian was sure. Ilea not as much, having seen some of the cities strongest defenders in Dawntree and Riverwatch. A fight between her and Trian alone could demolish a shit ton of houses before any reasonable reaction could even be formed. At least she

thought as much but she wouldn't question the noble's word. He had lived nearby most of his life after all.

Five minutes later, Ilea switched into leather armor, put up her hood and blinked up onto the street. A cat nearby hissed and jumped away. It looked like she had landed in a less lively part of the city, barely a soul walking on the street. 'Now where the hell do I start...', she thought and sighed, looking up at the sky, a black veil of clouds covering the stars beyond.

Deciding to at least walk, Ilea followed the closest noise and soon saw a square in the distance, a fire burning in its midst and stalls still tended to so late in the evening. Eve wouldn't be easy to find. If she could assume anything about her, that wasn't even her real name. Neither was the way she looked likely any indication to her current appearance. Like black widow with mind powers. The thought was rather sobering in her current situation. She really could've lived her life without a friend's family being murdered.

'Come then First Hunter, let me see...', she thought and focused on her Hunter's Sight, thinking of Balduur and Eve. Nothing registered. Still she had a couple hours to walk around. Asking questions about Balduur seemed safer and would create a good alibi should anybody question who she was looking for. A top tier mercenary looking for a top tier smith wasn't exactly out of the ordinary.

# Chapter 167 Reunited

## Chapter 167 Reunited

The fire she had seen from afar illuminated the whole square and she even saw a couple fire mages showing off their powers. One young boy could form little near perfect spheres and shot them up to create a swirling dance of flame. The stalls sold the usual, food mostly, still trying to get whatever was mostly fresh off the table before they would close for the night.

Ilea walked to one of the stalls and got out a copper coin. “Where’s the closest smith?” she asked and put the coin on the stall.

“Ahh, evening there warrior. Smithies are aplenty here. Big ones are west but you’ll find a small one if you follow the street for another fifteen minutes. You’ll see the hammer sign.” the middle aged man replied and smiled at her. “Care for some fish?” he asked, motioning to his wares but Ilea just shook her head and walked off.

The smithy was easy to find, a big hammer hanging over the heavy wooden door as the man had mentioned. There were three people inside, what Ilea assumed to be the smith and two men in armor. Stepping inside, the three of them looked towards her and continued their conversation in a whispered

tone. The words came out tense and Ilea's skills allowed her to listen in as clearly as if she would've stood next to them as she started looking at the weapons.

"I'm telling you it's not safe here anymore. I've heard talk of even guards vanishing, soon it's gonna be on the streets..." one of them said before the smith looked up and shouted towards Ilea.

"We're closed, please come again tomorrow!" he looked down again and continued his talk.

"I can't just leave Matt, selling the shop now will be just as suspicious. I'll be hanging come morning..." the smith said as Ilea casually walked up to them, a sword in her hand. Neither of them looked to be part of the army or the guard, adventurers then most likely.

"I'm looking for a smith called Balduur. Have you an idea where he is." she asked, interrupting them.

*[Smith – lvl 32]*

*[Warrior – lvl 70]*

*[Warrior – lvl 62]*

"I said we're closed miss." the smith said. "Or should I get the guard?"

It seemed personal power wasn't exactly as intimidating if the government provided some sort of protection. While they likely wouldn't be able to identify her, the gear on Ilea didn't exactly make her out to be some prime warrior. Still she could tell the warriors next to the smith weren't happy about the confrontation.

"Ok, then you tell me where Balduur the smith is and I won't tell the guard that you plan on running." Ilea said and smiled brightly.

"You damn..." the smith said but one of the warriors calmed him down.

“Alright, look we don’t want any trouble. You should get out of this city as soon as you can too. War is coming I tell ya. I don’t know no Balduur but if you want information on a smith just go to the guild like everybody else.” the warrior said and Ilea could tell he didn’t try to trick her, he was tense and her presence was unnerving to him, of that much she was sure.

“Sure you don’t know anything?” she asked, looking at the smith.

“The one from the south, I think he works for the city exclusively now. Came here a couple months ago, right with the demons.” the smith said and looked towards the warrior who nodded, an intense look in his eyes.

“Alright, you’ll find him around an hour from the west gate, it’s one street over from the main street. If you have a map I can show you.” the smith said but Ilea shook her head.

“That’s alright, I’ll find it. Thank you.” she said and put the sword back, leaving the store silently.

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Matt looked at the door for a whole minute until he was sure the woman was gone. The hairs on his neck were still standing.

“What the hell was that, we should’ve gotten the guard.” John said, the smith as usual the least perceptive of his friends.

“That one was trouble, right?” Steve asked and he nodded.

“She had bloody shit leather armor on, I can make better than that.” John spat and shook his head. “Information ain’t free you know. Could’ve at least gotten a bunch of coin from her. Seemed like she had never heard of the Smithing Guild before... no wonder her gear is that bad.”

“So she’s not from here. Just because the nobles and rich mercenaries like to show off doesn’t mean everybody does. Trust me, I had a bad feeling.” Matt said. “But back to the actual matter and Steve, close the door, I doubt any more customers will be coming tonight.” he said and the smith grumbled his acceptance as the other warrior went to close the door.

“I’ve heard Ravenhall is being built back up, that would be a great place for us to go, an opportunity perhaps.” Matt suggested. He had thought about the possibility for the past days, as soon as the news came.

“It said the whole population is dead.” Steve said as he walked back from the door, grabbing a nearby chair to sit.

“Are you mad, you will die up there. The average level of random beasts is at eighty!” the smith said. “And the Shadow’s Hand is not to be trusted.” he added.

“Not that again. Who cares who they work for. It’s safer than here.” Matt said again. It would be a long discussion but he would stand by his opinion. Either the two would come or he would go alone.

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Ilea rushed through the city, choosing to run on the roofs to not attract as much attention. She could see some flying people patrolling but decided the risk was worth it, simply stopping and hiding whenever any of them flew in her direction. To actually have airborne guards made the process of getting around a city a little more annoying, at least if one wanted to avoid human contact.

A good thing that the capital was absolutely massive. Not comparable to a modern metropolis back on earth but certainly bigger than anything she thought possible in medieval times. The main street leading to the western gate was easy enough to find, having the span of a hundred meters. Street performers, bouts of magic and even a small pond were passed as she ran on the rooftops a street away from the main one.

Ilea could hear drunken laughter, the sound of metal clashing against metal and shouts for her to get down from the rooftops. The guards that noticed here were much too slow to catch up to her, most not even reacting much. Her boots landed on the brick with barely any stress before she propelled herself further until finally she came to a stop near where the smith had described. The run had taken her over twenty minutes. About as long as they needed to cover the distance between the remote mansion of Trian's family and the city itself.

It was likely a lucky shot that the smith knew about Balduur or the man was simply famous enough to warrant being common knowledge. Jumping down onto the street, Ilea landed and continued walking, stopping the next best person. A man trying not to look at her directly, walking the opposite way.

“Hey, know where Balduur's shop is?” she asked, startling the young man who looked at her and to the ground again. He was a mage at level ninety. Either coming from a drug run or just socially not the most capable.

“I... I... I don't know Balduur... maybe the big smithy five minutes this way? You can see the smoke...,” he said and Ilea nodded, walking onwards.

“Thanks.” she said, seeing through her Sphere how he grasped towards her leaving form.

“B... beautiful...,” he said, making her smile. “Damn Harris, just take your balls and ask her...,” she heard him say to himself and would’ve been inclined to at least talk to him for a while, maybe wing him a nice wild waitress now that she was somewhat involved with Kyrian. On another day perhaps, a better one.

“Well he didn’t lie about it being big...,” Ilea said to herself as she looked up. “Imperial Smiths” she read the big lettering and noticed a sound in her mind.

*‘ding’ ‘Elos Standard Language reaches lvl 6’*

‘Now? Are you kidding me?’ she thought but ignored it. It wasn’t like this was the first time she had read any words in this magical ass place. Trying to go inside, a man stopped her. He was wearing imperial armor, a warrior at level one fifty.

“I’m sorry, the smithy isn’t accessible today for non soldiers.” he said. “I suggest you look for an alternative establishment.” he was polite and Ilea wasn’t in the mood for haggling.

“Thanks.” she said again and walked away, turning right two streets further away before she blinked into the closest cellar. Two more blinks and she was standing in one of the smithy’s bathrooms. Her sphere allowed her to check a radius of a little over twenty meters. The building itself was much bigger than that and it took a while for her to find Balduur.

He was hammering away at a sword as was to be expected. What she didn’t expect were the three other smiths in the room with him. They really had a lot of smiths in the building. Piles of weapons lay to the side and a bunch of kids brought metals, water and food to the workers. Ilea simply blinked next to his furnace and looked around. Nobody had notice her so far, other than one of the kids who looked at her with big eyes. She summoned a copper coin and flipped it towards the girl who caught it and winked at her.

‘Hey, I’m the winker here, I’m the one who winks...,’ she thought but let it go. Forming a small ball of ash, she shot it at Balduur’s head with a little force. It impacted with a thud and made the man look up, continuing his hammering nonetheless.

“Wait.” he said, ignoring her for the next three minutes as he shaped the blade. A moment later he looked at it and threw it in a big bucket of water, producing a sizzling noise and steam in the process.

“Been a while? I didn’t realize they let in civilians, or did you sign with the empire now?” the man asked and cleaned his hands with a towel.

“It has. And they don’t, didn’t realize You’d be signing with them.” Ilea said and walked up to him, shaking the man’s hand. This time she didn’t even need all her buffs to protect her hand.

“You’ve gotten stronger as well. Good for you. Well after your order so graciously invited those damn monsters into our mountains we couldn’t stop them and the whole village left. I’m a contractor. For some reason they’re currently paying better than if I sold through the guild or privately.” the man explained. It didn’t seem to bother any of the other smiths that a woman had suddenly appeared to talk to Balduur.

“I’m glad you all survived. One of our elders went nuts, sorry about that.” Ilea said. “Since when do you need money?”

“Since apparently smiths who don’t work are considered outlaws. Trust me the empire can be rather convincing when it wants to be. Plus they leave me enough freedoms, more than the bloody guild at least. I’ll wait for a while for this all to blow over. Maybe I can sneak out in a couple weeks.” the man said.

“The others are looking for a way already then?” Ilea asked and he nodded.

“Yea, we have to secure the village first. Having Ravenhall back is nice and good but all the smaller places around likely didn’t get the Hand’s destructive treatment.” he said, shaking his head.

“Send one of yours to Ravenhall and let the rune mage Claire of the Hand know, I’m sure she can help you secure your village if you mention my name, should that not have been taken care of already.” Ilea said.

“I will let them know. Why are you here then? Just to chat, a new bow perhaps?” he asked, chuckling. “You broke it didn’t you?”

“I didn’t break it. My armor is pretty much at its end though. I need something new or have it repaired.” Ilea said, summoning the pieces onto the table. The other smiths looked over in the next moments, continuing their work right after.

“That does look bad...,” Balduur said but didn’t continue when the guard from the entrance suddenly appeared next to them, a blue flame in his palm and aiming towards Ilea.

“I told you, no civilians.” he said, sighing.

“Cameron, she’s a personal friend. Cut out the magic if you don’t want to die.” Balduur said and continued looking over Ilea’s armor.

“The Hand?” Cameron asked as he looked at the armor. “Wait are you threatening me Balduur?” he asked, a little in disbelief.

“I’m not threatening you but if you don’t take down your hand soon, I’m not sure what she will do. Unpredictable that one... I mean look at this...,” he said and lifted the dented and scratched chest plate of her armor.

“One of the demons was pretty rough.” Ilea commented, completely ignoring the guard.

“Demon?” Cameron asked and his magic vanished. “Still, I have to ask you to leave.” he said.

“Cameron for the last time. We’re meeting twice our quota and you of all people know the quality coming from this part of the smithy. If I don’t do something interesting every once in a while I’ll go mad here.” Balduur said

and tapped the man's bracer. Ilea noticed in that moment that the bracer looked to be of much higher quality than anything else the guard wore.

"Alright, alright do whatever you want but I want you gone should anybody inspect this place." the guard said and pointed to Ilea who appeared behind him, pushing some air into his ear. It took some of his essential life energy to ignore that as he vanished again to take his spot at the entrance.

"How'd he spot us?" Ilea asked.

"Maybe like you spot people? I think he can sense mana very well too. Ask him if you care." Balduur talked as he looked over the pieces of armor. One of the other smiths had finished a spear and joined the two of them.

"Interesting looking... dwarven black?" she asked and looked towards Ilea questioningly. Ilea shrugged and the woman took one of the pieces.

"No, this is something else." she said confused.

"Elven." Ilea supplied which made the last smith in the room join them as well. He just grumbled and grabbed a piece too, grunting in approval.

"Can you repair it in reasonable time?" Ilea asked. "I won't be able to pay you yet, maybe twenty gold or so but not more." she said.

"Expecting me to work for free. Repairing something isn't exactly expensive but no. I can't repair this. Maybe I can make something new but I'm not sure we can even melt this stuff." Balduur shook his head as he put the armor back down.

"We can overheat it, two or three pieces in each furnace. Get your daughter to help me with the runes and we might be able to do it. Haven't found anything I couldn't melt so far." the woman said and Balduur chuckled.

"You've not seen a lot lassy. This is elven steel, old elven steel." Balduur said.

"I'll start right away." the other man said in a high pitched voice, completely taking Ilea out of the conversation.

“Don’t worry about paying, we’ll do it for free. Working with this is worth it already.” the woman said and Balduur shook his head.

“No sense for business with the next generation.” he said but didn’t reject the proposal. “You can pay me back later, I did want to work with that metal before. Full plate and mana allowed through at your fists and legs right?” the man asked and Ilea confirmed.

“Yea we’ll see how the enchanting works on those pieces but if the bloody elves can do it, we can as well.” he said, grumbling.

“Good, then I’ll leave it here. How long do you need?” Ilea asked, looking at the man.

“Someone’s in a hurry. Did someone step on your shoes?” he asked and chuckled.

“Sort of, a friend’s entire family got slaughtered.” she said and heard one of the smiths drop a bunch of tools. Balduur turned serious immediately and looked at her.

“Are you alright?” he asked, grabbing her shoulders.

“I’m alright. I do need that armor though.” Ilea said and effortlessly pushed his massive arms away.

“I get it, I get it. Been there.” the man said and started his work. She didn’t ask anything else and watched them work. None of the smiths knew about someone who looked like Eve but she did get some tips in which parts of the city she could start her search. The local smiths were rather knowledgeable, being the makers of weapons it was to be expected. Bringing the elven treated metal to them had been more than just an ice breaker it seemed. They treated her even more friendly than Balduur himself.

# Chapter 168 Tools and Information

## Chapter 168 Tools and Information

“Maybe Cameron can help you as well.” Balduur said at some point. “As long as you’re not doing anything against the empire.”

“Worth a shot.” Ilea said and blinked downwards. The street had gotten less busy in the past one and a half hour and she was standing close to alone with the man. Summoning one of Keyla’s meals, she handed it to him with a smile.

“Are you poisoning me?” the man asked with a raised eyebrow. He looked to be fifty with partially gray hair and more than one scar showing on his face. Black eyes stared at her, the man ready to strike at any moment.

“Relax, it’s a peace offering.” Ilea said, summoning a spoon and eating a little of the stew. ‘God her cooking is good..., she’s here isn’t she?’ Ilea thought and concentrated on the moment again.

“Yea alright, been a while since I ate.” the man said and took the bowl.

“That sounds like you’ve not eaten in decades.” Ilea said and got a chuckle from him.

“Might as well be the case.” he said and took a bite. “Wow this is good. By the necromancer.” he said and looked at her with a suddenly worried look.

“What, yea it’s good.” she said and leaned on the wall. He kept looking at her and then shook his head, continuing to eat.

“So you know Balduur?” he asked after a while.

“Yea, met him a couple months ago near Ravenhall.” Ilea said.

“What do you want then? From me that is.” Cameron said, not looking at her.

“Can’t I just want to be your friend.” she asked and chuckled. This time he stared at her.

“I’m looking for someone. Someone so incredibly sneaky I’m not even sure about their gender.” Ilea said.

“And how the hell would I be able to help there?” the man asked. “Better hire some trackers then.”

“Where is the most dangerous neighborhood. With the most unexplained disappearances, where somehow the guard is never allowed to investigate?” Ilea casually asked.

“Now would you want to take care of such a problem or would you somehow cause even more?” the guard replied, checking the surroundings for any listening ears.

“I believe the person I’m looking for likes to take care of such problems. And I need their help. That’s all you’ll get.” Ilea said and watched his reaction.

“Hmm, well that does sound intriguing. I doubt anybody involved in something like that would care about me. Still I’ll have to have someone vouch for you.” the guard said. “I don’t feel like ending up dead in a river somewhere.”

“I can empathize.” Ilea said. “How about Balduur himself?”

“I barely know the man. Got any other important connections.” he asked.



“How about Trian Alymie?” Ilea asked, saying the name with a whisper. This time his eyebrows rose.

“That Alymie family? So you’re looking for the people responsible?” he asked and shook his head. “No matter the reasons, slaughtering children and servants alike. I’d point out whoever did it, if I knew.”

“You seem like a good man.” Ilea said.

“I do have some principles. Killing children is not one of them. I can give you some places to start but also a warning. You’re not the first one to come and try to rip out the corruption. This is not like your backwater village where the elder dabbles in blood magic. This is the place where the elder got his blood magic tome from.” Cameron explained, somewhat confirming what Ilea had read in Eve’s letter. She wouldn’t mention the name she had read there either. Cameron already had a lot of information but after this talk, she was sure she could trust him with that much. Running into a trap set by him or by someone else, it wouldn’t make a difference.

“Nobody even mentioned the killings?” Ilea asked after a while and the man shook his head.

“Everybody knows but with the demons and Baralia, well it’s not exactly on everyone’s mind. You can feel the tension as well can’t you? This place would usually be guarded by a whole ten people.” he said.

“I thought the capital wasn’t hit that hard by the demons?” Ilea asked.

“It wasn’t but a big chunk of the imperial army residing here was sent out to clean out the mess your bloody order caused.” Cameron said, his voice composed.

“I’d be lying if I told you I care much.” Ilea said and shrugged.

“Tens of thousands have already died, likely even more. All of them citizens of the empire.” the man said and Ilea chose not to further engage. She didn’t know any of those people. A mere statistic. It wasn’t that she couldn’t see the tragedy but it didn’t exactly impact her directly. She

remembered the reports on slavery and civil war just a couple hours of flying away from her back on Earth. Perhaps she had been a little more idealistic back then, even just a year ago but her experiences she made in Elos definitely left their marks.

The man sighed and calmed down a little. “At least you’re only striving for personal power and not political. As much as I want to condemn the Shadow’s Hand, I can’t deny the kingdoms and the empire have done just as bad if not worse.” he said. “I’ll join you upstairs in an hour when the next shift starts, if that even comes to be.” the man finished and Ilea nodded. She decided not to stay any longer, his information at least a start in her search.

“I’ll be back in an hour.” she said to Balduur and blinked outside, not waiting for an answer as she spread her wings and flew upwards with her full speed, coming to a stop only when she went beyond the clouds.

The stars were breathtaking as always but she was a little in a hurry. The other two would be waiting for half an hour already, or even longer. Having memorized the direction to the current inn they would meet at, Ilea accelerated and dove back into the clouds and out below. She could already see a squad of flying humans rushing towards her as she moved downwards. Perhaps going further out of the city first would’ve been the more reasonable decision.

‘Oh well.’ she thought and moved towards the group with reasonable speed.

“Hold, State your name and your business in Virilya!” one of the guards said. They were all between level one twenty and one forty. A good thing as they still couldn’t identify her. Ilea hoped they wouldn’t delay her too much, head trauma wasn’t something she wished on anybody.

“I’m Lilith, of the Shadow’s Hand. I’m looking for jobs at the guild. The Hand is a little short on paid work at the moment.” she said immediately, summoning her badge into her pocket and getting it out to show them.

“Let me see.” the woman next to the previously talking guard said and moved a little closer. Ilea tossed the badge her way and waited for a moment as the woman’s eyes started glowing yellow.

“Yea, that’s a real one.” she said and handed the badge back to Ilea.

“A safe stay to you then.” the man said and Ilea nodded, rushing downwards immediately, putting her badge back into her necklace. She didn’t expect it to go that smoothly but the badge certainly helped. Thinking about it, the thing didn’t really identify you as an actual member. The shortage Cameron talked about must make it a little easier to get in.

“They were afraid of you...,” Aki said as Ilea landed on a rooftop near the inn, checking her surroundings before she blinked down into the house’s cellar.

“What do you mean?” she asked the dagger.

“Well you were wondering why they let you in so easily weren’t you? One of them seemed to be trying to run at least three times...,” Aki explained himself.

“Well that’s not a good sign then.” Ilea said after thinking about it for a moment.

“Can I ask you for something?” Aki asked, stopping Ilea from blinking towards the inn.

“Sure, what is it?” she asked, looking over to the spider crawling across the wall.

“Can you leave me with that smith and his daughter for a while? As much as I’ve been enjoying this, my personality I feel has become closer to yours... and with that I’m kind of sick of being a dagger hanging from your armor. I want to move, explore and after seeing you... fight.” the dagger said and paused.

“Yea sure, the girl seemed interested enough in you. I’ll ask them when I go back later. Would you still be bound to me in some way if I leave you behind?” she asked, not sure how their connection worked.

“Perhaps, maybe I’ll bind in some way with Iana but with all these runes I’m not quite sure of anything anymore...,” the dagger provided.

“Well as a dagger you’re not exactly useful to me.” Ilea said and chuckled. “Maybe I can pay for the armor like this.” she murmured and nodded. “Yea why the hell not.”

“I thought of it more like a gesture for a work colleague or something.” the dagger said. “But whatever.”

“That as well, not like I wouldn’t have agreed either way. We’ve traveled together for quite some time now, haven’t we?” Ilea said and sheathed the dagger again. “If you want to join me again after whatever they make out of you, do let me know.” she said and blinked into the next house, continuing until she was close enough to the inn.

Leaving through the back entrance of the current house, Ilea looked up to find the moon staring back at her. The clouds had cleared a little in the past hour and she made her way over to the inn, opening the heavy door as she checked the surroundings through her Sphere. Kyrian and Trian were sitting near a corner of the room, untouched beverages in front of them as Ilea joined the two and sat down.

“You’re late.” Trian said immediately, annoyance in his voice. “Any luck?”

Ilea just took the first mug and drank from it, casually relaxing in her chair. “I found the smith, they’re repairing my armor. What do you guys need?” Ilea asked. Trian looked at Kyrian and then back to her.

“They?” he asked, waving away the waitress who had come to their table.

“Yea, some other smiths that work with him. And I might get a lead on good neighborhoods to look for Eve. The guard who protects the smithy agreed to share some information. He knows your name and would like to

see the people responsible removed.” Ilea explained as she finished the mug, removing the alcohol from her blood immediately.

“You told him my name...,” Trian said, starting a little too loud but calming himself down immediately, leaning back again. “What did I expect really...,” he mumbled.

“Relax, it’s not like it’s a secret that you are with the Hand. And seeing the circumstances it’s not too far fetched that you’d want revenge. Plus he seems like a good man.” Ilea explained.

“Seems like a good man. You are far too trusting Ilea.” Trian said but his annoyance was already fading.

“We’ll see.” Ilea said. “Any luck on your side?” she asked.

“Some. Back to the smiths first though. My armor is fine but some of the enchantments have been broken, is there someone there who could fix that?” Trian asked and she just nodded. “Good, Kyrian’s armor probably needs maintenance as well.” he said and the other man grunted.

“Some haven’t forgotten my family.” Trian continued in a whisper, knowing that Ilea could hear him well enough. “I managed to get around sixty gold, enough to finance this whole thing at least. To pay you some as well.” he said, looking at the others. “The only property that still remains is the estate itself, everything else was sold immediately after the attack, at ludicrously low prices. Seems like I was never mentioned in any contracts so they had the right to sell everything. More names on my list...,” he explained and sighed.

Ilea had no understanding on how much gold a noble family near Virilya would have but even she could guess that sixty gold wasn’t the norm for their treasuries. Trian had been prepaid at the Hand and that alone was a hundred gold.

“And I’ve received information, most of all. Many of the sellers seem to have been forced, obvious with the relationships my family had with them. The picture of who was responsible isn’t exactly formed yet but we have

some pieces. Pieces we can follow.” Trian said. “Let’s visit that smith first.” he said and got up, leaving a bunch of copper coins on the table.

“How far is it?” Kyrian asked as he got up as well.

“All the way at the other end of town. If we fly, the guard will stop us.” Ilea said and followed the others outside.

“I don’t care.” Trian said and grabbed the metal frame that formed next to him. “Let’s just go lower than I did...,” Ilea said as she joined the others in the air, ascending just a little higher than the surrounding buildings. The two people out in the street so late at night watched them with drunken interest before they rushed off, Ilea taking the lead as they shot right above the houses, moving around the bigger buildings that stood in the way.

Not only was it more fun to move through the city like this but also a better way to stay hidden from the guards watching the skies. There were some shouts coming from below but the people or guards either didn’t have the ability or desire to follow the three.

“Stop.” Ilea said and landed on a rooftop, crouching down as her wings disintegrated behind her. The other two landed behind her, the frame Trian had held onto flowed back into the form of a smooth sphere before it vanished into Kyrian’s quiver like contraption on his back.

“We’re close, let’s move the rest on foot.” Ilea said, looking left to see the big main street around a hundred meters further back. Trian and Kyrian followed in silence as she started running across the rooftops, jumping and landing with graceful dexterity and silence. Neither of the two mages had as much control over their bodies it seemed, producing quite a bit more sound than her.

In the windy night it didn’t matter much and being a little further away from the still active main street, the trio avoided any more guard encounters.

Coming up on the smithy, Ilea blinked inside and quietly opened a window for Kyrian to come in. Trian had used his teleportation ability as well.

“You’re back.” Cameron said, watching the smiths work.

“Why is a guard here?” Trian asked.

“Those colors, you’re the survivor then?” Cameron asked and locked eyes with Trian.

“I am debating if I should let you live right now.” Trian said as a little lightning formed on the tips of his fingers. Ilea shoved him hard from the side.

“Relax man, he’s here and he’s alone. Doesn’t that speak for his sincerity?” she asked and looked at Trian.

“It could still be a trap, or he sells information.” Kyrian commented.

“I could yes, I could also be an imperial soldier tired of the corruption in this city and empire.” Cameron said as he stood up and walked towards Trian. Stopping a meter before him, the guard went down on one knee with his head bowed. “I am truly sorry my lord. The empire has failed you. If there is anything I can do.”

“Stand up. You can give her the information we need.” Trian said, not prepared to deal with a situation like this after all that had happened.

The door to the room opened and a tired looking Iana walked inside, rubbing her eyes. “Are you the reason I have to work in the middle of the night?” she asked with a resigned voice as she looked at the group. “Oh it’s you. Well that changes things a little.” she said and walked towards Ilea, waving at her.

Ilea just waved back and unsheathed Aki. “Well then maybe see you later friend.” she said and twirled the blade around.

“Hopefully, yes. It’s been a pleasure.” the dagger said, surprising Cameron who seemed already conflicted with another civilian entering the building

without his permission.

“Nice to see you, we’re a bit in a hurry, otherwise I wouldn’t dare disturb anybody’s sleep.” Ilea said as she walked up to the smith’s daughter. Trian focused on Cameron in the meantime, starting to talk about anything the guard knew about his family’s demise and possible responsible parties.

Kyrian went to talk to Balduur about his armor. They would finish Ilea’s first, having already managed to melt a little over half of the armor pieces.

“It’s fine, really. What’s with Aki?” Iana asked as Ilea handed over the dagger.

“He decided to stay with you for a while. I’ll check in at some point, I’m sure it’s beneficial for both of you. And maybe having him will cover for the armor.” Ilea said, winking to the girl as she ceremoniously received the dagger.

“I... it would be an honor. Welcome back Aki.” she said, not able to keep the big smile from her face.

“I’m glad to be back. Less exciting but probably more useful to myself. We can get started as soon as the three are done with what they need. You’re also here to check over their enchantments.” Aki said and Iana nodded quickly.

“I understand and sure Ilea, with this ancient artifact I’ll be able to convince Baldy to give you the armor for free. You didn’t seem to have much trouble on the money front last time we met.” the girl said and put Aki into her bag.

Ilea casually removed the dagger’s sheath from her armor and handed it to Iana, including the belt. “He likes to watch.” she said and winked. “I invested most of it.” Ilea added.

“Alright, so let’s get to work. In the middle of the night. Don’t tell me I’m turning into my father. Don’t.” Iana said and walked over to the others, everybody occupied with work or in conversation.



# Chapter 169 Shopping

## Chapter 169 Shopping

Everybody quickly explained what they needed and Iana started her work. Ilea's armor wouldn't be done for another hour at least, that is to say just the melting of the metal. She couldn't fathom a finished set would be ready within that time but then again she didn't understand much about smithing or how any skills would come in to assist. Maybe it was like in a video game where you hammer onto the piece of metal and it just forms straight into a helmet or sword.

Having seen Balduur hammer at the sword previously spoke against that notion. Perhaps he was just conserving mana? She listened to Cameron and Trian talk for a while, eating a meal in the meantime. They both knew a lot about the inner politics of the city and all the noble families and other factions.

Ilea didn't care too much about the intricacies, neither did she understand most of it without context. She did gather that Trian's suspicions laid on the houses Carter or Birminghamale, two similarly influential families as his own had been. Both would have profited quite a bit from the Alymie's removal. Less competition and a small void in several economic and political branches that they could fill if they moved quickly enough.

True, either of the families and many others would have acted this way even if they weren't involved at all. Power meant power, the question simply remained who had been willing to massacre a whole noble family for it.

The answer was likely any noble house in the empire but who would actually plan and go through with it.

Ilea learned that this wasn't by far a single case. In the past hundred years many a family, group or guild had come to quick power while others mysteriously vanished, were taken out or even engaged in open war. The open battles were simply held outside of the city itself but the empire apparently didn't care too much when some of the lesser influential parties squabbled with each other. With how important personal power in this world was, it was somewhat understandable.

Still, the most powerful parties rarely got involved and the last time one of the most powerful ten noble houses or guilds got involved in open conflict was over thirty years ago. Old history it seemed, for an empire quickly changing.

“The metal is done. Girlie come.” Balduur said, getting everybody's attention for a second before they returned to their own conversations and work. The three smiths came together as Ilea joined them.

“We have to take your measurements. The runes of course were broken but Iana suspected them to be made for the elf and his skills anyway. The incredibly high physical resistance is still there.” Balduur explained as he got some measuring tape.

“I have an idea.” Ilea said. “Not sure if it's practical though but bear with me.” she started and looked at the materials spread on several of the work benches. The room was dimly lit in the glow of the forges and the air was heavy with likely very unhealthy fumes. A normal human below level fifty likely would have trouble simply being in the room.

“What if you made the armor with a mold?” she asked and not just Balduur immediately scoffed at the idea.

“I trust my hands more and to get an accurate mold of your body it’d take at least another day.” he said.

“Yes but we have a metal mage here.” she said with a grin. “Hey Kyrian, do you have a moment?” she called to the man who looked up and nodded, excusing himself from his conversation with Iana.

“Do you have enough metal to cover me?” she asked.

“A mold? Interesting idea. I can easily cover you, sure.” the mage said and Ilea smiled at Balduur.

“Then let’s get started, do you have a mirror in here, I want it to look fancy and not have nipples.” Ilea said.

One of the smiths went to get a big mirror as Ilea and Kyrian discussed the procedure with Balduur.

“You’ll have to hold the metal exactly as it is on her body. Can you reform it once she’s out of it again?” the smith asked.

“That will be unnecessary, I should be able to just blink out of it.” Ilea said and Kyrian nodded.

“Should be possible, the metal is controlled by me so I’m not sure if you can.” he said as an assortment of metal spheres flowed out of his quiver, melting in the air and moving towards Ilea like a weird nano robot army on its march to devour her. “Test?” he asked and she just nodded, turning around and storing all but her underwear in her necklace.

The soothing cool metal started covering her a moment later. Ilea’s face turned a little hot as she imagined the possibilities with Kyrian’s magic. It was neither the time nor the place for that though so she simply concentrated on not moving as he created the mold around her.

“This is harder than I thought...,” Kyrian said as he moved a little closer. “Your body is moving. Well this was just for the blink test. Can you try?”

he asked and Ilea appeared next to the now ghostly form of metal floating in the air.

“It works!” she exclaimed, lifting her arms and remembering that she was nearly naked, blinking back into the metal.

“Ah, that’s what blinking means.” Balduur murmured as he looked at her.

“I’ll work in space for you to breathe, no nipples.” Kyrian said as he stepped in front of her and moved the metal around a little. The other smith arrived with the mirror a moment later and placed it on the wall in front of Ilea, joining Balduur and the remaining smith by his side.

“Metal mages are all too rare... young man would you be willing to work with me sometime?” the woman asked, looking at Kyrian.

“Sure.” he simply replied, continuing to form the armor around Ilea.

“It’s too tight around the neck. And down below.” Ilea said and winked at the man, the metal quickly moving to her wishes.

“Alright, can you hold it like this, then we’ll add what we need as well. And she can try to move in it.” Balduur said and watched on in fascination as the metal hardened, a glinting red sheen reflecting the light of the forges.

The smiths went on to explain to Kyrian where he would have to add separators between the later separate pieces to allow both the highest protection and range of movement, with a focus on movement. Ilea insisted on the priority.

It only took twenty minutes for them to form the armor into a prototype and Ilea started moving right after, testing different moves and stances, going into the basic Azarinth Fighting ones she had learned in the temple ruins so long ago. She moved on to what she had learned from her Ashen Warrior skill and at last she flowed the movements together into complex maneuvers challenging her flexibility and dexterity.

Her speed picked up as she moved faster and faster, her skills activating one after the other as her punches pushed away the very air residing around her fists. The smiths instinctively moved a couple steps further away as they watched the warrior dance before them. Ilea sacrificed a couple hundred points of her Health to get to near her maximum power and continued her testing for another couple minutes. Red runic tattoos glowing on her face interconnected with the fiery lines of her Form of Ash and Ember as she fell into a trance of movements.

“It’s not bad. I need a little more range on the shoulders. Knees are fine now. Loosen up the neck some more. Can’t move my head easily enough.” Ilea explained. They had been through the process two times already but she felt great. Were it not for the reason of their stay in Virilya, she’d be ecstatic. Kyrian’s prototype felt close to the freedom she remembered when fighting in her pajamas.

“Do you have some high quality metals stored up? I’m thinking of having one made as well.” Trian said. Him and Cameron had joined them too a couple minutes ago.

“Nothing as good as yours.” Balduur said as he looked sideways at Trian.

“We’re done then?” the smith asked after another testing session and Ilea nodded, blinking out of the metal and summoning her leather armor before turning around to the group of people.

“You can make the armor, Kyrian we can start with the helmet now.” she said with a grin.

Trian was sleeping in a corner of the room, covered by a blanked Ilea had summoned from her storage. Her armor had been cooled and Iana was finishing up the enchantments they had decided on.

“Do you like it?” Kyrian asked. He was dressed only in his clothes that he wore under his armor, his metal currently being molten as well. The man had decided to move a bigger part of his magically controlled metal into his armor to allow for easier flying, attacks and maneuverability on the fly. When he had it made, his control had been nowhere near where it was at now, both in quantity or quality.

“Yea, it looks awesome. I’m glad there was enough metal to not make it look like a leather suit.” Ilea said and chuckled, looking at the finished creation. The armor looked light but considering the Juggernaut armor had been the heavy kind, this one was a little deceiving. To most people this armor was completely unusable. To Ilea it was like a second skin.

While the plating was as thick as it had been before, the whole thing was reduced in size considerably, molded near perfectly to her body on the inside while giving her the complete range of motion she’d have if she were naked. The craftsmanship was more akin to something Ilea thought of as science fiction, an alien fighter suit but built from metal and enchanted with magic.

While she debated to have it look a little more futuristic, she decided on a more traditional look to not be quite as prominent as her personality usually was. The armor was full plate and protected her in nearly all places, the helmet closed off except for her eyes. There were as with most armors weak spots and incredibly small openings at all joints and the neck. Still the armor would be an amazing addition to her defensive arsenal, similar to what the Juggernaut armor had been but less bulky and much easier to move in.

The elven armor had been rather ideal as well but it had still been armor, forged for another. The color of the metal was a dull black that reflected little of the light in the room and wouldn’t stand out in most places. None of its features were exaggerated or bulky, the finished product being a mostly practical armor. Ilea allowed parts of the helmet to be a little more

extravagant. In the spirit of the previous armor, she had two forward facing spiked horns added, made of the same metal as the armor itself. Smaller than the ones that had adorned the Juggernaut armor but still immediately noticeable.

It added a lot to the whole piece she thought. Perhaps she'd add a symbol or two if she had any deep connection to one but for now she liked the Shadow's Hand black.

“Ok done! Come and try.” Iana said with an excited voice, all tiredness from before had left while working on both Trian's and Kyrian's armors and their enchantments. Ilea nodded and walked towards the armor pieces scattered on several workbenches. Enchantment possibilities were limited but Iana was good at it, very good.

They had decided on the main enchantment being a lightening one. The metal was incredibly durable and it had taken three heavily enchanted magical forges hours to just melt the single pieces, worked by high level smiths nonetheless. Balduur had explained that a smith's treatment of the metal was different compared to Ilea stepping into lava or a fire magic spell. Their skills and understanding of the metal allowed them to melt it and he doubted any creature he had ever heard about was capable of burning through the armor.

Ilea could definitely think of one that should do the trick but people didn't react well if one spoke of those creatures. She was pretty sure they did exist in Elos though.

Iana enchanted all pieces to make them considerably lighter and even added a minor strengthening enchantment to make them more durable as well. That was all that was possible. While the metal was of incredibly high durability, its magical properties weren't exactly staggering. It was still good to be sure but nothing extraordinary. Holding two enchantments of this quality was already quite impressive after all.

Having tried out her Destruction and Wave of Ember skills with the finished product, Ilea had found that her mana traveled uninterrupted through any part of the armor already. No further enchantment had been necessary. On

the contrary, had her fighting style not depended on it, both Iana and Balduur would've suggested enchanting first and foremost against mana intrusion. This allowed Iana to focus on the lightening instead.

While many metals were already somewhat good against mana intrusion, the enchantment against it remained one of the most popular, at least as far as Iana was informed. The other smiths agreed on her assessment.

Walking up to the armor, Ilea grinned despite the circumstances and identified it before she stored it in her necklace.

*[Ashen Hunter Armor Helm – Rare Quality]*

*[Ashen Hunter Armor Chest Piece – Rare Quality]*

*[Ashen Hunter Armor Bracers – Rare Quality]*

*[Ashen Hunter Armor Gauntlets – Rare Quality]*

*[Ashen Hunter Armor Legs – Rare Quality]*

*[Ashen Hunter Armor Boots – Rare Quality]*

She had already worn the armor enough to be comfortable about switching to it through her necklace. Replacing her leather armor with the new Ashen Hunter armor, she held up her armored hand and looked at it through the sockets that were close enough to her eyes and angled in a way as to not impede on her vision at all. It had kept its rare quality, likely thanks to the metal used. The name was interesting to her, obviously connected to her classes. There was a reason it had been called Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor before as well though. This time, it was simply made for her.

It felt lighter even than the armor Kyrian's metal had formed around her. Much lighter than the Juggernaut armor had been. More importantly though it was more comfortable. Ilea felt as flexible as if she wore her training shorts and tank top back in the kick boxing gym. Forming fists with her hands, she smiled as the individual pieces on her fingers moved smoothly into each other before she shadow boxed into the air before her.

She could still replace the gauntlets with her bladed and heavy gauntlets should she have need for them. Her armor gauntlets were measured to be exactly the same length after all. And should her armor come to the same state as her last one, she had a mold now that she could bring to Balduur to



forge either her destroyed armor anew or something completely fresh. At least if she didn't suddenly gain or lose more than a couple kilograms. No powerlifting for her. Considering her diet and its lack of an impact on her form, it didn't quite bother her.

"It's fantastic." she said, turning to the group of people.

"It is. One of my best so far. Now let's finish the metal man's." Balduur said and got back to work, as did the other smiths. The process of finishing Kyrian's armor was a lot simpler compared to Ilea's. While they had made a near perfect mold for her, Kyrian could bend the metal quite strongly to help the smiths in the process, each hammer swing having the impact of twenty with the help of the mage.

"If only all metal bent this easily." one of them said as they watched the helmet move into the cooling tank seemingly autonomously. Trian didn't have a new armor made because of the lack of metal and his own still being in good shape. Redoing any enchantments wouldn't be worth it for the rather slight improvement.

"Thanks again for the great work and the help." Ilea said, shaking Balduur's hand before she went and hugged Iana, careful not to injure her with the horns on her helmet. Trian said his goodbyes to Cameron who had stayed with them through the whole process. It seemed his previous suspicions had been lifted after the long talk the two of them had.

"Nothing to worry about, I'm glad I can finally go back to bed." Iana said, yawning, before she checked Aki in his sheath with a big smile on her face.

"Take care of him. I'll see you around little dagger." Ilea said as she stepped back.

"Oh I will and I'll crack every little secret hidden in those enchantments." Iana added.

# Chapter 170 Ambush

## Chapter 170 Ambush

All three members of the Hand and Cameron suddenly looked towards one of the windows, the latter walking up to it a moment later.

“Did you hear that?” the soldier asked as he opened it and looked outside. Ilea blinked upwards and on top of the big smithy to see a fire in the distance. Quite far away but also quite big. She could make out movements in the distance and flashes of light. Blinking back down, everybody had gathered around the windows.

“There’s a fire and spells being thrown around. A gang bust or something?” she asked but Cameron shook his head.

“Unlikely but let’s hope it’s nothing serious. I’ll go check it out. Open spells creating so much noise at this time of night aren’t exactly planned.” he said and vanished, appearing on the rooftop of the building opposite the smithy before her ran off.

“He didn’t even ask for help.” Trian said and turned to the others. “What should we do?”

“Armor is done, let’s go the the neighborhoods he mentioned. Or do you want to check out what’s going on?” Ilea asked. “Might involve us in some way though.”

“I agree, I think we should keep to the plan.” Kyrian said and looked to Trian. He had the last say in this, they were here for him after all. The mage nodded and looked to the craftsmen before an explosion far too close rocked the building a little.

“I think you should seek shelter.” Ilea said to Balduur and the others when several people entered her Sphere of Perception, rushing towards the guard below. The man had barely removed the sword from its sheath when a blade of wind went straight through his neck, entering the door behind it. He collapsed in silence as the three attackers silently entered the building.

“The imperial guard was just killed. Balduur I think your plan to leave the city might just have to be rushed ahead a little. One of them is coming up.” Ilea said and stepped forward when the door suddenly burst open and a woman slipped inside, dressed in black leather armor, a hood and her face covered. Her eyes scanned the room and got a little bigger as her quick approach slowed down, like a deer caught in a headlight.

“Good evening.” Ilea said as she took a step towards the woman. “Are you perhaps looking for trouble?”

The woman didn't reply and Ilea could feel her distress through her Sight. She hadn't expected to run into members of the Hand in the imperial smithy it seemed. “Do you care for any of the other smiths?” Ilea asked, casually turning towards Balduur and the others. “Because one of them is about to be killed.”

“I don't know them well but they're colleagues of the craft.” Balduur said but he didn't seem terribly upset about the situation. The man would've likely been able to take care of the intruders himself, if his handshake gave any indication about his fighting capabilities. The wind blade from before, Ilea wasn't so sure about that. The intruder still standing before them was at level one twenty, not to be underestimated of course but Ilea was pretty confident, especially seeing the woman's distress.

“I know you don't know me well but I'll work for free for you all if you protect them.” the smith with the high pitched voice said, the sound not quite having the same comedic effect as before.

“As you wish.” Ilea said. “A small detour allowed?” she asked and looked at Trian. In that moment the woman before them moved, trying to rush backwards but Ilea had been paying attention through her sphere. She appeared right in the doorway, jabbing her right hand into the woman’s unprotected throat. Something broke and the attacker stumbled backwards, choking and gurgling as Ilea took a step forward, punching her head with a quick hit. The force was enough to knock her out, sending her down to the ground as Ilea crouched down next to her, healing the damaged wind pipe to avoid her dying.

“Trian the room right below, there’s a guy sneaking up on one of the smiths.” she said and motioned towards Kyrian. “Bindings please.” she said and a metal sphere quickly floated towards her, reforming to create bonds around the woman’s arms and legs, a gag placed in her mouth.

“Go.” Kyrian said and she blinked, right behind the third attacker who was about to intrude on the sleeping quarters that some of the smiths and most of the helpers occupied. She simply grabbed the man’s neck with her arm and started choking. His arm shot up and a magical blade of wind smashed into her helmet, disorienting her for a moment and making her flare up her buffs. She heard a crack and frowned as she moved her head back down.

*‘ding’ ‘You have killed [Zenar – Prophecy of the Wind – lvl 102 / Silent Assassin – lvl 92]*

“Fuck! Yea great, how about investing some points into Vitality next time you dipshit.” Ilea murmured as she held onto the corpse and moved back up, this time taking the stairs. She hadn’t heard anything coming from the middle floor but saw Trian crouched over a spasming man. ‘And that one should’ve had some Lightning Resistance training.’ she thought. Hopefully she hadn’t just killed an innocent man just looking to free his enslaved friend working for the empire. Bad luck on his side either way.

“God you killed him!” one of the smiths exclaimed as Ilea put down the corpse next to the knocked out woman.

“That’s kind of on him.” she said and looked back to see Trian enter with the last man, that one still breathing.

“Let go of me you fuck, you have nothing to do with this!” the man exclaimed before a shock of lightning went through him. He looked rather young, Ilea thought he’d be around her age. Early twenties that is. His level was around a hundred as well, nothing low but also not incredibly impressive for the capital. The mage she had taken care of had managed to kill the guard below with a single clean strike however, indicating that these weren’t any random thugs.

“I will let go of you when you have told me what I need to know. And now please only speak when I ask it of you.” Trian said and let the man fall to the ground. Before he could even get up, metal bindings were around his ankles and both arms, moving them together against his will and pushing him upright into a kneeling position. His eyes weren’t quite as defiant as his words had been as he looked around the room, the demeanor quickly changing into fear instead of anger.

He was at least smart enough to listen to Trian’s words and didn’t start talking again immediately.

“Who are you people and what are you supposed to do here.” Trian asked. The man looked over to Ilea who was crouching over the knocked out woman again, checking on her vitals. He scanned over the corpse as well, gulping hard and looked back to Trian.

“We’re just mercenaries man, like you guys...,” He said and chuckled awkwardly. “We were supposed to hit specific empire buildings in the city and kill whoever we could inside.” he said, looking around and meeting Ilea’s eyes who had turned towards him. “I’m sorry if we offended somehow.” the man quickly added.

“I assume this is part of a bigger thing right?” Trian asked and the man nodded in response. “Baralia is moving earlier than expected. Seems like our little demon mistake has set the pieces into motion.” Trian said and watched the man gulp again.

“Good thing we got our gear before this started then.” Kyrian said as he stepped up to them.

“Where are your people, I’ll get you there safely and out of the city.” Ilea said, walking up to Balduur and the others.

“Nearby. Let me get my things. You’re welcome to join us.” He said to the other two smiths who watched the scene with wide open eyes.

“I doubt that there is an army nearby and the empire doesn’t know about it.” Trian said. “We should be safe helping them out of the city.” he said. More explosions could be heard, this time further away again.

“That enough payment for the gear?” Ilea asked the smith as she crouched down and closed the mage’s eyes.

“You’re getting better at this.” the smith grumbled as he made hammers and swords vanish into whatever storage item he had.

“Where are we going?” the male smith asked.

“South.” Ilea answered, blinking on top of the building again to assess the situation. There were several fires in the distance now, one rather close as well. Shouts rang through the night and a moment later bells rang through the city. If anybody hadn’t been awake already, now was the time. Spreading her wings, Ilea flew upwards with as much speed as she could.

The night sky had cleared somewhat, allowing her to see quite far. As Trian had suspected, there was no sea of torches anywhere close to the city. Perhaps an army was still waiting somewhere in the dark but she assumed organizing such a large number of people in the pitch black dark of the barren plains must’ve required at least some light.

Moving back down, she blinked back into the building.

“... don’t know anything else, please I beg you, we’re just mercenaries on a job.” the man finished and looked around the room. Trian looked at Kyrian and then at Ilea, the latter just shrugging.

“Your call.” she said, Kyrian not offering anything else either. A massive spasm went through the assassin as lightning burned his insides. Iana

looked away in disgust, as did two of the smiths. Balduur just rummaged loudly through a mountain of tools nearby until he pulled out a shiny silver tool.

“There you are.” he said before it vanished. A metal spike formed from one of Kyrian’s spheres before it shot into the remaining assassin’s head with a thud, killing her instantly. Ilea received a little experience for that one as well, having been involved in the fight herself.

“Safer that way.” Trian said as Ilea closed the woman’s eyes as well before moving on to the man Trian had killed. She ignored the thoughts trying to pop into her mind. This wasn’t a game and she had no space for doubts, not now anyways.

“We need to move. Balduur do you have your bloody things together?” Ilea asked and received a nod in response.

“South? Well I’ll come if you’ll allow it. If I’m nearly getting murdered in an imperial smithy then it’s time to get the hell away.” the female smith said.

“As will I.” the one with the high pitched voice added.

“Good, then move.” Trian said as they all exited the room.

“No big sea of torches in the distance.” Ilea said as they descended the stairs and exited the building, stepping over the guard’s corpse and decapitated head.

“Then there shouldn’t be an army. We’ll have to be ready for ambushes though. Try to avoid imperials as well.” he said as they followed Iana and Balduur through the streets. Shouts and a continued ringing of bells livened up the city as the group made their way to their destination.

They were left undisturbed until a burly man clad in heavy armor jumped out from a side street, two handed sword in hand and advancing on them quickly. Ilea prepared herself to intercept before he called out in a hushed voice.

“Balduur, finally. We were worried they'd come for you. What are we to do?” he said and lowered his sword, giving long glances to Ilea and the other companions. The man himself was level one sixty three but Ilea had a feeling the numbers weren't quite telling with that one. “There are attacks all over the place, even some beasts have been seen I hear.” the man added when he grasped the smith's hand.

“We are leaving, back home. It's time.” Balduur said and the man locked eyes with him, a big smile forming behind his beard.

“Come then, we'll bring the news to the others. I'm sure they'll be happy to leave finally.” the man said and turned around, waving for them to follow. He didn't question anybody's presence, either thinking them to be too much of a threat to do so or simply trusting the smith enough. Ilea had a feeling that it was the latter. They walked through several side streets until entering a big closed up square through a high archway.

Shouts and explosions could still be heard from further away and Ilea immediately moved to the front when she perceived movement coming from one of the windows overlooking the square. Her Veil moved in place and blocked the projectile, slowing it enough for her to simply pick it out of the floating defense.

An uneasy feeling spread in her stomach as she looked at the thing in her hand. “Get your people out of here Balduur. They set out demons.” she said and rushed towards the monster whom's eyes she caught through the open window. Blinking up twice, she stood right in front of it.

*[Demon – lvl 82]*

There was no mistake anymore. Whoever was attacking was prepared to have this city fall. She wouldn't believe any stray mind weaver was capable enough to have entered the city with demons hidden away. Not with the human attackers present at the same time. Her muscles strained as she stepped closer, moving her torso sideways as another bone projectile whistled past her. Ilea stood in front of the demon and her fist crashed against its skull, sending a shockwave of kinetic energy through the bone.



The wall behind the beast was coated in red a second later, the demon's lifeless body sacking to the ground as its blood soaked the rug. The dude won't be happy, Ilea thought and checked through the apartment, not finding either corpses or more of the monsters before she blinked outside again, letting herself fall and landing in a crouch on the ground.

The group had advanced through the square, all of them prepared for battle. "Where are your people?" Ilea asked as she joined the running group.

"The entrance with the torch, there!" the armored warrior said and pointed before Ilea sprinted off, blinking occasionally to increase the distance covered. Entering, she descended the stairs following right after. Following the corridor, she came up on two guards standing next to another door, behind which there were beds, goods and a bunch of people. Nothing had advanced this far it seemed. Neither were they a target she assumed.

Coming to a stop in front of the guards, she saw them activate their skills, one of them looking at her with a puzzled expression while the other one slashed his halberd towards her torso. Ilea stepped forward and extended her hand, blocking the weapon on its pole, right before the blade. The man tried to rip the weapon back but her grasp was unyielding.

"Hahaha, you'll have a hard time with that one." the other guard said, Ilea looking at him. "You are not our enemy are ya?" he asked, still prepared to fight.

"No." Ilea said, looking at both of them before she let go of the weapon. Trian appeared in the room a moment later, looking around as his lightning calmed down.

"Clear?" he asked and Ilea nodded.

"There are demons nearby. How will we get them out?" she asked and looked at the man.

"Get them close to the wall and fly them over. Nowhere near any of the gates. Any guards we'll have to take care of. At least we don't have to waste

gold to pay for our gear.” he said, getting a smile from Ilea under her helmet.

“If there are demons they definitely don't want to stay inside. We'll have to move fast, I don't want to squander this opportunity.” Trian said and Ilea nodded.

“I'll help them out at least but you can leave already.” she suggested but Trian shook his head.

“Don't get overconfident. We have to stay together as much as we can. This won't cost us a lot of time.” he said when the others came into the small space before the shelter's entrance.

“Balduur!” one of the guards shouted and started laughing. “I knew it. Are we leaving?” he asked and the smith nodded, walking past and entering the room before he started shouting for everybody to wake up and get ready.

“Something's coming.” the guard who had attacked Ilea said as he looked towards the corridor with intense eyes. Ilea blinked into the small space and saw a demon approaching. Another low leveled one, leaving more credibility to her theory. The thing was stopped dead in its tracks as Ilea's armored boot landed in its chest, pushing out all the remaining air and piercing its organs with its own ribs as they shattered inwards, killing the beast instantly.

“D... Demons.” one of the guards said, his hands shaking a little. The other one smiled and prepared his ax.

“Again? Were the fuckers following us this far?” he asked, a grin on his face.

“I doubt they're so selective.” Trian said as the villagers prepared to leave, some armored men and women already exiting into the corridor.

“Let's secure the square. Any other entrances?” Ilea asked, waiting until one of the men shook his head before she ran back outside. Tonight would be less sneaky than she had expected. A good change in her book.

# Chapter 171 Silent Escape

## Chapter 171 Silent Escape

The square was empty and Ilea ran around it, checking the side streets through her Sphere, finding a couple guards and other people running around, all armed. No demons were in sight and she hid herself next to the big archway leading outside.

Trian and Kyrian followed quickly after and ten minutes later the villagers came out of their temporary home. Not the only refugees in the city that would try and get out tonight or in the coming days. It would become significantly harder as soon as the initial chaos was taken care of or the demons had taken over.

Ilea heavily doubted that the same fate as Ravenhall was waiting for Virilya. That demon she had fought back there would've had to gather another army of mind weavers and thousands of high level demons to accomplish such a task. No, this wasn't going to bring down the capital of this empire.

“North east is the best bet. The forest is the closest there, at least from this part of the city.” Trian said. “Ilea, warn us from any groups, we'll move through the streets.” he added.

“How will we get over the walls? Only two of us can fly and that'll take a while to move everybody.” the armored man they had met first said.

“Our metal mage can surely assist there.” Ilea said and saw Kyrian smile under his helmet. They ran through the streets, the three members of the Hand and around sixty people from the village. She noticed that only three children were in the group but they kept up all the same.

Ilea lifted her hand in a signal for the group to stop, the people shuffling to come to a halt behind her, the closest ones trying to look out from the side street they were standing in. Iana held up a small trinket and her eyes glowed a light blue as Ilea felt her perception through her Sphere dampen.

The group of soldiers she had spotted ran by with a sense of urgency. She noticed that one of them was holding his side, a nasty wound spilling blood onto the cobbled street. The man grit his teeth and moved on, his perseverance the only thing Ilea would remember about him before she moved on, following Trian through the maze of streets the man seemed to know by heart.

The rather large group avoided the bigger explosions and fires in the distance, not encountering any demons or other groups trying to get in their way. Ilea thought that this night was probably the dream come true for any criminal in the city. Guards leaving their posts to help out with an invading force or even demonic enemies. The wall had been visible in the distance for a while but when they finally reached it, Ilea was glad she could fly.

Standing right below the massive structure made her again realize how impressive it was. Any army would have trouble breaching such a thing. Kyrian was already forming a platform with his metal and a moment later the first people started stepping onto it. Ilea was a little surprised at how much confidence they showed towards a magically constructed elevator a man they didn't even know had conjured right before them. Then again he was a member of the Shadow's Hand and Balduur seemed to trust him, making the decision likely a little easier.

“Come on, I can take three or so as well.” Ilea said, looking at the group of people that sceptically looked towards her before wings of black ash spread behind her. Looking up into the sky, more clouds had gathered, making the night quite a bit darker than it had been before. Only a couple hours were left until the suns would rise again. Time they better use to look through

some bad neighborhoods, especially on a night light this, where anybody that could get in their way was likely occupied themselves. Three people disengaged from the group and walked towards Ilea who welcomed them with open arms.

“Hold on tight.” she said and felt their grip harden before she ascended with high speed, checking their states through her healing spell, its diagnostic monitoring quite helpful at determining her passengers’ well doing. She was moving much faster than Kyrian’s platform of course and came out on the top a couple seconds later, finding only a single guard closer than a hundred meters, her sight locked onto the city below, an easy pick for any attacker that would come from outside.

‘Good for us then...,’ Ilea thought as she crossed over the wall, descending quickly downwards. Noticing that one of the people she was carrying was about to pass out, she slowed down little by little until she stepped onto the freshly growing grass on the other side of the wall.

“W... We made it.” the woman on her right said as she let go of her arm, her hands pale from the tight grip she had held around Ilea’s armor.

“Not really, the forest is quite a while away, best cover here and wait for the whole group before we move off. We’ll deal with anybody noticing us should that occur. Hug the wall.” Ilea said and flew up again as she watched the people move closer to the wall below her, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Coming up on top, Kyrian’s platform was just crossing over the wall and she waved at the group before she descended again quickly. Blinking through the wall would’ve saved her some time but she could check out the guards on top and any group possibly closing in on them from below. The aerial view gave her a definite advantage.

She did actually spot some people in the streets but found one of them to be a drunk according to his walking pattern and the other one to be a burglar, considering the shattering of a window that followed right before she moved past the buildings, obscuring her view. Landing, she took the next group of people and repeated her previous flight until there was nobody left to get.

It took less than seven minutes to move the whole group. Standing close to the wall, the village people of Indur waited for Trian's signal. Ilea watched them from above, hanging on the wall with one arm whilst checking the guards closest to them. The one she had spot before was still focused on the town itself but another guard standing a little further away was focused on the outside, taking his job a little more seriously it seemed.

She watched as the group of people below started running across the field. It was quite a long way until the safety of the nearby forest would cover their movements and at least half of the field wasn't cast in darkness, the moon breaking through the gathering clouds at around halfway towards their target.

Ilea moved closer to the guard, identifying the man to be at level one twenty. A moment later he too identified something. Rushing to the nearby bell, he grabbed the string to ring it when he found his arm unmoving, an armored hand clasped around his wrist and moving downwards steadily.

"They're not enemies. Neither am I." Ilea said as he turned his head towards the woman, his heart pounding faster every second as they stood in silence, Ilea looking at the other guards in the distance, none of them as attentive as the man before her.

Seeing her group safely making it to the forest, she released the man who stood there unsure to his next actions. "You did your job well, make sure that the others do their as well." Ilea said and pointed to the guards on each side of him. "Oh and if I hear that bell ringing, I'll come for you." she said, pretty sure the man wouldn't exactly risk his life to reveal their group. Especially not after one of them revealed themselves and didn't kill him already. A calculated risk. Plus she doubted he could arrange a group to follow them quick enough to change anything.

Rushing towards the forest with her full speed, Ilea came down and landed heavily in the dirt, finding tracks and the smell of the villagers passing through just minutes earlier. Following with her Hunter's Sight, she soon caught up to the running group and joined Trian and Balduur at the front.

"How long until we go back?" Ilea asked.

“Soon, after we crossed the forest. I doubt anybody will be following. At least not until late tomorrow. They’re capable of moving fast and for a long time.” he said, Balduur nodding towards Ilea, the run not bothering the huge man nearly as much as she would’ve expected. They did survive in the mountain village without any impressive walls or help.

They reached the other side of the forest fifteen minutes of running later and the villagers immediately spread out to check the surroundings for any dangers. Ilea had been a little apprehensive about leaving them to their own devices in the wild but that worry had been shattered in their run. She wanted to get back to their search as soon as possible.

“... and then I suggest moving further south until you reach Clamfell, the road west should be safe enough for your group if you’re not unlucky.” Trian explained, looking over the map with Balduur and a group of other villagers, one of them holding up a magical flame for them to see.

“The rest of the way plenty of us have gone before. We will be fine. Exiting the city was the difficult part. Thank you, all of you.” Balduur said and looked around to find Ilea and Kyrian.

Trian nodded and locked eyes with first Ilea and then Kyrian. “We’ll be off then.” he said and grabbed the metal handle forming from a floating sphere before him. His flashy way of flying really had been a detriment to tonight’s operations. A good thing they had the metal mage with them.

Ilea shook Balduur’s hand. “Good luck, the help means free service for life right?” she said and watched them with a grin.

“5% off for the next three years.” he said but the tone indicated a joke more than anything.

“Don’t die.” she said and moved on to Iana whose hand she squeezed in a much gentler way.

“Good luck on your mission.” the girl said. Ilea stepped back and joined her group, the enchantress unsheathing Aki and waving at them with dagger in hand. Ilea’s wings spread as she waved back, her expression turning serious again below her helmet as she turned around and started flying, Kyrian and Trian following close behind. It would be interesting to see how the city changed from this attack. For now, they had a couple hours of darkness still to work.

The flight back to the city and subsequent entry was laughably easy. Nobody came to stop them and nobody rang any bells either. A stark contrast to what Ilea had experienced even earlier in the night when a flying squad of guards had stopped her high above the city. Fires were burning in many parts of the capital, some barely noticeable in the far distance. The operation of whoever was attacking them had been extensive to say the least. What their exact goal was would likely stay a mystery to Ilea but considering the ensuing chaos, many an opportunist would seek to fulfill their plans tonight.

“Let’s go, we’ll check them systematically. Closest one first.” Trian said as he let go of the metal, landing on a building not far below. The others followed and continued on foot, a little slower than flying but Trian’s maneuverability wasn’t in control of Kyrian. He was the man who knew the city after all.

“This is it.” Trian said and stopped on a rooftop, overlooking a part of the city that didn’t exactly look any different than anything Ilea had seen before. Jumping down from the building, she noticed the details. No color



on any houses, a smell that spoke of a definite lack of hygiene, rot even. Eyes in the dark that shied away from the hooded individuals much too important looking to be visiting their downtrodden district.

Ilea spread her senses, enhanced through her skills as she took in the smells and surroundings, their group starting to walk. Trian occasionally knocked on doors but an answer failed to appear. Ilea knew there were people behind some of the doors but neither of her companions would force their way into somebody's home to get information. Trading for that good would be much better, and a willing merchant would likely open their doors to such an opportunity.

Ilea found indications for murders, thievery and a downright criminal lack of bathing as they continued on through the district that more and more seemed like a slum to her. While its outwards appearance with the high quality houses might fool an onlooker, what was laying inside painted quite the opposite picture.

“The shadow's hand, visiting on such a dangerous night.” the first to willingly open their door said, a shiver running through them as they finished the sentence. The man was frail and looked to be in his twenties, his eyes holding a dangerous spark that Ilea would avoid at all cost back on Earth. She locked eyes with him until he looked back to Trian.

“We're looking for a woman. Around level two hundred, last time we saw her she had blond hair. A rogue and a killer.” Trian said and flung a piece of copper into the man's direction. He caught it with surprising dexterity, grinning at the coin that he put away with shaking hands.

“That's a broad description sir shadow. Rogues at that level are rarely even seen, let alone known to give much worth to their outer appearance. Might as well look for a dwarven man at this point.” he said. “Still, I can tell you about where to find people that might know more, more than me that is.”

Trian flung another copper coin his way and the man told them about some places that sold information, people whose sole business was the very trade of it. Ilea smiled as she realized she had overpaid all those guards and

people she had paid for information so far. Another way to save some money now that she had less to spend.

They moved on with reasonable speed. Slow enough that Ilea could still check her surroundings for a stray clue on her friend's whereabouts. They had to go through another district to find the first information seller. Unluckily for both them and the seller, they found the window to the woman's flat broken in and a corpse inside. Likely hers, considering the bloody letters on the wall that spelled *Lyer*. The spelling made Ilea a little sad. An information seller killed by a barely literate. The reality of the world. Still she didn't know if the woman had actually been a liar.

The next stop was a little more successful. A rooftop bar with a copious assortment of plants and herbs. The man had simply told that this was a prime place one could go to learn things. The lack of tenants didn't tell them much as Trian walked up to one of the barkeepers. A question and piece of silver later, they were directed to a woman sitting alone on a small round table, smoking a fancy looking cigarette.

"The Shadow's Hand. Oh it has been a while. This night truly is exciting." she said as Trian and Ilea sat down, the latter ripping out a piece of an herb growing next to the table in a big box of wood.

"An exciting night indeed. We're not here because of that." Trian said and they watched the woman rise her eyebrow. A sudden flare of magic made Ilea tense up for a moment before she noticed the similar feel it had to Claire's spell that helped keep out any listeners.

Trian looked around and settled back on the woman. "I believe we have found a rather capable seller." he said and she smiled.

“Go on, I can see you’re in a hurry.” the woman said, her smile shifting to a more business like expression.

“What do you know of the Aymie massacre?” Trian asked and watched her silently put out her cigarette.

“You might be getting into something you don’t want to stir, boy.” she said and locked eyes with the man. Ilea was irking to throw the woman off the high building but this was Trian’s matter and not her own.

“Perhaps stirring is exactly my intention?” he asked and this time the woman chuckled.

“Ah to be young again and reckless. And stupid. Well the Shadow’s Hand was never famous for their intellect, at least not its baser members. You have suspicions already and I’m afraid I can’t give you any definite proof of anything. Whoever did it made sure to pay the right people and cover their tracks. I can’t give you anything concrete and any less would betray the quality of my service.” she finished, surprising Ilea with the statement. It was of course possible that she too had been paid, or she simply didn’t feel like sharing with a member of the Hand.

Trian leaned back and sighed. “Is that all?” the woman asked getting a grunt from the man opposite her.

# Chapter 172 Crash

## Chapter 172 Crash

“We’re looking for a rogue above level two hundred, blond hair when we last saw her. She’s hard to track and even harder to see. She should’ve been in the capital these past months.” he said. The woman lifted her eyebrow and chuckled.

“That is terribly unspecific. Any idea as to her weapons, gear, clothes or skills?” the woman asked.

“Two daggers, light gear of course, possibly a mask. Illusion and mind magic.” Trian said. The woman slowly opened a little box on the table and took out another fancy cigarette, lighting it with the plain looking lighter that lay next to the box. Taking a puff, she exhaled towards the group of people before she spoke.

“There aren’t many that fit a description even close to that. I know of three that get reasonably close but my information on their skills is limited at best. I’m pretty sure one of them has not been in the capital for a while. Of the two others I know for sure that one of them has been here. She visited me actually, asking many questions. Some regarding the demons... I would wager she has something to do with the Hand now that you suddenly show up here. And I believe she is your woman.” she said. “I want five gold pieces for further information on her.”

She had shared quite a bit without even expecting them to pay anything. Now she definitely had them on the hook. Impressive to see a professional

at work, Ilea thought as Trian stacked five gold coins on the table before he invited the woman to take them.

The coins vanished somewhere below the table. A hidden pouch, Ilea saw through her Sphere. A pouch with a hidden pouch within. A little extreme, she thought.

“She was wearing plain leather armor, cheap and worn. Short red hair. There was a weird pressure I felt back when she was here around two weeks ago. I believed it to be simply her presence and high level but it might’ve been mind magic now that you mentioned it. I saw only one dagger but she might’ve hidden another. She asked dangerous questions, questions that I won’t be willing to share with you. The woman left this way but she vanished right after jumping off the building.” she said, less than Ilea had expected and little to go on.

Hunter’s Sight was working overtime to catch anything in the surroundings. If the woman was right then Eve had been here two weeks ago. Much too long for any reasonable trace to still be here, especially with how hard Eve was to detect already.

“Any idea where she went or who her target was?” Trian asked and the woman raised a hand with five fingers.

“Another five gold. I might have an idea. Didn’t before our talk and that is why you’ll get this one for less.”

Ilea summoned five gold coins and placed them on the table. “Go on.” she said, continuing to look around the place.

“I’ve heard a woman has died. A dangerous woman with a rather unpleasant hobby. It would be foolish to get close to her and any acquaintances but somebody did and they managed to kill her. Stab wounds from a dagger, cursed as I’ve heard, veins of black running through the corpse. I don’t know the name of the woman but I know where she resided. The place was burnt down last week and with it the secrets held within. People talked as soon as she had died, their voices silenced quickly but not

quickly enough to not reach me and doubtlessly many others. Do you have a map?" the woman asked and Trian produced one from his pack.

"Here." she said and placed the not burning part of her cigarette onto the paper.

"Be wary of both that woman and anybody who might be watching. I would not normally say this to members of the Hand." she said and put away her money, continuing to smoke.

Trian got up and jumped off the building, the others following behind.

"We'll check it out." he said and started running towards what Ilea assumed to be the place pointed out on the map.

What Ilea assumed to be a mansion was actually a massive piece of land in the middle of the city. Where previously there must've been luscious gardens, there was only ash remaining. The fire had been controlled, burning only to the very edges of the estate. What remained of the house was burnt out as well, collapsed and destroyed.

Ilea connected with the remaining ash out of habit and started moving it a little as the three of them sneaked into the wasteland. The explosions and bells had lessened in the past half hour, a sign that the city was either getting completely overrun or they slowly got the situation under control.

"We should check the surroundings first." Kyrian said, the other two looking at him.

"They burned everything inside. Perhaps there are clues where the fire didn't reach." he added and Ilea agreed. Walking back, the three of them checked the streets and houses surrounding the estate.

One the last side street, Trian looked up and suddenly walked into the street. The others followed and watched him stop and touch a wall.

“What’d you find?” Ilea asked and checked the surroundings as well. She had the answer before he spoke it.

“Blood. It’s a week old at least. It seems. Familiar. I’m not the best at bloodtracking but I feel like I know this one.” he explained.

“Should we go back and check out the house or follow this one.” Ilea asked.

“We don’t know if the chaos lured away anybody who would be guarding the place. And if she was injured a week ago, there is no urgency for us to find her. She’s either fine or...,” he didn’t finish the sentence as he looked at Ilea. “We’ll find her.” he said, touching her shoulder.

They searched the burnt estate and the house itself. Ilea was sure there had been people burnt inside, the ash felt different to her. Little remained but a ruin. The underground cave they found didn’t help them much either, most of it collapsed and burnt as well. Evidence of something, to be sure.

The effort led them back to the side street where Trian had found dried blood. Him and Ilea worked together to find the next spot. It wasn’t far and not difficult. Easily determined to be from around the same time as the one from before.

It had been cleaned and partially removed but to Trian’s bloodmagic and Ilea’s sphere it was still noticeable.

The track led them to another district nearby but it suddenly stopped. Completely. Ilea knew it. She was here, somewhere here. It reminded her of the weird absence she had used to discover Eve in their early training bouts. Enough to fool most but not enough to fool her the Hunter Sphere.

“Her hideout is somewhere here...,” Ilea said, walking up to the wall of a house, touching it carefully. Her Sphere couldn’t penetrate to look inside. Surely this was the place.

“It’s in here.” she said, stepping away from the wall. Trian looked around and charged a spell, his electricity flowing into the wall and spreading on it like a disturbed nest of ants. The magic revealed a simple wooden door.

“... no.” Ilea said and rushed towards the entrance, a sinking feeling in her stomach as she pushed into the small room, the inside revealed now that the enchantments were broken. The smell of rot and blood filled her nose as she blinked to the bed and flung away the cloth placed on the body. Kneeling down she threw away her helmet and ripped off her gauntlets before she carefully touched Eve’s head.

The woman was dead. Ilea knew it the moment she laid eyes on the pale corpse, her healing spell pushing into the body nonetheless as her shaking hands ran through her friend’s hair. They were red after all. She had looked better with longer hair, Ilea thought as tears started to silently drip onto her armor. “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry...,” she said and kept on trying to heal her friend. Her dead friend. Her murdered friend. The knot in her stomach gripped at her tightly as a coldness filled her chest.

A sudden hand on her shoulder made her veer back into reality. She was crying, the hand on her shoulder lending little warmth to the cold inside of her. Pushing the hand away, she kept stroking Eve’s hair. Ilea didn’t know what to do.

‘Get a grip.’ a small voice in her head told her. ‘Would she be breaking down in a mess like that?’ the voice asked.

“No...,” Ilea replied a moment later, lifting her hands free of armor to brush away the tears. “She wouldn’t.” she said and laughed, the sound mixing with the occasional sob that broke through. Standing up, Ilea walked to the other side of the room and punched the wall. She was sad, angry and frustrated. Without any skills active, her fist shattered the stone, forming cracks on it as again and again it landed.

Why didn’t she ask for help? Why did she go at it alone? Why hadn’t she been there? Questions ran through her head as she kept on hammering her frustrations into the wall, blood joining the pulverized stone soon as her fist worked its way further. ‘Get a fucking grip.’ again the voice in her head



said. Ilea realized it was her own voice, a part of her just as frustrated and angry as she was. A part of her that was cold. It was her. Not the Ilea who was annoyed at her fastfood job. Not the Ilea who somehow landed in a weird and distant world, terrified of dragon like creatures. Not the Ilea who was used by who she considered to be a friend. No, it was her.

She had faced down Elves, creatures destroying human cities for fun and killing hundreds in their bloodthirst. She had faced dwarven machines thousands of years old, fine tuned for killing. She had traveled to the demon realm and killed thousands of the monsters that threatened to bring down even the strongest human empire. And she had killed them all. She had prevailed. Ilea found herself standing in the room, staring at the ceiling as ash swirled around her, slowly and gently, all her skills running at the max, her health declining as a red glow illuminated parts of the surroundings.

Someone had killed her friend. For one reason or the other, someone had killed her friend. Eve had been a murderer, an assassin, a thief and probably a liar. Ilea was sure of all that. The woman likely had enough enemies already and this time she had done something that had cost her her life. Ilea didn't care. She would find whoever did this.

The ash slowly came to a stop before it sunk to the floor, Ilea noticing Trian and Kyrian for the first time since she entered the room. The latter was kneeling near Eve, checking her wounds. Trian was looking through the many documents he had found in the nearby dresser.

“Do you have anything?” Ilea asked in a cold tone.

“A lot actually. I expected her to be a spy or assassin but this goes beyond anything I'd have given her credit for.” Trian said as he carefully distributed the papers and letters into piles.

“These are letters and documents from high nobles of Virilya.” he said.

“Whatever she was playing, it was as high stakes as it gets.”

“And she paid dearly for that.” Ilea said, walking up to Eve.

“She has a lot of wounds on her body but nothing fatal as far as I can tell. The rashes on her neck and the state of her hands and nails tell me she might’ve been killed here. Strangled.”

Ilea agreed. She had accumulated some knowledge in the past year, mostly because of injuries on her own body. Eve must’ve been injured heavily. For her to leave such easily traceable blood. It needed a good tracker but Eve wasn’t known to be found, not by anyone.

“Someone found her here after the fight and killed her.” Ilea said. “Perhaps she lost?”

“The information seller told us that a woman died. If that was the intended target then she didn’t lose. Not initially at least.” Kyrian said.

“This is all evidence of corruption, rape, murder, treason...,” Trian said as he continued looking through the documents. “That name, the Golden Lily. It hasn’t come up so far.”

“Something tells me it won’t.” Ilea said as she sat on the bed next to Eve.

Leaving behind Virilya, the airborne group made their way eastwards. Ilea carried Eve in her arms, gently landing near the cliff side as the suns started to rise. The waves crashed into the stone below as Kyrian went to cut down two nearby trees with metal magic, moving the pieces of wood into a pile and creating a deathbed for their lost teammember. A spark went up from Trian, striking into the wood and starting a fire.

Ilea waited and watched the endless ocean before her as the wind rushed through her hair. The fire behind her took over the pile of wood, crackling and consuming as the other two stood by. A deep breath filled her lungs and she turned around, stepping into the flames and gently placing her friend into the flames.

She ignored the pain as the flames dug into her skin, touching Eve's face one last time. A last moment and soon it passed. She stepped back out of the flames, her skin healing as she watched the fire slowly consume Eve Aillan, the mysterious rogue who had joined the Shadow's Hand with Ilea. She wouldn't learn about the woman's past, she didn't even know if the name was her true one. To her, Eve was her name and she had been a companion for a part of her journey.

Lightning crackled and lashed out towards the ocean, soon fading into nothing. Three strikes were unleashed by the lightning mage as Ilea sent the ash from the pyre upwards and out towards the sea.

They stood there until nothing was left, each in their own thoughts. Ilea sighed deeply and cracked her neck, her helmet and gauntlets appearing with the movement.

"Well she left us enough behind to work through. If she fucked with the highest, we'll find whoever murdered your family as well." Ilea said.

"Back to the city." Trian said, his lightning wings extending behind him as they ascended, rushing back towards Virilya, with their most dangerous mission so far on hand.

Ilea didn't know how she felt. The food she ate that night didn't taste like anything. She had experienced loss, most people have, some less some more. To have a friend actually murdered? That was not something she or any of her peers back on earth had to deal with, at least she hoped none of them did.

“It sucks...,” she said to nobody in particular as she read through another one of the letters they had recovered from Eve’s hideout. Whoever had killed Eve had apparently not cared enough to destroy the assortment of evidence. Nowhere did they find the name Golden Lily. The fact that Eve had mentioned the name in her letter spoke volumes and all three of them thought it to be particularly suspicious. Not even in her personal notes did she ever mention the name.

Trian was asleep and Kyrian was in meditation, metal circling around him, sometimes scratching the wooden inn walls and floor. The day had come and passed but Ilea had refused to sleep or do anything else but read through all the documents. Kyrian had insisted she at least eat something.

A knock on the door took her out of it. Three men in armor were standing outside, she saw through her Sphere. Still in her full armor, Ilea got up and blinked outside.

“My friend is sleeping, what do you want?” she asked, folding her arms before her.

“Madam Shadow!” the man spoke and bowed his head slightly. “There are still demons loose in the city, we’re looking for mercenaries and adventurers willing to deal with them. One district was completely run over.” he explained his plea, the man’s armor indicating him to be part of the guard.

“Why would I care? You three are capable enough to deal with some demons aren’t you?” she asked and blinked back into her room. They were all above level one hundred, none of the demons she saw were above that. She had better things to do.

Looking down, she saw the mess of papers she had created and the half eaten food. Ilea held her head and looked up. ‘I can’t do this right now.’ she thought and shook her head. Her body felt numb, her mind was the same. This wasn’t exactly the reaction she expected out of herself from losing one of her few friends she had in this new world, her world. The reaction yesterday, though blurry she did remember. That was more like it. “The anger and... the cold.” she mumbled to herself.

“Kyrian, I’ll be out for a while.” she said and blinked into the common room below, not waiting for her teammate to respond.

“I’ll do it, show the way.” she said to the three men who were already leaving the inn.

“Thank the empress. We can discuss the pay...,” Ilea interrupted the man and walked past them.

“I said show the way.” she said, locking eyes with the one who had spoken through her helmet. He was afraid of her, she felt it. No, she could even see it in his eyes but the thought gave nothing to her. Her rational mind told her that it should have some impact, to be feared. A part of her wanted to apologize but she didn’t. She stepped outside and looked at the sinking sun.

“Fuck this...,” Ilea said and waited for the painfully slow guards to exit. “If you don’t speed the fuck up I will murder all of you.” she said in a monotone voice. She was oh so tired.

# Chapter 173 Void

## Chapter 173 Void

“What’s their level?” she asked as she followed the three guards through the streets. The fires had been put out already but smoke was still rising from the city. An all too common picture in her life, she thought. Perhaps just staying in her house forever would be the better choice.

“Between fifty and one hundred and thirty, at least the ones we saw.” one of the guards replied, nearly stumbling as he looked back at her.

“Why are you looking for help then?” Ilea asked. Still it felt right to her. To move and to hunt.

“There have been casualties... They’re highly infectious and frankly terrifying to fight.” the man said. “We were ordered to keep injuries at a low. The healers have their hands full as it is. We have the money to pay and heard about Shadow’s Hand staying nearby.” another one of them explained.

Ilea thought back when she first fought a demon. They didn’t seem terrifying to her. There was another feeling she associated with them but right now she couldn’t recall what exactly that was. These men weren’t adventurers and they sure as hell weren’t hunters. Still, to defend one’s home, one’s family? Shouldn’t they step up?

She didn’t know. She knew that the numbness in her body left a little, just enough for her to feel it. The pain in her stomach. Like a curse, just ten

times worse.

“This is it. We have barricaded the next three streets.” one of the guards said as they approached a stone wall going higher than the houses. Guards and what looked like adventurers stood near and above it, bows at the ready and sometimes flinging magic downwards. They could’ve just waited the demons out and killed them at range. She didn’t know why they had been looking for help. She didn’t care.

“... the pay is good but do you honestly expect us to just jump in there? We’ll need to get a proper layout of the houses first, plans and...,” one of the adventurers was talking as she walked by, blinking inside the apparently demonized territory. Just a couple of houses. They should’ve seen Eregar’s Haven at the summoning. A familiar scream resounded a couple meters to her right and Ilea turned.

A two legged spawn, a turned human it seemed. Level sixty, similar to the ones she had killed in Morhill. By the hundreds they had killed them. She remembered but the pain in her stomach didn’t leave. The beast moved quickly, mutated to the point of a perfect hunter. Sharp claws adorned its elongated arms and legs, its hole body thin to allow for faster movement and less surface for attack. Reddish eyes stared at her as its maw opened, sharp teeth ready to tear out limbs and bone alike.

A moment later it was standing before her and Ilea’s arm lashed out, enhanced by her skills she shattered the monster’s throat before she grabbed it. The thing tried screaming but she squeezed as it lashed out with arms and legs, the hits deflected by her Veil of Ash alone that formed around her as quickly as the beast had attacked. “They’re scared... of You?” she stated more than asked before she threw the monster into a house’s wall.

It slowly rose, obviously injured and angry, screaming at the attacker. And this time, Ilea screamed back. A loud clearing scream, full of pain and agony. They clashed, Ilea ignoring the beast’s irrelevant attack as her fist smashed its chest, breaking through the tough skin, breaking the bone beneath and squishing the organs before she opened her hand, grabbing its spine and ripping a part of it out with a quick movement. It was dead.

She didn't even hear the sound in her mind, barely seeing what was happening before her as her eyes became blurry. 'My helmet...', she thought and switched out her armor with casual clothing she'd wear at her house. The demon fell down and so did she. Falling to her knees and her vision still blurry, Ilea saw the monsters approach through her sphere.

They screamed and rushed at their attacker. The first beast to reach her slashed its claw right across her face, the attack was stopped even before it reached the bone. Ilea's skin was already too tough. Blood streamed down her face, joining the tears as the beast ripped out its claw to attack again. One of her eyes came with it but the pain felt dull to her. Another attack landed on her back, cutting through the clothing and into her flesh before Ilea stood up.

A sudden blackness formed around them, a whirlpool of ash that suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Cuts quickly formed on the beasts still trying to attack her. One managed to mangle her leg quite badly but Ilea just stood there, a smile on her face as she sacrificed a thousand health to activate her State's third tier. Red tattoos started glowing on her, joining the fiery red from her Form of Ash and Ember. She turned and caught a clawed hand with her hand, fingers intertwining as the claws bit into her flesh.

Ilea just looked at the beast and pushed, the claws bending backwards as they struggled to cut deeper into her flesh before suddenly, several cracks resounded and the beast's fingers broke backwards. "Why didn't you come for me?" Ilea asked in a loud voice as the beast attacked her with its other arm, uncaring for its injury. Ilea simply punched, with all her strength. The demon's chest was cracked inwards and its lifeless corpse sent flying, flinging into its kind as they struggled with the storm of ash around them.

"You wouldn't be fucking dead now!" she shouted and stomped on the demon corpse next to her, her foot breaking through the skull and brain like through an overripe watermelon. Bone and blood flung upward, sullyng both her and her ripped clothing. Ilea felt it then. The pain, not in her stomach but her face. She was injured. Her back hurt too. "What the hell am I doing?" she asked in a sad tone as she looked around, the whirling ash cutting into the weak demons, blood dripping down from her face, back and leg.



Looking down, the leg was a mess. Her flesh had been cut deeply and any normal person would've already bled out by now. "You will die too you know? If you continue like this." she said and started laughing. Her healing spell activated and the arteries closed. The rest was irrelevant. The poison was irrelevant, as were the wounds themselves.

Breathing a deep breath, she quickly condensed the ash around her, five small spheres forming and condensing even further by the second. The demons looked at her and screamed. They did scream a lot, she thought before her ashen spheres rushed out, spinning in the air as she let go of them. One for each remaining demon.

The spheres weren't enough. The hit demons were slammed to the ground or to the side at the impacts but they got up again. Enough to destroy a tree but not one of these fuckers? Ilea asked herself. She felt it now, over the pain on her body. Grief. For a woman she had barely known. They had fought next to each other, had saved each other's lives. It was not a nice feeling, Ilea decided. But it was a feeling.

Her wounds closed and back in her armor, Ilea blinked into another house and clapped, several demons rushing at her immediately. Their impact was truly terrifying in a densely populated place like this. Moving quickly, she ducked under the first one's attack and side stepped to get behind another. A kick to its knee broke the bone as she jumped backwards, evading the wild flailing of her closest adversary before she killed it with two quick punches to the throat and head, sending her offensive magic through the beast as the room slowly filled with ash.

They weren't the best when they couldn't see and while they somehow worked well in the night, ash wasn't exactly the absence of light. She moved quickly through the room and finished the six remaining disoriented monsters with one hard punch to their heads, none of them above level

forty. It felt good to kill them, cleansing in a way. ‘That’s the last of them.’ she thought and breathed in, ignoring the fact that the ash going into her lungs didn’t bother her at all.

“See? This is what you could’ve had to help you along the way... dumbass.” Ilea said and kicked at one of the corpses. “At least I will avenge you.” she said and walked to the door, opening the battered piece of wood and stepping outside. The area was clear.

Walking back to the wall where she entered, she blinked up to a rooftop where the guards and some of the adventurers had been watching. “It’s clear.” she said and started walking away.

“Wait!” one of the guards said and held up a pouch. “Your pay!” he said. Ilea turned around and grabbed it. She counted the money through her sphere and nodded. Fifty silver coins. She remembered getting a fraction of that from her first job as a healer in Riverwatch. Her wings spread before she rushed away.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Demon – Slasher – lvl 52]*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Demon – Slasher – lvl 34]*

*‘ding’ ‘State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16’*

She couldn’t give less of a crap about her skills right now. If it helped her find and kill the people responsible for Eve’s death though? She wouldn’t say no.

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“Are you sure we can just leave her like that? She’s heavily injured!” Silvan said, shaking his head.

“Her eye was back.” Thomas answered, looking at his fellow guard.

“He’s right you know? That scream... I know the Shadows seem crazy sometimes but that wasn’t a battle cry...,” the leader of the adventurer group another guard had managed to hire said.

“She healed that injury? You mean she’s a healer?” Silvan asked and the adventurer shrugged.

“Well she got us out of a job, got any more areas like this one?” he asked.

“I heard about her I think? Lilith or something, the demon killer. Apparently she charged into a horde of those monsters outside the city, fights them with her fists alone.” another adventurer said and Thomas was already getting tired of it.

“Yes, you saw that monster. We do have more areas with demons so come along.” he said and shook his head, these fools had never seen a Shadow fight. Though he had to admit, that show was unorthodox. ‘Perhaps getting injured had some kind of effect for her, maybe a Berserker?’ The man thought. The scream seemed weird, he had to agree there and he could’ve sworn he saw tears, not that he would ever tell anybody of that.

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As Ilea rushed back, she saw a group of people break into a store, a fire raging in the building next to it. ‘Send in a couple demons and assassins and apparently you can damage even the capital of this empire...,’ she thought and continued on her way. The suns were going to set soon and she simply sat down on a rooftop near the inn they were staying at.

She wasn’t ready to face more of the disgusting documents yet. There was no video evidence like back on earth and Ilea had already seen a fair share of horrible shit in her time in Elos. Still, right now she just wanted to sit and look at the sky and the city that felt even more alive than it had before the attack. There were groups of guards moving around, some in the air. People were shouting and water and fire mages were trying to put out the flames that kept on appearing.

The scale of the operation attacking the city must’ve been rather big. Then again Trian speculated the kingdom of Baralia to be involved. An attack coordinated and funded by a big kingdom was understandably not something one could simply shrug off. She didn’t care much though.

Lying back, Ilea looked at the darkening sky. It was clearer than the day before. Some birds were flying by, nothing like she had ever seen but she hadn’t exactly been a bird watcher on earth either. Summoning some of Walter’s ale, she filled a cup she had taken from one inn or the other and took off her helmet, the old fashioned way.

Her black hair flowed a little in the wind, covering the blood and filth on her face a little. After taking a sip, she looked at the hair, moving it in her armored hand. It looked healthy, not something she ever really thought about but the lack of conditioner and shampoo really didn’t matter much. ‘Or is it the levels?’ she thought, taking another sip. She needed a bath and some sleep.

The decision made, Ilea got up and made her way back to the inn. Trian of course, was still asleep. Kyrian had taken over her position in reading through the evidence. He looked at her and smiled a weak smile. “You look terrible.”

Ilea didn't answer, just shrugging.

“Let me know if you need anything.” the man said before he went back to reading. To think he could barely spell his own name just half a year ago.

“I will.” she said and blinked down into the common room, helmet back on as she approached the inn keeper. A burly man in his forties, both in age and level. He didn't seem to care much about their presence, still she noticed his heartbeat increase a little at her approach. Respect, not fear.

“I need a bath, the biggest one you have. And another room.” she said. He responded with a nod and shouted a woman's name. A couple instructions later, the jittery woman ran upstairs, nearly stumbling on the steps. The reaction people had on her grew to become annoying. At least a little. Changing the armor would mostly remove the impact but even then they knew she was a higher level and a warrior at that.

“This is good...,” Ilea whispered as she sunk into the steaming hot water. She had told the woman to heat it as much as she could. The tub was in another room, a more expensive one probably. The inn keeper hadn't even asked for money beforehand.

Ilea just lay there, her head resting on the tub as she thought about the past days and weeks. Ten minutes later, she was asleep. Her dreams weren't exactly the most comforting but not bad enough for her to wake up suddenly.

A knock to the door woke her up. Ilea was a little surprised at still being in the tub. The water was cool now. She noted while moving up her hands that they hadn't been affected by soaking for so long. Another change her high level brought with it it seemed. The door opened a little and Kyrian peered inside. "Are you awake?" he asked.

"I'm awake." she replied.

"Good. Come on, she doesn't bite." Kyrian said to someone else as he opened the door and stepped inside, walking to the bed and sitting down as he looked at the naked Ilea in the tub. The young woman from the day before entered with a serving cart filled with breakfast foods and drinks.

"It's morning?" she asked, looking out the window but finding a wall blocking the view right behind the glass.

"It is." Kyrian replied. "How are you doing?"

Looking down on the water, she found the murky color a little concerning. Blood most of all. The woman in the room was preparing everything on a nearby table, setting out all the plates and cups with careful movements, avoiding looking in either of the other occupant's directions.

Blinking out of the water, Ilea grabbed a towel and dried herself before she summoned leather armor from her necklace. Walking to the table, she sat down and locked eyes with the woman.

"Thank you." she said and looked at the food.

"Don't tell me I have to feed you as well." Kyrian said as he got up and joined her.

"Careful now boy, or we'll have to pay more than just the rent." Ilea replied and put some buns on her plate. "Can you get me another tub of clean water?" she asked, looking at the woman who seemed much more at ease now. She nodded and rushed out, closing the door behind her.

"Bathing more?" Kyrian asked as he started eating as well.

“For my armor.” Ilea replied and spread some butter and honey on one of the buns. The man nodded.

“We worked through the documents. Got some interesting leads. Nothing directly to either Trian or Eve but it’s a start.” he said. The woman entered again, this time with a teenage boy in tow as they carried buckets of water into the room. The boy then spread his arms and the water from the tub moved out, replaced by the water in the buckets. Putting the buckets outside again, the woman closed the door and used her fire magic to heat the fresh water.

“That’s good to know. I’ll be ready after I cleaned my armor. How’s Trian doing?” she asked and continued eating.

“As well as one does in this situation.” Kyrian answered after a while. The two continued to eat in silence but Ilea’s appetite wasn’t at its usual height. As soon as the woman excused herself, Ilea went to dump her armor into the steaming water, scrubbing at the blood that luckily hadn’t been in there for a long time. The helmet was annoying to clean but it was nice focusing on working with her hands. ‘Going for another demon hunt might be a good idea.’ The thought crossed her mind but they had more important things to do, she knew that.

The cost of the stay including baths, food and both rooms had come to eight silver and forty copper. Considering she had just made fifty silver in about twenty minutes of work, the cost seemed incredibly low. Even with most of her money invested in Claire’s endeavors, leaving around 44 Gold coins, Ilea was still considered rich by most standards, albeit not lavishly so.

# Chapter 174 Following the Trail

## Chapter 174 Following the Trail

“There are many names coming up in the documents. Most of them don’t seem to be relevant or wouldn’t talk without torture or a lot of bribe money. The question is if they have anything relevant on our cases even when they would eventually share it.” Trian said, the three of them sitting on a rather high building’s roof, looking over the vast capital.

“Other than the Golden Lily, which she only mentioned in the letter you got, there are a couple people she seemed to be looking for. One rogue who used the dark element apparently. Eve didn’t have a lot on him according to the documents we recovered but she did know a lot about his fighting style and magic. I think she fought him.” Trian continued explaining. Ilea had read a mention of that man as well when she skimmed through some of the papers.

“Brings us to the one the man seemed to be connected to. Man called Edwin. He was... do you know him?” Trian asked, stopping his monologue after Ilea had lifted her eyebrows.

“Maybe, but the name might be more common. Go on.” she replied and he nodded.

“Well apparently he’s been cleaning up in the capital. Killing dozens of less and more influential nobles. Eve wrote down that several investigators and hunters from the government were looking for him, as well as. Other



parties.” he said. “Considering how many people the man killed in the past month, it’s only reasonable.”

“Why was Eve looking for him then? With all the rest we found I think she was here to do pretty much the same thing as that Edwin.” Ilea said.

“I think the same thing. Perhaps because she assumed the man knew something about her targets, or about this Golden Lily. And perhaps, with having a similar goal, she assumed he would cooperate with her, at least information wise.” Trian summarized.

“You think he’s a good bet then?” Kyrian asked.

“I’m not sure. I think this man she describes, the one she fought, to be a good bet as well. Most of the others are criminals in their own rights. Or at least as far as Eve considered it. My family would’ve held a couple of targets for her as well.” Trian said. “Well, no more.” he added.

“So we look for that Edwin?” Kyrian asked.

“We do. Got some locations of his last murders, though all are older than a week already. Maybe we’ll find something.” Trian said.

“Where investigators failed? I’m not so sure.” Ilea said but she still got up and switched to her armor. “Where to?”

“Somebody cleaned up rather well.” Ilea said as the three let themselves into the first noble mansion. “Speaking of, there are people downstairs. Maids according to the outfits.” she added, checking the rooms with her Sphere and Hunter’s Sight. There were some leftovers but it mostly showed because certain parts of some rooms were cleaned more thoroughly than others. If she didn’t know about the fate of the inhabitants, she wouldn’t have guessed anything to be amiss.

“I’ll talk to them.” Trian said and walked downstairs. They had entered through one of the windows which the man had opened after teleporting inside. Perhaps the guy they were looking for entered the same way.

“Don’t people put up any defenses around here? Seems like an assassin could just enter.” Ilea asked while walking around.

“Costs a lot of money to put up runes and enchantments. Or skill. Money that could be spent on other things. I guess the people here were taking a risk?” Kyrian said and shrugged. “Not like I understand the ins and outs.” he added, touching an expensive looking candlestick.

“Guess they wanted candlesticks more than defenses.” Ilea said as she touched the wall where she got a weird feeling from her Sphere. Moving the attached picture frame sideways opened up a hidden room.

“That’s more like it. Smells like death in here.” she said and walked in. The room had been cleaned as well but less thoroughly. Likely because it was hidden anyway. She could see Trian talking to the personnel downstairs as she took in the room. “Hmm...,” she sniffed and walked around. People had been killed in here, recently. Of that she was sure. There were some smells still lingering but she couldn’t really place any of them and they didn’t lead anywhere. Simply confined in the tight space. Trying to put them to memory, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

One of them reminded her of Eve. ‘Perhaps she had been here as well?’ she thought and felt her stomach tighten. Touching her armor above her belly, she smiled a little. It hurt again. “How did it go? There’s always another drake...,” she whispered to herself and left the room again. “Perhaps this is similar...,” she added.

“What’s similar?” Trian asked, having come up again. Ilea shook her head lightly.

“Found a hidden room? Anything in there?” the man asked and she shrugged.

“Can’t find anything other than smells. Nothing that leads anywhere.” Ilea said.

“Did you find out anything from the people?” Kyrian asked as he entered the room.

“One of them was rather talkative. Apparently liked the noble who was murdered quite a bit... or the man’s wife. Both had been killed. She said the government doesn’t care. They stopped the investigation after only an hour and sent in a cleaning team to cover everything up. The noble’s brother has inherited the mansion and that seems to be that.” Trian explained.

“A dud then. Well we have a couple more places to go.” Ilea said.

“I doubt we’ll find anything useful there either. What we need is a fresher lead. I’ve got some names, investigators. Perhaps they’ll be of use.” Trian said.

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“Another report came in sir.” the soldier said as he handed over the letter. This case really was going to be the end of his career.

“You can go.” Roose said as he looked through the contents before the paper shredded itself into thousands of small pieces and flew into the bin next to his desk.

“Yes Captain!” the soldier said and left his office, closing the door behind him.

Getting paid for all the cover ups was certainly good and had earned him enough to finally buy the estate he had wanted for the past five years. The scope of that murderer’s operation was getting out of hand though. A

couple more complaints against his investigation and questions would be asked. Questions that would put him in a dangerous situation.

‘Why can’t they finally take him out?’ he continued to ask himself. Whoever was paying him was certainly rich and influential. More so than anybody he had worked with beforehand. Still somehow the murders didn’t stop. Just two days ago an estate of the Redleaf family had been the target. To think the man would go against families of that caliber was making him nervous. He might just be in a game too dangerous for him to play.

Calming himself, the man opened his drawer and got out the scotch and a glass he had stored in there. Pouring himself a glass, he fell back into his chair and relaxed. Another hour and he’d go for lunch. Perhaps a visit to the missus? Perhaps. The thought excited him and his worries were soon forgotten.

“Welcome back Sir Roose.” the maid bowed deeply, as she should. All of his servants knew well not to step out of line.

“Prepare a meal, stuffed duck with a white wine sauce. A regular side dish in addition. I’ll be up in an hour.” captain Roose said as he deactivated the trap rune to the cellar. No mana was used.

“What the?” he asked and activated his spells. Had somebody broken in? Or was it one of his servants again? Odan that old geezer, he really ought to finally take care of the man.

Walking downstairs he activated the magical lights and shouted into the cellar. “Is anybody there?!”

The trap runes had failed four times already in the past two years, not out of the ordinary. He didn’t remember when he had charged it last. Still it was the least to be cautious. Coming to the bottom of the stairs, Roose looked to

the right and found the chains opened, his dear wife sobbing in the hands of a dark haired woman.

“You dare touch her!” he shouted. “Filthy bitch!” he added but stopped, unsure of the encounter after identifying the intruder.

*[Warrior – lvl ??]*

That hadn't happened in a while. He could identify people and creatures fifty levels above himself. Getting help wasn't an option, not with what was down here. He had to bet it all on his skills.

Sharpened paper flew out of his pockets and from under his clothes, creating a swarm of projectiles that rushed at the woman touching his beloved with all the speed and strength he could muster.

Roose frowned as he felt his paper impact something hard and his eyes widened as the woman got up, now clad in dull black armor. Light and efficient, her head turning to reveal two icy blue eyes behind the sockets in her helmet. Two horns pointed forward, directly at him. A moment later her eyes were but centimeters in front of his. The air left his lungs, tears filling his eyes before he puked up the rich breakfast he had earlier that day.

He felt himself get dragged through the room, seeing two more people clad in black armor. Had they come for him? But why? Suddenly he was thrown, his back cracked as he impacted the stone cellar.

“Go close the door.” he heard the woman say in a monotone voice. “Are you sure you want to stay?” she asked but not him.

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Ilea grabbed the man who looked like a thirty year old in his prime. Luckily she had avoided the puke, knowing that it had been the likely reaction from a mage at level one fifty. A good thing Trian had suggested waiting for the man to go home. ‘Truly, a good thing.’

Metal flew towards the man and pinned him to the wall before a gag forced itself into his mouth.

“I... w... I would like to... to stay.” the woman said, defiant eyes looking at Ilea.

“Alright.” Trian said. “Investigator Roose. It has come to our attention that you are taking bribes.” he said, stepping towards the man. His eyes opened wide at the accusation as he gurgled something through his gag.

“We’re looking for the man you’re apparently supposed to find. Edwin.” Trian said. “Do you perhaps know who we’re talking about?”

The man shook his head as quickly as he could. Ilea walked over to the woman again and prepped her up. All the cuts had been healed already and somehow it made Ilea happy to see the defiant stare she gave her husband. “He’s lying.” Ilea said, having felt his heart rate speed up upon the mention of Edwin’s name.

“You’re lying.” Trian said and sighed. “Look. We’re not here to torture you, we’re not here to expose you to the government, we’re here to find the man you’re supposed to be after. Do you understand?” he asked and watched the man calm down. They locked eyes before the man slowly nodded.

“Good, now tell me what you know.” he said and the gag slowly moved out of the man’s mouth.

“I’ll tell you everything, just let me live.” he said and quickly continued. “The man, Edwin. He has hunted down a staggering number of people in the past weeks. The body count has reached over thirty already. The last news I have came from an estate outside Virilya. To the north, around a day’s travel by carriage. The estate belongs to the Redleaf family.” he said. “I can point it out to you on a map.”

The name Redleaf was quite familiar to Ilea. A coincidence perhaps but more and more it seemed plausible. She didn't know if it was a good thing or not. It didn't matter if the man could help her find the killers of Eve and Trian's family. She sat on the ground next to the wife of the investigator.

"Do you want him dead?" she asked in a whisper, not listening to Trian who continued asking questions. The woman turned her head and looked into her eyes, before she looked down.

"You know... I loved him. He was so sweet at first. The work changed him, awakened something in him. He tortured people there... for the city. It was heart breaking... to see him... change." she said and looked back at the man. He hadn't heard her and kept talking, sharing information about the case and possible targets of Edwin, as well as all the people he had hunted down so far.

"I think... I think Charles has been dead for many years." the woman said and touched Ilea's gauntlet. "I c... I can't do it myself." she said and looked deep into Ilea's eyes.

Ilea looked back to the man and didn't say anything else.

"We've got a location. The attack was two days ago." Trian said and turned back to the investigator. "Do you know who the people are that are looking for him?"

"They pay me but I don't have a name, not even a face. It was all done through enchanted letters and money. I didn't question it. It would've been foolish to try and find out." the man said.

"True. Well you have been helpful." Trian said and looked at Ilea.

"Do we need anything else here?" she asked and Trian shook his head. Kyrian removed the bindings as Ilea approached the man who seemed relieved. Right until she grabbed him around the neck with one hand and lifted him up, squeezing his throat shut as she locked eyes with him. He struggled, even trying to activate his magic but it seemed being strangled wasn't the best help to his concentration.

It took a while but he stopped moving soon. Ilea kept on holding him for a couple of seconds, verifying his death by the message she received in her mind. She placed him down slowly and closed his eyes before she walked out. The woman rushed to her husband and cried over his body, quickly switching to screaming and punching. Kyrian stayed behind for a moment and approached her right as Ilea walked far away enough for her Sphere not to reach them anymore.

Some of the servants looked at the leaving figures but nobody shouted, one of them simply moving down into the cellar.

“We have a location then. Do we need anything before we leave?” Trian asked.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be identified as members of the Hand all the time. A bunch of cloaks at least? We can all make at least our helmets disappear.” Ilea suggested and he nodded. They stood there for a couple minutes, waiting in the street as people went by, most of them ignoring the two as best as they could.

They would possibly be deemed criminals now that they had killed an investigator of the city but neither of the two cared about that at the moment. They had enough evidence to prove his treason anyway but the paperwork would be bothersome.

Kyrian stepped out and joined them. “They’re gonna be alright. The servants thank you for killing the man.” he said, not getting a response from the others.

“We need cloaks.” Trian said eventually and walked off.

Three travelers flew northwards through the sky. It was a sunny afternoon around Virilya, their armor not reflecting much light as they sped over the plains and small forests, the wild lands of Lys. The group reached their



destination a couple hours later, all of them landing at Trian's signal, their boots digging into the muddy meadow a couple hundred meters before the estate looming in the distance.

The house looked old. Well taken care of but there was something about it that made the hairs on Ilea's back stand up. "Enchantments?" she asked and Kyrian nodded.

"Fear, usually used to keep monsters away but it seems more targeted against humans. They didn't want anybody intruding." he suggested.

"They didn't want anybody escaping." Trian said with conviction as he walked a little closer. "Ilea can you scout it out before we go in?"

The woman moved before he finished his question, rushing over the terrain and blinking from cover to cover as she checked for any signs of life. Other than the insects under her boots and the birds flying by, she couldn't find anything in the estate's gardens. The birds being part of someone's personal entourage was of course always a possibility but so far she hasn't been met with resistance.

Ten seconds later she reached the wall. A rough stone wall with windows starting two meters further up. Metal bars prevented people from going either inside or outside. Combined with the enchantments, the place seemed more like some kind of mental health institution. One of the creepy ones you see in horror movies. Ilea had to chuckle at the thought. A weird reaction, she thought shaking her head as she checked inside the building.

There were definitely people inside. Butlers and maids as it looked like. Cleaning and preparing food. She couldn't see anybody else with her limited Sphere of perception.

Blinking up, she checked a part of the first floor. Here she found some people asleep and others again cleaning. Blinking into an empty room, Ilea continued to look around. With the size of the estate it would take some time to look through it all.

# Chapter 175 Hunting in the Woods

## Chapter 175 Hunting in the Woods

There were many targets she could've grabbed and interrogated but the two people in the room below her were the most interesting ones she had found. A plain looking man and a beautiful woman. Of course Ilea had been interested immediately because they weren't dressed in the uniform everybody else in the estate was wearing but the fact that the man was strapped to a bed with metal chains while the woman was sitting in a nearby chair, both her arms bandaged and soaked with likely blood, added to her interest.

Ilea couldn't tell through her Sphere if it was blood on her bandages but she could certainly tell that the man had been riddled with cuts. He was bleeding from several of them, enough to kill any normal person in mere minutes. Buckets had been placed below the bed and she could hear the blood dripping inside the already half full containers. Her instinct combined with the picture she saw below told her that these weren't people she would want to engage unprepared.

The man's constant moaning didn't help in that regard. The wounds must be painful, either cursed or something else. She could see them rip open again and again after they had healed a little bit at first.

"They won't heal if you move that much." she heard the clear voice of the woman through the floor, her ear pressed closer to understand every word. Only thanks to her buffs could she even hear anything.

“He has...lear...aaaaah...ned a thing or two. The blood is strong Tiana.” the man said “I will be ready tomorrow. Any more reports?” he asked right before another wound reopened.

“We know the general location. Still around Fort Keenshill. That bitch is killing all the hunters and trackers, we should stop wasting resources and get back to it as soon as you are up.” Tiana suggested.

“Don’t talk nonsense. That’s all they’re good for. Send all we have, keep them busy.”

“I’d rather send for more healers, your arrogance has caused this delay Kyle.” she said and Ilea watched as his hand flicked her way, a small projectile flashing towards the woman who casually sat there. The projectile was stopped right before her face by a thin surface. Ilea couldn’t tell what it was.

“Stop playing around and focus on healing your wounds.” Tiana said before she looked up, right at Ilea. Her face tilted a little to the side as Ilea blinked into another room, still having the two in her Sphere’s influence.

“What is it?” the man asked.

“Nothing.” Tiana replied. Ilea had heard enough for now. The two of them would likely come for Edwin and his group the day after. Rushing back to the others, she explained what she had seen.

“Should we take them out now? They’re obviously injured and will be a problem down the road.” Kyrian suggested.

“No. I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Trian answered. “Maybe I’m wrong but I’d rather not attack two complete unknowns in an enclosed space. What do you think Ilea?”

Ilea shrugged. “Whatever you think. I do believe we could take them despite the bad feeling I got but the other people in the mansion were all at least level one hundred. Some even noticed me and went checking into the rooms I had been in. Weirdly nobody informed the two injured people.”

“We don’t know enough to act. Finding Edwin should be the first goal. If he and whoever he’s with managed to injure the two here so badly, then with our help it should tip the balance, no matter with whom we side.” Trian said and stood up.

“Then let’s find them. Fort Keenshill you said? Let’s hope the woman didn’t notice you and we’re walking headfirst into a trap.” Trian added and Ilea shrugged again. If there was a fight, there was a fight.

Flying north, they soon came up on a small walled off village, the people there rather keen on directing them far away from themselves as they explained where exactly Fort Keenshill was. Trian paid them to stay quiet about their visit as well. Another two hours later, the ruined fort could be seen in the distance, surrounded by tall trees.

It was an impressive structure, standing alone and defiant in the wilds of the northern plains. While abandoned and partially destroyed, some enchantments in the walls seemed to still be working, ever so slightly slowing the retake by nature.

The group landed nearby, Ilea activating her Sight and Sphere to check for any tracks, any signs of human life. She did find tracks, but not human. “There are tracks, look like wolf but bigger and bipedal. Some sort of werewolf perhaps.” she suggested.

“Well let’s hope we don’t wake it up.” Trian said, looking a little more worried than before. The three had put on their helmets again, the cloaks stored in Ilea’s necklace as they walked through the forest. The trees were high and thick, older than the fort itself it seemed.

“There’s a corpse.” Ilea suddenly said, the group stopping and preparing for a fight as she walked closer to the half eaten ripped apart body.

“Looks like a monster got him.” Kyrian suggested but Ilea was pretty sure the man was wrong.

“This is a woman. And her heart is missing. It’s like someone ripped out a sphere from inside her chest. I’d say the monster got to her afterwards. An easy meal.” she said and looked up. “There are tracks over there. Human ones.” she added and got up, walking in the direction of the tracks.

“I don’t know a monster that can rip out someone’s heart from within.” Trian commented absentmindedly. The suns were high, indicating noon or something close enough as the group followed the tracks Ilea had found. At some point they stopped but Ilea’s Sight showed her a path where the tracks had been removed. The ground looked ever so slightly more disturbed, enough for her skill to pick it up.

*‘ding’ ‘Hunter’s Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8’*

Willing the notification away, Ilea continued following the path. It led them a little away from the fort and towards a fenced off part of the estate. A small hut could be seen behind a couple of trees. Movement could be seen within. “Someone’s in there.” Ilea said when she suddenly felt a weird sensation in her chest. Moving to the right instinctively, a sudden surge of magic could be felt within her arm as a part of her bone and flesh simply vanished.

“We’re under attack, keep moving, they can rip out parts of your body.” Ilea said to the others as she vanished, appearing ten meters ahead. Her skills were running overtime as they tried to make out where the attack had come from. Hunter Recovery already worked on regrowing the missing parts of bone and flesh as Ilea decided to move closer to the hut, likely holding whatever the attacker wanted to defend. Another weird feeling spread on her back right before she blinked away.

Ilea heard the suction of air from where she had just stood. She’d find the attacker and she’d rip out their throat. Continuing her walk towards the hut, a woman suddenly appeared a couple meters to the left of the wooden structure. Light leather armor, gray hair and purple eyes. Ilea noticed the features but kept staring at the eyes.

“You’re not attacking?” the woman asked in a tired voice. “Why is the Hand here? Perhaps we can find an arrangement.” she added as Trian and Kyrian joined Ilea’s side.

“If you attack again I will kill you.” Ilea said. Her eyes locked with the woman’s and there was a moment of consideration. A small part of her hoped that she would attack.

*[Mage – lvl 231]*

A formidable opponent, at least level wise. Her magic was too slow to touch Ilea, at least without the factor of surprise. She was sure the woman had more up her sleeve than just ripping out body parts from within.

“We’re not here to hunt you.” Trian said, trying to defuse the situation somewhat. Ilea’s arm was healed by then and she moved her fingers as she stared at the woman.

“Neither are we here on the Hand’s orders. We’re looking for information. Perhaps we Can find an arrangement.” Trian added.

“I’m not looking to trade and I can’t trust...,” the woman was interrupted when the door to the hut opened and someone quite familiar to Ilea stepped out. The woman looked at the three before she started smiling, waving towards them.

“Hello Ilea! Wow you’ve become strong, I knew you would!” the wave was replaced by a thumbs up before the woman turned to the confused mage next to her. “I’m going to get fresh water, is that ok? Aliana is exhausted.”

“Hey Felicia. Is Edwin alright?” Ilea asked, waving back.

“No, he’s nearly dead. Hey weren’t you a healer? Well you’re not anymore... can you help us? Some dangerous people are after us.” Felicia said.

“I can have a look if you convince your friend there to trust us.” Ilea said, winking at the purple eyed mage.

“Are you using an illusion spell on her? Mind mage?” the woman asked as she prepared to fight again.

“No no, Maria calm down.” Felicia said and sighed. “We know her. Ilea the battle healer. She was in the Taleen dungeon we used to get to you. She defused all the traps for us, hahaha. Remember that one!” Felicia exclaimed but the rings under her eyes painted the excited picture with a dark shade.

“Yes, I remember.” Ilea said as she removed her helmet. “I’m glad you’re alive Felicia. You’re brother still owes me an explanation.” and his face to punch but to her surprise Ilea was simply happy to see the woman had survived thus far. Felicia seemed a little childlike but there was more to her than seen at first glance.

“You look horrible Ilea. Where’s that smile you always sported?” Felicia asked as she walked towards her, stopped a moment later by Maria.

“I can heal and the guy in the spiky armor can heal poisons and likely curses as well. Edwin might have some answers that we’re looking for.” Ilea explained. “Oh and Aliana can back up the story. She’s a water and fire mage, likes to boil stuff and eat meat all the time. Edwin is a manipulative asshole, two swords and blood magic as far as I remember. Felicia there is a wind mage. And you, you seem pretty vulnerable with your obvious defensive objective. I’d just teleport in there and rip Edwin’s head off if I wanted to. Think about it.” Ilea finished. She really was about to just attack the woman, tired of having to justify herself. Beating the information out of Edwin sounded annoying but she’d do it if needed.

“I agree it seems unlikely you know all of this without knowing the people. I doubt you’re a mind mage either.” Maria said, Ilea looking down at the mention of mind magic. She watched on through her sphere as Felicia dropped the bucket she had been holding and walked up to Ilea, her arms folding around her in a hug.

“It’s ok.” Felicia said. “It’s ok.” Ilea’s arms hung uselessly at her side as the woman hugged her. She didn’t quite know how to feel but she was sure that this helped. Felicia had been the only one of the three she had considered something like a friend. The only reason for her to go look for the group

other than smashing Edwin's head into some medieval cobbled road. Eve was dead. She'd have to come to terms with that. Soon. And then she'd get her revenge, no matter how long and hard it'd be.

"I know it's selfish but my brother is dying. I know he used you and I know you are angry but we will help you however we can." Felicia whispered to her and Ilea nodded. Noticing the wet spot on Felicia's shoulder.

"Alright, let's have a look then. Kyrian come." Ilea said as Felicia jumped up in joy before she ran towards the hut, Ilea's arm pulled behind her.

Maria didn't move to interrupt them, instead following into the hut as well. It reeked of blood and death inside. The small space was occupied by a stone table with a man on top of it. His shoulder looked eaten from inside out. Like an infection blood red lines spread on his whole body as he convulsed from time to time.

Aliana was sleeping in a corner of the room as they stepped inside, Ilea looking at the man she had sworn to punch when she saw him. In a state like this, both Edwin's and her own, that notion seemed childish to her now. A bout would happen eventually but there were more important things to think about right now.

It was an infection. Blood magic originating from the small and big cuts on his body. It looked vaguely similar to the wounds she had seen on the man in the mansion earlier that day. More savage though and spreading more quickly it seemed. The man had been sure he'd survive and be ready to attack the next day. Edwin on the other hand looked to be ready to die. Her healing mana was countered by the infection, not completely but it would take days if not longer to heal the man.

"It would take days but we don't have that." Ilea said. "Can you do something?" she asked Kyrian whose needles floated above Edwin's flesh.

"It's not a curse, and neither poison. I could try to attack the infection but it's wild, ever changing." he said.



Ilea nodded and touched Edwin's shoulder. Moving him would worsen his condition, which left only one way to go. Her reversed healing rushed into his shoulder, destroying everything in its path as she observed the reaction. The man coughed up blood while Ilea tried to localize her attack, watching the infection get removed along with the man's health. Stopping before she actually killed him, she started healing the area again. Both the infection and her healing worked to reclaim territory on the man marked for death.

Contrary to the infection though, her resources would regenerate. "It'll take an hour or two." Ilea said as she continued to destroy and heal his body. The blood magic had spread nearly all over and she couldn't weaken him too much as that would worsen the spread as well.

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

Ilea was pretty sure she had gained some insight into her healing spell as well although that one was already at its current maximum level.

"He's fine now." she said to the room of waiting individuals. Slapping him with enough force to send someone else flying, Ilea held Edwin with her other hand. Maria moved closer but stopped as the man started groaning and then coughing.

"What the hell..." he said, coughing again. His eyes opened as he looked around the room, locking eyes with Ilea for a second before his head fell back on the table. "How the hell did you surpass me."

Ilea had noticed him to be level two twenty two earlier. "I disable the traps myself and don't use people's lives as decoys." Ilea said and stepped out of the room to get some fresh air. Felicia immediately went to hug her brother and Maria seemed quite happy as well. Trian remained in the room as Kyrian stepped out to join Ilea.

“Are you alright? Any history I should know about?” the man asked as he leaned on the hut. Sunlight was broken by the trees above, illuminating parts of his armor.

“Nothing major. Nothing that matters right now.” Ilea said after a while, putting her helmet back on.

A couple minutes later the others stepped out as well, Edwin being supported by Maria.

“So the little Ilea has managed to come this far... and with the Hand as...,” she stopped him with a gesture and a hard stare.

“We need to move. The man who I assume did this to you is recovering and him with that beautiful woman will come for you tomorrow. I’m not sure if you want to be here when that happens.” Ilea said, surprising him.

“How do you know this?” Maria asked.

“I heard them talk. In the Redleaf mansion. Now for healing you we require some information. And you still owe me from back in the Taleen dungeon. The exchange wasn’t exactly fair.” Ilea added.

Edwin looked at her for a while before he sighed. “I do. But I have an alternative suggestion.” he said and looked first at Maria and then back towards Ilea. “I will give you the information you need for saving my life. If I have it of course. But if you help me kill those two and help me hunt down one more target, I will personally assist you in whatever goal you have.” he said.

“First the information then. We will consider anything else afterwards.” Trian interjected and looked at Ilea.

“Fine with me.” she said and the man nodded.

“My name is Trian Alymie and my family has been murdered. I’d like to know by whom.”

# Chapter 176 Tracks

## Chapter 176 Tracks

“The Alymies. Yes, I’ve heard of that. Would’ve assumed that they pinned that one on me. I have recovered a lot of paperwork and believe your family has been mentioned in some of them. Feel free to look through it. Aliana has them.” Edwin said.

“She’s still asleep, I’ll go wake her.” Felicia said, her mood having improved drastically.

“Any why should I believe that it wasn’t you? You have been going around murdering nobles in Virilya, haven’t you?” Trian asked. Maria stepped a little closer to Edwin, keeping eye contact with Trian.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you.” Edwin said. “As far as I can tell the Alymies never came up in any connection to our own family. Have you seen the bodies? Know anything about the attackers or how many there were?”

“A group, likely more than ten people. Different causes for death.” Trian answered.

“It was always just me and Maria. I know you just have my word but I’m sure you’ll find out more in the evidence I’ve so far... recovered.”

“That is not all.” Ilea said. “A friend of ours was murdered as well. She was investigating an organization or individual called the Golden Lily. We think

they are responsible.”

Edwin’s mouth opened a little before it closed again. He looked at Maria and then shook his head. “You should forget about that. At least as you are right now. They are... we’re hunting one of them as well. Arthur Redleaf, my father. I’ve only ever heard the name of that organization twice. I’m sure my father is part of it and I’m sure many other influential nobles are as well. Ilea. I’ve been planning for five years to free Maria and to kill that man. To try and hunt the whole order... I don’t even know where to begin.” he said and shook his head.

“That’s easy. We’ll begin with your father. If he knows nothing, we’ll move on to the next. Until I find and kill the ones responsible.” Ilea said.

“I’m not sure you know what exactly you’re getting into.” Edwin said and sighed again. “But. I will tell you everything I know and will talk to all my sources. And if you help me kill my father, I’ll do whatever is in my power to help you find your target. And kill it.” he said.

“Edwin are you sure, it is already damn near suicide to go against Arthur. To go for the order behind him...,” Maria said but the man waved her off.

“Ilea was barely level one hundred when we met her on the road to Dawntree. That was around half a year ago, if she needs to get stronger, she will. And so will I. We won’t be going in recklessly. And if I know her at all, she’ll be the one going for the kill.” Edwin said and smiled. Ilea didn’t but she’d just come a step closer to finding out something about Eve’s killers.

“Why are you hunting your father?” she asked a moment later. She had Kyrian and Trian to work with, a little unsure if she even needed Edwin and his group anymore. His resources and connections would help, certainly but she didn’t want to waste time on a cause that meant nothing to her.

Checking behind himself, Edwin walked closer to Ilea and whispered in her ear. “There are many reasons, for which you won’t care. However, if I know anything about you at all then you care at least a little about Felicia. She was sold to be married as a mere child to some noble he meant to do

business with. It was among other things a reason for my departure, with my sister and Aliana. Ask her about it and perhaps you'll be convinced to work with us." he finished and looked at her.

"When did you say the hunters would come?" Maria asked as she looked into the trees behind Ilea's group.

"Oh that's not them." sniffing the air, Ilea turned around and found a presence near the fenced off property. Not in her Sphere yet but her instincts were on high alert. "I think we might've alerted whatever left those tracks."

"What tracks?" Maria asked before they all heard a growl coming from the trees.

"Looked like a big wolf, bipedal though." Kyrian supplied as they all prepared for a fight. Ilea's eyes shot up as she spotted a fast moving furry creature going up the trees before it rushed down right at Trian.

Ilea stepped a small step to the side, intercepting the creature as all her skills were activated and a Veil of Ash formed around her. The impact sent her flying, Trian managing to teleport away right after the beast had smashed her aside. The smell of pine needles and dirt filled Ilea's nose as the spinning world came to an abrupt stop, her armored body rolling on the ground after smashing through several thin trees.

Getting up quickly, she found lightning and metal in the air, the smell of singed hair joining the more natural scents around her. It really was a bipedal wolf, something like a werewolf, she thought as she rushed back towards the hut. The monster was a little over two meters tall on its hind legs, lean and muscular. Its claws slashed through the air, creating a sound with the sheer speed of the attacks before they were deflected by Edwin's twin swords.

Despite the clear advantage of skill and range, the man didn't manage to do anything else but defend. The beast's sheer raw power was too much.

*[Beastwolf of Krak Duun – lvl ???]*

‘Three, which means this thing could be as strong as the bloody demon whale attacking Ravenhall, but condensed into a much smaller, faster form.’ It reminded her a little of her first encounter with a Taleen Centurion. She couldn’t see Maria anymore but all the other mages were spread around them, flying high in the trees while sending projectiles towards the monster. None of it seemed to impact the beast more than the waves clashing against a rocky beach.

‘Another drake then...,’ Ilea thought as she rushed towards the monster’s back. Her fist landed and a bit of mana left her as both Destruction and Wave of Ember rushed into the black fur of the beastwolf.

‘Weren’t they supposed to only turn at night?’ she thought when the monster’s arm moved backwards, making her blink away a couple steps before she advanced again. Using her ash to distract the monster didn’t seem like the best idea as it would obstruct the mages around her as well as Edwin. She had a feeling that perhaps it wouldn’t be a detriment to the lupin creature either.

Again her fist hit but Edwin was shot backwards, blood spurting out of his mouth from the powerful kick of the creature. A lightning bolt rushed towards its maw as it turned towards Ilea, the monster crouching down slightly to dodge the attack before its claws rushed towards Ilea. They dug into her Veil, leaving her to step backwards to dodge as closely as possible, trying to get hits in between the flurry of claws. Her eyes focused only on the enemy’s movements as she stepped one step backwards after the other, magic attacks raining into the creature from behind, sometimes dodged and sometimes simply ignored as its bloodshot eyes focused on its pray.

Her fist hit the monster’s chest right before one clawed paw managed to nearly hit her. Blinking left as the creature followed up its attack with a kick, she managed to get in one more hit before the beastwolf’s elbow smashed into her chest. All the air in her lungs was pushed out as she slid backwards for two meters, the beastwolf advancing and not giving her time to adjust, leaving her no other option but to blink upwards and away.

The wolf turned and looked at her as her ashen wings spread behind her. Back to full health after a couple seconds of healing, Ilea watched as the

beast moved rapidly towards her, jumping up and using the trees as stepping stones to get to her. Even with all the mages' attacks and her own accumulating damage, she doubted that they could take the thing down before the two hunters of Edwin's group arrived, if they even managed to do that.

"Kyrian, get Edwin and the others up in the air. It's best if we get out of here!" Ilea shouted and watched her friend nod and fly off towards the hut. The beastwolf didn't seem to be much the wiser as it continued rushing towards Ilea who lazily blinked backwards time and time again, leading the beast on as lightning magic singed its fur. After five blinks, the beast stopped as it clung to a tree, its claws gripping into the wood as it creaked and splintered.

The beastwolf looked up to the sun above, snarling at it. And then it howled.

*'You have heard a mighty beast's howl. You are paralyzed for two seconds.'*

*'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 3'*

Two seconds was just enough for the monster to jump off and slash Ilea with one clawed paw before she was able to move again.

'Fucking bullshit ability....,' she thought as blood spurted out of her mouth and onto the inside of her helmet, spinning in the air as she flowed healing magic through her own body. Her ribs had been cracked by the hit and Ilea considered herself lucky that the beast hadn't decided to just grab her and rip off her head. Then again the lack of intellect in a beast like that might just be the only thing a group of humans had going against it.

Wings spread again before she blinked upwards, the beastwolf rushing past her below, clashing through several trees as Ilea flew upwards and out of the forest. Seeing all the others in the air as well, Edwin's group grabbing onto the metal rods created by Kyrian, she continued upwards and towards them.

"You're bleeding." Trian said to Edwin as Ilea arrived.

Ilea wasn't in the mood for stupid comments and just touched the man's shoulder before she tended to his injury. Edwin's gear wasn't close to as good as her own it seemed. Her armor had been scratched a little by the beastwolf's attack but Edwin had a gash that went deep into his chest as well. He would've recovered, surely but perhaps not in time with both the beastwolf and the hunters behind him.

"You still can't fly?" Ilea asked, looking over to the floating Felicia and Maria. Mages seemed to have a higher chance of getting a flying skill it seemed.

"Sadly not, maybe at two fifty if I ever reach it." Edwin answered, looking down at the howling creature.

"How long were you paralyzed for?" Ilea asked, looking at Kyrian and Trian.

"Ten seconds." Kyrian said and Trian answered with fifteen. Nodding in return, she was glad the beast had focused on her, otherwise someone else might've been dead already.

"Aren't we in the human plains, surrounded by cities and adventurers running around? How is a high level beast like that just strolling around here?" Ilea asked, genuine confusion in her voice.

"The wilderness is dangerous everywhere and for everybody. Something as dangerous as that is rare in these parts, sure. Not unheard of though. Adventurers, even at higher levels like us vanish all the time. Something must be out there to get them. Not everybody goes to the north or to hunt elves." Trian said, looking at her before he continued. "Where should we go? I have some more save places but perhaps you have something better?" he asked Edwin.

"I'd say your hideouts are the better bet." Edwin answered and left it at that.

"Alright, then follow me." Trian said and rushed off, everybody else following behind.



Ilea looked back, not able to make out where the beastwolf was in the forest. Perhaps it would follow them but if it had any resemblance with actual wolves then it likely had a territory.

“We should move further up.” Felicia said as she also looked back, the wind carrying and rushing around her. The group followed the suggestion without comment as they rushed through the clouds above. Whoever had tried to follow them would likely not succeed anymore now.

Ilea looked over to Aliana holding onto the piece of metal before her and nodded. “Ah it’s you isn’t it!” the woman said and smiled widely.

“How have you been?” she asked and Ilea just shook her head, ignoring the question. They had found Edwin and his group and with that likely some answers and some more questions. The proposition of helping him find and kill his own father was likely to be the best bet of finding out more about the Golden Lily. Ilea certainly didn’t trust the man, Maria even less so. She had already worked with him to fulfill mutual goals. This time, she just had to make sure it was in her favor instead.

At least now they had fought together and compared to Edwin she had held her own rather splendidly. Looking at all of them in turn, she found Edwin to be at level two twenty two, just two levels lower than herself. He must’ve gotten stronger in the past months as well but apparently not as much as she did. The woman Maria was at level two thirty one, one of the highest people Ilea had ever managed to identify. Felicia had managed to reach the two hundreds as well, being at two hundred and three. Aliana on the other hand was still quite a bit below that threshold.

They flew in silence for a while until Trian moved downwards again. “Kyrian.” he said as his lightning wings vanished, a rod of metal forming from a sphere flying next to him. “Down, we can walk the rest.” he said.

“Did you find anything?” Ilea asked, summoning a meal on the table next to Trian and Kyrian who were looking through even more paperwork, this time assembled not by Eve but by Edwin and his group.

“Not much so far but a couple hints are pointing towards Birmingham. Not enough to be considered evidence yet but we have some more things to look into.” Trian explained and put the documents down before he looked at her.

“Ilea look. I know you cared a lot about Eve. I didn’t... well I didn’t hate her either but...” Ilea interrupted him with a flick to his forehead.

“Trian it’s alright. You don’t have to join me on a wild goose chase through the whole empire to avenge her. I know you guys didn’t like each other.” she said and sat down, summoning a meal for herself. Trian looked surprised at the plate, just now realizing that it had been for him.

“Eve, well considering what we’ve learned about her and her targets. She wasn’t exactly a saint. And I’m sure whatever got her killed justified her death at least in the minds of her enemies. I’ve never...” Ilea started but stopped, taking a bite of her food as she looked up at a beautiful shelf filled with expensive looking books. The hideout really needed a new ventilation system. Perhaps Felicia could do something about that later.

She leaned back and sighed. “I’ve never lost anybody this close to me. I know we weren’t exactly the best of friends but...” Trian just casually touched her shoulder and looked into her eyes.

“I know how you feel. Trust me, I do. And if. If you ask me to help you then I will. As you know Claire and Kyrian will as well.” Ilea felt her chest tighten at his words.

“I won’t ask you to die for my revenge Trian.” she said at last.

“And I won’t ask the same of you. If it really was the Birminghames then it should be a manageable target, at least with you two helping me along. If it turns out to be bigger than that I’ll make sure to pay you better or make you leave.” the man said as he leaned back.

“I won’t leave you to fight a whole noble house alone Trian. I’m not an asshole like you.” Ilea said and continued eating.

The man snorted. “Was that a joke?”

“Why is that weird?” Ilea asked.

“Well you’ve been kind of down the past days.” he said and smiled.

Ilea just snorted. “How have you been holding up?” she asked.

“It’s pretty bad.” he said, looking at her. Ilea felt the same but she didn’t want to go down this conversation any further.

“I’ll go talk to Edwin.” Ilea said and got up, leaving the two men to their work.

The hideout was similar to the one Trian had led them to after they had investigated the Alymie estate. Walking into the corridor, Ilea picked up the conversation between Maria and Edwin in the next room over. They were of course talking in a whisper but Ilea’s hearing was rather impressive with her constantly active Sphere and State of Azarinth.

“You’ve been working on this for damn near your whole life Ed and now you want to involve a wildcard like her? We’re a team, we know each other and you told me how fucking naive she was in that dungeon. How the hell would I be able to trust her?” Maria said as Ilea stopped her approach, listening in the hallway instead.

# Chapter 177 Negotiations

## Chapter 177 Negotiations

“You saw her fight that beastwolf. If she agrees to help us take down Arthur I’ll give her whatever information she requires.” Edwin said. “I hate to admit it but she’s caught up to me... in half a year.”

“You know everybody rising that fast is taking risks, she’ll die just as quickly. They all do.” Maria said.

“Then she’ll die for us.” Edwin said, which was the point when Ilea appeared in the room, casually sitting on the desk next to where Felicia and Aliana were sleeping.

“I see you haven’t changed Edwin.” she said. Maria took a defensive position as soon as she had appeared.

“And she’s listening in on us. How trustworthy.” she said, raising one of her eyebrows. Ilea pointed towards the woman.

“Nice trick with the one eyebrow, one of your skills?” she asked. “Look, Edwin used me to get to that Taleen teleportation thing. I profited by being able to get some rather nice loot and an insane power jump from that dungeon. Plus, I learned a valuable lesson.” Ilea jumped off the table and walked a couple steps closer to the two.

“Your stealth won’t protect you in here and I’m pretty sure I could take you two out without losing more than a couple limbs.” she started and activated

all her skills. “Plus I have two guys a hallway over that have some rather nasty spells ready. The only reason I’m not smashing in your skulls for again trying to set me up to be your tool is sleeping right there in the corner.” She could tell they had activated some skills as well, Maria looking damn near invisible. ‘Not as good as Eve’ she thought.

“Now for starters, grow a fucking spine Edwin. If you’re looking to avenge what they’ve done to your sister you should at least be strong enough to face the man alone. Not that that would be a reasonable decision but just in case.” Ilea said and deactivated her active abilities again, walking back to the desk.

“I don’t trust you. You’re manipulative assholes only thinking of their own goals but right now? Right now I’m quite similar.” Ilea said and watched as Maria became more visible again and Edwin’s body relaxed a little.

Ilea clapped her hands together. “So we’re in luck. Somehow nobody has started fighting yet and we seem to have intertwining goals. I don’t want your help actually fighting the Golden fucking Lily. You’re here for your father, that I believe you. And as he is the only connection I have to reaching MY goal, I’ll be assisting at least to an extent. I’ve saved your ass Edwin, more than once at this point. It’s disappointing. We might’ve made a good team, us and you guys. On our way to kill some rare flowers.”

“I’m starting to think you might not be an asset.” Maria said and Ilea just shrugged in response. “Why would we want your help when you could disappear any moment?”

“You’re not exactly in a position to bargain lady. You know where Arthur is and I want to meet said Arthur. So I’m staying, if you want it or not.” Ilea said.

Maria just sighed and looked at the ground. “Alright, have it your way. You’re as bloody stubborn as this dolt. At least she has guts.” she said. Ilea saw Edwin gulp at that through her Sphere.

“We’ll make this very simple. As we are a group of mercenaries, you’ll be paying us. In gold and information. Additionally we’ll be free to loot,

destroy, employ or kill anybody wherever we'll find that man you so desperately want to murder." Ilea said.

"We'll get a say in the killings." Edwin said and Ilea shrugged. "How much gold?" Maria asked.

"All of it." Ilea said without a beat. "You would've died today or tomorrow, either by that wolf fucker or your two pursuers. Now if those flowers are as strong and dangerous as you suggested, I'll think you'd need all the help you can get." Ilea added.

Maria wanted to say something but Edwin stopped her. "Fine, you'll get it. All the fucking gold we have and everything I'll pry off my family. I'll even make you bloody head of the house if you want it, as long as that man dies." he said, a determined look on his face.

Ilea nodded. "Good. Then at least I know your goal is true. Perhaps this is the first time I feel like you're not lying to me. Maybe I'm wrong too, well we will see. I don't want to become a noble, most of the ones I've met so far were absolute cunts." Ilea said, her magic activating as she blinked in front of Edwin, delivering a quick punch to his gut while Maria raised her hand, magic ripping at Ilea's flesh as she moved backwards just a step, part of her lung vanishing instead of her heart.

The woman had nearly vanished already but she wasn't invisible to Ilea's sphere who took three quick steps and lashed out her hand, grabbing her neck. "Careful what you do now." she said, her lung regenerating in the meantime. Seeing that Edwin was alright, Maria remained unmoving.

"You deserved it, and more." Ilea said as she let go of Maria.

Edwin nodded as if nothing had happened. "We have a deal then."

"We do." Ilea said and smiled.

"Did I not get you?" Maria asked, surprisingly a little worry in her voice. For her own magical talent or her target's well being, Ilea didn't know.

“You should’ve gone for the head.” Ilea quoted and blinked away, her joyous mood settling quickly as she shook her head, remembering their task. “Eve liked my shit jokes.” she murmured to herself as she walked back to her team, at least what remained of it.

“It’s them. Can you read through the marked passages and confirm? I’d appreciate your input.” Trian said as he gestured towards the table with the spread out papers and letters. Edwin nodded and got to work.

“I meant you as well.” Trian said to Maria but she just chuckled.

“I doubt my input will be of any value.” she answered and left it at that. Though Ilea noticed that the woman kept a sly grin afterwards.

“The Birmingales then. Wouldn’t have expected such an act out of them but considering the past year they must’ve become desperate.” Trian said. “I’m not completely sure but were I in your position I’d grab one of them and interrogate. Could be that they’re being framed but considering the diversity of sources I’d say they’re your target.” Edwin said and leaned back.

“Good, I thought the same. I know some of them personally. They’re definitely capable of that. Fuck.” Trian said and shook his head while nibbling at his nails. “This is it then?” he asked himself before he looked at Ilea and Kyrian respectively.

“How are you looking with targets?” Ilea asked Edwin and Maria.

“It would be nice to surprise the two that were hunting for us.” Maria said.

“We have a couple more people on our list. Sadly the location of Arthur is still unknown to me. There’s plenty of possible places but the man is paranoid, always was. Damn well should be, I’m far from the only enemy willing to track him down.” Edwin explained. “Not the only one worth killing either.” he added.

“If we’re taking out a whole noble family anyway you might want to join us, they’re bound to have valuable information.” Ilea said, surprising Edwin who lifted his eyebrow.

“I don’t want you running off again.” Ilea added.

“Ah. Well you have my word Ilea.” he said and now she was chuckling.

“Would you like to join then? You two do love your killing.” Ilea said, locking eyes with Maria who started grinning.

“Only the ones deserving.” Edwin said.

“You really are a comedian Edwin, why didn’t I ever notice that trait about you.” Ilea said but didn’t expand on it. While Elos was somewhat advanced in some things and with the external threat of monsters and other races showed a somewhat bigger unity among humans, they certainly were not in the twenty first century with their morals. Ilea knew she was a murderer at this point, weirdly it didn’t affect her that much. She felt her actions had been justified, especially in a world as brutal as this one.

Perhaps she’d have long lasting psychological damage but that train of thought wasn’t a priority for her. Not now and maybe not ever. Edwin didn’t react to her remark but nodded a while later.

“We can help. Maria can check out their estate and look for evidence while we grab someone from higher up to interrogate. Up for that?” He asked the woman next to him who just shrugged.

“Good to not feel chased anymore.” she said.

“Who were those people anyway?” Kyrian asked. “They paid off the officials to hunt you on their own. Most would welcome the help.”

“Likely directly employed by my father. They’re dangerous. Kyle and Tiana. Kyle is a necromancer and can turn into a beast. Poison, blood magic. The usual. Tiana is a bit more tricky. She’s an ice mage but combines her first class with being a silver mage as well. Very rare that one



and the combination can be unpredictable. They work together somewhat competently but as with Kyle's nature, he can get a little out of control." Edwin explained. "Just in case we encounter them again."

"Silver mage. Interesting." Trian said. "Creation?" he asked but Edwin shook his head.

"She'd be far more influential in that case. And she would likely not be working for my father." he answered. "But it could be, who knows. If she has the skill, she didn't use it in our fight."

"She could make silver out of thin air?" Ilea asked and Trian nodded.

"It's possible. Kyrian's class is rare, having specific metal control is even rarer. While possibly not as useful in a fight, if you manage to advance your control to be able to create it you can basically trade mana into money. I don't know of any proven gold or silver creator but considering some wealthy family's quick rising in history, well I'd say it's possible." he answered.

An interesting ability to be sure. 'Perhaps I can sell my ash then...', Ilea thought and smiled. Crashing the economy with created gold didn't seem sustainable to her but then again she was no economist, especially not one for a magical medieval place like this. They might not even know about inflation.

Considering that gold still has worth though likely meant that the skills were incredibly rare, hard to use or the people in question know about the dangers of overusing it.

"We'll move out as soon as the two wake." Ilea said, motioning to the sleeping Felicia and Aliana.

"They're not coming with us." Edwin said and Ilea just looked at him before she nodded lightly.

"Then we leave now. Or does anybody need sleep or healing?" she asked. "Good. Then let's go."

The suns were setting when they started making their way back towards Virilya. Flying low, they passed over the wilderness, having left behind only their limited possessions not put into a storage item. Ilea knew Edwin had at least one ring but the man didn't know about their own yet and she wanted to keep it that way.

The estate of the Birminghamales was inside Virilya itself which made the whole operation both harder and easier in some respects. They couldn't simply march in and fight openly as that would attract other parties rather quickly but it was also easier to stalk around the property and perhaps sneak in without arising too much suspicion.

Virilya was a vast city and considering how it looked like from Ilea's previously used bird's view, she was pretty sure Elos lacked competent city planners. The lack of cars meant that this wasn't much of an issue, lending many of the streets, alleys and architecture a nice and unique touch. Horrible to navigate if you didn't know where you were going though.

Entering the city without being noticed was somewhat tricky. The guards on the walls and even some flying squads had a pretty good view of the plains around the city. It also seemed like the chaos from the previous day had been mostly cleared up. Kyrian went in alone and through normal means as he was the only one in the group lacking a teleportation skill. The others had to wait a little longer but right before night truly came, a caravan of adventurers returning from a hunt or expedition arrived through one of the patches of forests near them.

After identifying some of them and seeing their rather downtrodden disposition, Ilea blinked right into one of the carriages where she found some wounded and dead. Without a word, she started checking and healing, surprising the woman sitting near one of the wounded with the young man's head on her lap.

"Who who are you?" she asked, wiping at her eyes.

“Passerby healer.” Ilea replied, surprised the woman hadn’t screamed. “I’m going to heal everybody here and me and some friends are allowed to ride in this carriage. Sounds fair?” she asked as she continued.

“You’re hardly a passerby healer... if you take care of them then I don’t mind. Just make sure to vanish before anybody checks in here.” the woman said, smiling at the man who woke up because of the noise. Ilea walked up to the two and checked him, healing the wounds in his legs. Arrows, and nasty ones at that it seemed.

“You’re right, I’m not but I will take care of them.” Ilea said as the man looked to his legs in a confused manner.

“You’re alright.”

“H... hand...,” he stammered as he looked at her.

“I’m not gonna marry you.” Ilea commented and blinked away again, appearing ten seconds later accompanied by Trian, Edwin and Maria. “We will teleport in as soon as we reach the gate, don’t worry.” she said to the two people in the carriage.

“Shut it in there, we’re nearly here.” the driver commented, a ranger according to the bow on his back.

“Should we leave the city quickly?” the woman asked Ilea as she looked at the armored crew the healer had brought.

“No, but the city was attacked yesterday. We’re here for different reasons.” Ilea supplied which seemed to calm the woman down somewhat.

“Attacked by whom?” she then asked but Ilea held up a finger to her mouth.

“We’re here. Security is tight and one of them is already staring at us. See you in ten.” Ilea said and vanished, appearing as far away as she could which was just a couple meters behind the walls. ‘They should really invest in enchantments against teleportation skills.’ the thought had barely

processed when a guard appeared next to her, a blade flashing towards her head.

Ilea ducked slightly and felt the metal glide through the air barely an inch above her helmet. She grabbed the guard's arms and squeezed until he let go of the blade. Ilea casually caught the weapon with her free hand and threw it a couple meters away.

"I'm no enemy to the city." she said and let go of the man, blinking away further inside. Blink after blink, she crossed through houses, cellars and alleys until she was somewhat confident nobody was still after her. After a while of running, she made her way towards their target. An inn closest to the Birmingham property and their area of influence.

Kyrian had gone into the city hours earlier and was waiting in one of the rooms inside. Ilea appeared and was greeted by a flurry of metal needles rushing towards her, stopping inches before her face.

"You're the first." the man said and turned around. "I might've already aroused some suspicion. We won't have long."

"We won't need long." Ilea said. A minute later Trian appeared, then Maria and lastly Edwin.

"Ready then?" Trian asked, getting nods and grunts in response. While they hadn't worked together, everybody present was a veteran of their own right and the respective tasks were given respectively.

Ilea looked at Edwin and vanished, appearing just as he too teleported onto the street below. Some bypassers stumbled at the sudden appearance but lowered their heads quickly not to arouse and interest from the warriors before them.

"You know I've really wanted to do this for a long time." Ilea said as they made their way towards the gated and walled off estate of the noble family called Birmingham. A name that didn't mean anything to Ilea just a couple weeks ago. The name won't mean much to her in the future either but perhaps her own name will etch itself into the family's history.

“The circumstances just aren’t right.” Ilea said, looking up at the moon. A clear night it was. She took a deep breath and let out a sigh.

“I am sorry for your loss.” Edwin said after walking for a minute. Ilea scoffed and chuckled.

“Appreciate it.” she said before her fist rushed towards his face. The man dodged the attack as his blades flashed out of their sheaths and towards her throat. Blinking behind him, she grabbed around him and pushed forwards, crashing his head and torso right through the high wall of the Birmingham estate.

As expected, the stone broke and the two tumbled through the rubble and ensuing dust. She rushed at Edwin who prepared to defend, slashing through the air to deter her as they purposefully made their way towards the mansion standing a couple dozen meters further away. The first guards were already shouting as they made their way towards the noise.

Only Eve had used blades in their group but Ilea was thankful for that practice as she moved into Edwin’s defenses, letting his blades rush past her dexterous form before she elbowed him into his chest, grabbing onto his arm and twisting her body before she threw the man towards the house.

The loud crash indicated that they hadn’t put enchantments on the windows at least. Ilea looked up once more before she followed the man into the house, engaging him seriously and with the full power she had, except for her ashen skills. Those she wanted to keep a secret for now, just in case she needed an edge on the man at one point or the other. Their eyes locked and she made it clear that this wasn’t just a mock battle.

# Chapter 178 The Price of Information

## Chapter 178 The Price of Information

Edwin's swords slashed through the wall as he tried to attack Ilea who had blinked away, dodging his blood magic coating the blades.

“What the hell is going on!?” they could hear more and more shouts from inside and outside the mansion. Both Ilea and Edwin had focused more on speed than anything else but considering the man had already taken several of her punches directly, he was at least more tough than she had expected.

“Your armor is good. Care to share the smith's name?” Edwin asked before he teleported into a new room, surprising a couple in the process of intercourse.

“I think not.” Ilea said as she rushed at him, dodging the flurry of attacks, some of the blood magic getting through her defenses, even managing to singe her flesh beneath her armor. Nothing a little bit of healing couldn't easily take care of. She found the small injuries much harder to heal than more severe wounds in the past. ‘Blood magic...,’ she thought and smiled. Her arms rushed out, hitting the man's hands and pushing away the swords before she delivered a headbutt to his chest.

The hit landed and Edwin was rammed through the room's wall before he vanished again. Ilea quickly followed him through the use of her Sphere

and Blink skills, not giving him pause as she continued to push further and further, activating more of her skills as they went on. At first she hadn't used her Destruction and Wave of Ember but now she delivered them with each blow.

Ilea didn't plan to kill the man but she did want to know if she could. Perhaps he felt the same, his attacks getting stronger and faster to match her. Of course their goal was simple, to cause a distraction in the estate for the others to carry out their parts. So far, they were doing rather well.

Ilea delivered three punches in quick succession, hearing a slight crack from the third one as Edwin stumbled backwards. Waiting for a moment for him to react, two people, a man and a woman appeared in the room, armored and with spells ready to go.

“Who are you!? Leave this place, take your squabble somewhere else.” the woman shouted. Edwin spat out blood before red flames gathered around him and Ilea saw as his chest moved a little, indicating that the broken bone had been mended.

His blades appeared before her, too fast for her to dodge as she blinked behind him, moving her hand just in time to hit his sword upwards as it threatened to smash into her helmet. Her hand was on fire immediately, her flesh burning below her armor with a pain distracting even to her. Turning off the perception of it, she simply used her healing spell against the red flames enveloping her hand. The fire didn't expand, stopped by her Hunter Recovery but neither could she remove it.

Blinking upwards right when the next blade rushed towards her, Ilea ripped off her gauntlet, summoned one of her remaining Taleen swords and hoped that the blade was strong enough to do the trick. With all her strength, she slashed at her wrist. The bone was severed halfway but a second hit did the trick. Healing again, Ilea found the wound now completely normal and she put on her gauntlet again when Edwin appeared in the room, looking at her as she regrew her bone and flesh below her armor.

“Nice flames.” she said, honestly impressed at the destructive potential.

“Let me know if you’re close to death.” the man said with a very slight grin.

“The same goes to you.” Ilea said and activated State of Azarinth’s third stage before she ran towards him, now focusing on his limbs instead of the blades. Not able to touch the metal made the fight more even. She found that while the flames around his body did injure her, they were much less dangerous than the ones enveloping his curved short swords.

Dodging backwards, Ilea moved her body left and right, appearing and disappearing, trying to get into range for her fists while the man tried hard to keep her at his blades’ distance. His weapon rushed past her right side as she delivered a punch to his gut, the full force of Destruction and Wave of Ember entering him before she appeared behind him. The man teleported away but she followed but a moment later.

They stared at each other, Ilea waiting to give him time should the attack have been a little much. Edwin was panting, sweat on his brow reflecting the candle light in the small hallway as maids stumbled and ran away to avoid the two maniacs who intruded their workplace.

The man raised his blades again and Ilea nodded, appearing before him. His right blade flickered as Ilea turned her body to push her back against his chest as she grabbed both of his arms, pumping destructive mana into his body as he struggled to get away. A sudden heat could be felt in her right shoulder before it literally exploded, making her stumble. Thanks to Azarinth Reversal’s second stage she could continue to attack the man while she mended the nasty wound on her shoulder.

“Stop.” he suddenly said. “I’m getting dangerously low...,” he added with a whisper as Ilea disengaged, feeling her shoulder reconstruct under her armor. The way he just ignored the metal made her understand Iana’s lecture about how many people wanted enchantments that protected against mana intrusion. Well she didn’t really have a choice.

Stepping towards the man, she started healing him as the flames left his form, his blades held limply in both hands as he panted and leaned against a wall. Ilea was quite aware that he could’ve targeted her heart or head with that attack, which could’ve lead to a different result entirely. She could



certainly recover but not having tested actually losing her head, she didn't know how exactly that would pan out.

*'ding' 'You have learned the general skill Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 1'*

*'The arts of blood manipulation can be deceptive and dangerous to both ally and foe. You have stood against the old magic and lived. Next time your chance of survival will be even higher.'*

*'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3'*

'That will come in handy.' she thought and continued healing as she heard people move towards them.

"You think that was enough time?" she asked the man who answered by teleporting away. Ilea followed when the first people came into the hallway. Edwin was still not at full strength when she reached him outside.

"Barely but we can't stay longer, the city guard will join shortly." he said while looking upwards.

"Let's get out of here then." she said and watched him vanish. She followed suit and blinked away as well. Again the escape was somewhat easy, mostly because of her blink spell, still one of the main reasons she hadn't died yet. In a battle of attrition she was sure to have beaten Edwin. The surprise attack was a risk on her part. Perhaps she should only use her reverse healing when she knew the enemy couldn't pull something like that. Or perhaps there was a magic intrusion resistance as well. She'd ask him to test it with her later on. For now, they had to meet up again with the others. This time in a hideout Edwin still had in the city.

She followed the man through cellars and houses, Ilea questioning the city guard's ability to hunt down criminals with abilities like Ilea's. It wasn't uncommon to be able to teleport short distances after all. Then again she didn't know how common crime actually was in Virilya.

Reaching their destination down in the sewers, Edwin vanished through a wall behind which Ilea's Sphere didn't let her see. Blinking inside, she found her team mates there. There must have been a rune placed somewhere to open the door as Kyrian was inside as well. They found themselves in a rather large room with stone walls, dilapidated and moist. In the middle of it there was a man, strung up by metal cuffs and with a sack over his head.

Maria appeared a little later, holding her arm where she had been cut. Ilea blinked to her side and started healing without any questions. The woman was injured worse than it looked. According to the mana Ilea used, the injury wasn't just a clean cut. She couldn't tell if it was poison or something else.

"What the hell were you doing?" Maria asked as she walked towards Edwin, slapping him. "You were supposed to distract them, not just fight each other like a bunch of fucking beasts!"

"Calm down, it served the same purpose didn't it?" Edwin asked, looking towards Ilea who just shrugged.

"We got a little carried away." she said. "Did they manage to follow you?" Ilea asked but Maria shook her head.

"Once we're done here we're going to go back out and you two can fight until you're damn near dead. Just don't do that while we're working. Fucking idiots." she said, dropped a bunch of paper into Trian's hands and left the room again.

"Well she's not wrong." Kyrian said. "That's rather unlike you, even with your love for fighting." he added, looking at Ilea.

"Just felt right in the moment." Ilea said and looked towards Trian. "Won't happen again."

"We got what we wanted and nobody's dead. Let's worry about the sentimentalities later." Trian said as he approached the man in the middle of the room.

“Now, you’re here to answer some questions.” he said as lightning crackled around him.

Ilea left half a minute later, blinking out of the room and puking on the ground. Seeing torture wasn’t exactly on her list of things to experience in a magical land far from home. “Fuck this.” she said and left, the screams not audible anymore through the thick stone wall. They had agreed on meeting back in Trian’s hideout outside of the city. She didn’t want to know what they did to that man, nor did she want to know who he was.

If this was required to get revenge then perhaps she’d have to find another way. A more direct one perhaps.

Going back into the streets, she found some guards running around the area but they were easily avoided as she sneaked through the houses until she reached the city wall. It was night and Ilea wore completely black armor. She crouched down and blinked outside and into the grass. The color of the metal didn’t reflect much light, allowing her to simply crawl the distance to the tree line a hundred or two meters away.

Blinking turned out to be the even simpler way as she simply used the spell a couple times in a row to reach the trees. Looking behind, she saw an arrow cast in flames near where she had been lying three blinks earlier. There were some capable guards up there after all, she thought and started running through the forest.

Soon after she felt far enough away to spread her wings and rushed upwards into the clouds.

Ilea appeared in the hideout, just to be met with a wind blade to her chest. The impact resounded through the room with a bang and she stumbled back a step as she looked towards Felicia whose expression was already changing to a combination of apology and shock.

“Ilea I’m so sorry! I realized too late it was you, are you alright?” she asked as she rushed towards her, checking her armor.

“Of course you are. Damn indestructible barbarian.” she said and punched Ilea’s helmet. “Aliana has prepared food, come. I remember you loved to eat, didn’t you.” she added and walked into the room Edwin’s group had resided in.

The smell of sizzling meat was in the air and Ilea heard her stomach rumble as she entered. “Smells good.” she said and Felicia went to grab a couple pieces and handed them to Ilea on a plate, sitting down next to her on the big table.

“Thanks.”

“It’s wolf I hunted earlier.” Felicia said.

“You went outside?” Ilea asked, starting to eat after taking off her helmet.

“Of course, as much as Ed wants to protect us I’m above level two hundred and if we’re just staying behind all the time we won’t exactly get stronger either, will we?” she asked, poking Ilea’s shoulder and smiling. Seeing her so happy made Ilea smile too as she continued to eat.

“You went through some bad things huh?” Felicia asked suddenly, the chewing of meat the only sound remaining after the question. Aliana wasn’t around which made Ilea more inclined to actually answer.

“I did. Fought a lot and saw a lot of death. Now Trian’s family was murdered and Eve too.” she said, continuing to eat. Aliana really knew how to prepare meat.

“Yea. You remind me more of my brother now. Just don’t forget to smile, I liked you a lot when we found you in that dungeon. A bit naive perhaps...,” she said and laughed. “... I think Ed didn’t kill you because of that actually. You cheered him up for a little while afterwards you know?”

“Thank you for that.” Felicia said. “And sorry for just leaving you there. He can be very cold.” Felicia added. The woman was rather talkative when she was alone.

“Don’t worry, my humor’s still there. Just even darker now. And right now it just sucks.” Ilea said and smiled.

“There’s a smile.” Felicia said and pinched her cheek. A gesture Ilea would not allow to be left unpunished if done by anybody else.

They sat there for a while, Ilea finishing her plate in silence when Felicia talked again.

“It’s scary.” she started. “To know that your loved ones could die, at any moment. Ed is out there right now, fighting to get his revenge.”

“His? What about you?” Ilea asked and looked at the woman. Felicia just stared at the wall.

“Me? I survived, he saved me, saved us...,” she said, taking a deep breath. “... I wish we could just leave, go somewhere quiet, built a farm or take an abandoned castle and just. Live, you know?”

“Why not suggest that, maybe for you he’ll forget his revenge.” Ilea said, quite aware of the similarities to her own wish for vengeance.

“He would. I know he would but I can’t take that away from him. It’s what he fought for, his whole life. I’ll be there if he succeeds, or if he fails or gives up. But this is his path. And it’s not mine to take away.” Felicia said and looked at Ilea again, a smile and tears on her face. Getting up, Ilea grabbed the woman’s arm and lifted her up before she embraced her in a hug.

“I’ll try to protect him ok?” Ilea said after a while, letting go of the woman who nodded weakly.

“You don’t have to do anything. He’s not a good man and you have all the right to refuse to help. I don’t know how many times you’ve already saved his life. That dungeon was one of the most dangerous parts of our journey.” Felicia said but Ilea just stroked her hair lightly.

“I’m not doing that for him you know. I consider you a friend.” Ilea said.

“Really? After all we’ve done to you?” Felicia asked and then laughed. “I’m glad you’re still so naive Ilea. Ok, let’s be friends!” she said and held up her hand, making a weird sign with her fingers.

“What’s that supposed to be?” Ilea asked but Felicia just laughed.

“It’s something we used to do as kids. It means love and respect.” she said and smiled.

“God you’re fucking cheesy. How old are you again?” Ilea asked and mimicked the gesture, their hands touching a moment later.

“I’m not exactly the weird one here. Plus, we’re both above level two hundred, we have to be weird.” she said and smiled. “How the hell did you reach it that fast anyway? Tell me about it.” Felicia said.

Ilea summoned a piece of paper and wrote down that the two of them would be nearby. “Come, it’s depressing inside this stuffy chamber. I feel like seeing the stars.” Ilea said and got up. Felicia followed without complaint as they left the hideout and flew a couple hundred meters to find a clearing in the forest.

The first spring flowers were already blooming and Ilea jumped, switching to a more comfortable leather set in the air before she landed in the grass. Felicia sat down next to her as Ilea summoned some more food and mead.

“You’re an insatiable beast.” Felicia said. “You and Aliana should have a competition at some point. Now tell me. And you got a storage item? Does

Ed know?"

"He doesn't, at least I think so." Ilea said, gesturing to the necklace that lightly reflected the moon's light.

"Uuuuh, a necklace? That's beautiful! Rings are so last decade." Felicia said and reached out. "Can I?"

"Sure, don't remove it though, I've grown rather attached." Ilea said and smiled.

Felicia carefully touched the necklace and looked at it.

"I got it in the same Taleen dungeon. Belonged to a dwarven corpse I found. They had a treasure hall and everything." she said.

"It's pretty nice." Felicia said and let go, sitting back again. "Ed said the traps probably wouldn't be worth it. How'd you fare?"

"Nearly burned to a crisp." Ilea said and smiled, remembering the green flames enveloping her. "I lost my favorite cloak there. Got the necklace in turn though so it's alright."

She continued to tell Felicia about the encounter with the Taleen Praetorians and her escape from the dungeon, her way to Salia and encounter with the elves.

"Never heard of Praetorians, you're planning to go back there?" Felicia asked with a smirk. "Maybe we can come and help."

"Not anytime soon, they were ridiculously strong. I feel like even the Basilisk or the demons I've faced don't have a chance against them. Even with a likely lower level." Ilea said and got a nod in response.

# Chapter 179 Moonlit Talk

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“I can imagine that. The Centurions were already pretty scary. But to know that you faced even stronger ones... and elves as well. We encountered one a long time ago but fled after Ed managed to injure him.” Felicia said.

“They’re incredibly aggressive. Arrogant and kind of stupid.” Ilea said and chuckled, remembering the literal temper tantrums they would have.

“The ones that come here, yes. Ed talked about it once, saying that it’s dangerous to go further west. There was another Taleen dungeon in the forest, we knew where it was but people don’t usually come back from there. He said that the elves there are stronger.” Felicia said with a concerned voice.

“Might be something else as well. Like a ton of beastwolves.” Ilea answered.

Felicia punched her jokingly. “Don’t joke about that, that thing nearly ripped us apart.”

“I know. We humans are really weak aren’t we? To think that me and Edwin are already at near the top.” Ilea said and shook her head. “And still there are things out there we probably can’t even comprehend.”

“It’s exciting isn’t it?” Felicia said. “To think that we have only seen such a small part of the world.”



“I thought you wanted to live on a farm or something?” Ilea asked confused and sat up.

“Well it can still be exciting, no? I don’t have to do all that myself. I’ve seen enough exotic creatures.” Felicia said and laughed. “I’ll have time to read again if we get a farm.” she said with a nostalgic voice.

“Ever seen a dragon?” Ilea asked out of the blue when Felicia covered her mouth and looked up with a scared look on her face.

“Are you mad!?” she asked and let go of Ilea again. “You can’t just blurt out that name, nothing good comes of it.”

“Alright, alright. Always wondered why people here never mention them. They exist though, right? They have to. It’s a bloody fantasy world.” she said and chuckled.

“Maybe. I only know some stories. Of cities vanishing and whole kingdoms burning. It’s forbidden to talk of them and common knowledge that one doesn’t utter the name, lest one appears and swallows you whole.” Felicia said in a dramatic voice.

“Well now it sounds like a faery tale.” Ilea said.

“Why do you keep tempting fate? First that and now this?” Felicia asked, a disturbed look on her face. Ilea actually felt sorry now. She hadn’t really asked about those creatures before, understanding that it was kind of a taboo. With Felicia she didn’t feel so restricted.

“Apologies my lady. I’ll stop my blasphemous talk.” she said. “I’ve actually met one of the latter ones.” she added, peaking Felicia’s interest.

“You did? Well no, let’s not talk about that. One of the boys in court talked about them once and he vanished that same day.” Felicia said in a whisper.

“Interesting. I wonder where to.” Ilea said and looked to the stars. Fae and dragons, two of the most magical creatures she could think of. And yet all she truly saw so far was death.

‘No, that’s not true.’ she thought as ash started forming in her hand, a swirling ball formed quickly as it spun around. She smiled and looked at the magic before her.

“Is that ash? You’re a creator? Wow.” Felicia said and seemed genuinely impressed. “You’re not mainly a mage though.”

“I’m not. It’s my second class.” Ilea said.

“Didn’t you have something with fire? Well I guess it makes sense that it evolved. You should really focus on that. The legends always say creators were grand mages.” Felicia pondered as she looked at the sphere, reaching out to touch the swirling ash.

Ilea moved it towards the woman’s hand and let go of it after it had reached enough density to sustain itself. “I know. There are other things on my mind right now though. Other things than my skills and classes.”

“It’s good to think about things. Maybe you should take some time to train and think you know? Your revenge won’t run away. Ed... well I think he forgot to live and enjoy things as he did before he... found out about our family.” Felicia said.

Ilea looked at the woman briefly as a night breeze flowed over the clearing, rustling her hair. “What if I die on the way, what if my target dies?”

“Then so be it. Don’t forget who you are because of revenge. He was so sweet and nice before.” Felicia said, quieting down at the end and lost in thought. She laughed a moment later, filling the clearing with the noise. “And you’re strong, your best asset is your healing. You were a healer before weren’t you?”

“I was and yea, I’m pretty tough. But there are monsters out there that can beat me in mere seconds.” Ilea said.

“Then escape before that. And come back once you can face them. You’re a hunter aren’t you?” Felicia asked, catching Ilea by surprise.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked in turn.

“You hunt, you’re not the one being hunted. You’re a predator and I’m sure that if you set your mind to it you can achieve whatever you want.” Felicia said.

“Or I’ll die trying.” Ilea said before she chuckled.

“With a smile on your face.” Felicia said. “My second class is Arcane Berserker, trust me I know the feeling.” she said with a grin. “Even though I’m not normally like that. When the power rushes through me I’m one with the fight.”

“Arcane Berserker... do you lose control?” Ilea asked and the woman shook her head.

“No, not completely. Even if I’m close to death. Level two hundred helped me there.” The reply made Ilea grin.

“Wanna show me? My Wind Resistance could be higher you know.” she said and got up, her armor replaced by her Ashen Hunter Armor.

“You’re only allowed to use ash, that’s the deal.” Felicia said with a smile and Ilea blinked upwards and landed in the grass.

“Agreed.” she said with a smile, ashen spheres forming around her, a Veil of it protecting her body.

Felicia’s eyes started glowing a light green as she got up, the grass pushed aside by magical pressure alone before the air around the woman turned chaotic, cutting into the ground and the nearby trees as Ilea moved back a little further to avoid being attacked already.

Green lines formed around Felicia’s eyes before she opened them with a grin. “Ready?” she asked in a voice almost ethereal.

Ilea nodded and saw a blade of air moving towards her. It was so dense that her eyes alone let her know about it but her sphere gave her a bit more of an insight, telling her that there were dozens of smaller blades coming her way

as well, covering different paths of her possible escape. A blink towards Felicia was the most reasonable thing to do and so she advanced.

Appearing behind the blades of wind, Ilea watched Felicia advance with frightening speed, her arms reaching out before cones of air were released from them. Ilea dodged both attacks with a jump, assisted by her wings before another wind blade smashed into her armor, making her tumble through the air before she landed on her feet, skidding on the ground for a couple meters.

“You’re really something. Half a year ago that would’ve halved you.” Felicia said as she slowly approached. Ilea’s ash moved then, spinning black spheres rushed towards Felicia who moved protected by a tornado around her. The spheres were torn apart but Ilea was already forming spikes, making them spin before she shot them out.

This time Felicia dodged the projectiles, her tornado moving her body as if it was controlled by a puppeteer. A cloud of ash formed around Ilea but was quickly blown away by a stream of wind.

“You’re not gonna obscure my vision.” Felicia said, sending more air blades towards Ilea. This time she dodged more defensively, not getting too close to the mage as she formed new projectiles, this time aiming for a much bigger area.

Even dodging, one of the black spikes cut through the tornado and hit Felicia on her shoulder. It didn’t pierce but the speed and weight still stunned the woman slightly.

“Creation really is something else.” Felicia murmured. “I could simply trap and crush you with air if I had such a skill.”

“Can’t you do that with your air manipulation?” Ilea asked, dodging backwards and into the woods as air blades rushed through the trees, some of them slowly sliding down do the ground, cleanly cut through.

“No, the extent of manipulating existing elements is limited. While helpful it takes time to infuse it with mana and use it more freely. Your metal mage

friend does it that way. You seem to be completely in control of your ash immediately upon creation.” Felicia wondered.

“I can barely pierce your defenses though.” Ilea said with a frown.

“Hmm, I let that one pass to see how it would fare against my armor. You don’t have any skills that enhance your ash do you? Mine are basically all about making my air blades more damaging.”

“Hence they cut through trees like butter.” Ilea said.

“Exactly.” Felicia said and smiled, more blades cutting through the forest.

“Something’s nearby. Let’s stop for now.” Ilea said, turning around to look where she had sensed something. Trees were still creaking and falling when Felicia landed next to Ilea, her eyes still with a green line around them but the tornado was absent.

“You think the beastwolf followed us?” Felicia asked but Ilea shook her head.

“It felt different. There it is.” she said, pointing to a bush but all that happened was a bunny hopping out from behind.

Ilea identified the creatures just to be sure.

*[Bunny – lvl 3]*

“You never know.” she murmured and started walking back towards the clearing. At least fifteen trees had been cut down in their little mock battle. Ilea thought about the power of certain beasts and species when this was considered weak in comparison.

“We should head back soon.” Felicia said. “Lest we attract unwanted attention.”

Ilea nodded and the two made their way back, casually flying over the trees as they took in the night sky and moonlit lands around them.

“You’re back. Good. If I understood your friend correctly, he needs some time to plan the attack. We’ll be gone tomorrow for a couple days. Felicia and Aliana will stay here.” Edwin said upon their return. He didn’t mention Felicia’s absence and Ilea saw that the note she had left on the table was missing.

“Alright, just don’t disappear on us.” she said and walked to their room. Entering, she found the two men discussing over a big piece of paper, a map or ground plan.

“Welcome back.” Trian said as he turned his head. Kyrian looked at her as well and smiled.

“You look better.” he said and nodded before he focused on the plan again.

‘Do I?’ Ilea asked herself and took a seat. Talking to Felicia was nice. Worst case, she would tell Edwin about the necklace and her Ashen abilities but she wanted to give the woman the benefit of the doubt. They wouldn’t sleep without two people awake and Ilea was confident in their group’s ability to escape. Even if Edwin somehow got other people involved.

She doubted it would be worth the resources needed but just in case. “Is it alright if we don’t stay here during the others’ absence? I don’t trust them that far.” Ilea said and Trian just nodded.

“We can leave in the morning, go somewhere nearby and build a shelter.” Kyrian said. Ilea nodded and watched as Trian continued drawing on the plan.

“It was them then?” she asked and Trian nodded. Ilea sighed, she didn’t want to ask about the details and simply watched as the two talked and planned. Trian excused himself to sleep for a while after an hour, leaving the other two to protect him.

Kyrian moved closer to her and sat down. They remained in silence for a long while, both in their thoughts.

“You talked to your friend?” Kyrian asked, waking Ilea from her thoughtful state.

“Hmm? Yea, caught up a little.” she said and smiled.

“Good, you seem like you’re doing a little better.” he said and sighed.

“I’ve been on edge lately. Sorry if I’ve been a bit of a bitch to you.” Ilea said, thinking about the past days and weeks. They didn’t have a longer downtime for a while and now they were planning to attack a noblehouse in the capital of the empire.

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind too much, it’s kind of sexy actually.” he said.

“I’m not in the mood for this Kyrian.” Ilea said and he chuckled in response.

“I didn’t mean it that way. Just an observation. Don’t beat yourself up over it.” he added and took her hand. “I’m glad you could talk to her.”

Ilea nodded and held his hand for a while.

“Did you watch when the man was tortured?” Ilea asked.

“I was there, yes.” Kyrian said. “I’ve seen similar things and worse when I was younger.”

“Does it get easier?” Ilea said as she looked at a candle and the moving flame on top.

“A little, I think. It helps to know they at least somewhat deserve it.” Ilea grunted at that and created a couple ash spheres around her, swirling them around to work on the skill.

Kyrian joined her a moment later, still holding her hand while metal and ash fought a fierce battle around them.

The next days were spent planning and preparing. Edwin and Maria were gone for two days, returning on the third while Ilea and her group stayed a couple kilometers further away from the hideout.

Black spheres rushed into a tree, their spin coming to a stop a couple centimeters into the wood as Ilea concentrated to create more and more of them. Sweat was dripping down her brow as the suns shined down from above. Her control had improved. While the skills didn't rise in level, Ilea was now able to create the spheres without the massive mist of ash to be condensed afterwards. Instead they formed a small bubble of ash and started forming the sphere in the middle of it.

The same technique was applied to creating many other forms. A drill like spike turned out to be the most destructive for now, at least as far as projectiles went. Ilea thought it possible to use tendrils of ash connected to her for attack as well. It was easier for her to imagine the tendrils attacking if they were connected to her body and magic was a lot about your imagination. Her high skills helped of course.

Ilea also tried to use swords, spears and axes from the Taleen dungeon to attack, the gear held up and moved by her ash. It sadly turned out to be even less effective than simply attacking with the ash itself, even without any buffs to its damage.

Kyrian had improved as well after Ilea discussed possible projectile designs with him. Her ash simply lacked the power output to really get something out of the designs but Kyrian had successfully created something akin to a



frag grenade. While Ilea's design managed to dig into trees, Kyrian's managed to fell them.

Cursed frag grenades was something she didn't really want to encounter. Traps and mines followed after but Kyrian had to be somewhat close to be able to still control everything. Still it was an asset and would definitely help to defend a camp or prepare an ambush.

Creating another dozen spheres, Ilea formed them into spikes quickly before they rushed out into the trees.

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

She had reached her goal for now. The skill was close to twenty already for a while now.

"You're improving." Kyrian said before he focused himself on the creation before him again.

Ilea lay on her back and turned towards him as she panted, damn near out of mana, even with her meditation skill constantly active. 'When is that one gonna level again?' she asked herself but got distracted by the ball of metal in front of Kyrian.

"What are you building? A mini nuke?" she asked.

"I don't know what that is Ilea." the man said and put in the last piece of metal.

"This is all the metal I have and I've pumped in three times my total mana. Let's see what it can do." he said as the thing started moving, hovering higher until it was on eye level with the man.

"I don't think it's a good idea to test it on your face." Ilea said and got a chuckle from him in response before the ball flew into the forest.

The two of them got into cover before a loud crash resounded. Less like an explosion and more like two cars crashing together. Shrapnel flew over

them, shredding through trees and the ground. One of the trees fell on Ilea who caught it and rolled it away from her. 'I just caught a tree.' she thought and noted the ridiculousness of her strength as she got up.

"Damn, not bad." she exclaimed as she looked at the weirdly destroyed area. Seemed less like a bomb had exploded and more like a tornado of sharks had appeared before it vanished again.

"You wanna use that when we go for it? The area might cover a couple rooms." Ilea said, thinking about the damage it would do to people. All the pieces would inflict a curse as well, not to be underestimated.

"I'll think about it. For now I'll have to work on the details some more. You continue your training." he said as metal started ripping out of the ground and trees, forming spheres again as it got closer to the mage.

"Yes sir." Ilea said in a tired voice, recharging her mana with meditation.

# Chapter 180 The Path of Revenge

## Chapter 180 The Path of Revenge

“Could you go a little further away.” Trian appeared, ripping out a piece of metal from his shoulder plate.

“Ah, apologies.” Kyrian said as the piece floated towards him. “I’ve been testing a new thing.”

“I gathered that.” Trian said and shook his head before he vanished again. Now that they knew where and who the target was, the whole mood became a little better. The uncertainty had left Trian in a worse state than the focus he was in now.

Ilea talked to Felicia nearly daily between her training sessions and she found that she really liked the woman. Weirdly childish with character traits she’d normally associate with a mother. Felicia seemed naive but was incredibly smart and her insight into magic theory helped Ilea improve immensely.

Aliana wasn’t around much, usually out hunting for more meat but she was tolerable when she was around. Ilea found it much harder to keep a conversation going with her than with Felicia though.

“Leaving already?” Kyrian asked as he watched Ilea grab her pack. She had taken it with her most of the time to let the others think she didn’t have a storage item. As much as she liked Felicia, she wasn’t sure the woman would withhold information from her brother. Perhaps if she thought it

irrelevant to him and Ilea didn't see a reason why Edwin would need another storage item.

She'd see at some point. "Yea, are you guys coming too? You can continue to tinker in the hideout." Ilea said. Trian, a little further away made his things vanish into his ring and walked towards them.

"I'm nearly done." he said as he reached Ilea.

"I'll finish gathering my metal. Give me a moment." Kyrian said and the others nodded.

"Are you sure you don't want to share anything other than the targets yet?" Ilea asked the lightning mage who just shook his head.

"I've been changing things up somewhat. Doesn't make sense if I have to explain it four times. Plus we have to be somewhat flexible anyway. We don't have any scouts and while Maria's information is certainly helpful, we can't trust it completely." Trian explained as Ilea leaned on a tree. She agreed but thought the operation to have too many unknowns.

What they knew now, thanks to the man who was so helpful during his interview, was that a lot of mercenaries had been involved in the Alymie massacre. Which meant that the targets were spread out and not a concentrated unit, which would've made it much harder to strike back. Especially with their limited manpower.

Trian knew that they only had a handful of level two hundred people in the Alymie household, his parents being two of them. Their abilities were somewhat well known due to tournaments, warfare and other internal conflicts. Gathering specialized tools and people to counter their abilities at least somewhat was a difficult undertaking but with enough time and money rather risk free.

It has also become apparent that the Birminghames were struggling to keep up. They had taken loans and their talent was leaving the family, which meant they had to risk something to keep afloat. It just so happened that the

Alymies were direct competitors in several fields they operated in and they had coffers with enough money to pay back their loans and then some.

Trian had a lot of insider knowledge regarding his own family which helped immensely at placing the evidence. The whole thing was an operation that wasn't unheard of within noble politics, especially in uncertain times but to eradicate a competing family so mercilessly was definitely a fringe case.

Being openly part of noble politics and trying to gain power bore certain risks with it, risks that for example an adventurer didn't have to think about. Having a publicly known residence was one of them. Having members compete in more or less friendly tournaments and knowing the people behind the houses were more of them. All reasons why the Alymies had succumbed to the attack. And all reasons why it was possible for Trian's own operation to work as well. At least against the actual family who ordered everything.

Most of the mercenaries would either be gone or would remain unknown and while Trian wouldn't give up, the chance of finding them would remain rather slim.

"We're going to strike in six days. Earlier if Baralia makes another move on the capital." Trian said as Kyrian joined them.

"What about the increased security. And with the attack last week I'd assume the city is crawling with soldiers by now." Kyrian asked as he shouldered his makeshift quiver.

"Irrelevant for a small group like us. We can even enter the city legally. As long as we don't wear our armor from the get go. People might've spotted us. They definitely know your look Ilea." Trian said as they started moving towards the hideout.

“You want to train your resistance to blood magic?” Edwin asked.

“And whatever she’s using.” Ilea said, gesturing to the sitting Maria who was in the process of reading through new letters they had recovered from one of their excursions. “You owe me Edwin, getting to use your skills against an opponent as strong as you isn’t exactly hard work.”

“I mean sure but it’ll hurt.” he said.

“Remember, second stage.” Ilea said and winked at Maria who looked up from her book at that statement.

“And she can even heal herself... well if that isn’t a convenient way to get resistances.” the woman said as she got up. “Care to help us out as well?”

“For the right price.” Ilea said and shrugged. Maria gave her a sly grin at that and gathered her mana. Ilea blinked backwards to avoid the attack.

“Not here, outside. I want the others to watch out.” she said.

“It’s too risky to be out all the time.” Maria said with a frown. “You all are already out in the open too much.”

“Who would come here. We’ve flown here. If anybody stumbles upon us randomly we’ll take care of it. And if it’s too much we’ll just flee again.” Ilea replied.

“It’d be easier to flee out in the open. I agree with her. While a hideout is good it might end up being a trap as well. At least if we’re throwing around magic anyway, let’s do that outside.” Edwin surprisingly agreed with Ilea and Maria sighed as she gestured for the others to leave.

An explosion of flesh and blood splattered red onto both Ilea and Edwin. “Damn, that’s nasty.” Maria said from the side as Ilea’s destroyed arm started reforming. “Good thing you have Pain Immunity.” she added.

“It’s less effective.” Ilea said to Edwin. “Does it bother you?”

“I’ll be honest. It does a little.” he replied.

“Still rips off my arm quite easily.” she said.

“No, there’s threads still hanging. Here and here.” he said, pointing to specific pieces of flesh. Ilea found him to be right. Soon he won’t even be able to rip off her whole arm anymore.

“And you didn’t want to be there when they tortured a guy?” Maria asked before she started laughing out loud. “Silly girl.” she added before her void magic manifested inside Ilea’s other arm. Maria was better at reducing the area which meant Ilea didn’t have to regrow her right arm all the time, just heal the insides.

“It’s different. I’m not screaming.” Ilea said. “Can you two just do that inside my head? You’d be able to kill anybody with a single strike...,” she said which made them look at each other.

“Sadly not. Using my void abilities is harder against more vital spots. I think because of the mana density. It’s a form of mana intrusion so that always made sense to me. Easier to rip out two legs anyway than a heart. People can tell and with higher levels they can tell even earlier.” she explained.

Edwin didn’t comment on it which made Ilea doubt both of them. If he wanted he could destroy her brain, she was pretty sure about that. Then again maybe he remained quiet because he knew the limitations of his ability. In that case it meant she had won the latest bout between them.

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill Void Magic Resistance – lvl 1’*

*‘The mystical magic usually used to enchant high level items applied as a form of combat magic. It’s as deadly as it is silent. How exactly you survived is unclear, perhaps the caster willed it so. Next time it might work against a true enemy as well.’*

Ilea felt immediately how the attack was earlier predictable. The damage as well was noticeably lessened. If the Golden Lily really was as dangerous as Edwin proposed, she'd have to get as many of these skills as she could beforehand. A visit to the Shadow's Hand would likely provide most.

Perhaps some exotic animals and monsters would provide even more. Her initial rage had subsided and Ilea realized that there was nothing she could do for Eve anymore. She was dead. Her friend was dead. To find out who did it and to bring them down she needed more than what she had now. She needed levels and skills, she needed resistances and influence.

Claire, Edwin and Trian were great sources for information. If Claire was as competent as Ilea believed, then her investment would lead to quite a lot of influence through gold alone. For her personal strength though, she needed more. Before she got lost in thoughts, her arm was ripped off again.

*'ding' 'Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4'*

She needed to focus on the now. Trian had his plan ready and she would help him pay back the people who wronged him. Their motives and execution more than justified Trian's plans. The parts she knew of already at least.

With a somewhat clearer mind, Ilea realized that she didn't know what exactly Eve had done to enrage the Golden Lily, if it really was them being responsible. She didn't know what Eve's goals were in the first place, other than hunting down individuals with evidence to their corruption and criminality. Perhaps she was working for someone as well, perhaps the evidence was placed to lead her or others in a wrong direction.

All she really had was the letter she had gotten from Eve. And Ilea knew that before she wanted to hunt down anybody, she'd want to find out more about the person she had considered a friend. Perhaps that would lead her to the killers as well.

Another void attack ripped out a chunk of her arm that started regenerating immediately. With her meditation active, it was a simple act of healing the wounds and reconstructing her left arm. Ilea found that she got better with it



in time as well, forgetting that her skill was already at the current max, she focused on how exactly she rebuilt the arm and how the finished product was supposed to look like.

Compared to most healers, she had the advantage that she could heal the same body again and again, getting to know the intricacies better with each cycle. In addition her skill healed herself much quicker than others, even faster than what she assumed a dedicated healer could heal another person.

Trian continued planning while the others were helping out Ilea while Kyrian worked on his metal magic. The two of them were only there to intervene should Edwin and Maria try to do something unplanned for.

She had informed them that should her head suddenly explode, to just leave her body there and engage the others. And to avoid having them damage her more. Ilea trusted her healing skill and losing her head or heart would not be the end of her. 'Sucks that Eve didn't have a skill like that.' she thought and squished the small hope that tried to squeeze out of her subconscious. 'Eve is dead.'

Hours later they stopped their session, Edwin mentioning that they had to prepare for the next day as well. Ilea felt that Maria somehow liked her a little more at this point, perhaps because she could destroy her arm for a couple hours or perhaps because Ilea had her Pain Tolerance in the second stage. If she interpreted correctly, then Maria was the friend Edwin talked about when he asked her about the second stage. Which meant that the woman had gone through quite an extensive assortment of pain. Having done the same, Ilea couldn't help but harbor a certain level of respect for her as well.

The time wasn't wasted either. She had advanced her Blood Magic Resistance to level 6 and her Void Magic Resistance to level 5. It seemed so easy to her. She just needed a couple of willing attackers and they could literally rip off her limbs for a couple hours. The inflicted damage was

absurd but with her healing ability and pain immunity it felt like cheating the system.

‘There must be others out there who do the same...,’ she thought but so far everything spoke against that. Even Maria who had pain immunity didn’t seem to have gone through all this. Hiring a healer couldn’t be that hard. ‘Maybe didn’t have the time yet?’ Ilea asked herself. She hadn’t exactly banked on the idea that much either. Not as much as she probably should have. There were other things more pressing and more lucrative to both her personal power and priorities at the time.

Sighing, she looked towards her two companions, both occupied with their own work. Time really was the only factor that really seemed to be an issue. Becoming a time mage seemed like a better idea all in all. She walked up to the others as she looked around, seeing the suns set on the horizon. Birds were chirping nearby, making Ilea take a deep breath. “Can we move back out, I want to continue training.”

“Sure.” Trian said, his papers vanishing again after he checked for the two distant figures of Edwin and Maria.

The last days of their preparations passed somewhat uneventful. Nobody attacked them out in the woods, nor did they even see anybody pass by. Even so close to the capital Ilea felt like she was stranded nowhere near any civilization. She compared it to the early ages of humanity on earth, when perhaps their species wasn’t at the top of the foodchain.

As the suns rose, Ilea sat on the top branches of a tall tree to see the light envelop the distant lands. Lands she could travel to with her wings in mere hours. She smiled and created a small sphere of ash. Today would be quite a bit more chaotic than the past week had been. Ilea had managed to raise her void and blood magic resistances even further, also working on Lightning, wind, water, curse, health drain, mana drain and heat. The latter was not as the name suggested a resistance to both cold and warm temperatures but

fire only. The naming didn't make much sense she thought but boiling water wasn't exactly fire so she gladly accepted the additional usefulness.

Checking her stats, she wasn't exactly sure what to think.

*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 2*
- 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 8*
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 16*

*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 20*
- Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 20*
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 12*
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 20*
- 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 16*

*General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *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 7*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 8*
- *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 5*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Veteran – lvl 3*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 600*

*Endurance: 350*

*Strength 251*

*Dexterity 350*

*Intelligence 525*  
*Wisdom 415*

*Health: 6000/6000*  
*Stamina: 3492/3500*  
*Mana: 4138/4150*

Her levels, skills and stats were impressive of course. Especially knowing that many people worked for years to achieve something even closely similar to what she had managed in a little over a year. Recklessness, high risks, the luck of her healing and warrior hybrid class and some fortunate help she had received marked the rather short way of the rise in her power.

Still, she had been stagnating. While it was true that Ilea had learned a lot in the past six months, from her lessons in the Shadow's Hand to working together with her team, it had become much harder to both find and kill enemies that rose her levels and skills. Perhaps there wasn't much of a need either, she thought. Initially the reasons for her fast improvements were mostly tied to her own survival.

The Taleen dungeon had been a huge step in power and that one didn't come completely without help. Ilea was pretty sure she would've managed either way but it would've taken longer and the expedition would have likely thinned out her possible targets while removing any possible treasures she had walked away with. It had been a fun and exciting ride but now she had more than just her love for fighting and exploring to think about. She had to get stronger to face her enemies, to find out more about Eve and to face the people who had killed her.

# Chapter 181 Plan and Execution

## Chapter 181 Plan and Execution

Until she had exhausted the reasonable limits of resistance training with the Hand and had at least spent her ash class' third tier skill points she wouldn't even start to think about going after the Golden Lily. Finding another dungeon that would help her gain some class and skill levels wouldn't hurt either.

Edwin had spent over five years plotting and didn't seem sure he was ready to face his father yet, Ilea wouldn't be running into her own doom unprepared. From beasts and dungeons she could flee, her skills allowed as much, reducing her risks by quite a bit. From people hunting for her though? She wasn't sure she could hide forever. People who managed to hunt and kill Eve nonetheless.

She sighed, leaning her back on the sturdy tree trunk behind her. Separating her tasks into smaller, at least somewhat manageable bits was the first thing she could think of after going through the work she had cut out for herself.

First she would help Trian, then Edwin and then she would start her preparations. At least if everything went at least somewhat well. Even if any of their goals failed, Ilea was somewhat confident to her own survival. Her team was good at running away. She wasn't so sure about Edwin and Maria but they were of little concern to her.

“Brooding in the treetops.” Kyrian said as he floated up next to her.  
“Doesn't suit you.” he added.

“Are we going then?” Ilea asked, ignoring the comment.

“Trian is ready to explain the details. We’re just waiting for you.” Kyrian said and flew down again, Ilea following behind with a blink, her wings spreading right after to stop her fall as she rushed behind her friend.

They reached the hideout soon after and joined the waiting group, Ilea sitting down on one of the chairs, looking at the ground plan of the Birmingham estate.

“We can start then. First, we’ll strike tonight. The tension in the city hasn’t lessened as far as Maria could tell in her various visits throughout the week. The estate is guarded the same as it had been before, either they bought that your brawl was just an accident or it’s a trap.” Trian said.

“They could just not have the resources.” Maria added.

“Of course, I was generally planning with the worst case in mind.” Trian answered. “We’re going in and out quick. There should be guards at all the entrances, inside the gardens and the mansion itself.” he said, marking spots on the map. “Maria will leave earlier to check on their movements but as we know they shouldn’t be above level one fifty. Likely not much of a threat with their low numbers. Still, it’s paramount that we stay silent and get to the targets before they can group up. They used chaos against my family and we shall do the same.” Trian explained.

“Edwin and Maria will take out the guards at the northern gate. I’ll store the corpses in my ring before we move into the mansion.” he said, showing the item. Edwin and Maria looked at each other but didn’t react further. It was a necessary part of the plan to get the corpses away before a squad of guards or soldiers stumbled upon them.

“As soon as we get closer, I’ll use my lightning magic to disable any defensive or alarming runes. We’ll have a minute or two at best for this and should I fail, all the people who can teleport will go inside regardless and spread out in the mansion. From the entrance, Edwin and Maria to the left, me, Ilea and Kyrian right. Move and kill together to make sure the target is dead before you move on to the next one. If their resistance is

overwhelming, we flee but otherwise I want to deal as much damage before we get out again. It will be difficult to find and attack any surviving members afterwards.” Trian explained before he pinned sketched paintings to the wall.

“These are the main targets. Ronan Birminghamale. He’s supposed to have surpassed the mid two hundreds and is likely one of the most dangerous targets. The current head of the family and trust me, he has enough blood on his hands that everyone here has a good reason to take him out of the picture.” He said, pointing to the first picture he hung up. It looked like a man in his fifties with long black hair. “We don’t know anything about his abilities other than him being a warrior. Anybody who challenged him directly in the past ten years has vanished without a trace, both in the family or outside.”

“This is Bale Birminghamale, Ronan’s wife and possible matriarch of the family. The sources differ but she definitely holds a lot of influence and she’s the first I would blame for my family’s murder. She was a high ranking officer in the imperial army with a lot of pull. Make sure to take her out or we’ll have specialized military units hunting for us before the night is over. She’s a mage, a fire one at that. Prisoners of war isn’t her thing and back in her military days she was known as the melting demon. If Ilea’s perception ability works, she will point out those two targets so we can focus on them first. I would count the operation a success if we get them.” Ilea looked at the picture of the smiling woman, a middle aged motherly type, not someone she’d associate with a melting demon. Then again, appearances can be deceptive.

“The rest are more notable members, just read through the notes on their abilities. Depending on how many of them are present tonight, we might or might not have an easy time fighting and escaping. Take your time, I want everybody to be prepared.”

Ilea looked at the pictures and the notes underneath. She was a little reminded of the wanted pictures she’d seen in movies and comics back in the day. Billy the kid, gunslinger class. Focusing on the task at hand, Ilea started reading through the papers. Different people of differing ages and



abilities. There was a lack of information about many of them, including even their possible levels.

If the assumption that the Birminghames had hired a lot of high level and specialized mercenaries turned out to be wrong, then they might have quite a problem on their hands. While their group of five was certainly strong, Ilea doubted they could stand against Trian's family at full power. The goal was to take out the two leaders and as many of the others as possible, which at least seemed somewhat possible. The consequences for both success and failure were difficult to grasp but success seemed the safer bet.

Other nobles would take over the diminished influence of the Birminghames, just like it had happened to the Alymies. Though the latter was nearly completely wiped out and Ilea doubted they'd be that successful, neither did she sign up for killing babies and kids.

Trian continued explaining the plan after they all had checked out the roster of notable nobles in the family. Possible escape routes, plans of regrouping in several different places both in and out of the city. He had really thought through a lot of scenarios and with Ilea's experience in combat she assumed the end result would look different still. Preparing as best as possible was paramount for a situation like this but she definitely liked hunting for monsters more. Perhaps some of the people in the Birmingham family could be considered as such after reading through the notes but they were of the human species still. Smart, adapting and unpredictable. Some of the things Ilea thought to be the reason for their race's survival in Elos thus far.

To Ilea's surprise, that wasn't it. Not at all. Listening to Trian's continued explanations made her realize that he didn't just want the Birminghames to pay with blood. He wanted to remove them from the picture entirely.

Night came and the weather was in their favor, huge clouds hanging over the city of Virilya and the surrounding area. Flying in from above while avoiding the individual flying squads patrolling around and over the city

was made much easier. Ilea was surprised none of the guards had spotted them but perhaps they simply didn't want anything to do with a squad of Shadows.

The tension in the city was tangible as the five landed. Rain was falling lightly and the streets were deserted compared to just a couple days ago. An attack from Baralia was expected and feared, as much was clear to Ilea but she didn't know the specifics. Edwin's operations combined with their own tonight wouldn't help anybody feel any more safe.

They rushed silently through the streets, vanishing into houses or side streets whenever they saw light approach. Some of the patrolling groups were soldiers but few of them were higher than level one twenty. 'No scouts or whatever other special units they had...', Ilea thought. Their target lay quite a distance away from the governmental center of the city, which was the actual center of the city as well. A place Ilea hadn't yet visited.

They waited in their hideouts until the group of guards slowly passed.

"Fuck night patrols." one of them said and spat on the ground, adding little to the already wet cobble.

"And the rain and fuck the soldiers too, with their bloody arrogance. Who'd they think ey are?" the man said, giving Ilea the impression that he was at least a little drunk with the sound of his voice.

"Shut the fuck up you dumb idiot." another of the four replied.

"Call me an idiot one more time, I dare ye." the first one said and turned around, pointing his finger towards the man who had spoken up.

"Guys we'll be in trouble if you fight. Do that after the shift." a third one said which didn't help much with defusing the situation.

"You dumb fucking idio...", the second guards said when he was punched in the face hard. He stumbled back when a fifth man landed near them.

“Stop this at once.” the man said as he approached, the two uninvolved guards taking a couple steps back as they watched him.

“You attacked another guard while on duty, what do you have to say for yourself.” the man asked, likely part of the military but Ilea couldn’t tell through her Sphere only. She was waiting in the cellar of a nearby house.

“Called me an idiot that one.” the man replied.

“That is all?” he was asked and replied with a confirming grunt.

“Alright. You come with me. Continue your patrol and report back.” the man said and grabbed the guard’s neck before he flew off.

“Told him to shut up.” the injured guard grumbled as he brushed away the blood on his chin.

“Are you alright?” one of them asked but he just shrugged.

“Let’s continue, I wanna go sleep.” he replied and that was that.

Were it not for Kyrian, the group could’ve continued on their way but they’d lose a fifth of their power and neither Ilea nor Trian would leave him behind to possibly face guards or soldiers. He was at least good at hiding, molding onto houses or the street with his dark metal.

They moved on, having another two encounters with patrols. Security had certainly been increased and as they approached the respective noble district, they found even stationary guard posts on bridges and vantage points. Trian led them through parts of the sewer system and through narrow streets to avoid the guard posts, having prepared rather extensively after they knew where exactly they would strike.

Ilea was getting a little worried about the quick intervention by the flying military officer or soldier. If they reacted that quick to the attack, then their group would have a problem. Especially with the matriarch being strongly connected to the military. Still, they’d likely have a little while and the chaos would help.

Ilea quietly opened the door to an empty apartment close to the estate's western entrance, letting Kyrian inside who was hiding near the door. Maria had spotted the place a couple days ago, giving them a close start to their operation.

It was hard to defend against an attack while having a stronghold in the midst of a city. It helped that in Virilya, most of the nobles didn't seem to build massive forts but lavishly expensive looking mansions. Ilea had seen some more defensible architecture but the Birminghamales hadn't invested in that. For one reason or the other.

The guards were patrolling as Maria had previously reported and two of them were standing near the entrance, a closed gate of metal placed in the two meter high stone wall surrounding the property. Torches to each side of the gate lit up the otherwise dark street, rain lapping onto their heavy armors as they waited with spear and two handed sword in hand respectively.

"On three then." Trian whispered to the people next to him when the patrolling two guards had walked on, leaving only the two at the gate. They were too far away to identify but Maria assured them they were below one forty and warriors each. It shouldn't be too much of a threat if their skills weren't absurdly high or they had stronger than usual classes. The difficulty came in their need to kill the two quickly and silently.

Ilea steeled herself, to fight and kill. The evidence was definite, she could think about her actions later.

"... two... three." Trian finished and Ilea vanished, appearing behind the guard with the sword and grabbing his helmet, pulling backwards as Edwin slashed his two blades across the man's neck. Ilea removed the helmed far enough to get to the man's mouth, holding it shut as she pumped destructive mana into him. It was unnecessary she found, seeing the notification come up in her mind about the dead guard.

*'ding' 'Your group has killed [Blade of Power – lvl 121 / Sword of Light – lvl 108]'*

Ilea saw the other guard meeting a similar fate as lightning cursed through him while Maria's void magic ripped something vital out of his body.

*'ding' 'Your group has killed [Spear of the Wind – lvl 144 / Nimble Spearman lvl 130]'*

Kyrian rushed towards them as Trian made the corpses vanish. Checking the Gate, he didn't find any defensive runes.

“Don't go over the walls.” Maria said and he nodded, looking at Kyrian whose metal sphere flowed into the gate's lock. A click resounded and the group rushed into the open gate, Kyrian closing it again when everyone was inside.

Lights from the mansion illuminated the luscious garden, a testament to the noble's wealth in this early spring climate. No guards were imminently visible and they rushed towards the entrance.

“Someone's coming out, maid.” Ilea whispered when the door opened and a woman stepped out with a bag in her hand. Her eyes widened for a split second as Trian stopped Edwin's arm and grabbed the woman's throat, her body falling down limply a second later.

“Top floor third room to the back. Both of them, kissing.” Ilea said.

“Go.” Trian said as Ilea saw through her sphere that at least one person in the house had noticed them, getting up from their chair and walking to the door. She vanished and appeared next to the kissing couple, her group lacking Kyrian appeared around them, Edwin's blood and fire blade bit into the sides of their necks as Ilea felt void and lightning magic curse through them.

The two were separated by the magic and Ilea quickly grabbed the woman's two arms at the wrists as fire magic enveloped her. Ilea's chest moved back before her head collided with her enemy's. She heard a slight crack as more and more fire rushed past her, burning her flesh below her armor as healing magic flowed through her. Another headbutt and the magic lessened. The deep cut by Edwin was bleeding profoundly and the woman's skull was

fractured by Ilea's attacks, continuously weakened by the reversed healing streaming into her.

Ilea knew that she was taking a risk again by grabbing onto the enemy but against fire, she had both more experience and resistance. Having the woman expand her magic in the room would endanger her companions, so she held on and continued her assault. Until with a last attack, the woman's head nearly came off. Ilea made sure she was dead by ripping off the head and throwing it a short distance away. She'd have an eye on the corpse to make sure she didn't have an ability like her own.

The message in her mind confirmed the kill though and she moved over to her group who wasn't quite as successful as herself. The man, Ronan had two bloody axes in his hands and whirled around wildly, bleeding from at least seven deep wounds as he gargled, unable to scream as his throat was cut. Ilea moved in and kicked at his legs, to bring him to the ground. The lack of balance allowed Edwin to cut his blades into the man's neck once again, cutting deeper once more.

His chest suddenly sunk inwards, Maria's magic taking effect as another bolt of lightning flashed through him. Ilea ripped away his axes and started smashing her armored fists into his face, each punch cracking his bones as the others continued their attacks. A whole ten punches and just as many attacks from each of the others finally managed to take him down but the noise they had produced was enough to even wake up the neighbors.

# Chapter 182 Murder

## Chapter 182 Murder

Three people appeared in the room while another two burst through the door, Ilea immediately jumping one of the mages who was charging up a spell. The two of them burst through the wall and into the hallway where more people ran around, most of them servants. Ilea's fist landed on his face but was blocked in the last moment by a yellow shield that cracked under her assault.

A surge of wind blasted her upwards and through the roof, all the air leaving her chest as Ilea's wings spread above the mansion, looking down on the mage who was already preparing his next attack.

Blinking away to dodge the blast of wind rushing towards her, Ilea flew around the house, before she equipped her heavy gauntlets, pushing downwards and towards one of the mages in the previous room. The man was channeling a spell which was contested by Trian's lightning, only interrupted by Ilea who smashed through the roof and into the man from above. Her speed combined with the weight and power of her attack broke his back and skull as he was pushed downwards, dead in but a moment.

Ilea felt like there was another resistance when she had landed the attack but she didn't have time to contemplate as she broke into the room below the leader's den. She saw in her sphere that the others were spreading out as well, Kyrian fighting the approaching guards on the ground floor as the

others spread out to deal as much damage as possible to both case chaos and property damage.

Ilea dodged an arrow as she saw a young girl with a bow standing on her bed, anger in her eyes. She blinked close and grabbed her throat, squeezing it shut until she was sure the girl was unconscious, putting her down again on the bed when a man burst into the room.

He screamed as he saw the two and wood formed out of thin air before him, tendrils with spiked ends filled the room and rushed towards Ilea who blinked away again to the ground floor, intercepting an attack towards Kyrian's back, punching the guard in his throat, the hit bending his armor. A kick sent him flying when she vanished again, this time appearing next to Edwin who was getting overwhelmed by three men, each warriors.

Trian appeared as well, chaos breaking out as Ilea healed Edwin's wounds with each touch she could get in between punches and dodging. Seeing Trian charge his attack, she appeared in front of him, halting a blade with her armored hands, the enemy magic flowing into her as she counter healed. Ducking in the last moment, Trian's lightning blast sent the man flying, out through the wall and into a nearby house where he slid off the side of it.

Edwin removed his blades from another man's chest, the corpse dropping down as the last man in the room prepared his sword. Ilea rushed towards him when a new opponent appeared before her, his fists barely dodged as she moved backwards again, Edwin appearing next to the initial foe. Fist after fist followed as he stepped closer to her with each punch. Finally finding an opening, she countered but found him just as proficient in dodging than she was herself.

He wasn't very quick but two or three blocked punches let her know that he had quite a bit more power in his attacks than herself. Still, each connection sent destructive mana through him and Ilea was quicker. She was engrossed in her fight, concentrating only on her opponent as they dodged and weaved through the narrow room. Finding himself on the wall, the man vanished and Ilea followed.



Before she could engage the man again, a shard of ice rushed her way, Ilea blinking towards the mage, punching the woman's throat. Her second punch was again intercepted by a yellow shield. The man behind her had approached again, making her blink away into the room where they had started their attack.

"You killed them both..." he uttered as he looked at the corpses. The man was in his fifties, blood flowing down his mouth, the accumulated damage showing when a sudden green shimmer flowed towards him from the door, his wounds closing before Ilea's eyes. She used the moment to meditate and get some mana back as she too healed her wounds and assessed the situation.

Kyrian was in the cellar now, most of the guards on the ground floor dead or close to it. Edwin and Trian had finished the man from before and had cleaned up some of the mages in the corridors. The latter was currently engaged with the wood mage Ilea had previously encountered. Two women stepped into the room, one of them tears in her eyes as she healed the man Ilea had fought. The other one locked eyes with Ilea, a yellow shield floating before her.

'Can't fight all three.' she thought and blinked, finding herself in the same room as before.

"You won't escape, murderer..." the woman with the shield said. A slight shimmer had formed on all walls, ceiling and floor included.

'Enclosed room.' Ilea thought and rushed the trio, ash spreading out around her, slowly filling the room as she continued her fight against the man. She knew that all the damage she managed to deal would be healed quickly and that the barrier mage would protect the healer. But before the room was dark, she wouldn't do anything risky. It didn't take long, Ilea vanishing into her ash as she formed her currently most effective projectiles, the screw like spikes rushed towards the healer when they were all blocked by small shields.

'She can see...' Ilea thought and appeared next to the man, this time getting him on the defensive as he struggled to see her move in the

darkened room, the ash starting to move around them, more and more volatile. A lot of the healer's magic would be used up by the small cuts her ash would create.

Appearing next to the barrier mage, Ilea sacrificed three hundred health to activate her third tier stage, punching the woman's shields until they started cracking. She blinked away when the man attacked her through the mist, Ilea managing to kick the healer after he reappeared. The woman was flung towards the wall behind her as Ilea continued hitting the barrier mage's shields. Her destructive mana flowed into the yellow layer keeping her away from her enemy.

She watched the woman's eyes widen as she pumped more and more destructive mana into the defenses until she could reach through, grabbing the back stepping woman's throat and gripping hard. She didn't manage to get through her skin but managed to create three more ash spheres inside the mage's defenses, each burrowing into her body before the man reached her again. More spheres formed and rushed towards the healer who was getting up again, the damage taken care of when Ilea's projectiles punched into her belly and chest, much more damaging than against the barrier mage.

"Stop!" the man yelled as Ilea jumped back, his flurry of attacks rushing past her previous position.

Ilea hid in the ash, panting heavily and recovering her stamina and mana slowly as she watched the healer struggle to stop the bleeding on her own body, whimpering at the pain of the nasty wounds. The barrier mage was grabbing at her throat, injured as well.

"Whatever we did to you please. I swear to you these two had nothing to do with it." the man said when Ilea felt a presence behind her. The air had changed and her ash was pushed aside. She blinked to the side, looking to her right and seeing nothing. Her sphere told her otherwise. The room wasn't cut off anymore and an invisible blade rushed towards her neck, making her dodge downwards before she punched the invisible woman. Her fist reached the enemy and she heard a yelp before she punched again.

This time her enemy fell down to the ground but right before she could finish it, the man appeared again, his fist moving towards her. 'Fuck it.' Ilea thought and finished her stomp to her attacker's head, hearing a crack before his fist impacted on her side, sending her flying through the wall and outside the mansion.

She watched the man grab the injured and moving her towards the healer as Ilea's wings spread and she stopped her momentum, healing the sustained damage and broken arm. Arrows were fired at her from below when a weird noise of metal hitting metal resounded through the vicinity. She smiled as she watched the shrapnel shred through anybody too close to the ground and first floor. Military and guards were approaching from the distance as she rushed back in, blinking twice to appear next to Kyrian who had been ducking behind a metal plate impaled by shrapnel that quickly moved together again.

"We don't have much ti...", Ilea started as she looked at one of the walls. Kyrian's bomb had destroyed what looked like a bunch of runes and a wall, leading to what she saw through her sphere to be the treasury.

Tapping him on the shoulder, she blinked inside and stored anything she touched in her necklace. She rushed through the spacious room, stealing gold, artifacts and documents. Anything that would damage the house.

"Go up and help the others." she shouted back to the metal mage who quickly rushed upwards. The room was clean of anything valuable in the span of half a minute but they had to get out soon. Ilea watched as Trian was flung out into the gardens, bleeding from several wounds, Edwin landing next to him. She blinked up and started healing both of them.

"Who are you? To attack our house so openly, murder and destroy!" the wood mage shouted as he jumped out of the house, into the garden and facing them. He didn't look quite as well as his voice made him seem, bleeding and burnt in many places. His wounds were recovering though but with Ilea's help, the same was true for her companions.

She watched a black shadow fly out of the property and nodded. The time has come to make their escape.

“I will kill every last one of you. As you have done to mine.” Trian said, red lightning crackling around him.”

“Stick to the plan.” Edwin said and got a glare from the man.

“More are coming.” Ilea said as she looked up, seeing flying squads in the distance. The mansion was on fire.

The older man Ilea had fought appeared next to the wood mage, a much younger looking man in his twenties.

“Everyone who survived is safe. Don’t engage.” he said and prepared himself.

“Leave.” the man said, to Ilea directly and with a pleading look in his eyes.

“Come on.” Ilea said and grabbed Trian who followed with a grunt, the three of them vanishing and rushing through the city’s cellars and houses.

For thirty minutes they fled, seeing and hearing the commotion spread throughout the district but soon enough they felt safe. Ilea appeared next to Trian in a nearby cellar, the three of them having diverged somewhat to lead any hunters astray.

The man was bleeding still, below his armor. His flesh had been burnt somewhat and he was coughing, poisoned most likely. Ilea started healing him without a word. She had killed and destroyed, for revenge. It felt cold to her, neither good nor bad. Ilea sat down next to the man and continued healing him as the poison’s effects slowly diminished. Still, she felt what they had done was right. An example perhaps to other noble houses and their choices. And they weren’t done yet.

“Come. We need to meet up with the others. Change your clothes.” Ilea said and watched him switch out, doing the same herself before they walked out of the house, checking the street and walking towards the inn they had

agreed on. Nobody gave them much of a look, likely assuming they were adventurers or mercenaries hired to defend the city. Ilea let go of the breath she was holding when she entered and found all the others inside, nobody dead.

All of them had at least hidden beneath cloaks before entering the inn but the scent of blood was thick around them. Luckily they were far from the only ones in the room with such a smell.

“Welcome back.” Edwin said with a smirk and held up a mug of ale. Ilea didn’t quite feel like drinking and smiling as she sat down.

“We should move to a room.” Ilea said and checked each of them with a quick touch, healing Kyrian’s minor wounds and Edwin’s more severe ones. Maria was casually sitting next to him so Ilea checked her last, finding a life threatening wound in her stomach.

“You should mention that next time.” she whispered to her as she moved closer. “Got a change of clothes?” she asked.

“Shut it.” Maria said with a hiss.

“I’ll lend you some of mine.” Ilea said and finished healing her, which took the better part of two minutes. Someone had managed to cut deep.

“Did you get them?” Ilea asked after a while. A band had started playing and more patrons filled the common room deep in the night. It seemed some people cared neither for war nor demons. The inn keeper did look quite suspiciously at all the new people but tried hard to avoid looking at their group. He didn’t want any trouble and new they were exactly that.

“I did.” Maria answered and took a sip of her drink. “Thank you.” she added with a whisper.

“We’ll go up then. Second on the left side.” Kyrian said and got up, followed by Trian.

Ilea sat there with Edwin and Maria for a while, the man drinking one pint after the other.

“Thanks for your help.” Ilea said and got up as well. “Come up if you want the clothes.” Ilea said to Maria, getting a look from Edwin.

The stairs creaked as she made her way up, checking every face in the common room through her sphere to make sure nobody was looking at her. There were two but the way they looked made her think her ass was the target and not her person.

Going into the room, she closed the door behind her. Trian and Kyrian were talking in a whisper over the prepared map. Ilea made sure nobody was listening in but found most of the other rooms unoccupied. The few people around were sleeping. She was sure of that after a minute or two, their breathing too regular. At least if they weren't trained assassins.

“Definitely successful. We'll continue in four hours when the search squads moved out or gave up. Let's hope they'll hide in their mansion or some safe house.” Trian said as Ilea joined them, leaning on the wall next to their table.

“They will, if that guy wasn't the best actor I've seen in a while.” Ilea said.

“The wood mage? Seemed more like he wanted to hunt us down. Must be Graham, the oldest son. Never imagined him to be a wood creator.” Trian said and shook his head.

“No, the older guy. Fist fighter and a strong one at that.” Ilea said, remembering the hit that shook her whole skeleton before she was smashed through the wall.

“Wallace Birmingale. Perhaps it was good that he is alive. He definitely seemed afraid. Perhaps our plans will work then.” Trian said as he took off his helmet with shaking hands. His face had streaks of blood on it, the man soaked in sweat. Ilea casually summoned a clean cloth and soaked it with the water rune in the room, handing it to the man.

“Thanks.” he said and cleaned his face. Neither Ilea nor Kyrian looked much better but she felt like he needed it the most. She summoned two more pieces of cloth and handed one to Kyrian before she looked through her notifications while cleaning up.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Eternal Pyromancer – lvl 230 / Catalyst of Fire – lvl 222]*

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Unyielding Berserker – lvl 248 / Fire Wielder – lvl 241]*

‘Good thing we took them out early on and together...,’ Ilea thought, reminded of her own classes by reading the descriptions. Had they any healing skills like herself, the operation might not have turned out the way it did.

There were some more kill notifications but none of them came close to the two initial ones. There were three more above level two hundred however, which surprised her. Other than the people she had personally fought, there wasn’t anybody she felt showed much of a resistance. Either they just weren’t very strong or the others had fought and killed them while she was busy herself.

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 225 – 5 Stat Points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 226 – 5 Stat Points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 221 – 5 Stat Points awarded’*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Eyes of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

She was getting close now. Four skills in her ashen class were already at the second tier and level twenty. Checking for possible third tier advancements, Ilea found none available as expected. She would have to think about which skills she advanced, and soon.

Walking back to the others, she added her fifteen stat points into Strength, bringing it to 266. A lot of her skills, while magical, did use her Strength as a baseline. At first investing big into Intelligence was definitely the way to go but now that her buffs could stay active more or less indefinitely, a bit more of a base punch would likely help her more.



# Chapter 183 Demolition Crew

## Chapter 183 Demolition Crew

She might even manage to advance the rest of her ashen skills near Ravenhall without seeking out specifically dangerous situations. ‘They do level slowly though...,’ she thought but shook her head. Hopefully she could at least level from fighting monsters instead of people, however monstrous they may be.

“How long until we move out again?” Ilea asked as she pushed the cold cloth below her shirt.

“Couple hours. Two teams as discussed. I feel like we did enough damage. Let’s hope they don’t have enough gold to immediately hire an army of mercenaries.” Trian said.

“Well for one thing, I’d assume with the situation in the city those might be hard to come by. And for another.” she said and summoned a couple documents and some gold coins. “Kyrian found their treasury.” smiling weakly, she pushed the things towards him, watching the man lean back.

“Hmm, haha. Hahahahaha...,” he laughed before he covered his face with both hands. “You two are amazing.” he added, turning serious again as he looked at the papers. “Got any more of those?” he asked, looking at Ilea. The man looked tired and exhausted. She didn’t fault him for that, unwilling to check out a mirror at the moment.

“Loads.” she said and distributed the certificates, books, letters and paintings on the bed, the floor and the table.

“This is...,” Trian said, getting up. Grabbing one of the paintings, he turned it around and cursed under his breath.

“Half of this stuff is ours. Heirlooms...,” he made the painting vanish. “... I thought they had burned them all. Ilea... I will. I’ll buy them all from you. I’ll pay you back in the future, how does that sound?” Trian asked, obviously not knowing Ilea quite as well as she thought. Or perhaps his noble upbringing was the reason for that question.

“They’re yours anyway mate. Take all that belongs to your family.” Ilea said, getting a nervous nod from him in response.

“Alright, alright. Thank you.” he murmured and touched a couple of the paintings, making them vanish before he stared at one of them for a while longer. A couple in their forties, likely his parents Ilea thought. A lack of photography meant that something like that was priceless, especially to him in this situation. She was glad they had accidentally found the treasury. Ilea touched Kyrian’s shoulder and smiled at him.

“Well done.” she said.

“Speaking of, I get at least half of that stuff, right?” Kyrian asked and she nodded.

“Of course, we’ll look through it after this is over. Don’t want to entice the others. Trian they’re coming up, can you store your stuff?” Ilea asked.

“Sorry.” she added as she approached him. He first didn’t react but nodded a moment later.

“It’s.” he said, brushing away at his eyes. “Alright.” he added and quickly stored all the paintings and books, leaving behind the letters and certificates. Perhaps they would give them some more knowledge, ways to fight and hurt their wealth. Edwin and Maria would likely understand that they had found a stash of some sort but Ilea doubted the two would outright ask for loot. Edwin didn’t seem like he was in need or want of anything but

blood. And blood he got plenty. Summoning a set of Taleen clothes and a set of Hand leather armor, Ilea placed them on the bed.

The knock came and Ilea went to open the door, both Maria and Edwin joining the group.

“Ah, so you did find the treasury. Hopefully there were some things recovered.” Edwin said.

“There were.” Trian said and left it at that.

“There you go.” Ilea said and motioned Maria towards the bed.

“You’re lovely Ilea. Thank you.” Maria said honestly and grabbed the things, teleporting behind the dressing screen.

“I suggest we don’t wait less than two hours but not longer than three.” Edwin said as he sat down, reading through some of the papers.

“That was the plan. Maybe we can find some other locations through this.” Trian said as he hunched over the table.

Ilea sat down on the bed and looked through her skills again. “We’d be more efficient if we move alone and not in groups.” Edwin said but Trian shook his head.

“I thought about it too Edwin but the chance of someone dying isn’t worth it. Not for any of you.” he said and summoned a map of the city, circling a specific place while checking another document.

Ilea took a deep breath and looked at the wooden ceiling before she closed her eyes.

The night had gotten dark as they ran over the rooftops. Three dark figures clad in bloody armor, unarmed it seemed but to any trained eye a danger

best left alone. They blended in with the environment, hiding whenever a patrol walked or flew by close to them.

“Night shifts suck...,” Johann mumbled to himself as he continued cleaning the massive ax he could barely hold. Fifteen other boys were doing various tasks in the same hall, the air heavy and the temperature high. The smiths worked just a room over, giving the boys a good brunt of the heat and gases.

“Come on lads, you can do it faster than this. Or do you want to have your pay reduced.” The adult mage said as he walked around inspecting their work one by one, sometimes giving quiet instructions or even encouragement when someone’s work was good. That was the only good part about night shift, Johann thought. The man was nicer than the ones he had worked under during the day.

Still he had heard stories before, stories that he hoped weren’t true and hopefully he would never found out.

The work was suddenly interrupted by a yelp from the mage, making Johann turn around with the big ax. Three figures clad in black full plate armor stood next to the man as he stumbled backwards. Johann couldn’t hold onto the ax anymore and panicked as it slowly slipped his grasp, only to find it had stopped falling suddenly.

One of the Shadows had appeared next to him and held onto the ax. “Leave this place.” the woman said, casually placing the ax on the ground. “All of you.” her voice didn’t leave any room for argument and Johann ran off towards the door.

“Hey you brats, come back here!” the mage shouted but Johann was already out the door, sweating as he ran through the streets, avoiding the usual patrols that would come near here. Turning around, he climbed a ladder that led onto a nearby building, breathing hard as he reached the top.

Checking if anybody was following, he ran over the rooftop, jumping onto the close next building until he reached the usual vantage point to check who would be in charge that day in the smithy. Some people you best avoid, that was what his sister had taught him.

Just when he could see over the rooftop, the night shift boss was pushed out of the door. “You can’t do this! The Birminghamales will hear about this!” he shouted before the door itself suddenly smashed into the man, the two of them in the air for a couple meters before they came crashing down. Johann yelped and hid again before he waited a minute. ‘Who are those people?’ he thought, feeling both excitement and anxiety. He had heard of the Shadow’s Hand of course but Johann was more interested in the individuals.

The woman had talked to him, he thought giddily as he looked back up. The five smiths he had rarely seen walked out, some of them protesting. One of the Shadows was following them.

“If I see you working for the Birminghamales again, you’re dead men.” he said and walked back into the place.

Johann hid again, his heart beating fast as he smiled to himself.

“Can I start finally. I don’t think most of the stuff here is work taking. The Taleen weapons seem like a much higher quality. What do you think Kyrian?” Ilea asked as she played with a sword.

“They’re mass produced. Of course the quality doesn’t hold up. Why not kill the smiths?” Kyrian asked.

“They’d get new smiths. Like this the news will spread that someone threatened anybody working for the Birmingales. They’ll be hard pressed to find any labor for a while. Ilea yes, please start. We’ve got a lot of places to visit tonight.” Trian said teleported out of the building.

Kyrian followed after nodding to Ilea.

All buffs activated, Ilea was a little disappointed she didn’t have headphones and her workout playlist. Well it would be alright. Running towards the wall, Ilea didn’t stop and smashed her head into the stone with full force. Stone and dust was sent into the street as she broke through, turning around and activating her wings.

Her acceleration really was something, as she combined her wings and legs to burst her speed as high as possible before she jumped towards the ceiling, crashing through before she continued running, destroying parts of the walls and supporting beams of the buildings. Only three minutes later she heard the first groaning of metal and stone as the weight became too much for the damaged base to carry.

Continuing her work, Ilea smashed walls and support beams until the ceiling came crashing down on her. Blinking out in the last moment, she watched the building collapse. A smile covered her lips, despite the circumstances. Letting her pent up emotions, her anger and grief out on a building for once calmed her down somewhat. Not killing people for once.

“That’s one down. Kyrian can you not help with your metal?” Trian asked as Ilea joined the two of them.

“Oh, I didn’t think of that. Next one I suppose.” the man answered, touching the back of his helmet. Trian shook his head and started flying.

“Thought you needed it.” Kyrian said to Ilea before he followed, leaving her with a somewhat surprised look. He definitely became more perceptive in the time they had known each other.

Ilea looked back at the boy hiding on a nearby building. She chuckled, hoping that she hadn't just destroyed his only way of making a living. The look on his face when her Sphere was still in range had however told her the opposite.

What followed was a destructive sight seeing tour through the city of Virilya. Ilea combined with Kyrian shredded through buildings like a bulldozer on crack, giving both authorities and members from the noble family in question little time to respond. They were on their eight target already.

A seamstress it seemed. The woman was sleeping on the first floor of the building while their group entered the house. Beautifully crafted gowns were laid out in the working space, Ilea grabbing some of the dresses and inspecting them.

Trian rang the bell placed on the counter a couple times until they heard rustling above.

"Who's there!?" a female voice resounded. "I don't have no money so leave, the shop is closed until the morrow." she said as she came closer to the stairs.

"We're not here for money, nor are we here for your services. Or you for the matter." Trian said calmly as he inspected the bell.

"You're...", the woman said as she came down the stairs. Young and beautiful, her hair hanging down nearly to her waist.

"You are working for the Birminghames." Trian said. "I can't have that. Leave the store and never cooperate with them again. I'm sure your skills will let you find other work."

"I... you're from the Hand, why would I be a target of you... the Birminghames... I can't. You don't understand, they promised to return it if I worked for them for a year." the woman said, her words coming out quickly as the sleep left her immediately upon seeing the group of people.

“This stuff is beautiful.” Ilea said as she stepped into the room. “Would be a waste to make it for those nobles.” she added.

“Return what?” Trian asked.

“A painting my father made. It’s the last thing left of the damn fool and they took it.” the woman said, anger flashing in her eyes before she calmed down again.

“One of these?” Trian asked as he summoned some of the paintings Ilea had given to him. The woman’s eyes opened wide before she walked straight towards one of them. A painting of a woman, not the woman standing before them but there was a resemblance.

“Take it and leave. Do you have a place to stay?” Trian asked and she nodded.

“I do. Let me...,” she said, rushing to the counter and taking the silver out of the till, looking around nervously.

“I’ll take the clothes. Got anything hidden away? We’ll be demolishing this house shortly.” Ilea informed.

“Demoli... yes...,” again, she looked at Trian nervously.

“We don’t want anything other than your promise not to work with them again. And the destruction of this property. It’s not yours, is it?” he said to her.

“It isn’t. I just need to get some things. Two minutes.” she said, rushing upstairs with the painting in hand. Ilea watched her wrap it in some protective layers of cloth before she opened the closet, grabbing some leather armor and a short sword she sheathed on her belt. The woman clothed herself about as quickly as Ilea did back when she didn’t have her necklace. Trained movements to be sure.

The woman grabbed a hidden pouch of gold from under her bed and hid it inside her armor before she rushed down again, picture in hand and a little



red on her cheeks from the rush.

“Got everything? Then promise me and know that should you work with them again, I’ll come for you.” Trian said.

“I do, I’ll leave the city tomorrow. This is all I wanted. Never liked them anyway. Thank you, for saving me nearly a year’s worth of time.” the woman said and bowed slightly.

“Can...,” she looked back as she reached the door. “Can I have your name?” she asked, blushing.

“Trian Alymie.” the man said, a smile coming to her face as she left the store, walking away briskly.

“That one was very beautiful.” Kyrian said.

“Well she has her eyes on this guy.” Ilea said, tapping Trian’s shoulder. “Let me grab the rest of the clothes before we wreck this place.”

Ilea wasn’t sure if sharing your name with a pretty lady who previously worked for the enemy was a wise thing to do but she had done things more idiotic than that aplenty. Plus they already knew how he looked, likely able to find out his identity at this point anyway. Hers and Kyrian’s as well. “Oh well, another noble house on the hunt for me...,” she murmured to herself as she stored away the dresses and clothes she found.

She came out with eight not too over the top dresses that she could casually wear and five pairs of shirts and trousers. The days of Taleen clothes as replacements were over, a good thing too as she only had one set left.

Kyrian had prepared one of his metal bombs in the meantime. “Should be enough for the house.” he said as they stepped outside, turning around on the street. A loud noise came out of the house, windows shattering and walls pierced by shrapnel. Mana surged in the man to Ilea’s right before the metal in the walls started moving, forming into blades that whirled around in the house, cutting through stone and wood alike. The building collapsed after a couple minutes of the assault, crashing down slowly. Ilea waved to a

young girl looking out of a nearby window, most of the people in the street woken from the loud noise. She waved back before she was snatched away by a concerned mother.

“Guards on the way.” Trian said as they ascended and rushed towards their next target. A brewery where Ilea intended to leave with a stock of fresh mead.

“The suns are rising.” Kyrian said as he looked towards the horizon. The three sat together on a roof again, looking over a city that didn’t seem changed by any of the abuse they had put it under the past night. Buildings would be rebuilt and guards would be hunting for them but hopefully they had dealt a blow to the Birmingham’s reputation and economic power. They would do another round in two days, while remaining in the city.

“Let’s change clothes.” Ilea said and switched to a summer dress she had gotten from the seamstress. It looked stupid with the leather boots she had on but she didn’t really care right now. The cool air brushed against her skin as she looked at the sky above, her body undisturbed by the cold.

Trian switched to formal attire and Kyrian removed his helmet. “Here.” Trian said and handed some clothes to the man. “We have a similar enough build.” he added.

“Thank you.” Kyrian said and started undressing on the roof.

“You should really get a storage ring or something.” Ilea said while smiling.

“They are so easy to find aren’t they?” Kyrian said sarcastically.

“Were there none in the Birmingham treasury?” he asked and Ilea shrugged.

“Didn’t look at everything yet. Wanna do that after he’s done? I’m hungry too. Maybe we can find a nice restaurant. Distract ourselves a little from all the blood.” she said, her face turning serious as she locked eyes with Trian.

He clenched his fists but relaxed again a moment later, sad eyes looking back at her.

“That sounds good.” he said. “And we’ll get you some damn shoes.” he added, making her laugh. Kyrian chuckled as well, struggling to put on the shirt that was a little too tight for him.

# Chapter 184 Shoes?

## Chapter 184 Shoes?

The bell rung as they entered the room, early sunlight illuminating parts of the store. “I’ll be right there!” a young female voice resounded from somewhere in the back. Ilea saw the woman through her sphere, identifying her as soon as she came out to the front.

*[Shoemaker – lvl 59]*

“Welcome to Laria’s Shoepalace. What are you looking for?” she smiled at them and waited. A refreshing reaction to Ilea who was getting used to the respect and fear people who knew about her level or membership with the Hand usually portrayed.

“I’m looking to replace these.” Ilea said, stepping to the left of the counter and pointing to her boots.

“Oh my, that doesn’t fit with your clothes at all darling. Of course, come let me see if we can find something that works with the red dress.” the woman said, acting as if what she saw was a crime.

“Do your companions need something as well?” the woman asked, her eyes lingering on Kyrian a little longer.

“We’re just looking.” Trian said. “And accompanying the lady.” he added.

“I’m no lady.” Ilea said as she looked through the shelves of shoes, finding some simple ones that she liked. The quality seemed incredible compared to what she was used to from earth. Leather boots, she kind of expected to be high quality but casual wear like this? Then again everything was handmade by a trained craftsman or in this case woman.

“I’ll have these and these.” Ilea said after just four minutes, trying on the first pair immediately.

“They fit much better.” the woman said and smiled.

“How much are they both?” Ilea asked after having tried both of them on. They were a well enough fit.

“Fifteen silver together.” the woman said and Ilea moved her hands behind her back, summoning the silver before she put it on the counter.

“Come back if you need anything else. I’m willing to repair them for free in the first month!” the woman said but the way she looked at Kyrian, Ilea assumed that offer wasn’t just for her.

The shoes were still rather high but Ilea liked something a little more substantial anyway. Plus she felt confident to fight like this. They wouldn’t fly off immediately.

“Know any good restaurants Trian?” Ilea asked as they stepped into the street, the early people already going about their business.

“I do but I’d rather not visit them right now.” he said, Ilea nodding in response. She felt a little weird walking around with her dress ending right above her knees while some of the people around them wore warm jackets. She did get some stares but couldn’t tell if they were out of interest or because they were weirded out.

“We’ll find something.” Ilea said and started walking in a random direction. For the first time in Virilya, she had some time to actually look at the city. Using all her skills, she took everything in, specifically focusing on

anything that would lead her to another one of Eve's hideouts. She was sure there were more in a city as big as this one.

Would her illusions still be in place? Many hidden places would likely be from other people or organizations as well. Her hopes of finding something weren't high but it felt good to at least look around. She'd take her time finding out more about her, what she did and who had killed her. Then she would face that person, regardless of anything else. She'd ask them why and perhaps she would try and kill them.

Right now though, the goal was to find a restaurant and Ilea made herself focus on that task to not lose herself on the way. One step after another, she told herself and after walking for ten minutes, they came upon an open square with some inns and restaurants, some even serving food already.

They sat down at one of them that seemed nice and had a nice scent coming from inside. "Don't people know how you look?" Ilea asked Trian who sat opposite her.

"The chance is rather slim. Even so, how would anybody connect the dots. I don't think anybody who saw us is walking around here." he said, the last part in a whisper.

Ilea nodded and leaned back on the bench, realizing that her armor was much more comfortable to sit with than a dress. Still, the fresh air was a welcome change.

"Hello, what can I bring you?" a waitress came and asked.

"Got any warm food?" Ilea asked and the waitress nodded.

"Yea, stew from yesterday or bacon and egg for breakfast. You're so early the bread is still warm." she said and smiled.

"Bring both then." Ilea said.

"Enough for six people." Kyrian said and the waitress just nodded again. Perhaps regularly having adventurers around made a request like that more

acceptable.

The group ate, mostly in silence but the food helped change their moods somewhat. Having a full belly helped, even if it wasn't needed as much anymore. The restaurant had rooms to rent in the house and the group moved inside after their brunch.

“Alright, let's see what we got.” Ilea said as she sat on the bed, Kyrian lying next to her while Trian stood before the bed. The first thing she summoned was a sword. Ilea could've checked out all the items in her necklace but decided after their operation that she'd look through them with her group instead. They would meet Edwin and Maria again in six days, as the two had said they'd return to the hideout after the initial attacks on the first three days.

*[Sword of the Morning – High Quality]*

“Think we should sell this.” Ilea said and Kyrian nodded. She continued with weapons, going through eight more swords of similar quality, three axes, two bows and two whole sets of armor. Nothing was higher than high quality, except for a single two handed ax.

*[Ax of Carnage – Rare Quality]*

“What do you want to do with all this?” Ilea said, handing the ax to Trian who just shrugged.

“More gold would be fine but take whatever you want.” he said, handing the ax back.

“You want it?” Ilea asked Kyrian who shook his head.

“Take it, maybe you'll find some use for it someday.” he said and Ilea stored the ax again.

The next thing were several smaller chests. Opening the first one, there was gold inside. An assortment of coins. Putting it back into her necklace, she knew it to be two hundred gold coins. One more chest had the same amount in it and the others were filled with metals, jewelery and perfume.

“Four hundred gold.” she said, placing everything back.

“How much can I have?” Trian asked and Ilea just shrugged.

“I have enough gold for now, take it, maybe it will help you right some wrongs.” she said and looked at Kyrian.

“I’ll take a hundred to pay off the Hand if that’s possible.” he said and Trian nodded.

“Of course. Ilea are you sure? You two are the ones who found and got this stuff after all.” Trian said but she shook her head.

“It’s alright, leave it.” she said. “I think Kyrian should take the metals, maybe you can find out something about them. Go visit Balduur as well and let him know I was involved as well.” Ilea said, handing the thing to Kyrian.

“I won’t carry this around with me, you take it for now.” he said, handing the chest back but Ilea shook her head with a smile.

“Not so fast. There were a bunch of rings as well. Maybe...,” she said and summoned the seven rings that had been lying in the treasury.

*[Ring of Illusions – Rare Quality]*

*[Well of Winter – Rare Quality] – Would you like to claim the Well of Winter?*

‘No.’ Ilea thought and handed the ring to Kyrian. “Take it, and let me know what it is.”

“Oh I claimed it.” Kyrian said, looking at the two of them nervously. “It says, storage capacity at 0/30” he said and took the chest with the metal,



before it suddenly vanished. “Oh wow... now it’s at 1/30. That means I can put a looot of stuff in here.” he said, curious about the newfound toy.

“Take it out again...,” Ilea said, having a hunch. The chest appeared and she touched it. “As I thought.” she said to a confused Kyrian. He touched it as well and nodded.

“Well of Winter indeed. It’s cold. Well I hope it doesn’t freeze everything completely.” he said, a little worry in his voice.

“I doubt that. I heard of similar enchantments before. It’s intentional.” Trian said. “What about the other rings?” he asked.

“No more storage ones I don’t think. At least none of them ask me to claim them. Some have enchantments though but nothing extraordinary. At least I think so.” Ilea said, handing the rings to Trian.

“The crest on this one...,” Trian said, holding up one of the rings. “That’s another noble family who had significant losses half a year ago. We might’ve not been the only ones targeted.” he said.

“Knowing you, this one might be beneficial to you.” he said and handed one of the rings to Ilea. “Kyrian, this one for you it says it lessens wind resistance a little when flying.”

*[Drowning Bear Ring] – [You drown but less quickly]*

“What the hell does that mean?” Ilea asked but shrugged and stored the ring. Remembering her lookout on water, she decided to visit an underwater fighting class in Ravenhall if that was still possible.

“Sell the rest, they’re useless to us.” Ilea said and Kyrian gave his ok after looking through them.

“The paintings and documents we’ve looked through already. Leaves only these books.” Ilea said and summoned the last pieces looted from the Birmingham treasury.

“They’re class books. Anything that interests you two?” Trian asked.

*[Introductions on Wood Magic]*

*[The dominance of Fire]*

*[Blood Rituals Volume VII]*

*[Blood Rituals Volume VIII]*

*[Alchemy for the uninspired]*

“Not really.” Ilea said and Kyrian put them back as well.

“I’ll read the Blood magic ones. Selling the rest.” Trian said and made everything vanish.

“What the... I’ll be right back.” Ilea said and blinked downstairs, appearing in the middle of the common room in her dress. A man was crouched close to the door, clutching his stomach as blood flowed onto the ground. The waitress from before was rushing back towards the kitchen, shouting for help.

Ilea walked to the man who seemed to be dying and touched him, her healing magic flowing into him as she focused her spell on the stab wound on his stomach. He was poisoned as well, the effect nearly canceling out her healing. Stronger than most poisons she had come into contact with.

The waitress and two more people rushed out from the kitchen with towels, hot water and bandages but stopped as they watched Ilea sit the man down next to the door, touching his brow with one hand as he confusedly touched his stomach. The wound slowly closed as the poison’s effect lessened with time.

‘Very recent...,’ she thought, as the man would’ve died a minute or two later with the poison’s destructive influence. Checking through her sphere, Ilea recognized a weird spot on top of the opposite building’s roof. There was nothing there. Nothing at all. A mistake that Eve had made early on in their training.

“Any reason someone would want to kill you?” Ilea asked the man sitting before her, the confusion in his look apparent.

“No lady, I dunno wha happend... nobody there who would go as far as killin ol Jonas.” he said as the waitress got closer to Ilea.

“What happened to him?” the woman asked as she held a wet towel to his brow.

“Poison and a stab wound. You know him?” Ilea asked and the woman grunted.

“Yea, he’s a regular. Not sure why anybody would do something like that to him. Perhaps a demon possessed somebody. Damn scum of that Shadow’s Hand.” she said, the last part more to herself but Ilea saw the man behind her nodding.

She wasn’t sure if demons could actually possess anybody. They seemed more bent on eating people than using their bodies. Looking at the man and his *impressive* level twenty three, she was somewhat sure he wasn’t a prime target for anybody. Ilea nodded and disappeared, appearing again a couple meters behind the blank spot in her Sphere on the opposite building’s roof.

“Hey there.” she said. She could see a haze before her, barely visible but combined with her Sphere she was sure there was someone standing right there. No reaction came back.

“Trying out new poisons I suppose?” Ilea added and still didn’t get a reaction. She had difficulties identifying the thing before her but her instincts weren’t going haywire and Ilea had learned to trust them somewhat. In fact she knew she should trust them more but her life on earth had trained her otherwise.

“If you don’t start talking now I’ll try some skills on you as well and you don’t seem like you specialize in defense.” Ilea said, starting to walk towards the haze a moment later.

“Stop please.” a voice spoke, a young man it seemed. The haze lessened a little and she could see a figure standing on the roof now.

“I’ll have you warned. If you interfere with my operation you’ll have to answer the imperial jury.” the man spoke and Ilea chuckled in response.

“I doubt they’ll connect your deformed corpse with this cute young lady.” she said, smiling with her mouth only. “You’re imperial then? So why not tell me why ol Jonas deserved to die of poisoning?” she asked.

The man seemed unsure, the haze flickering a little before it vanished completely, a man in white robes appearing, red and black weaved into the cloth, some kind of armor showing below. A hood covered most of his facial features. He was holding up his hands in a placatory gesture.

*[Rogue – lvl 171]*

“You don’t care about the empire. Why then care about that man?” he asked, seeming genuinely interested.

Ilea shrugged. “I don’t want to see death today I think. Call it a mood.” she said.

The man scratched his head and nodded. “I don’t understand. Have it your way then. I’ll find a different target further away. Is that acceptable for you?” he asked respectfully.

“Target for what?” Ilea asked, having a good guess at the answer.

“Some new poisons I developed.” the man said, showing her some vials that appeared in his hands.

“How would you test them on random people. You don’t know how high their resistance is and how much health they have and lose.” Ilea said, walking past him and sitting down on the edge of the roof.

“I take an educated guess. Time until death combined with the damage of the stab wound.” the man answered.

“That’s terribly inefficient. Want to test them on me and you’ll owe me a couple favors in return?” Ilea asked. An imperial rogue would likely open a lot of doors, literally and figuratively.

The man thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think killing random citizens is exactly allowed either.” Ilea added.

“You are right. I can blame Baralia or the Shadow’s Hand at the moment.” he said nonchalantly.

“Your offer seems generous, why would you trust me?” the man asked.

“Oh I don’t trust you. I just doubt you have something that could kill me.” Ilea answered with a smile. “And I want some variety today. Some more Poison Resistance and talking to an imperial seems to fulfill exactly that need.” she said. “Plus I will only allow it if my friends are close by.” she added.

“A challenge then? I accept. Are you staying in that establishment?” the man asked and Ilea answered by blinking onto the street, some nearby people veering out of the way. The man followed, shrouded again in a barely visible mist.

“You’re back. And you brought someone?” Kyrian asked as she entered the room. Trian was reading the first of his blood magic volumes, a welcome distraction it seemed.

“Yea, he’s an imperial rogue... kind of a contradiction isn’t it?” Ilea said as she sat down on the bed. “He wants to test some poisons and we get favors or information in return. Could you keep an eye on me and murder him if I die or he tries anything stupid.” she asked, leaning on the wall behind her.

Kyrian shrugged. “Sure.” he said, sitting down next to her as his metal started floating around, flowing from one shape to another. The rogue became visible again and looked around the room.

“Are you mercenaries? Or spies sent from another land?” he asked, staring at the book Trian was reading.

“Does it matter to you?” Ilea asked. The man answered by handing her a vial filled with a clear liquid. Ilea chugged it immediately.

“It’s too bitter. I would add some sugar and maybe a bit of lime.” she said dryly.

*‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Tincture of Seething Flame -50 HP/s for one minute. Disturbed Vision for twenty minutes.’*

Ilea’s healing magic kicked in and counteracted the poison, negating the health drain completely. She hadn’t tested her Hunter Recovery like this but now she knew that it was at least fifty health per second. Kind of ridiculous really, seeing how her health was at six thousand. She could go from zero to full health in just two minutes or even less. Then again she knew that certain problems like a missing arm would take quite a bit longer to heal, depending on her expertise on the specific injury.

# Chapter 185 A Bright Night

## Chapter 185 A Bright Night

“Tincture of Seething Flame. Fifty health per second at level seventeen poison resistance. And my vision is supposed to be disturbed for twenty minutes but I don’t see a change.” Ilea said.

“Marvelous... marvelous.” the man said as he got a small notebook and started writing everything down. “No change? Do you have any perception related skills?” he asked.

“I do. Cancel it out don’t they?” she asked and the man continued writing.

“You’re crazy for trying this. How long until you’ve recovered?” he asked. “Are you perhaps a Shadow of the Hand? I doubt a lot of people with your power would agree to something like this. Plus you seem rather young.” the man asked but Ilea just shrugged.

“I’m recovered already. Let’s just wait until the health drain stops.” she answered.

“Self healing ability as well? Exciting.” he said and she was sure she saw his eyes sparkling. The man had just found a perfect target for his experimentation and Ilea had found a source for likely a bit chunk of the empire’s information. An assassin was supposed to know quite a bit, she assumed. If his story of being part of the empire was actually true. She would gain some Poison resistance at least, if he was lying.

The man could barely stay still, his hands rushing all over his pouches to find the next poison to try.

“What’s your name and how do I find you after you leave.” Ilea asked.

“Sadin’s the name. First Assassin’s division. We don’t exist but you can ask Major Falken for my whereabouts. I’ll inform him about you. Take this badge.” he said, handing her a small token with an eagle like bird on it. “He’s near the palace usually, in one of the military bases.” he added, handing her another poison.

“This one should make you very dizzy. No health drainage. If your healing can cure it, I’d prefer you don’t use it and tell me about its effects.” the man said.

Ilea downed the poison and waited for the notification to pop up. It really wasn’t an effective assassination method if it just informed you about being poisoned. Then again it seemed like most of them took effect immediately and had enough punch to kill at least lower health targets. The man likely had other ways to kill up his sleeve as well.

*‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by The Glutton’s Curse. All perception reduced by 90%. A sluggishness drowns out your senses for five minutes.’*

Ilea didn’t use any of her active skills but her passive ones had to have an effect as she felt only slightly slowed down. She related her experience to the man and the effects she read in the message as he wrote everything down with trained motions of his pen.

“Not a perfect test subject for these kinds then. Oh well, there are many others or myself.” Sadin said, shrugging and giving Ilea the next substance.

Testing of the assassin’s arsenal went on for another two hours but Ilea insisted after ten minutes to relocate to the roof of the building to at least



get some sun in the process. Kyrian accompanied them as she kept on drinking or eating poisonous substances before healing herself.

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches lvl 20'*

The fruit of her labor, easily accomplished by digesting incredibly expensive poisons and using her very own healing spell to counter them.

“That is all I have with me at the moment but I’d like to continue this at some point.” the man said as he closed all his pouches again, putting away the empty vials. “Sadly I will be occupied for a while starting tonight. Find me again in a couple weeks if you would like to continue working together. And for me to repay you of course.” Sadin said.

“I assume then that you would like information on the Birmingales?” he asked, surprising both Ilea and Kyrian whose metal stopped floating, instead forming into spikes.

“Oh do not worry. I don’t care. It is just, this revenge of yours. One of you is a survivor then, an Alymie or a Recot?” Sadin said. “Alymie is more likely, they were more open and spread out among the empire. I will look into it and bring you some names, mercenaries and associates to look for the next time you meet me.”

“I have another target.” Ilea said and watched the man closely. The Golden Lily was on her tongue but she wasn’t sure about their influence. “Eve Aillan. Joined the Shadow’s Hand over half a year ago. A high level mind mage and illusionist.”

“I will open my eyes to such an individual. Illusionists are hard to track and mind mages are difficult to face.” Sadin said.

“Oh, she is already dead.” Ilea said, going into the details of what she already knew of Eve and where she had found her. She didn’t mention that the woman was a friend but instead formed a narrative of revenge against her and her associates, should there be any. This way, should the Golden

Lily ever come up, they would in the worst case ignore her and in the best case contact her or even wish to work together.

“Be well then. I suggest you leave the city within the week. Military units are being relocated and an attack from Baralia is imminent. Even with your power you could be in danger and the leading generals won’t tolerate attacks on nobles. They are already on the hunt for you.” Sadin said before he vanished into his mist like state.

“Nice talking to you as well.” Ilea said towards the leaving mist.

“We should relocate. Just in case he’s informing the wrong people.” Ilea said as she got up, Kyrian following behind.

“I didn’t plan to stay for more than a couple more days anyway. Enough to destabilize them near completely.” Trian said.

The group left the inn and moved through the city undisturbed for around an hour, renting another room for the evening. “We leave again in the night, get some rest now if you need it.” Trian said but neither of the others had any need. He continued reading his Blood Magic book and Ilea flipped through her monster encyclopedia to focus on something different. Kyrian worked on his metal magic and Ilea helped by creating ash and moving it around the room while reading, making the rest of the evening go by rather quickly.

‘A welcome change of pace.’ Ilea thought as she prepared herself for the night to come. Looking into the mirror, she smiled a little at the nice dress she was wearing. She had never owned anything as well made as this back on earth but the woman looking back at her wasn’t who she had become.

The smile left her face and her arms dropped to her sides. A mere blink later her dress was replaced by black armor, covering her whole body and face.

Blue eyes looked back at her from within a horned black helmet. The same blue eyes that had stared back at her for now over twenty years. “You really went to shit didn’t you?” she asked herself in a whisper. Surprisingly her eyes held the same spark as they always had. She had become a survivor, hunted by fantastical beasts she knew for a fact didn’t exist. Here they did. And here they had become her prey. She had fought and killed humans, in self defense at first but now she was hunting and killing them to avenge her friend’s murdered family.

A bizarre place she had found herself in. ‘Magic and monsters.’ she thought as a sphere of ash formed above her outstretched and armored hand. It felt right and it felt true. She felt alive. And she would overcome whatever life threw at her. Breathing out slowly, Ilea blinked upwards and onto the roof of the building. A pale moon shone above, barely illuminating the three warriors clad in black.

“Ready?” Trian asked and she nodded. To the man who had been introduced as a part of her mercenary team over half a year ago. A snotty and arrogant noble who used blood magic to strengthen himself. A lesson to her that morality wasn’t as black and white in this world as she would’ve believed. It was just as gray and complicated as earth had been but here everybody had the opportunity to become strong enough to fight, to defend oneself and to punch above their given fate, stomp on it and become even more powerful through that.

Ilea nodded not just to his question, she nodded her affirmation to kill, to hunt and hurt other people, people with just as much of a will to live as her own. People with flaws, fears and dreams. People who had made wrong decisions, yet still people. And she would be the one to right some of those wrongs. She didn’t have any illusions as to the result of revenge. More people would die and that would be that. Nothing new would arise and nothing lost would be regained. Yet still, to her, it felt like the right thing to do. The only thing she could do.

Trian jumped off, the powerful mage vanishing before her eyes and appearing on a building twenty meters in front of them, Kyrian shooting forward quickly, drawn by the metal controlled in his hands. She didn't like it. To be in a city, to hunt and fight people. Sighing, her magic activated and her legs tensed before she shot forward, with speed no human on earth would've ever reached, no body strong enough to endure it.

She yearned the days of monster hunting. Non human monsters that was. Her mind focused on the task again as she put her conflicting thoughts to the back, the memories of her day of comforts forgotten as the wind rushed past her, her body leaping from roof to roof as the tiles dared not creak under her balanced weight and trained movements. Twelve more factories were destroyed in the next six hours.

“This one is much better fortified.” Kyrian said the obvious as the three stared at the lone fortress overlooking a small estate within the city. Guards and adventurers with torches patrolled the gardens in groups, their watchful eyes looking for intruders to their employer's property.

“Do you think the survivors are in there?” Ilea asked without looking at the man next to her. It was obvious that this building was important to the Birminghames, either the building or the people residing within. None of the factories, stores or inns they had attacked before had this amount of guards. It seemed they had focused all their resources here, the remaining ones that is.

“At least something important is here...,” Trian said and got lost in thought.

“Do you want to inform Edwin and Maria. We could work together.” Ilea suggested but the man waved her off.

“If they're really here then I'd rather do this alone. I trust you two. And this is not their battle, this is mine.” he answered.

“I’m with you Trian.” Ilea said and touched his armored shoulder.

“As am I.” Kyrian added, making the man relax a little and sigh.

“This is gonna be a difficult one.” he said. “Ilea can you check around if there is a way to get in under it?” Trian asked, looking at her.

Nodding, she vanished and appeared on the ground, using her Sphere to check for any sewers that led towards the small fortress. After searching for a couple minutes, she did indeed find a path leading straight to their intended target. Only one in the complicated sewage system and she was reasonably sure that there were guards placed at the end of it or where it would lead into the building.

Still, it was likely a better idea than to run into the heavily guarded gardens. Going back to her team, Ilea relayed the information and they both agreed with her. “I’ll go in first if it’s a trap or something.” Ilea said as she looked at the metal bars before them. At least so far there were no guards around.

“Any enchantments?” Kyrian asked “I don’t see anything.” he added as metal spheres split next to him.

“Nothing I can detect.” Trian said and watched as the metal formed into small blades positioned on each bar before they snapped through. The bars came loose as one grid, falling towards them as Ilea stepped forward, her buffs activating before she caught the heavy mesh of metal. Lifting the whole thing up, she placed it as silently as possible on a nearby wall before she turned around and led the way through the small tunnel.

There was barely enough space to go through crouched and the pipe got smaller as they continued onwards. A couple minutes later, it was too small to go on and Ilea saw that a couple meters further down there was barely enough space for a mouse to get through.

“They closed it off. And it’s too far to blink inside from here.” she whispered to the others behind her. A sudden noise made her concentrate.

“There are tremors going through the ground.” Kyrian whispered.

“Magic spells.” Trian added.

“A trap then? But there’s nobody here.” she said, checking through her sphere that reached as far as to the entrance of the pipe.

“Well something is happening. Perhaps Edwin and Maria followed us?” Kyrian asked but Trian shook his head.

“They don’t have the skills to make such a ruckus. At least we wouldn’t know of those.” he said and Ilea had to agree. The tremors were too numerous for it to be them, even if they had hidden skills that could shake the ground around them.

“Whatever it may be. It’s giving us a good opportunity.” Ilea said and started punching the stone in their way. Kyrian started helping immediately.

The tremors didn’t stop, some of them much stronger than others. Ilea was remembering what had happened in Ravenhall but Virilya would be on a completely different scale. Surely they had enough manpower to fend off whatever demon attack was coming. Even elves for that matter.

“We’re through.” she whispered as she walked into the dark cellar. “There’s nobody here.” she added, looking around the room.

“That’s weird. Why have so many guards outside and leave this entrance empty?” Trian asked himself.

“There were people here recently. The torches are missing but there’s ash on the ground.” Kyrian said, pointing to the metal holders on the walls. Using her magic to influence the ash, Ilea touched the floating bits with her fingers and sure enough, they were warm still.

“Yep, something’s happening outside that made these guards rush upwards. The tremors must be something rather serious then.” she added. “Go with the plan?” Ilea asked towards Trian.

“Yes, whatever it is it’s a distraction. If it’s nothing justifying an immediate escape from the city we’re going in.” he said.

“And what would that be?” Ilea asked seriously.

“An elven invasion is the only thing that comes to mind. It would be hard to flee without chaos.” he said and walked up the stairs. Ilea followed and checked as far as she could see with her sphere but found nobody close by.

Opening the door, the group rushed upwards and Ilea soon saw several people on the walls and towers of the fortress, looking upwards, sending spells and arrows towards the sky.

“Something’s definitely attacking the fortress. I can see the wood mage and the women I fought, as well as the old man. The Birminghamales seem to have barricaded themselves in here. I don’t recognize any of the others.” Ilea finished.

“We should strike now, cause even more chaos.” Trian said but Kyrian stopped him.

“We have to see what’s going on first. Your revenge doesn’t mean anything if you die in the process.” he said, glaring at Trian. It took him a moment to accept it but Trian backed down.

“Alright, Ilea any balconies or something where we could see?” he asked.

“The south east tower is unoccupied.” she answered and led the two towards the staircase. Again there were no guards, all the residents focused on sending spells upwards.

Coming up on the windows, Ilea saw fire. The sky was burning but as her eyes adjusted to the light, she could see a staggering variation of spells raining down on Virilya. Defenders sent spells upwards but fires were already raging in a dozen nearby buildings.

“Are they elves?” Kyrian asked, standing next to her.

“In that number? That has never happened before... and why attack the capital?” he asked but Ilea knew they weren’t elves.

“The spells are too weak. Elves rip out streets and houses with their fire and ice. I think we’re looking at war, a war between humans.” she said, a little baffled by the scene before her. The only reasonable comparison she could draw were war movies about the second world war and the storming of the Normandy.

“The city seems to be losing...,” Trian said “The response is too weak. But how? It should be unbeatable...,” he said, confusion apparent in his voice. Neither Ilea nor Kyrian were versed in the city’s military power but if what he said was true then Ilea had a simple suggestion.

“The empire’s in on it then? Or at least a part of it. Am I wrong?” she asked and Trian nodded.

“That is the simple explanation, yes. I just never thought it possible. With the recent developments... it could be viable. Difficult and you’d have to have a lot of connections already. People loyal and on the inside.” he suddenly started laughing, realizing something but he didn’t elaborate further.

“This is our opportunity then. The Birminghamales are responding with attacks which means they’re not in on it. Let’s wait here until the attackers focus on this small defensive beacon. We’ll strike then.” he said and calmed down. The rain of spells continued from above and Ilea could see stones and small dots of fire in uncountable numbers coming over the distant walls. Again, she had stumbled upon a city invasion. For the first time, the enemy was human.



# Chapter 186 Night Attack

## Chapter 186 Night Attack

They didn't have to wait long for some of the attackers to focus their spells on the small fortress standing alone surrounded by gardens. Shields flared up from time to time to block incoming spells and Ilea knew exactly where they were coming from.

"I think it's time." she said as the first enemy mages and warriors actually landed on the roof, engaging the Birminghamales in close combat.

"It is." Trian said right before an armored warrior broke through their tower's roof and swung his two handed sword at them.

*[Warrior – lvl 130]*

Ilea quickly identified the man as she ducked under the slow and powerful swing, quickly advancing and kneeing him hard in his armored crotch. The metal didn't help much against Ilea's powerful attack that dented his defense inwards. The man howled in pain as she grabbed his helmet and ripped it off to reveal a middle aged man with a patchy beard.

"Who are you people?" she asked simply but he was too occupied with the lack of children in his future to answer, making her let go of him.

"It's Baralia. They're not even hiding it anymore." Trian said, tapping the crest on the man's shoulder. A spike of metal smashed into the soldier's

head, blood spraying on Ilea's armor as she looked away from the gruesome sight.

"Fucking warn me before you do that." she said to Kyrian who shrugged in response.

"We don't have time, sorry." he said and looking outside, Ilea knew that to be true. More and more soldiers were coming towards the fortress. Both from the sky and land. They must've already breached the closest gate.

"Focus on the targets." Trian said as he vanished. Ilea quickly checked and found the wood mage, blinking next to him as he was engaged with three soldiers. A hard punch sent him flying into the fortress wall but Ilea didn't see any blood. He had managed to block her.

Creating ash around herself, she spread it outwards to create additional chaos and confusion. Her companions could just attack from further away.

A sudden stab sent pain through her, her right leg buckling downwards. She grabbed at the blade but it was gone already, a weird presence visible in her Sphere. Not only the enemy had gotten distracted by all the people and spells around them it seemed.

*'ding' 'You have been poisoned by Nocturnal Bite -35 HP/s for two minutes. A curse of Fatigue has been placed on you for ten minutes.'*

'Poison, again...,' Ilea thought as she focused on the weird blur in her sphere as her Healing took over. Her severed leg was nearly back together when the blur advanced again and forced her to blink away, into an empty room downstairs. She heard people advancing up the nearby stairwell and the fighting on the roof but focused on getting her leg fixed which didn't take long.

Spreading ash in the room, a moment later the blur appeared again, a near invisible blade slashing towards her. Ilea jabbed the blade upwards and moved to the right to avoid it hitting her helmet. Her enemy vanished before she could land a blow but Ilea knew the person was still in the room.

“You’re the one from two days ago aren’t you... the invisible girl.” Ilea said, a small grin spreading on her lips.

“Don’t call me girl. You’re not old either.” a female voice replied.

Ilea advanced on her, dodging the blade as she watched the woman dodge and weave through her attacks.

“You seem to be having difficulties in the ash.” Ilea stated as she created seven spiked projectiles, sending them towards her at the same time. One of them hit but apparently didn’t deal much damage.

Blinking next to the woman, Ilea got a little more aggressive, leaving herself a little more open to deliver her attacks. Her assumption was right and she landed two quick blows on the woman’s armor, sending destructive mana into her. It could’ve been a facade but from the way she had previously attacked Ilea and from what she had said, she didn’t think her enemy was the deceptive kind. One never knew though. She really did have difficulties in the ash.

The woman vanishing again, Ilea followed her upwards into another empty and dark room. To her surprise, she could see the woman now. Clad in black armor but much lighter than her own. Her blade was curved and reminded Ilea of a Japanese sword. ‘A Hanzo? I should be careful...,’ she thought.

*[Rogue – lvl 241]*

“Why do you attack our family?” the woman asked, her blade still pointed towards Ilea who was still counter healing the poison.

“The empire is under attack, are you paid by the enemy?” she accused Ilea.

“No, your family killed my friend’s family. That’s why I’m here.” Ilea explained. The blade wavered a little and the woman’s eyes opened a bit more.

“Which family? And who planned this? I wasn’t involved and I always talked out against such tactics.” the woman said.

“A family. Your parents and brother if you’re a Birmingham yourself. Being an assassin I doubt you weren’t involved.” Ilea said before she rushed at her, the blade flickering as she tried to get closer, driving away the blade with her armor as it scratched past her, making the woman dodge again and separate from Ilea.

“I kill and fight but for my own reasons. If what you say is true then your cause is just but I won’t stand by while my family gets slaughtered. You killed my parents and for that you must die. No ash and no illusions. Just you and me.” the woman said and Ilea nodded. If it got close, she would escape but Ilea was quite sure her adversary would do the same.

“It’s your choice. If you stand in our way then so be it. And if you want revenge then I understand.” Ilea said and breathed in, focusing on all her skills before she rushed forward. The woman’s blade flickered and Ilea blocked with her armor, deflecting the blade in the last moments and ensuring no injuries.

There was some destructive mana flowing into her from where the blade touched but nothing substantial and she continued her assault, pushing the woman back in the small room. Teleporting around, her enemy managed to avoid any damage from her first assault but in a prolonged fight, Ilea was sure of her own capabilities.

Rushing forward, Ilea suddenly found her muscles tensing up and locking down as the woman’s blade rushed towards her head, the blade stopped by her helmet right after it pierced through her eye with its pointy end. The pain was negligible and her vision wasn’t the only way with which Ilea saw the world. The blade rushed at her other eye immediately but her healing magic rushed through her body, making her muscles move again.

At the last moment, Ilea moved her head to the right, the blade scraping against the metal unable to inflict serious damage before Ilea attacked, her eye healing whilst her punches were blocked by defensive swings. The move had surprised the woman, likely expecting more of a reaction from

her injured prey as Ilea anticipated and followed the next teleport and grabbed her enemy by the wrist of her sword hand, pressing down hard while her other arm moved to punch her stomach.

The light looking armor didn't relent immediately but was bent more and more while destructive mana flowed into her enemy, her punch pushing out all the air from the woman's lungs. Holding out her hand, the woman held a small ball that suddenly exploded towards Ilea, sending hundreds of small projectiles her way, some of them smashing into her healing and good eye as she stumbled backwards from the force, letting go just a little of the woman's arm who used the opportunity to struggle free of her opponent's grasp.

Ilea's eyes were ruined and she had metal pieces inside them, continuously poisoning her but her foe wasn't done, sending another two of the blasts her way, Ilea covering her eyes with her arms as she aligned her body in a way that the armor would take most of the shrapnel. Blood flowed down her eyes as she watched her enemy switch her sword to the other hand, her right one clearly injured, the armor dented inwards. Blood flowed down her neck as well, Ilea saw as she watched the woman advance.

Cautiously, she aligned her sword to stab Ilea's shoulder right between the connecting pieces of armor and Ilea helped her a little by not defending against it. The blade flashed and stabbed into her shoulder cleanly, spreading a numbing feeling into Ilea's flesh but not before she grabbed the blade with one hand and her enemy's arm with the other. With a blade stuck in her shoulder, Ilea swung the woman up through the air and into the nearby stone wall, breaking through the rock with all her strength as she screamed.

Holding on to the injured woman, against she squeezed as hard as she could, ripping out the blade with her other hand and throwing it towards the window. It clattered on the ground as Ilea placed her leg on the woman's chest, pulling on her arm with both hands as she activated the third stage of her State of Azarinth, sacrificing a couple hundred health to give her a short push in power. Blood sprayed on her armor and the ground as the woman screamed, her arm separated from her shoulder as Ilea prepared to stomp

down, finding herself paralyzed once again for a moment, watching the woman crawl away towards the dropped sword.

Whimpers of pain could be heard as Ilea flowed her healing spell through her, focusing first on her own shoulder and ignoring her eyes for now. Her Sphere was enough and if the woman didn't have a way to disturb it, it was quite adequate at seeing in a fight. The paralyzing effect lessened and Ilea found herself able to move again, appearing right when the woman had reached the blade and grasped it with her broken right arm.

Stepping on the hand, she broke some fingers too, kicking away the blade again and grabbing the woman from the ground, wrapping her arms around her neck from behind. Ilea squeezed hard and didn't stop through her enemy's struggling until she heard a crack, the woman's body going limp. Still she didn't stop and continued sending mana into her to make sure she was dead. Even through the message in her mind she continued for at least another minute.

"I'm sorry." she said at last, a part of her disgusted at her own actions, another part indifferent. This is what revenge was and as much as she believed the woman to be uninvolved in Trian's trauma she had to die, it was either her or Ilea and she was not going to die today. Again her healing had been the deciding factor, that and her ability to see without eyes, to feel no pain from injuries that would incapacitate most others and to have armor capable of stopping blades. Closing the woman's eyes after laying her down, Ilea grabbed the blade and stored it in her necklace, summoning a talen sword instead.

Her healing combined with some hard poking removed the metal fragments from her eye sockets and beyond. Breathing out, Ilea sat down next to the corpse, leaning on the wall as she let her healing flow through her, eyes recovering as her Meditation skill helped keep the mana cost low. She had lost quite a bit of health in the fight, despite her best efforts to heal herself continuously. Letting herself get stabbed might not be advisable for the future, seeing that the paralyzing effects could've just as well been something like Edwin's blood magic ruptures. Those would've been a little more problematic.

*'ding' 'You have killed [Blade of Whispers lvl 241 / Claw of Rot lvl 221]. For killing an enemy fifteen or more levels above your own you receive bonus experience.'*

Ilea chuckled in the room as she looked at the corpse's face. "Funny world eh? I murder you and even get bonus experience." she said in a bitter tone as she got up again. Ilea had a lifetime to think about her actions tonight but only right now to do something. To help her friends not to die and to help them succeed in their mission. Blinking upwards, she found the scene on top of the building pure chaos. Spells rushed through the air and blades flashed through the air before they severed heads or pierced bodies.

She quickly found her opponent, the older man she had fought before. Trian and Kyrian were nowhere to be seen, neither was the wood mage. Ilea did spot both the healer and barrier girl, the latter deflecting five soldiers' attacks while the healer lay dead to her side. A tragic scene and the human in Ilea screamed at her to go help but the screams were silenced as she focused on her target, blinking upwards to face him.

A scream left the man as he slammed both his fists into the held up arms of a pinned down soldier, breaking through both the arms, the man's helmet and his skull, blood slowly leaking onto the stone floor.

"Birmingale." Ilea said and watched him snap up, anger in his eyes as he looked at her. A moment later he stood before her, his fist smashing into her held up arm as her buffs surged, barely holding back the strong arm that pushed against her. His second arm rushed forward, making her dodge back to avoid his attack. Blades were one thing but his arms were more akin to clubs, deflecting them was difficult.

Their fists met again as he closed the distance, their fighting styles clashing in a flurry of blows as his raw strength shook through her with each landed punch and her destructive mana flowed into him with each of her own successful hits. Ilea positioned herself and deflected in a way to allow his hits to connect but never in full force or close to anything vital. The damage was healed in the subsequent dodging as she took several steps back.

Looking upwards, the two separated as a meteor of fire smashed through the roof, breaking apart into small burning rocks that set ablaze everything they touched. The two of them rushed at each other, him jumping and Ilea's wings carrying her towards him before they clashed, grappling in the air before they fell down together, blocking and punching as they could before they impacted the burning ground below. Ilea rolled as his fist smashed into the stone next to her, kicking at his side with all the power she could muster.

He was pushed aside but got up just as she did. Ilea breathed heavily as her Meditation and Hunter Recovery surged through her, prepared for his next moves as the fire around them grew. The man was bleeding and sported several injuries, broken bones and missing teeth. Several cuts lined his legs and arms from his previous battles but he still stood, sighing as he looked upwards.

“At least those Baralia cunts won't get me.” he said and laughed aloud. “Girl.” he added, looking at her seriously. “I've done horrible things in my life and this is the last of many times where I should've died. Maybe today is finally the day when I do. If any of the girls are still alive, know that they had nothing to do with the Alymies. If you find it in you, let them go.” he said.

Ilea just looked at him and gave him a slight nod. To acknowledge his desires, the wishes of a man soon dead. Her blood was boiling and she was focused on the fight to come. What would happen to the girl still fighting above them was not on her mind right now.

“Come then.” she said, her muscles tensing, ash spreading around her.

The man grabbed at her arm, squeezing but finding her bones and armor unrelenting as the flesh between was bruised, Ilea's free hand repeatedly



smashing into his face, her mana flowing into him from where he grabbed her. His other hand finally came down on her helmet, the shock going through her head, blinding Ilea for a second in both her eyes and sphere before another punch to her stomach send her flying, several organs injured from the heavy hit.

She lay there and watched the man sink to his knees, blood flowing from his mouth as he stabilized himself with one arm, using the other to brush away the blood. Meditation and healing slowly repaired her own sustained damages.

“You’re a tough one lassie.” he said before coughing, more blood painting the floor red. Parts of their surroundings were still burning and a beam of wood finally broke loose, threatening to fall on Ilea who blinked away in the last moment, continuing her healing nearly uninterrupted. Moving her body would’ve been a bad idea but she gave herself some more time seeing the man near his end as well.

“You lack a healer.” she said, getting up slowly and cracking her neck. ‘Good as new.’ she thought and finished reconstructing her organs, having stopped the internal bleeding. “But you do pack a hard fucking punch.”

“You’re the first one to survive it. Wallace is the name. Kill some of those damn Baralia fuckers for me will you.” he said, Ilea appearing behind him, a hard punch landing on his head before he sluggishly turned around, Ilea’s kick connecting with his head just as he was about to retaliate, his body slammed to the side.

“Ilea is mine.” she said, approaching and kicking at him again while he blocked. The man was certainly hard to kill but at least she didn’t feel like she was murdering puppies.

# Chapter 187 Bath before the Storm

## Chapter 187 Bath before the Storm

A loud crack was heard, Ilea's last punch breaking the man's back, his body falling down limply.

*'ding' 'You have killed [Beastblood warrior 210 / Pure Enhancer 203].'*

Ilea again closed the man's eyes and looked upwards. The girl was on her final straws, more and more spells nearly getting through her defenses. Ilea blinked upwards and looked around. A pile of corpses littered the roof, both Baralia soldiers, mercenaries and Birminghamale guards and family. The stench of blood, piss and the same in burnt and poisoned variations filled the air, nearly making her gag now that she focused on it.

The city was on fire as far as she could see. The first signs of dawn could be seen in the distance but the damage done to the city was as of yet unclear. Less spells rained from above by now but she could hear fighting from every direction, shouts and screams filled with anger and fear. The soldiers hadn't noticed her yet, six of them continuously attacking the last remaining defender of the fort.

Ilea looked over the side of the building and found Trian and Kyrian standing over the dead wood mage's corpse. Around them was a similar scene as on the roof. She jumped down and blinked three times, appearing close to them and holding up her arms to alert them.

“You’re alive.” Kyrian said and nodded. “We’re both somewhat injured.” he said, taking a step towards her but losing his balance before she caught the man.

“He saved my life.” Trian said as he looked at her, Ilea’s healing flowing through Kyrian as she inspected his injuries. There were burns and internal bleedings but worst of all were a series of wooden stakes having pierced his armor right above his waist. Placing the man down, she slowly healed the injuries as she slid out the stakes one by one. It took a while but no more soldiers from Baralia were focused on their location anymore, their black armor likely lost in the sea of corpses and fires.

As soon as Kyrian was stable, Ilea moved on to Trian without a word and checked him as well. The man had broken damn near all his ribs, a wonder that none of them had pierced his lungs. Then again he had some way to steal other people’s health. Perhaps that’s what saved him. The rest of his injuries were minor at best and Ilea moved back to Kyrian.

“Anyone still alive?” Trian asked.

“One of the girls, the shield ones. The old guy asked me to let her go. Wallace was his name. Said they didn’t have anything to do with it.” Ilea said, continuing her healing. Trian grunted at that, sending a lightning bolt next to the dead wood mage’s corpse, burning the earth and adding another small fire to the field.

“Are you going for her?” she asked the man, moving on to Kyrian’s minor injuries as she watched him.

“We got the people behind it. I don’t... care anymore. The Birminghamales are no more.” he said and sat down, wincing at the pain of his broken bones.

“Just use your drain on me.” Ilea said but he grunted again. Regardless, Ilea found her health draining a little a moment later, making her move some of her healing capabilities to herself. Hunter Recovery was much more efficient on her own body, making the distraction minor at best.

“He’s done.” she said, moving on to Trian who had mended about a third of his injuries before she started working on the rest.

“Thank you.” he said quietly after a while.

“I don’t want you guys to die.” Ilea said but he shook his head.

“No, thank you for this.” he said and gestured around. “I know it’s not easy for you. Blame me if it helps.” he added but she waved him off.

“What I did, I did myself. And I will deal with that myself Trian.” she said and left it at that.

“Ah I passed out didn’t I.” Kyrian murmured from the side as he slowly got up. “I need to get me some healing spells as well.” he said and got up, wincing and touching his stomach. “Those were close.” he said, checking the holes in his armor.

“We should get out and hide. Or do you want to leave the city immediately?” Trian asked.

“It would be safer to hide for a while. There are probably a lot of troops surrounding the city.” Kyrian said.

“We’d break through easily.” Ilea said. “I’d like to check with the informant we found earlier though. Before he dies.” Ilea added.

“Back to the inn then, if it’s still standing.” Trian said. Ilea turned towards the fort and looked up.

“I’ll be right there.” she said and spread her wings, the ashen limbs pushing away the air and fire around them, making her ascend. Ilea rushed towards the roof of the fort and landed silently, watching the soldiers beat the last remaining survivor, one of them ripping away her clothes.

‘I don’t have to kill her.’ she thought and silently made her way to the group, a mist of ash coming to life around her and floating menacingly with her. “But she deserves a better death.” she whispered, smiling as her ash enveloped the group of soldiers and the girl, her form shrouded in it as her

arms reached around the first man's neck, a strong and quick jerk broke his neck and ended his life. Shouts resounded around her in the mass of confused people, her arms lashing out at the perfectly visible targets, breaking bones and destroying joints and ligaments alike.

Half a minute later none of them were alive anymore, a crying woman holding up a shield above what was likely her dead sister. Blood dripping from several injuries and barely any cloth left to cover her. Ilea summoned the blade she had taken and slammed it into the roof, the ash dispersing around her, the woman locking eyes with her as she sobbed.

“You should leave and hide. They are dead and neither would want the same fate for you.” she said and blinked away, not giving the woman an opportunity to strike at her. Her survival was her own now.

Neither Trian nor Kyrian said a word as she rejoined them and the three rushed towards the inn they had stayed at earlier.

The attack was massive and the three of them found troops of both sides rushing through the streets, adventurers and civilians running to safety as doors were smashed in and spells set buildings ablaze. The three of them avoided confrontation and it seemed most of the soldiers didn't want to engage with a random squad of Shadow's Hand mercenaries either, not seeing them or simply ignoring their presence as they made their way through the city.

Smoke darkened the dawn as they arrived at the inn, finding the entrance shut and two soldiers banging on the door.

“I told you we're closed!” the innkeeper shouted from within, not quite managing to hide the fear in his voice. The building itself and most of the surrounding ones were spared from the long range attacks, likely because they were further away from where the brunt of the attacks had come from.

“We're just here for your gold. Open the doors and hand it over.” one of the soldiers said as Ilea identified them to be around level one hundred.

“I have the gold here, take it and leave.” the innkeeper said before a small window opened and a sack of coin was thrown onto the street, silver spilling out.

The soldier looked at it and shook his head. “I said gold, not silver. Ian?” he gestured to the other soldier who summoned a sphere of fire into his hand. “Burn it down.” the first man said when Ilea appeared behind them and grabbed the mage’s arm.

“Aren’t you imperials?” she asked as they turned around, startled at her sudden appearance.

“Yes mam, keeping the peace.” the other soldier said.

“By burning down an inn.” Ilea said.

“They’re traitors, in cahoots with Baralia!” the man said, Ilea’s fist lashing out and smashing his face. His jaw was broken and he fell down on his ass with a pained whimper.

“There’s plenty of real enemies coming. I suggest you leave.” Ilea said and let go of the mage who ran to save his life. The soldier on the ground scrambled up and ran after his buddy.

“They’ll find another target.” Kyrian said as he approached, picking up the sack of silver.

“Maybe.” she answered and left it at that.

“I heard you were closed. We’d like to rent our room again though.” Kyrian said, handing the sack of silver to Ilea. She vanished and appeared in the midst of the inn’s common room. Around a dozen people, some mothers with children, some old people and even one or two adventurers looked at her in her bloodied black armor and she could see the fear in their eyes, the terror.

“We just want food, a room and a bath.” she said, dropping the bag of coins. “I’ll take care of shit soldiers like those.” she added and opened the

window, Kyrian jumping through it and Trian appearing next to her.

The innkeeper looked at them and then at the other occupants and nodded. “Of... of course.. esteemed guests please follow...,” Ilea waved him off and walked towards the stairs.

“Piss off with that, just serve some food and send someone to get a bath going.” she said, waiting in the biggest room with a bath for merely half a minute before a young boy entered, scared but determined as he rushed to the bath and activated the runes, heating the appearing water with his magic.

Trian and Kyrian sat in the armchairs placed in the room and Ilea sat on the bed, the wood nearly giving under her own weight combined with her armor.

“Anything else mam?” the boy asked.

“No, thank you. Leave and close the door.” Ilea said and he promptly followed her orders.

She stored her armor and blinked into the bath, instantly enveloped by the hot water.

“We got them.” Kyrian quietly said to Trian. The man just looked at him without a word.

Ilea closed her eyes and leaned her head on the tub’s rim as she enjoyed the cleansing ritual. Looking through her notifications, Ilea focused on what she had gained tonight.

*‘ding’ ‘Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’*

No class level ups and none of her Ashen skills had reached 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20. Forgetting about that again, Ilea remembered the night, from the first fight with the Baralia soldier to her slaughter of seven of them. A lot of people would die tonight, in this city. She knew that but she felt numb to it. A statistic more than anything. Virilya might be taken or they might manage to defend themselves but in the end the number of deaths would just be recorded somewhere and forgotten.

“I didn’t sign up for fucking wars.” she said to herself.

“Then let’s leave.” Trian said. “I’m sick of this city. Sick of all this. I’m going back to the family I have left. Build something new in Ravenhall.” he said and got up.

“Then do that. I’ll stay and find out about Eve and the Golden Lily. I think working with Edwin might be a good idea as well. Kyrian what will you do?” she asked.

“I need to advance my skills. I think I could gain a lot by cursing some soldiers tonight. If you want to work with Edwin then you need someone to have your back, don’t you?” the man asked, his head cocked a little.

‘Damn idiot.’ she thought and couldn’t help but smile. “The next bunch of cunts is coming towards the inn. Maybe they’re your first targets?” she asked, brushing at her skin to get away the rest of the blood and grime, likely not the last to dirty it in the near future.

“Perhaps they might be.” the man said and got up, the holes in his armor closed by now, his moving metal having adjusted to the damages.



“Another inn, why aren’t we going for smithies Jack.” one of his stupidest followers asked. Perhaps he’d let him storm in and die to the hands of some peasant.

“They have good money and where do you think the imperials send their troops first?” another asked to point out the stupidity of the question.

“Shut it, just go and get the gold. Kill anyone inside.” Jack said. The elves in the west, the demons running rampart and now Baralia attacking. If he got out of this fucking city alive, he’d do so as rich as he possibly could. Move somewhere northeast to one of the port cities. Safer than this lot. To think the capital would get sacked. He shook his head at the thought when his men started to hack at the closed door.

A window to the right opened, an armored figure exiting and standing up, spheres of dull metal floated around him when a wrong feeling suddenly took Jack. He buckled down and retched up the last meal he’d eaten, the feeling getting worse by the second. Looking up, he removed the cork of the healing potion he had stolen earlier just to find that the feeling didn’t get any better.

Small thin needles shot past him on the ground, forming an intricate design around their group before a moment later magic flowed through it, pain shooting down his spine before he fell down, spasming on the ground. “Why aren’t we going for smithies Jack?” he heard in his mind over and over again as the pain worsened and he felt his body grow weaker and weaker.

The commotion in the common room came to a close when Kyrian entered again through the window, grabbing three plates of food and walking

upstairs as Ilea watched on through her Sphere.

The door opened with a creak and the man closed it again behind him, a metal plate floating before him, the food placed on top of it. He handed one to Ilea and another to Trian before he sat down on his armchair again.

“Do you guys want to take a bath as well?” she asked.

“There are going to be more fights soon. I don’t see the point.” Kyrian said.

“Me neither.” Trian said and started eating. “Thanks.” he added a couple bites later, putting the plate back down on the small table next to him. “For your help avenging my family.” he said.

“We’re a team. Call for me whenever something comes up again.” Ilea said and left the tub, appreciating the lack of looks she got before putting on her leather armor, dumping her metal one in the water to scrub off at least some of the blood on it. Especially inside.

“Same for me.” Kyrian said, getting up and touching Trian’s shoulder. Ilea worried a little about him, perhaps the realization of loss fully hit him now that his immediate goal was fulfilled.

“You should leave for Ravenhall tomorrow. Being together with your sister will be good I think.” Ilea said and got a grunt in return.

“I will. Don’t get too caught up in the politics. I don’t want you two dead.” Trian said after a while. She smiled at that, at least he cared still.

“We won’t. At least I won’t. Ilea promise me you won’t single handedly fight a war.” Kyrian said as he went to the door.

“I won’t promise anything Kyrian. Going out alone?” she asked the man.

“I doubt anybody will care enough to catch and kill me. And you two have been holding me back long enough.” the man said, the tone suggesting a smile on his face before he left.

Ilea dried her armor and switched to it after she had finished cleaning. “You’re going as well?” Trian asked, tapping the armchair with his fingers.

“I will.” Ilea answered.

“You care, don’t you? It’s dangerous you know?” the man said.

Ilea turned around to face him. “The problem is that I don’t care Trian. But I can at least do something. Get out there and look for clues while keeping people from getting raped and murdered.”

“Just don’t get killed for some random kid.” the man said but Ilea didn’t want to continue the conversation.

“Can you stay and protect the inn at least?” Ilea asked and was glad to see him nod slightly in response.

Blinking upwards, Ilea found herself on the roof of the inn looking over a burning city. The sun would rise in around an hour but the fighting wouldn’t stop anytime soon. Virilya was simply too large to be taken quickly, not by any force Ilea had seen in this world or her previous one.

Gaining levels and information was the plan for now. She would meet with Edwin and Maria in a couple weeks but seeing this large scale attack, perhaps those plans changed as well. One thing was clear, she had to get stronger. Her classes, skills, stats and resistances had to be higher to face what was to come. She had to gain experience to face people in the business of killing for dozens if not more years. And she had to get evidence and information that might be getting destroyed in the fires of war in that very moment.

“A bunch of big tasks.” she said to herself and spread her wings. “Better get started.”

# Chapter 188 War

Patch notes 1.01

Thoughts previously: 'I am thinking'

Thoughts new: *I am thinking in italics to add edge*

System previously: 'ding' 'Fancy italics'

System new: '**ding**' '**Bold and fancy italics**'

This change will be implemented as of now. Let me know if you spot mistakes or if you think this is a stupid change. I'll retroactively change it to existing chapters as soon as we have two suns as well.

## Chapter 188 War

Some rare spells were still impacting the city from above but as far as Ilea could tell from a distance, most of the fighting had come to the streets instead. The inn they were staying at was quite a bit away from where they had attacked the Birmingham fort. It seemed like the attack was coming from the north. *The brunt of it at least* Ilea thought and looked to her right where she heard fighting coming from the streets.

She landed on a nearby house and observed the three warriors below, two of them in imperial armor armed with swords fighting a single spear wielding

Baralia soldier. The latter held his own rather well and Ilea moved on, not about to take sides in a conflict she understood nothing about. Although there were things she would interrupt. Her hearing improved by her skills was rather impressive and amidst all the explosions, spells, fighting and screaming, she could hear out specifics.

*Here we go.* She thought and blinked into a partially burning house, the smoke not yet having reached the ground floor where several corpses littered the floor and a soldier was currently engaged with a rather unwilling woman. Ilea grabbed one of the swords of the dead and rammed it through the man's chest, twisting the blade before she grabbed his collar and flung him towards a nearby wall.

The woman retreated to the far wall, her eyes focused on the armored intruder to her home. "Go hide in the cellar of the house opposite yours. There's people in it already." Ilea said before she blinked away again.

***'ding' 'You have killed [Swordmaster lvl 108 / Fire Blade lvl 82]'***

*One of many tonight.* Ilea thought as she continued her flight, uninterrupted in the chaos of the invasion. Of war, seeing how large scale the operation looked like. This wasn't any small city like Riverwatch, this was the capital of an empire. And someone came and invaded it. Ilea thought of Berlin in the second world war as an adequate comparison.

Her involvement would be minor in any case but if she could save some normal people just living their lives then perhaps it was worth it. She did make her way towards the center of the city where someone could tell her the whereabouts of her newfound friend Sadin. Now was the time to get specialized and secret information for helping out in the war efforts. And if she didn't find him then perhaps someone else could be of use.

Interrupted in her flight, Ilea dodged a thrown spear coming from her right. The metal rushed past her while she identified the attacker, one soldier in a five man squad walking down a street. Imperial as far as she could tell. Ilea sped towards them and landed non threateningly a couple meters in front of them, her eyes focused on the thrower who looked positively terrified.

“We’re sorry s... sir, Rudy over there didn’t mean to a... attack you. We thought you were a Baralia soldier sir.” the apparent squad leader informed her with quick and stuttered words.

“Haven’t seen a black armored Baralia man yet.” she said and blinked before the man in question who promptly stumbled backwards and fell down.

“Making grown man piss themselves...,” she muttered to herself and shook her head. “What am I doing?” she asked and ascended again. *Could’ve asked them about Major what was his name? Falken?* She thought but there would be enough imperials around for her to ask. Big swaths of smoke were rising in the northern parts of the city and Ilea quickly remembered the guard she had met at the smithy.

Thousands had died and you don’t care. The man had said. Herself from a year ago would be terrified, Ilea knew that. Still she couldn’t change who she had become. At least now she could do something good to get information.

Activating her Embered Body Heat, she made herself cold enough that anybody with Heat Vision wouldn’t be able to spot her. The skill had been underused but she had simply not wanted to waste mana on its limited usability. In this scenario there was some use at least and perhaps its second stage would be worth it. Otherwise she’d have to replace it with another skill, if she ever got another one, her classes weren’t exactly overwhelming her with choice.

Again blinking downwards, Ilea stopped a man’s sword by grabbing his hand. “Are you the shopkeeper?” she asked the target of the interrupted attack while the soldier struggled to get free.

“Y... Yes, he came in and demanded money.” the man stuttered out.

“Go hide, the city’s under attack if you haven’t noticed yet.” she said before she broke the soldier’s arm, the sword dropping on the ground next to her. Her hand around his throat, she used her Embered Body Heat to increase

the temperature in her body to the max. More than a light singe, there wasn't any damage. Might be good for leveling the skill.

The soldier was barely level sixty, seeing the invasion as an opportunity to rob a store. "Great morals really." Ilea said as she ascended again, keeping her hand around the man's throat as she continued on her way towards the central district.

"You don't do shit like that again. I'll come for you if you do. Either fight off the invaders or hide." she said to the man who could obviously not get a word out. Slowing down, she let him fall from a couple meters, making sure he only broke a couple more bones.

*Another night for my future psychiatrist.* She thought as a squad of flying imperials intercepted her, making her slow down and raise her hands.

"Shadow's Hand? Why are you here?" one of them asked.

Ilea summoned her badge and flung it his way before she answered. "Looking to make a deal, maybe help out with the defense? Looking for Major Falken."

"Falken." The man said as he inspected the badge and threw it back towards her. "Well if you're looking for that division then I won't stand in your way. Could use a shadow in this mess. Head straight towards the military complex, ask for him there." the man said and gestured to the others before they flew off. One of them nodded to Ilea. *Lovely group.*

Continuing on her way, Ilea glimpsed a flashing light coming from a rooftop of a high building. She wasn't sure what it meant but saw the archers and mages standing near the building. *Perhaps a warning or they're asking me to approach?* The building was on her way anyway so she made her way towards the man using the light spell, slowing down as she went on and with raised hands. No attacks came and she flew until reaching five meters before the group on the main building.

"Looking for Major Falken. Shadow's Hand." she said, showing her badge before throwing it. The woman quickly nodded after checking the badge

and pointed to the big structures in the distance. Central military buildings to be sure, more impressive than anything she had seen back on earth. She had to remind herself that magic was more effective than machines. Except for computers but she had a feeling the Taleen had that covered. A shiver went through her remembering the Praetorians. *That's what happens when you put smartphone A.Is into murder machines.*

She nodded to the woman before catching her badge and flew towards the central military construct of the capital. The palace was nearby and just as impressive. More guards were around and she was stopped another two times before one group actually escorted her to the last destination. Scouts, she later remembered according to their badges. Around level one fifty all of them. Ilea was surprised how easily she had gotten into the brain of the imperial military but considering how the people around here looked combined with their level, she'd have difficulties dealing a lot of damage or at least getting away with it.

She wouldn't underestimate people just because they had fifty fewer levels than her. Ten years of additional experience, teamwork and defensive structures would do her in in no time. An itch somewhere in her mind asked her to try it out but there would come enough situations in her future without having to kill people with families just to test her strength.

"Here you go." one of the men said before they all flew off again. Ilea looked at the building before her and two guards approached immediately, not scouts those but assassins the way they looked and moved. *Graceful bunch.* She thought approaching them herself.

"Looking for Falken and employment." she said with a smile. The two looked at each other and nodded.

"You are very welcome here Shadow." one of them said and bowed respectfully.

"Please follow me." the other one said and went inside. The building opened up as soon as they had entered, dozens of people rushing around talking, preparing and some even meditating. Ilea wasn't quite sure where



she had landed when a thin man in his forties with an androgynous look approached her.

“Shadow, welcome to Virilya. I’m sure you have noticed the commotion. Are you already employed? To kill me perhaps?” he asked with a thin smile on his lips. His eyes had a spark that told her he hoped she answered with a yes. Ilea’s instincts were on alert even though he was at level 205, something she thought she could handle. Still her instincts were something she tried to trust more in her new world and levels weren’t everything, she had learned that early on.

“You must be Major Falken. I wish to be employed. A man named Sadin has suggested I come looking for him here but I doubt he is available at the moment.” Ilea explained quickly.

“Ah, a good thing he found you then. Are you looking for gold?”

“Information.” Ilea answered.

“Information. Well we do have plenty of that, may I ask what kind in beforehand?”

“No.” Ilea simply stated.

“And what kind of work may you provide?” the man asked in a disappointed tone.

“Killing pillagers, rapists, stopping torture and protecting citizens. Perhaps delaying enemy troops. No assassinations or simply killing Baralia troops I’m afraid.” Ilea said and watched his excited face change to an outright disgusted grimace.

“Ah you bore me. Such a powerful being and yet you chose an idealist moral code. Why?” he asked, surprising her a little.

“I don’t give a shit about your war but I do care about the terror it causes.” She said with a smile under her helmet. To be lectured on her ideals by a literal assassin master, comedy gold to be sure. Her upbringing in a country

where killing each other wasn't the norm made her have at least some set of morals. More and more they were changed here but while she was fine with two soldiers fighting and killing each other, she wouldn't blink at murdering a soldier who tortured a child or killed a defenseless family.

Ilea was quite aware that she was just a vigilante without evidence, a judge or existing law. While she wouldn't seek out war crimes and slave traders, if her goals aligned with it, she could see a certain joy in delivering some justice. *Invigorating power...*, she thought. Perhaps she shouldn't overdo it, or she might turn out like that nutter from the tournament in Riverwatch. Or she might turn up dead because she fucked with the wrong people. *Oh well, that's gonna happen now anyway. Eve you dolt.* She thought, sighing. *Perhaps that was her plan all along.*

“Well so be it. It is a service to the empire and you will be rewarded in return. Bring me the ears and badges of the soldiers you kill. Don't think to cheat me.” the man said, already talking to the next person that approached him.

The last sentence should've been intimidating but Ilea just chuckled. If she wanted to steal from them she would be down in the floors below, blinking through to find the treasury or the archives. If the city fell that was exactly where she would be.

She walked to a nearby lower level accountant looking woman. “Hear that, can I have that on paper should he bite the dust?” she asked and watched her frown and take a fresh piece of paper, moving her hand in a ridiculously fast fashion over it before she stamped and signed it.

“There you go. If you have anything else please ask any of the others, I'm insanely busy. Sorry!” the woman said and continued her work.

*How did you know what we were talking about if you were so busy.* Ilea asked herself and looked through the paper before blinking on top of the house, making the paper vanish right after. North would be the best bet to start but she had already killed on guy and that was barely ten minutes from the eastern inn they had stayed at.

Her wings spread and she accelerated to her top speed with all buffs activated, rushing past buildings, fires and soldiers alike until she reached the area where the fighting was the most intense. Or one of them at least. She couldn't exactly grasp where the defensive line was in this mess. The corpses piled high where she was and that seemed good enough for her.

Spells and arrows shot her way from somewhere along the northern territory but she simply dodged behind the stone wall next to her, parts of it immediately destroyed by the attacks. She definitely was in the right area. It had been over an hour since the attack started but a lot of people still hadn't evacuated it seemed. Thinking it to be similar to the attack a week ago, perhaps that was the plan? To test the defenses and give a sense of insecurity to allow a large scale invasion without the mobilized forces answering where the biggest part of the attack came from.

While the spells in the air had thinned, trebuchets or whatever they were using were still destroying parts of the city with their payload coming from beyond the city walls. Either they didn't have a defensive shield system like Dawntree or they simply didn't use it. Ilea's suspicion was that the city was simply too large. The palace and central military structures were sure to be defended in a similar or even more sophisticated manner as Dawntree. The layout of the city inside the mountain lent a geographical advantage unlike anything she had seen so far.

"Please don't take them!" a scream heard through the noise of all the chaos around her alerted Ilea of her first possible intervention. Rushing through houses and over roofs, she landed softly on the ground near a house inside which a group of soldiers was taking two young teens from their mother.

"They'll fetch a good price. Maybe we can use them once or twice beforehand." one of the soldiers said as the mother screamed next to him.

"Oh shut it bitch." he said and punched her hard enough to knock her out.

"Krom are you sure about this? We're supposed to wait until after the city is taken." another soldier said but was immediately pushed by a third.

“Fuck off Brandon. For that you’re not getting a cut. And no go at the girl.” another said. Ilea watched on through her sphere as Brandon apologetically looked towards the two young soon to be slaves.

Ilea looked to her left and caught an arrow fired at her, forming a rotating spike of ash that was shot back at the archer on the nearby roof. The projectile injured the man but he wasn’t killed, rolling off the other side of the building and to safety. *Poor target choice mate.* She thought and smiled at the comically evil soldiers inside the house. Considering their upbringing and the apparent normality of slavery, one might not be able to fault them completely for their missteps but they were about to take away the children of a mother to sell them into slavery.

*Definitely an easier choice than fighting the Birmingham daughter.* Ilea thought before blinking into the midst of the group, spreading ash around her and guiding parts of it towards their mouths and noses. Swords flashed and spells flared up as some of them started coughing and Ilea started to move, equipping her bladed gauntlets and smashing them through two of their necks, the standard Baralia armor leaving a lot to be desired.

Another four slashes in the mist and the ash settled, leaving behind a burnt staircase, two swords stuck in walls and six corpses. Taking a dagger from one of the dead soldiers, she started cutting off one ear each.

“Who are...,” the girl said while the boy checked on their mother.

“I’ll heal her after. You should head east and try to get out of the city or into the center.” Ilea said as she continued cutting off ears.

“And you, Brandon?” Ilea asked as she moved to the third soldier.

“Y... yes...,” the man stuttered out.

“Tell your people that a hunter in black will come for them if they rape or kill the people of this city. Slavery is a nono as well. Get it?” She asked.

“But... we’re at war?” The man asked, more confused than scared at this point. He knew that had she wanted to kill him, he would already be dead.

“Yes you are.” Ilea said and looked at the bloody ears, checking on the mother and healing the wound on her head. “So go and fight the soldiers, take over the city and steal money and power. But leave these people alone.” she finished as the mother was waking up.

“Leave now.” she said to the three civilians as they scrambled up.

“Thank you!” the boy said as they left.

Brandon got up next to her and scratched his head. “Were a bunch of assholes anyway.” he said, kicked the guy who had shoved him and walked out, otherwise seeming unfazed by the experience.

Ilea stored her ears and moved onwards, continuously using her Embered Body Heat. Plenty of prey to hunt.

# Chapter 189 First Huntress

## Chapter 189 First Huntress

*Another one...*, Ilea thought as she blinked into an apartment, her hand slamming into the windpipe of a laughing soldier. Her next hit was a knee to his groin with forward movement, sending herself and the man tumbling into the second soldier in the room whose magic activated in a shower of ice that glanced against her ashen veil, not quite managing to break through as Ilea's fist repeatedly smashed into the first soldier's head before it finally cracked.

“Who are you, why are you fi...,” the mage couldn't finish his sentence before Ilea reached him, her fist breaking his jaw with the first hit before her fist hit his chest, again and again her destructive mana surged into the man until she received a notification in her mind, the soldier falling down a moment later.

“I'm a bit late. You should flee.” she told the only survivor of the family who had been slaughtered, a small boy of around twelve years old with nasty wounds on his legs. She grabbed him and healed the injuries. The kid started crying a moment later and Ilea crouched down next to him. “Come on, up and grab on.” she said. “If you want to survive this is it.”

The kid brushed away the tears with anger and fear in his eyes before he carefully moved onto her back. Ilea cut off ears number twenty seven and twenty eight before she grabbed the corpses and walked out of the house, her wings spreading before she ascended. She quickly found what she had

been looking for, a group of Baralia soldiers resting after a battle in a square. Imperial and Baralia soldiers laid dying or dead on the ground.

Ilea walked up to the group who got alerted immediately and sprung up, apprehensive of the new arrival. “Shadow... what do you seek?” The one with the most fancy armor asked as his fists started glowing a shade of blue.

“These two have killed an innocent family. For no reason I assume.” she said and effortlessly threw the corpses towards the group. “Don’t do that. And don’t rape people. I’ll come for you if you do. Just fight your war and be done with it.” she said and turned around before she flew off again. Perhaps the fear of someone specifically looking for rapists and killers would change some people’s minds. Even with slavery being a thing, what Ilea had seen of the Baralia soldiers so far didn’t imply complete savagery. They were people like the people of the empire or the independent cities in the west.

She sped up while shielding the boy on her back from most of the wind before she landed much closer to the center, near a defensive line of imperials. Again she was met with apprehension but not outright hostility. Her status as a Shadow’s Hand mercenary certainly helped, as most wouldn’t want to engage her at all and listened first instead of shooting first.

“Boy, you go towards the center ok?” she asked, putting the kid down. “His family was killed, show him where to go to reach the center.” Ilea said to the soldiers, one of them nodding quickly and going for the boy.

“Thank you.” the man said with honest respect in his eyes.

“There’s a lot more coming, if your officer doesn’t demand otherwise I suggest you go too. The defensive line in the center will be where they’re stopped.” Ilea said while flying off. *If they’re stopped at all.*

Again she rushed towards the attackers, seeing a line of citizens running towards the center of the city as bells rang through it all. It seemed finally clear that the attack wasn’t coming from within but from without. People leaving behind all they own to get to safety. Ilea checked her notifications and found none of the soldiers she had killed to be above level one twenty.

Compared to the force the Shadow's Hand had sent to retake Ravenhall, this was quantity over quality. Still, she kept on the lookout for stronger soldiers, they had to be there after all.

Perhaps the enemy sent in their paid foot soldiers or even slaves to attack first, keeping the specialized powerhouses behind. Or more likely the higher leveled people were the ones in charge anyway. Having commanders rush into battle was definitely heroic and inspiring but risky for both the attacking army and the people themselves.

*Well let's hope there's not a level two hundred assassin squad looking for me.* She thought as she landed with a hard kick to a man's chest, sending him flying and stumbling. He wasn't dead yet and a healer rushed towards him to cure the wounds. Ilea turned around immediately and blinked towards a mage attacking fleeing civilians. His neck was broken with a swift movement and she blinked again, grabbing an archer's foot standing on a roof and firing down before she turned and flung her downwards with full force, the woman's head splitting open on the cobbled street.

Using a looted dagger, she cut off two of their ears and grabbed their bodies again. The healer was nearly done taking care of the injured soldier when Ilea suddenly stood next to her, dumping the two bodies. "You're attacking citizens. Please tell them to focus on soldiers, these people just want to live." Ilea said, moved closer and pushed away the healer before she stabbed her dagger down into the man's throat.

Flying up again, she watched the healer run to the dead soldier, trying to change the man's fate. Perhaps they were lovers and Ilea had just created a tragedy in the healer's life. *Focus.* Ilea told herself. Hovering above a group of running soldiers, she watched them apprehensively as they ignored the fleeing people and instead secured their position. She nodded and continued on her way.

A sudden beam of lightning appeared in her Sphere's vision, making her blink upwards as the energy flashed by in an arc, coming down with a crash on a roof a hundred meters further in. Ilea looked towards the origin of the spell and found a soldier flying a couple hundred meters away, drawing a massive bow before another lightning arch flew her way. The projectiles



were fast but at that distance it was easy to dodge them with her sphere and blink abilities, the speed comparable to a Taleen Guardian's guns.

She ignored the attacker and continued westward, no further attacks coming from the archer. Perhaps an officer or a mercenary. Or simply a weak and flashy spell. She wasn't sure but she didn't care much either, landing behind a mass of fleeing people pursued by a couple Baralia soldiers.

"Let them go or you die!" Ilea shouted as the soldiers skidded to a halt, looking at each other after a moment.

"The hunter..." one of them said as he held his spear towards her.

"Yes, the hunting huntress." Ilea said. "So what will it be?"

A spear like object suddenly appeared ten meters in front of her, too fast to dodge as she blinked to the side, the speed and power of the projectile pulling her a little towards the impact where the metal spear dug into the ground until it vanished completely from her sight, leaving behind a trail in the cobbled road before it came to a stop somewhere below the ground.

Magic suddenly surged from where the spear lay, an explosion nearly taking out her hearing resounded before a flash of light and fire covered her sight, stone and earth alike flung off her armor as she stood her ground, lifting her left arm against the wave. One of the soldiers had stood too close, his body falling down, charred from the fire.

Looking up, Ilea could see three floating dots in the distant sky, one of them likely responsible for the attack just now. Either they had started looking for her or it was a random move. Seeing three dots and the power of the attack meant that likely each of them was around or higher than level two hundred. Or they simply invested all their stat points in a way to allow such a powerful attack. Mages tended to be killed rather easily, Ilea found.

"Fuck off." She said to the two remaining soldiers. They ran away immediately as Ilea looked up again. The dots were moving but no further attack came her way, perhaps because the first one hadn't taken her out. *A specialized assassin squad then, find and eliminate targets from that kind of*

*distance...* The thought made sense. So at least they weren't specifically targeting her, just opponents worth taking out. If her theory was correct at least. She hoped Kyrian wouldn't get hit suddenly. Then again he probably felt the metal coming long before she even noticed.

She quickly took off again, seeing that the civilians weren't in sight anymore. The massive main road leading from the northern gate towards the center of the city had been turned into a battlefield, mages fighting for life and death where they had previously performed their spectacles. Ilea landed on the outskirts of it but found that the civilians had mostly avoided this place, or they were all dead already. Heavy artillery was being moved further inwards, flinging fiery stones towards the houses from time to time as groups of people pulled the heavy machinery.

Ilea couldn't help but admire the weaponry. Some of them looked like medieval rail guns, runes engraved on the insides as mages charged up the machine and a metal sphere shot out, crashing through four houses before it finally came to a halt. Others were catapults or trebuchets but clad in metal armor and equipped with runes to increase what Ilea assumed to be their power. Bricks and pieces of destroyed buildings were moved by earth and stone mages or by warriors strong enough to lift them before they were flung towards the houses again.

Her sphere suddenly spotted another metal spear rushing towards her back as she blinked away again, the weapon digging deep into the big street before her, coming to a stop around twenty meters further in before the explosion ripped friend and foe alike apart in a fiery chaos. A small crater was left behind as she looked back to find the dots again. Hopefully they would leave her alone now, seeing how she dodged both a frontal and a sneak attack. Either that or they would come closer. In that case she could maybe harass them a little or flee immediately.

Here on one of the main streets, the empire responded in kind, big groups of troops clashing with the enemy as spells ripped apart bodies, machines and stone alike. A terrifying picture, yet awe inspiring nonetheless. *I've wasted enough time.*

Ilea jumped down and crossed the several hundred meter long battlefield to the other side, through smoke and fighting warriors, deflecting or dodging spells and arrows as she pushed through. Her sphere picked up someone following her, making her jump up a building and turn around. An armored man with a halberd greeted her with a slash that she dodged backwards.

“Shadow, what side are you on?!” He demanded as he landed on the house she had just stood on.

***[Warrior – lvl 221]***

“My task is to protect civilians.” she answered with a smile on her face, his attitude changing immediately as he lowered his weapon a little.

“What...,” he looked around but found nobody close by. “You’re not paid by the empire? A generous noble then. A shame, it would’ve been a joy to face you.” the man said and Ilea agreed.

“Perhaps another time.” Ilea said as she turned around and ran off, hearing him shout after her.

“Veran Dagoth, come look for me Shadow!” he shouted and laughed, the sound growing more and more distant as Ilea veered right, towards the faraway wall of the city. Other than on the main road, Ilea saw few imperial soldiers the further she got away from the center. Either their numbers were much lower or they focused themselves on a defensible center with the strongest military forces grouped up there. Another reason for Ilea to be out here taking care of the undisciplined enemies moving away from their task.

She hoped that once the city was taken there wasn’t a massive murderfest but she couldn’t be sure about that. *More people to kill then.* The thought made her feel more like at the beginning of a long shift at the fastfood place compared to anything else. Once the fighting had settled it would become far more difficult for her to move freely. Her curiosity taking over, Ilea landed near a group of somewhat lower leveled Baralia soldiers carefully moving through the streets, looking for ambushes and enemy soldiers.

“Shadow!” one of them exclaimed and clutched his blade, unleashing magic to lend his attack speed and power. Yet Ilea sidestepped casually and felt the wind rush past, her hand gently holding down the man’s arm and with her other she grabbed his neck.

“Don’t move or this guy is dead.” she said. “Just a bunch of questions.” she added. The group seemed unsure but seeing their enemy it looked like they at least considered.

“My task is to protect civilians. I’m not here to kill you.” Ilea gambled and let go of the man who quickly jumped backwards, his sword held in a defensive stance.

“We are not here for the civilians.” one of them said.

“That’s good. I just want to know what your orders say in regards to my task.” Ilea said, hoping that the Hand’s reputation would prevail once again. She was a mercenary and not a soldier after all. Combined with the fear of facing her in battle it seemed her gamble paid off.

“We are to advance through the city, secure sector after sector as we take out enemy forces. There are no orders in regards to civilians. No restrictions either I’m afraid. Getting distracted by looting or killing is disobeying orders.” the man explained and Ilea nodded. She couldn’t be sure he was telling the truth but the man seemed like a real soldier to her, not one to scheme or lie in the face of danger.

“What about after the city is taken?” Ilea asked and watched him getting a little more nervous.

“There are no orders. In the face of war I’m sure you know what will happen.” he said, making her sigh.

“Well humanity really is the same everywhere isn’t it?” Ilea said more to herself, looking up towards the sky. She really did long for nature again, to get away from this mess. But she wouldn’t forget about Eve and this was a good way to get information, now while the city was in chaos and her power was desperately needed, even for a task such as protecting civilians.

If she showed the ears of all the soldiers she had killed, she was sure it was worth something.

“Monsters without fur.” one of the soldiers said, making two of the others look at him with anger.

“We really are, aren’t we?” Ilea asked, looking at the man who gulped, regretting that he opened his mouth. “Well let everyone you see know that I will kill anybody murdering, raping or torturing civilians.” Ilea said before she blinked away, her vanishing form likely leaving a more threatening impression behind. She specifically didn’t mention slavery as these people likely didn’t see it as anything bad or wrong, just a part of life. Still people could rape and kill their slaves or give them work and a home. Not that she supported it but in a society with established rules, she didn’t have illusions about changing a fundamental thought like that.

The fighting went on for hours and hours, the sun moving along the horizon as more and more smoke covered the city in its looming doom. Forces on both sides suffered casualties and Ilea couldn’t tell if either side gained the upper hand in specific battles but what she could tell was that Baralia was moving in further and further, the resistance moving towards the center more and more.

She had killed over a hundred people already, just a drop in the numbers of participating soldiers. Some of them were even empire soldiers, showing that neither side had a perfect control over their troops. At least several hundred soldiers knew about her and her task by now and hopefully it had a small impact at least.

The evening would soon come and she wanted to check with the major to see if she could already get something. Her efforts would be in vain should there be a takeover in the central powers of Virilya. Ilea ate while flying,

covering the distance from near the wall to the center in the span of about forty five minutes. The Baralia siege engines hadn't reached so far yet, the fighting still raging in many parts of the city further out as Ilea reached the palace and military structures looming over the surrounding buildings.

As expected, there was a massive shield slightly visible in the air over the area. Certain areas on the ground were left open, troops moving through with already established checkpoints. Wounded and reinforcements moved in and out as Ilea landed, a group of alerts soldiers approaching immediately.

"In the employ of Major Falken." Ilea stated, showing the previously summoned contract and her badge of the Hand.

"May I see that miss?" An officer asked as he approached carefully, looking her over. She handed over the document and badge, waiting for only a couple seconds before he handed it back.

"You may move through. She's with Major Falken!" he shouted as he resumed his position and waved her through. Ilea saw some begging civilians asking to be let in but denied by their own soldiers. She could see the issue with feeding and protecting everybody inside and to her own surprise didn't care further. These people had to flee, one way or the other. There was not even enough room alone to shelter all of the city's population in its central district, let alone food and water.

Spreading her wings as soon as she was through, Ilea made her way to Falken's command and entered, this time let through upon showing her contract.

# Chapter 190 The Walls of Virilya

## Chapter 190 The Walls of Virilya

“The Shadow returns. Now how many people have you saved?” Falken asked in a mocking tone as he looked at her sideways. His attitude reminded her of her time in Kindergarden. She was long past caring about provocations of that manner. *Who hurt you spoiled noble boy?* She asked herself but assumed his every word part of a deliberate game, a master assassin poking at her for a reaction to find her weak spots and possible ways to manipulate her. Ilea didn’t know which interpretation was the right one but she knew that she preferred facing monsters of non human nature compared to an environment like this.

“I’ve killed one hundred and forty two soldiers having murdered or raped civilians. Should I pile the ears on your desk?” she asked in a naive tone.

“An impressive number. How many of those were imperial?” the man asked in turn, a sly smile on his face that Ilea mimicked under her helmet.

“None of course master Falken.” she said.

The man stared at her before he laughed. “Perhaps I don’t dislike you as much as I thought. You’re a Shadow after all. You’ve got a storage item I assume? Pile them in there.” he said and motioned to a metal bin next to the massive desk showing a map of the city.

“I don’t, I hid them outside. Let me get them.” Ilea said in a completely serious tone.

The man just grunted and continued his word while she took the bin and walked outside again, dumping the ears when she thought to be far enough away from the guards.

“What a gory fucking mess.” Ilea murmured to herself and looked at the bin. The ears looked freshly cut off, basically telling anybody with an ounce of knowledge on the subject that she had a storage item. *Ah who cares. They should come and get it if they want.* She thought and walked back, thinking that most influential people probably had one anyway. There were easier ways for someone capable of stealing from her or killing her to get to money or such an item.

Looking at the ears made her look through her notifications quickly. The fact that hardly any of the soldiers even noticed her, let alone put up a reasonable defense meant her level gains were rather unimpressive. Still, they were all human and fitted with two classes. At least better than hunting level one hundred birds.

***‘ding’ ‘Hunter’s Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9’***

***‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1’***

*And the last one at second stage. Took me long enough.* She thought, checking out the added description.

***Active: Embered Body Heat - 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1***

***Regulate the heat in your body to protect yourself against harsh climates or even blend in with your environment.***

***2<sup>nd</sup> stage: The Embers run deep. Your blood boils and the ash around you singes, should you will it.***

***Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic***



*So I can heat the ash and my blood is hot?* She thought but decided to simply test it later. Intervening in this war was certainly not gonna help her advance much in personal power. That much was sure and Ilea wasn't going to try and seek out the higher leveled enemies on her own. They were people, cunning bastards likely with good ways to flee and recover as well and most of them teamed up too. The thought of even facing herself in combat was pretty terrifying. Exciting, yes but incredibly dangerous too. And as much as she liked to believe herself to be a special snowflake, there must be people or creatures out there similar enough in their classes and skills.

*Well let's see if this was worth it.* Ilea had of course saved more than a bunch of people but neither did she care much about their lives, nor did she believe she did much more than postpone their ends for a couple hours, maybe a day or two. At least some were spared immediate pain and tragedy.

“That’s one ugly bin.” One of the guards said when she entered again, winking at the man before she ascended the stairs to reach Falken.

“Here you go.” She said and waited. The man just put his hand into the basket and Ilea watched as the ears quickly vanished.

“A hundred and forty two. At least not a liar then. Well what do you want for your services?” The man asked, seeming a bit annoyed at the interruption to his work.

“I’d like to discuss that somewhere a little more, private.” Ilea answered.

“Oh I’m not going to service you Shadow. I’m asking if you are looking for information on a country, an organization, a person, a beast, an item or something of the like. I don’t have a library of knowledge in my head but there IS a library where I can send you.” The man told her.

“A person.” Ilea said and Falken quickly snapped his fingers, an armored rogue appearing next to him immediately.

“Take this Shadow to the Library of Souls.” Major Falken said and the man nodded. “Your contract.” he demanded of Ilea before he wrote the number eight on it and pushed some mana into the paper, at least that was what Ilea thought happened. Perhaps he had activated a spell of some sort as well.

“Follow me Shadow.” The rogue said before he vanished and reappeared on the roof, Ilea appearing next to him nearly instantly.

“Good.” He said and sped off, Ilea following behind. The man was far below her level but his graceful movement and speed were similar to hers, perhaps even higher if her really tried. Then again, she doubted he could take a bunch of her punches without flinching. The two of them ran through the central district, Ilea getting her first view at the architecture around here. While a lot of the places she had seen in the capital were filled with houses meant to be inhabited, the central district was a collection of more and more impressive government buildings reaching higher and higher, their intricate detail and near reckless architecture probably wouldn’t be possible on earth. Not with magic and runes, stabilizing everything. The streets and stairways were broader here, a massive wall surrounding the district itself, not rivaling the outer wall in size but definitely as impressive, its stone nearly humming with the powerful enchantments laying within.

Ilea checked out the different structures and when she focused found every single one of them having military machinery, patrolling mages and archers in near unreachable positions with great vantage points. She understood why the empire wasn’t too eager on defending the whole city against an attack and instead would focus on this central district. Still a large area, rivaling at least the size of Dawntree itself. She even glanced another wall further in the center, surrounding likely the core military buildings and the palace.

*So Falken isn’t quite as important as I thought...*, she thought but maybe that was part of his game as well. Or he feared a massive strike at the central most buildings, avoiding the same fate all the other occupants would be exposed to. The rogue stopped in front of a massive building, somewhat high level guards standing in front of it.

“The Library of Souls.” He stated and vanished again. Ilea saw him appearing in a blind spot through her Sphere. The man apparently liked to be mysterious. She had no issue with that, after all, vanishing is a pretty cool skill to have.

“Shadow? May I see your badge if my assumption is correct?” One of the guards asked. Ilea handed him her badge before he opened the massive gates and let her in. Ilea’s Sphere couldn’t reach past a certain point in the building, neither downwards nor upwards. Entering, she found herself inside a hall, two guards sitting in a corner talking about the progression of the Baralia attack, ignoring Ilea other than a quick glance.

At the end of the somewhat small hall was a massive steel wall, only one small window like opening at the end of it. The air seemed distorted and Ilea couldn’t see through it with her Sphere either. Her eyes told her that there was in fact a person sitting on the other end of the window. A woman looking to be in her forties with a kind face, brown hair to her shoulders and wearing white horn glasses.

“Greetings.” Ilea said, waking the woman from her concentrated stare at what Ilea could only assume was a book. This was a library after all.

“Oh hello dear. Wait are you with the Hand?” The woman asked.

“I am. Looking for a person, I have this.” Ilea said and showed the woman the contract from Falken.

“Working for Falken heh? Well that fits. Hand me that will you?” The woman said.

“Eight, that doesn’t exactly give you a lot. Been in the capital for long? Any news from Ravenhall? The retaking was a success but numbers on casualties and specifics of the fighting haven’t reached us sadly and none of the scouts were there before the battle.” The woman said, Ilea’s brow rising.

“There should’ve been at least one scout, maybe I remember it wrong. I was there. Is that information going to get me anything in return?” Ilea asked making the woman smile.

“Of course it is. More than what that freaky old fuck gave you for what I assume was a damn shitload of work.” The woman said with the same smile on her face.

“Good, let me get a chair then.” Ilea said and walked to the guards where two free chairs remained.

“Is she just allowed to take a chair?” One of them asked the other quietly, Ilea walking back to the woman.

“Look at her, if she wants a chair, she can have a chair.” The second guard helpfully supplied and Ilea couldn’t agree more. If she wanted a chair she’ll bloody well take it.

“Now tell me child, what happened in Ravenhall.” The woman said and Ilea could tell there was something more than just a thirst for knowledge there. Something personal. A good thing she was there.

“You won’t tell me but I can only think of a couple people who could’ve done that. Specifically Adam Strand. Ever since...,” The woman said but stopped, looking up at Ilea.

“You know a damn lot about the Shadow’s Hand. What’s your name?” Ilea asked.

“Elise. My name is Elise. Now you must be that Lilith girl, black full plate armor and you’re not a mage. I doubt that’s your real name. Care to share it with me?” The woman asked. Ilea thought about it, looking back at the guards. She couldn’t identify the woman behind the magic field, another enchantment. One that she’d have to look into at some point.

“I’m Ilea. Team thirty four.” She said and took off her helmet.

“Ilea, you have beautiful hair. You should really let that out more, the armor is intimidating. It suits you but...,” She didn’t continue on that but paused

instead. “Thank you, for telling me about Ravenhall I do appreciate it. Why were you in the city then?” Elise asked, leaning back in her chair as she locked eyes with Ilea.

“You’re asking a lot without anything in return.” Ilea said, smirking at the woman who looked away for a second. Something about her made Ilea feel at ease. *Illusion perhaps?* She asked herself but didn’t feel any intrusion. Her Veil came up to enhance her Resistance but nothing changed.

“You don’t have to be on alert. It’s just. There’s...,” She started. “I needed to know about the Hand. But now we have Baralia to take care of. I owe you Ilea, big time. And while what you have told me has great personal value, it also adds to our archives. Forgive me for being rude, it’s been a long day. What would you like to know?” Elise asked.

*Someone in the Hand she cares about? A child perhaps?* Ilea thought but focused. “I came to find a friend. Her name was Eve Aillan, or at least that’s the name she told us.” Ilea started.

“Was? So you seek to find out who is responsible for her death.” Elise stated.

“Later, perhaps. If whoever did it killed Eve then they’re capable of killing me as well. No, I would like to know who Eve was. Learn why she was here and why she was killed. Afterwards I will seek out the person or people who did it.” Ilea said.

“You are not completely lost then. A friend to you but not an honest one? I will do my best to find who you are looking for. Who your friend was. Tell me all you know.” Elise said and smiled at Ilea. The look on her face nearly made her tear up. Nearly.

“Why do you care?” Ilea asked. Or was it just a lie, an actress hiding behind her enchantments?

“You are not the only one who has lost people. I like you. I like what you did today. While it is likely fruitless you have shown an effort to protect those who can’t protect themselves.” Elise said.

“They will die most likely or be enslaved.” Ilea said as a matter of fact.

“Yes. Everyone has a choice, everyone has a life to live and everybody has the chance to seek power. To destroy and conquer, to build and protect. Your choices both in Ravenhall and here today have shown me who you are. Or at least a part of you. Perhaps you could even...,” She broke it off and shook her head.

“I will look for this Eve, master of Illusions. Come back tomorrow and I will have something for you.” Elise said and Ilea nodded. “Oh, before you go.” she added. “Just out of curiosity... the individual Trian Alymie... he is part of your team is he not?” She asked and Ilea winked at her, a smile spreading on Elise’s lips. “A choice was made and consequences followed.” The librarian said to herself as Ilea put her helmet back on, the first impacts of artillery resounding outside.

“Could’ve at least brought the chair back...,” The guard grumbled as he got up.

“Sorry.” Ilea said and looked at him, the man freezing up immediately.

“I didn’t mean no offense miss Shadow.” He said respectfully.

“None taken.” She said and walked out. Something told her she was lucky to have met Elise today. Looking up at the transparent yellow shield, she smiled to herself. *I’ll get your real name Eve. Hope you’re watching.* She thought, in a good mood suddenly. Ilea didn’t believe in god but in this magical as fuck world, who knew?

*Where to now...*, she thought, looking at the impacts of magic and stone on the shield. It would take a while for Baralia to take over the rest of the city. With their quick advance, Ilea didn’t really question their takeover anymore. *The center will be the issue*, she thought as she identified an officer running by.

***[Warrior – lvl 183]***

*Better.* She would visit Trian for now and see if he still intended to leave. He didn't look to be his best self earlier but perhaps some brooding helped. She doubted it.

The checkpoints were still open, although fewer of them. More civilians and even soldiers were asking to be let in, soon they would have a hard time stopping the masses but the fact that people could also flee the city didn't escape their minds. A better option than to turtle behind the central shield, perhaps a deathtrap after all. Ilea spread her wings and flew off, to the southeast where their inn was located. The streets were filled with people trying to get southwards, pure chaos it looked like. The sheer mass of residents in the capital astounded her and having such a number of people panic and flee was something she had never seen before. Terrifying really. A good thing she could fly.

Curiosity got the better of her as she ascended further and further to see over the southern part of the wall, overlooking the plains beyond. Streams of people were moving southwards, nothing standing in their way. Either Baralia didn't plan for that or they wanted those people gone anyway. The logistics of feeding and organizing such a mass would likely daunt even them. And without a simple way to arm those people and turn them against the enemy in a matter of days, they had little to fear and no reason to slaughter them.

No militaristic reason at least but what Ilea had seen of them so far this war seemed primarily territorial, not about race or a long growing hatred. Perhaps this wouldn't end in a travesty similar to Ravenhall's population. The refugees would further destabilize the remaining empire. *They could go to Ravenhall.* Ilea thought and flew downwards, hovering over the fleeing masses.

“If you manage, Ravenhall has a city to fill with people. Craftsmen and women, guards and adventurers. Go south and survive.” She said loudly, most people stopping for a second to listen to the flying Shadow. She saw

fear and hostility but also hope and determination. Perhaps some of them would make it into the mountains. Claire sure as hell had a lot of work on her table already. The thought made her smile as she turned and sped up, going for the inn. News of Ravenhall would spread, many citizens likely had the goal in mind anyway.

The independent western cities had been scratched from the map by the elves, at least most of them. Baralia to the north was the enemy and the empire was flooded with refugees. There were more kingdoms to the west of course but had Ilea been one of the fleeing people, she would've sought the mountain city as her goal.



# Chapter 191 Black Death

## Chapter 191 Black Death

“So you’re definitely leaving.” Ilea said, sitting comfortably on the bed while eating one of Keyla’s meals. Maybe she should ask about her as well, the woman was supposed to be in the capital after all. And now she was all but safe. If anything she owed it to her for the great food she sold her.

“I am. And soon. The inn is empty, its owners gave up on it when news of the invasion’s scale spread.” Trian said.

“Then we meet again in Ravenhall.” Ilea said and put her hand on his shoulder. “Take your time to grief them. My people were quite a bit ahead in psychology... so take me seriously here and talk to someone.” Ilea said and looked him in the eye.

Trian nodded and got up. “Thank you again Ilea. I would’ve failed without you two.” Trian said and hugged her. A surprising gesture to be sure but she hugged him back after a second.

“Take care. And greet Aurelia and Claire for me. I’ll visit as soon as I can.” Ilea said, releasing the hug.

“I will. You’re going to look for Eve’s killers?” He asked, sounding a little guilty.

“No. Not yet. If the time comes and you’re willing to help, perhaps I’ll come and ask.” She answered and smiled at him.

“I won’t promise anything but I definitely owe you, more than a life.” He said, putting on his cloak and helmet. “Kyrian is waiting for you in the clock tower down the road. Had something he wanted to show you.” Trian said before he vanished.

Ilea appeared on the roof of the inn and looked after him, red lightning spreading around the man before he sped off. *Still too slow.* She thought, smiling. Turning around she saw the half destroyed clock tower and jumped down on the road. It was deserted, the people in this area having fled hours ago already. Pieces of clothing, goods and tracks remained, the smell of fire and ash lying thick in the air.

She reached the tower and blinked upwards, once, twice, appearing in the top. A good view, overlooking the eastern part of the city, the wall to the north too distant to see.

“Welcome back, Huntress. I heard they called you black death.” Kyrian said as he looked northwards, Ilea stepping next to him.

“An undeserved name.” She said and chuckled.

“Why? I think it fits.” The man said.

“There’s a history to that name where I come from. One a little more terrifying than little old Ilea.” She said and leaned on the railing. “The city’s going down.”

“It is. The center will stand strong. I hear it’s not the first time an invading force has come this far. Too large an area to effectively defend. The people will return once the war is over, no matter who wins or loses.” Kyrian said.

“Even if it means slavery?” Ilea asked and he looked at her.

“Better than dying of starvation. Or being in the wild. Many will die to beasts and monsters in the coming weeks.” He said.

“You wanted to show me something?” Ilea asked and saw him smile. She could only see his eyes but knew him well enough.

“I’ve had a breakthrough. Yours and Trian’s abilities have always fascinated me. You’re a healer or at least you once were one. And Trian could take other people’s life for himself. Well focusing on that I’ve developed a new curse. One quite effective at taking life.” He said and flung a needle her way, the piece of metal stabbing her between two pieces of armor before she felt a drain of her health.

“It’s not very effective on someone like you of course, having trained with Trian and myself. Curse and Health Drain is part of your defensive arsenal but trust me this has changed how I can fight. How long I can fight. No longer do I have to worry about any small injuries.” He said and smiled.

“Congratulations.” Ilea said and ripped out the needle, flinging it back. “Why didn’t you do it earlier? Seems like an obvious choice to get a skill for self healing.” She asked.

“Not any random class can do it. And my teacher in curses never mentioned the possibility. Trian’s magic always felt peculiar to me but seeing that wood mage fight made something click. He had ways to heal himself as well. Life magic, something quite opposite to my curses but it helped tremendously to see it in action.” He explained quite happily.

Ilea didn’t reply but looked over the city again. She was glad the man had found another thing to protect him from death. Her own abilities had grown as well and soon she would likely have the possibility to advance one of her Ashen skills to the third tier.

“What are you going to do now? Trian left a moment ago. For Ravenhall.” Ilea said.

“I’m not sure. The team...,” he started and paused. “Well you’ve been the first group I worked with. And I’ve learned a lot from you all, you specifically Ilea.” He said, turning his head away a little.

“I think I’ll try to work with you for now. If you’ll have me.” He said which put a smile on her face. Working alone felt right to Ilea but having capable backup made a huge difference. As much as she hated to admit it. Plus the man wasn’t half bad.

“Of course I’ll have you Kyrian.” Ilea said and looked at him. “It would be my pleasure in fact. For now I’ll observe the developments here. Tomorrow I’ll meet the librarian again who I asked to look for records on Eve. We’ll see what comes of it.” She said, tapping her helmet with a finger.

“What about Edwin and Maria? You wanted to help them find his father didn’t you?” Kyrian asked.

“Yes. We might just do that. I doubt he has the strength to pull it off, if his father really is as powerful as he said. I don’t get why he doesn’t go and train first.” She said.

“I think he trained for years to get to where he is now. One’s patience isn’t endless and if he feels himself ready then that is the time to move. You don’t feel ready to face his father?” He asked.

“If we’re together then I think we’ll find a way. Or at least escape if everything goes wrong. There’s an opportunity to learn about the Golden Lily as well and I don’t want to miss that. But no, were I alone then I wouldn’t want to face him, knowing that Edwin fears the man. Other than just for a fun fight but to death? No.” Ilea said when a bright light made them look towards the center of the city.

A beam of bright red energy shot out northwards from the central military construct, explosions resounding far enough away to be barely audible.

“So it’s started then.” Kyrian said.

“What has?” Ilea asked.

“The stage is set. Now begins the battle for Virilya.” He said.

“The death of thousands.” Ilea said as another beam came from the center.

“Glorious isn’t it. To be witness to such an event.” He said, excitement in his voice that surprised her. “Some of the books in your room, they talk of events like this. Did you not want to see for yourself?”

“Reading about it and witnessing it is different. You don’t see people split in half and burned alive in a book.” Ilea said.

“But you can’t change anything about it either, in a book that is.” He said and smiled. “Or do you wish to simply observe. Huntress?”

She laughed and smiled. “You like that nickname don’t you.”

“I do. And I have a feeling you do as well.” Kyrian answered.

“Well I am the Azarinth First Hunter.” Ilea said.

“Azarinth First Hunter. I like that. Better than Witch of Nari.” He said and chuckled.

“You’re a witch? What about your metal class?” Ilea asked.

“Not a chance I’ll tell you.” He said. “So, First Huntress. We have a city in flames, two countries at war and ample opportunity to profit. What would you like to hunt?”

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Cameron held his breath as he hid inside the closet, his sword clutched tightly in his hands and ready to strike at any moment. He could hear the crying coming from the apartment above but he didn’t dare move. Baralia soldiers were around and in the house, he could feel them clearly.

*Why the hell didn’t I go back with the others?* The thought was too late, his squad dead by now. Slaughtered in an ambush, himself the only one with a teleportation ability to escape. Well Gloria had one too but she was the first to be hit. A sudden noise in the room, he felt a couple of people enter.

“I tell you it’s not a good idea.” A male voice said.

“I don’t give a fuck, they insulted us and I’ll kill them.” Another voice said before Cameron felt a magic surge, the presence of the third person suddenly vanishing.

“Fuck, come on let’s at least leave quickly.” The first person said.

“Why are you so damn scared.” The second man said, laughing right after, their voices leaving the room and growing more distant every moment.

Cameron waited another two minutes before he left his hiding spot, checking the room to find a dead man. One of the citizens he was supposed to protect yet he hid to save himself.

*He would’ve died one way or the other.* He didn’t believe his own thought but right now, survival came first. It wouldn’t help anybody for him to die in some random house behind enemy lines. Cameron winced as he moved through the room, the wound on his thigh bleeding into his clothes. He wouldn’t die from this but any more injuries and he might as well surrender to the Baralia troops.

*Heroic Cameron.* He thought and smiled to himself, bitter about the course of events. The empire was still busy with the roaming demons and now the very capital was at war. Opening the door to the street, he checked the surroundings, finding not a single living soul. A few of the buildings were on fire and he could tell from scorch marks on the ground that a fight had happened in the street. The soldiers previously in the house were nowhere to be seen or felt.

He had to make it back to the center. If a reasonable defense was put up, then it was there. The man had helped people escape right until his whole squad was wiped out, himself left wounded and fleeing from the elite squad they had faced. The Blood Vipers apparently. He had never heard of them before but their apparent tendency to babble about themselves left him time enough to route his escape and actually survive. Perhaps they had let him go but considering his level was comparable to theirs, it wouldn’t serve them in any conceivable way. At least none that he could think of.

The man made his way through the northern parts of the city using mostly his teleportation ability to cross streets and hide again in empty houses. Any looter would have a good time in the current capital. A sudden set of explosions rang through his ears as he shielded them quickly and jumped on the ground. *Far enough away.* He thought as he scrambled back up, careful not to worsen his wound any further.

The center was ready it seemed and the city, or at least the northern part was evacuated enough for them to engage the enemy with full force. Virilya was huge and they had the resources and people to rebuild. So long as the central district held. He knew that and Baralia knew that as well. Still, even if they couldn't take it, the economic damage would be substantial. *As is sending an army.* He thought as he rounded a corner, watching enemy troops casually walk through a rather large street, checking in stores and houses for survivors or anything easily looted. Most of the people would've taken their gold and most prized possessions with them but some likely weren't fast enough to leave.

A beam of red light suddenly enveloped the street, making Cameron duck back, his cheek singed from the heat. Explosions followed as he braced against the shock wave. It came and went, as did many of the soldiers he had seen walking their streets just a moment ago.

He would've avoided the open streets anyway but now he had another reason. The problem was that the enemy would do so too from now on.

Appearing beyond the street, he walked towards where the beam had come from. As an officer in the guard, they would let him into the central district, even heal him.

“Hold right there.” A voice resounded behind him, a presence he just now noticed, too distracted by the fire and mana in the air. Cameron turned around to find a Baralia soldier standing there, missing an arm and holding out the other with lightning crackling at his fist.

“You are dying. Go see a healer and I will do the same.” Cameron said. He was in the worse situation. Should the soldier call for help, he was likely done for. He didn’t know if he could take him out in time and lightning had the annoying side effect of being a rather good defense. At least against enemies up close.

The soldier chuckled before leaning on the wall to his right. “You’re not getting away scum...,” he said smiling before a bolt was sent Cameron’s way.

His sword flashing with blue fire, the man appeared next to the soldier and slashed towards his neck with full force. A shock went through him right when his sword made contact but the defense wasn’t as formidable as he had dreaded, the metal cutting through to the bone, killing the soldier in a single strike.

The message in his mind informed him about the man’s classes and levels. Just twenty below his main one. And now his health was even slower, his regeneration canceled out due to the wound on his thigh. *Keep moving*. He told himself. It was a long way still, especially with his injury. But he would spend his last ounce of mana and health to get back and to take as many of those fuckers with him as he could.

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“Black death, fucking ridiculous.” The soldier said as he sheathed his sword again, the joy of killing coming over him as he looked at the bloodbath before him. They had tried to hide but his nose was a good one. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth as he turned around, only to find ash spreading towards him. The only escape route was through one of the



windows but he would just blast whatever feeble mage did this to bits. His senses were good, especially in dark places.

The ash suddenly advanced much more quickly, enveloping him and the room. “Fuck... what the fuck.” He grunted as his body started burning, his health draining as his armor heated up, burning ash shot down his throat and into his eyes and nose as he tried to brush it away.

Ilea appeared behind him and cracked his neck. She didn’t bother taking an ear as she checked the massacre for any survivors. There were none.

“Too late.” She said as the man dropped to the ground, a notification popping up in her mind. An almost comical noise to her in this gruesome situation.

“I doubt there are many survivors by now.” Kyrian said but Ilea wasn’t so sure about it.

“At least we can find these kind of guys. Weed them out and murder them.” She said, grabbing the man by his chest piece and lifting him up. Looking at his face, she had to remind herself not to do this for too long, otherwise maybe she would become like him at some point. *Perhaps I already am.*

Walking out, she found a group of around fifteen Baralia soldiers stopping in their tracks as she exited the house. None of them was above level one fifty even. Likely a group they could take.

“The black death...,” One of them exclaimed in a hush, readying his weapon.

Ilea just threw the body towards them. “Don’t kill bystanders and citizens.” She stated before her wings spread and she flew off, avoiding any high level people that might’ve come to hunt them down.

*Don’t linger.* Kyrian had told her earlier. Especially now that the resistance from the empire was mostly focused on the central district. Soldiers had either fled there or outside the city, if they were alive that was. According to the corpses she saw, both sides had lost an absurd amount of people by now.

She didn't quite know what the purpose of those deaths was. She knew rationally speaking but seeing the corpses didn't quite make sense to her. For power and territory? Both countries were fine before, why have a war.

Greed was of course the answer, as were many more complicated motives but to Ilea human nature itself was at fault here. Seeing all this horror made her lose most of the remaining belief she had in her species. Demon spawn at least were single minded killing machines, driven by their instinct and hunger. Mere beasts to be fought and taken down but all of this here? That was deliberate, the people in charge knowing exactly how many people would die, how many houses destroyed and how much resources lost. They knew and still they decided to engage.

"I've decided Kyrian." She said, turning to the man leaning on the wall of the side street they were stopping in to eat and drink something.

"Hmm?" He asked, finishing up, his helmet appearing on his head.

"Tomorrow we'll meet the librarian and after that I'm going to try and get as much info on Eve and the Golden Lily as I can. Then I leave this dump." She said and he nodded.

"If that's what you've decided. You'll have to do the stealth though." He said, pointing at her.

# Chapter 192 The Librarian

## Chapter 192 The Librarian

“I’m aware of that.” Ilea said, smiling. “Looking to get a teleportation ability as well?” She asked, the man answering with a grunt.

“Doubt my classes can spew that up.” He said as they ascended again, just barely over the rooftops.

“Back to the center then? Or out into the wild?” The man asked.

Ilea watched the burning city, the center a shining beacon as spells rained down on it, retaliation coming from within just a moment later. If there still were any survivors in these parts, it would be hard to find them if none of the enemy soldiers did that. By now Ilea thought she had at least instilled a conscience into some of the murderous rapists being part of both armies. That was as much as she could do. She wasn’t about to pick sides in a war she didn’t understand, nor care about.

“I’m not sure how easy it would be to get in again. Both the city and especially the center.” Ilea said.

“What if we can’t get out anymore either?” Kyrian asked.

“Do you really think the elite, royalty and generals of the Empire don’t have a way to save their own skin?” Ilea asked with a smile.

“We just might get stuck there for a while.” He answered.

“I’ll leave tomorrow. Maybe it’s best if you stay in the clocktower? I’m sure I’ll find a way out. Did so before out of a shielded city. You though?” She said, thinking mostly of her Sphere and Blink abilities, both great at getting into and out of places.

“I suppose you’re right.” The man said after a while. “Don’t die on me, ok?” He added.

“You neither. If I’m not there in a couple days, I suggest you leave for Ravenhall. It’s going to be more and more dangerous the longer we stay here.” Ilea said and Kyrian nodded.

“I will. Good luck on your search.” He said and flew off. Ilea did the same but compared to him, rushing directly towards the shining center of the capital. An area at least as big as the whole city of Riverwatch, with much higher buildings as well.

The second stage of her Embered Body Heat was certainly effective at distraction, if nothing else. Perhaps at higher stages the heat would actually manage to seriously injure someone. At least she now had an effective area attack against really weak enemies.

Landing near the central shield, Ilea rushed through the streets, avoiding soldiers of both sides as she looked for a checkpoint to get into the center. *Should I?* She thought and instead blinked into a house close to the shield dome. Seeing through the dome with her Sphere worked she found. Blinking through it didn’t. If she couldn’t get in, she couldn’t get out either. At least that was the likely scenario.

Checking around, she found that the shield didn’t extend underground but as soon as an explosion or spell ripped a part of the street away, it would fill in the gap near immediately. *There have to be sewers or something around...* The thought led her to check any possible entryways below the

ground. Sure enough there were some. Not as many as the sewage system right outside the central district but there were some entryways.

Blinking downwards around twenty meters, Ilea entered one of them and walked towards the center with hands held high. She was sure there were people defending this place as well and sure enough as soon as she had reached a certain spot, scorch marks around the metal tube she was in, fire came rushing towards her.

Her Veil of Ash combined with her healing power and Heat Resistance made the attack seem more like a warm summer breeze. She walked on, shouting into the tunnel. "I'm not the enemy!"

Another attack came, this time water. Ilea blinked into it again and again until the powerful stream ended. Either they didn't hear her or they didn't care. Perhaps the attacks were traps or runes, not even initiated by a sentient being at the other end.

Blinking further, she rounded a corner and finally came up on the defensive force. A shield shimmered in the dark and she could see at least ten people standing behind it, one of them preparing another spell. This time she could identify them through the shield as she walked onwards. None above two hundred she found. A risky test but one she felt necessary should she want to leave the center again.

The barrier flickered when the mage behind it released his spell. A greenish mist entered the tunnel and flowed towards her, the shield closing again right after. Intrigued by the spell, Ilea let it come closer, touching and breathing in just the edge to make sure she could still blink away if it was more dangerous than she suspected.

***'ding' 'You have been poisoned by the Mist of Lys -50 HP/s for five minutes.'***

A rather strong poison but other than reducing her healing ability a little while she countered it, nothing special. *Empire of Lys... Maybe it's a spell they discovered here.* Of course they had biological weapons at their disposal. Without an insanely high defense to poisons or a healing skill, a

lot of people would succumb to this attack but who in their right mind would come through this tunnel to engage in such an easily defensible spot. Especially with shield mages in place.

Walking closer and through the mist, she was surprised to find the people behind the shield stayed calm and collected. Perhaps they expected her to fall down any moment now. The poison did take a while to drain all life after all. Ilea didn't stop though and instead kept walking, trying to blink through the barrier but again finding it impossible. Even blinking into the corners of the room wasn't possible, runes likely put up to prevent such a thing.

"I'm not your enemy." She said as she stood right in front of the barrier, the people behind it looking at each other with confusion.

"You cannot enter here and the poison will kill you soon. Leave." One of the mages said after a moment.

*Perhaps I cannot enter. Ilea thought. But I can certainly leave.*

Turning around, she left again, not about to engage that group of people, unsure if she could even break through the shield. Although her Destruction spell was surprisingly good at well, destroying them. Even that high level guy Albert who had found Cless couldn't stop her.

Blinking up again, Ilea moved through the streets, finding a check point a couple minutes later. The opening in the shield had gotten much smaller, mostly only allowing the defenders to shoot spells towards the street before them. Nobody else was entering at the moment but one of the soldiers waved her in immediately upon seeing her.

"The Shadow is back. It'll be good to have you." He said as she entered.

"Are you going out again?" He added, making her stop in her tracks.

"Perhaps later. I need to restock and prepare a new route. Baralia has taken over a big part of the city. It's getting dangerous to move around. When are

you closing the barrier for good?" She asked, hoping that her bullshit would convince the man.

"Tonight likely. No official command yet but the way things are going I'd say tonight. Most of the soldiers are already back and the rest are either dead or fleeing." He said.

"Any other way to come and go?" Ilea asked but he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not. At least not to my knowledge. I'm sure the assassins have a way. Perhaps you should speak to Major Falken." He said and she nodded.

*Most definitely not.* She thought, walking through the big plaza full of soldiers, mages, war machines and supplies. Defensive structures were built before her eyes, earth and stone mages forming the very ground to their wills. *It's gonna be pretty difficult to penetrate that one.* She thought, looking up to see the massive shining dome. Meteor like attacks coming from siege weapons exploded on impact, fire and stone rolling off the barrier like raindrops on an umbrella.

Mages working together. Ilea thought about perhaps an attacking group of mages creating a massive offensive spell like the big red light she had seen coming from the center earlier. She couldn't quite figure out where it had come from but there were a lot of machines and buildings around hershe didn't know the purpose of.

The poison was gone from her body now, earlier than the message had implied. Either her Healing spell or her resistance had done more than she had expected. Not quite knowing where to go, Ilea went to the library again. If anything the woman could tell her where to find something interesting in the central district.

Upon entering, she found that the person behind the counter was someone else. Something about the way the man looked at her made her a little uncomfortable. There was only one guard sitting in the corner this time.

"What do you want?" The man asked, obviously occupied with whatever he was reading.

“I’m looking for the woman I talked to yesterday. Brown hair and white glasses?” She asked and saw him smile a little. Not the good kind of smile.

“Oh yes, I recall her. She’s in the dungeons now, a traitor. The final proof found, I believe thanks to you.” The man said.

“Interesting story. I was looking for someone, perhaps you can take over the work she left.” Ilea said, pretending not to care. The man was gloating about his victory and obviously disliked her as well. Perhaps she could get some more information out of him before she ripped open the metal wall and smashed his skull against it.

“The work... she. No, no I’m afraid we can’t help you anymore. What again is your connection to Virilya anyway? Ilea was it?” He asked. So they knew who she was, which meant there was a chance they got it out of Elise.

“I’m here on a mission to look for the person I told Elise about. Now if you’re going to waste my time I’ll have to look somewhere else.” Ilea said, acting impatient.

“The dungeon is the only place you’ll find help.” He said and chuckled while Ilea walked towards the door, exiting with a heavy sigh.

*The Golden Lily intervened? Or was it someone else. Something unrelated to her and Eve perhaps? Now where to find the dungeons.* The man had given her enough information to work on. Ilea walked down the street and stopped near a group of soldiers.

“Where are the dungeons? I’m looking for a traitor. They owe me a service.” Ilea said, the group stopping their conversation to look at her.

“Dungeons are that way. Traitors and others alike. Should be quick about it, they don’t last long in times of war.” The man said seriously, Ilea rushing off in a sprint. The directions were simple but they served their purpose, Ilea finding a big sign only a couple streets further, indicating exactly the way the soldier had implied.



Another couple minutes of running and she came up on a stairwell leading downwards, the word dungeons barely readable written on an aging sign. Rushing down, Ilea ignored the guards and people around, blinking first into a cell, surprising the resident before she vanished again, going further down into the structure as she looked for Elise in her Sphere. There were no shouts coming from above, the guards on duty either not having seen her or simply not caring about a break in.

Unsurprisingly the dungeons were rather vast, leading down for over a dozen floors, hundreds of cells on each floor with differing amounts of residents. There were very few guards, some floors even completely empty other than the dying criminals. Hygiene was certainly not a highly prioritized concern, mold and piss damn near everywhere, only getting worse the further she went.

Finally on the fourteenth floor, in a closed up room she found who she had been looking for. Blinking inside, Ilea gently smashed the torturer's head and started healing the woman strapped on the table in the center of the room.

There were cuts and bruises but nothing life threatening. Ilea made a double take when she identified the woman and looked at the torturer again, concerned her instincts had failed her. Stopping in her motions for a second, she scratched her helmet and shook her head, checking around Elise. *There you are.* She thought, seeing the runes below the table. The woman was a mage at level 211, not something the torturer at level eighty should really be able to restrain. Touching one of the runes, Ilea felt her magic drain. Instead she just unshackled the healed woman and moved her to a chair also standing in the room.

“Y... you.” Elise stammered but Ilea just put a finger on her mouth.

“Just tell me if it's a trap, otherwise you need to recover. Meditate.” Ilea said and Elise nodded weakly, closing her eyes. She couldn't find any increased commotion both visual or audible. Perhaps this really was it. Nobody cared about the woman as soon as she had been strapped to that table. To think that a runed device like that could take out an above level

two hundred mage that easily. Investing some of her stat points into Strength wasn't the worst idea then.

*But to only have one guy at level eighty in the room with her?* It was war after all and all resources not desperately needed were reallocated towards the enemy. It seemed the empire really trusted their enchantments.

The torturer groaned and slowly got up. "I wouldn't m...", Ilea didn't get her sentence out before a red beam of energy damn near pulverized the man's head, blood and bits of brain and flesh landing on her quickly expanding Veil.

"Could've fucking warned me." She said to the woman whose extended arm slowly sunk down.

"He just did his job. Sadly it got personal." Elise said and tried to get up.

"We have time, don't worry. The center is under siege anyway, we're not going to escape easily. You'll have to be at full strength." Ilea said. "And while we're here, where nobody cares about us, I'd like to have a little talk." She said, sitting down on the table.

"You know your mana is draining right?" Elise asked with one eye open, cracking her neck.

"Easy way to build resistances. I'm sure you would've escaped eventually." Ilea answered. She already had a rather high level of Mana Drain Resistance at 18, making the device somewhat ineffective. Still it canceled out her recovery without Meditation. Add a mage or two and they could even leave her powerless down here, at least when it came to Mana related spells.

"I forgot for a second that you're from the Shadow's Hand. Plus you're young, I don't want to know what the hell you've been through." Elise said.

"Haven't been tortured yet." Ilea said with a smile, removing her helmet and holding it in her hands.

The woman grunted. “Not very pleasant I tell you. Not the worst I’ve had though.” She said and smiled back. “Now where the hell are my glasses.”

“On the table in the next room. Should I get them for you?” Ilea asked but the woman shook her head.

“It’s fine. I just really like them. Now Ilea, why did you come to these lengths to save me?” Elise asked, smirking towards her.

“Well for one thing, you wanted to help me find out more about Eve. For another, the guy at the library was the most insufferable little shit. It’s worth it just to spite him really.” Ilea said, Elise starting to laugh. “And last but not least I like you. Seem like a decent witch.”

“Witch? I prefer Arcanist but when do I ever get anything I want.” Elise said sighing.

“A good friend is a witch, take it as a compliment. So did you find out anything about Eve?” Ilea asked, constantly checking if anybody was around. She didn’t know when the torturer’s shift ended or if anybody even started to miss him at some point.

“I did, albeit not much. There are different records we have that fit well enough with the woman you described. She was a high level illusionist and mind mage but she hasn’t always been. Assassinations or rather murders from six and more years ago associated with some of the records make her out to be a somewhat sloppy killer. Apparently she learned. Was never caught, even in her early years and the records dry up around four years ago. I don’t have to tell you that there are plenty of dead around where it’s impossible to find the killer, let alone anybody that cares to find out.” Elise explained. “Do you have something to drink?” She asked, her voice drying up.

Ilea summoned some water but decided otherwise, filling a cup with ale and handing it to the woman.

“Wow, that is some good ale. Where did you get it?” Elise asked after finishing the cup.

Ilea chuckled and refilled it. “Friendly Dark Sorcerer and dare I say professional brewer.”

“Definitely, this is some of the best I’ve ever had.” Elise said, drinking a little from the second cup.

“Well I’d assume after being released from torture even piss tastes good.” Ilea said making the woman chuckle.

“I’m not going to try.” She said. “Anyway, the fact that she’s so young leads me to believe she’s one of seven possible people, all of them commoners, all of them having a reason to go after nobles. That’s what they all did, mostly. Criminals and human traffickers, slave traders and just generally horrible people protected by the law or paid by influential officials. They took it into their own hands to deliver what they thought to be justice. Some ore successful than others. Your friend, if she really managed to join the Shadows, was one of the more successful ones.” Elise explained.

“The records are in the library if you want to find out where they were from and additional possible leads. Sadly there’s nothing about recent times, not for a lack of dead nobles, that’s for sure. No idea who would’ve killed her at last but all of the people I researched for this certainly had enough enemies.” Elise finished.

“The Golden Lily.” Ilea said, watching Elise’s face turn even more serious.

# Chapter 193 Prison Break

## Chapter 193 Prison Break

“Be very careful where you mention that name Ilea.” Elise said. “Why do you think it was them?”

“Got a letter from Eve. Wrote it before she died. She mentioned she was looking for them.” Ilea said.

“That’s definitely an ambitious target. Not impossible for someone like her to be sure but still. If anything Ilea, I highly respect your deceased friend.” She said, shaking her head.

“What do you know of them?” Ilea asked.

“You know. Even with you saving me from here, I don’t think it’s a good idea to share this knowledge.” She said and looked towards the corpse in the room. “Ah fuck it. I don’t know much anyway.”

“It’s an order comprised of powerful individuals. Now take all of this with a grain of salt, even I don’t know any of this for sure. They likely have their eyes on the Library of Souls too, making it somewhat hard to find any records. I read the name in a couple letters we recovered over the years but since then the evidence has vanished. Not that difficult a task to be sure but to find their name nowhere in the whole library?” Elise shook her head.

“While we didn’t have records about the order itself, the people mentioned in the letter we did know. One of them one of the wealthiest nobles in the Kingdom of Kroll, the other a commoner owning nearly a tenth of the

capital's businesses in one way or the other. Both known to be at least above level two hundred." Elise explained.

"Now the letter implied cooperation between them, on a personal level. Going through records in regards to them and their businesses, I've found them cooperating with many others and in a grand scale. That's why I believe they don't care much about borders and countries, instead looking only to strengthen their individual stand. I have no idea if it's just a trade organization or puppeteers involved in even the empress' business,"

"We know about dozens, even hundreds of underground organizations, some even cooperating with the empire, some dangerous enough for us to ignore them. I think the Golden Lily is one of them, if not even more powerful than that. I stopped looking into the people when the High Librarian asked me personally to drop it, no reason stated." Elise said. "Some knowledge is not meant for us." He said. "So if you're looking for more concrete information you can ask the man. I doubt you could force him to share anything though."

"Stronger than you?" Ilea asked.

"Oh yes, more than just a little. Older too and he looks younger than me. Hasn't shared that secret with me either." Elise said. "Well since I've reached the two hundreds I've barely aged either. Should've worked harder when I was younger."

"I think you look great Elise. Be more confident." Ilea said with a smile, blinking into the other room and getting her glasses. "And these, they're fantastic on you. Trust me."

"Oh I know, still I appreciate it Ilea. Thank you for getting me out of this. I'd give you the records but I'm not exactly allowed back into the library." She said as she cleaned her glasses and put them back on.

"Your clothes are back there too. I'll wait for you to change." Ilea said.

"You have what you wanted, don't you?" Elise asked.

“Well now you can tell me why you’re a traitor.” Ilea said, Elise walking to the other room in her bloodied undershirt and thin pants.

“And so I wrote a letter, finally. Would’ve asked you to deliver it were it not for that bastard Rickson.” Elise said.

“The guy I met?” Ilea asked.

“That guy. You see, communication with any outside forces or governments is prohibited if you work in the library. Punishable by death actually. We know that when we go in and I was ready forty years ago. Year after year it got harder. I felt more and more isolated and seeing you come in at the brink of war, well I couldn’t quite help that tiny romantic voice inside of me anymore.” Elise said with a thin smile on her lips.

“I met him when I was still adventuring. A brilliant man. We wrote with each other for years after that until I joined the library upon my parents’ request. Honor and pride meant a lot more to me then than they do now.” She said. “I should’ve just joined the Hand.” She shook her head before looking into Ilea’s eyes.

“Well it’s worth to be on his good side, perhaps he knows about the Lily as well. Still, I like him anyways and if you want I can get you out of here. Planned to go to Ravenhall anyway as soon as I had the information I needed.” Ilea said.

“Y... you.” Elise said, brushing away tears from below her glasses. “Ilea. I knew trusting you was a good idea.” She said and smiled.

“You got tortured and nearly killed.” Ilea retorted.

“Life goes on. Getting tortured builds character.” Elise said, waving her off as she put on her second boot.

“And trauma.” Ilea said.

“That too.” Elise answered. “Now if I know you at all, you’re not going to leave those records lying on my desk behind.” She said, brushing off her clothes. Elise didn’t look like a woman who had just escaped torture.

“I mean it’s war now. The library might not stand anymore tomorrow.” Ilea said.

“You’re right. Now you have a storage device?” Elise asked, waiting for Ilea to nod. “Good. I worked for them for decades. Time to finally take something back.” She said.

“Anybody else you want to get out?” Ilea asked.

“No contact, remember? Anybody I liked at the library will be fine. Oh by the way, if we get in a fight we better run. The Library of Souls has never been taken. Not ever.” Elise warned.

“Well I’m sure you know a couple secrets that would allow us to get in without a fight.” Ilea said with a smirk.

“I do. Don’t steal too much though. If their library is empty they’ll have no other choice but to come look for you personally. As much as I think you’re strong, that would be akin to hunting down something like the Golden Lily.” Elise said.

“We get everything you have on Eve and the people she might’ve been. Anything you need or suggest we get?” Ilea asked, taking the warning seriously. If the woman alone was a mage at level two hundred, she didn’t want to face the whole staff. Not the way she was right now. Something told her that this wouldn’t be the last time she entered that particular library.

“Oh yes. Any records about me.” Elise said smiling. “I know where they are. Spent quite enough time to plan such an opportunity.”

“And you get caught immediately when you finally have it.” Ilea said.



“Ah shut it. The reason I didn’t leave before speaks for its difficulty.” Elise said. “Plus I didn’t expect Rickson of all people to have those kind of guts.”

“How will we get out again if it’s so hard to do?” Ilea asked.

“Getting out of the library was never the issue. Getting out of the city though...,” Elise said. “They insert an enchanted piece of metal into each and every member. Now you don’t want to be hunt down by the members of the library, the royal guard or an assassin squad specifically put together to rip you to shreds.” Elise said, sitting on the table.

“It’s a difficult operation and normally I’d have asked or paid you to get a healer. Now we don’t need that, do we?” She asked.

“You have one here.” Ilea said. “Where’s the piece?”

Elise tapped her chest. “It’s fixed to the back of the sternum.”

“So you have been tortured before.” Ilea murmured as she tapped on the woman’s chest.

“I guess I have.” Elise said, unbuttoning her shirt again.

“Should I try to knock you out first?” Ilea asked.

“Don’t waste your mana and the time. One quick cut here and you rip it out, bone and all. I assume you can heal missing bone?” Elise asked.

“I can. I’ll try to be as quick as possible. Want something to bite on?” Ilea asked, summoning a dagger from her necklace, heating her body up and coating the blade in heated ash to kill of any bacteria that might’ve still remained on it.

“The muffled screams might give us away.” Elise said and closed her eyes. Ilea didn’t wait any longer. Making sure there wasn’t anybody close to the cell, she put Elise to the wall behind her and stabbed her with the dagger, punching through the protective bone before she stored the blade and moved her hand inside the wound. Ilea’s hand closed around the woman’s sternum before she crushed it, a scream resounding through the room.

Pulling out the broken bone, Ilea found the metal connected to it while she healed Elise with her other hand, focusing on recreating the bone and then the flesh. The woman's screams calmed down soon after until her chest looked the same as it had been a minute ago. Healthy and closed.

"You alright?" Ilea asked, looking at the woman. She just shook her head.

"Need a moment." She said and slumped down.

"Here." Ilea said, holding out a cup of ale that she gladly took and drank in one go.

"So things like this exist." Ilea said and held up the piece of enchanted metal. "Is it kept running through your own mana?"

"It is." Elise said after a while, buttoning her shirt again.

"What else can you do with these enchantments? Cause pain or obedience?" Ilea asked.

"You mean for slaves? No." Elise answered.

"Why not?" Ilea asked again, seeing that the woman looked alright enough to talk again.

"They're always active and a high level mind magic or illusion spell, would need more mana to activate than anybody too weak to go against it could produce. Pain disrupts your mana flow and concentration, the first one is needed to activate the enchantment." Elise explained as she got up.

"Good to know." Ilea said as she opened the door to the cell. "Can you teleport?" She asked.

"Yes. One of the reasons I wanted to get the Arcanist class. It has a high chance to grant such a skill." Elise said, appearing behind Ilea and outside the cell. Ilea placed the enchanted metal piece on the table nearby.

"They'll be looking for the dead Elise." She said.

“Depends on what their orders were.” Elise said.

“You lead.” Ilea said, gesturing for the woman to go on. She vanished before Ilea’s eyes right after, appearing two floors above them.

“Do you have a perception skill that lets you see through walls?” Ilea asked right after appearing next to her.

“No, I can sense mana to an extent and there was nobody nearby. The perception type skill you talk about is mostly found in warrior type classes like your own I assume.” Elise said.

“Good speculation.” Ilea basically confirmed, making the woman laugh.

The two made their way through the dungeons without alerting anybody to their presence, appearing in an alley near the entrance just a minute after escaping the cell. Someone from the library would likely check on the corpse but they had a bit of time. Hopefully enough to get what they needed.

Ilea provided Elise with a hooded cloak and put one on herself as well, her armor below obscured at least a little. They made their way to the Library, unhindered by anybody walking by, even getting some relieved looks at two rather powerful individuals on their side of the barrier. The day had progressed, the suns at their highest point, hidden behind the rising smoke and ash from the continuing battle for the capital. The sound of magic hitting the barrier and areas around the center, intertwined with shouting from the people within helped with the concealment of the two women.

Elise didn’t lead Ilea to the library but to a building quite a bit of a distance away from it, blinking inside and below after checking around them to make sure nobody saw them vanishing. They made their way to the lowest point of the cellars, about four floors down before Elise stopped and turned to Ilea.

“Now this is the closest to the inside of the actual library that we can get without making a mess. Too far for my teleportation ability to get me there

and likely most others too. Not that you could teleport inside even if you wanted to.” Elise explained and tapped the stone wall with her fist.

“Dig?” Ilea asked, cracking her knuckles before she made her cloak vanish.

“My arcane magic lacks the punch against earth. Try not to create too much vibration.” Elise said and stepped back.

Ash formed around Ilea, specifically her hands as she created small and sharp tips on her armored hands, pushing her control to the limit to increase their density and strength. She could scratch stone back when she had just acquired her Azarinth Healer class. Digging through the ground with her current power would prove to be quite simple. Doing so quietly was just an additional difficulty.

Her skills activated and her hand lashed out, digging into the cracking stone wall as if it was mere earth. Again and again her arms rushed out, cutting rock and stone with minimal noise. The ash around her moved to push back the fragments and pieces of stone behind her and into the cellar as she moved downwards and towards the library.

Half an hour later Ilea stopped, blinking back to the starting cellar and Elise. “I can’t see further. I think we might’ve reached the library.” She said.

“Yes. Let’s see what I can do then.” Elise said as she entered the small tunnel Ilea had created, the two of them teleporting to the other end of it.

“I haven’t studied these enchantments for nothing.” Elise said, her mana flowing into the stone before her, red lines of light forming on both her hands and the wall itself before smoke rose from both. Elise winced and retracted her hand but the smile on her face let Ilea know that the operation was a success.

“Wait a second. Can we get some info on Arthur Redleaf? An associate likes to know where he is.” Ilea said. Perhaps the Library had something on the man that Edwin didn’t know about.

“Simple enough, he’s a rather prominent noble. Now we probably only have a couple minutes. Follow me closely.” Elise said before she vanished, Ilea following behind, her Perception no longer ending on the wall of her tunnel but opening up into the inner architecture of the Library of Souls.

Elise moved quickly, avoiding any living soul residing in the library as she first teleported three times, coming to a stop in what Ilea presumed was her office.

“Lazy fucks.” She said and pointed to a pile of papers on a table nearby. “That’s what you need.” She said and Ilea stored all of it in her necklace. “Now come, we should be out of here in a minute’s time.” Elise added and vanished again, Ilea appearing next to her as she already opened up a book before ripping out four pages. Ilea stored them while Elise closed the book again and put it back.

Again she vanished, Ilea following behind and storing the documents, files and books Elise gave her. She checked on them quickly when they had been summoned, finding them to be records of library members, arcanists and lastly a list of traitors to the empire. Elise smiled when she put back the last book and teleported, handing Ilea a bunch of pages regarding a certain noble.

Back in the self made tunnel, the woman waved her arms, red lines appearing again on her hands and the wall before smoke rose again and then settled. Ilea’s view of the library vanished immediately, the enchantments back in place.

“Can you fill up the tunnel again?” Elise asked when they were back in the cellar, leaving Ilea to move the rocks and crumbled stone back into the opening. The entrance was still clearly visible upon completion, Ilea storing all the rubble that didn’t fit anymore in her necklace.

“Do you have gold?” Elise asked suddenly.

“A couple, yes.” Ilea answered.

“Great, I’ll pay you back tenfold. Will just need a couple months or years to earn it first. Let’s find a stone mage.” She said and vanished.

The two of them walked through the streets of the central district as they looked for their target. It was certainly easy to find mages, even stone mages but all of them so far were imperial soldiers. Not likely that they’d betray an imperial institution for money.

“That was nearly too easy.” Ilea said after a while of walking, enjoying the impressive architecture with the golden shine from above, spells still continuously raining upon the defensive globe.

“What do you mean? Another minute and we would’ve been confronted.” Elise said.

“You mean they spotted us?” Ilea asked and Elise turned towards her and smiled.

“Did you honestly think we’re the only two people in that building having a perception skill to see living beings? Most of them are mages.” Elise said. “The good thing was that they knew me and I doubt my betrayal made the rounds yet. I’m not terribly liked but still, with the flimsy reason of sending a letter at least some people would’ve made a bit of a ruckus. Especially regarding the contents of the letter. Easier to just kill me and then present the charges. Not much anybody would do then.” Elise explained.

“Still, with you there as well some of them must’ve asked themselves who exactly I was with.” She added. “And now the next generation won’t even know who I was. Hopefully.”

“You mean the pages you ripped out. Can’t they just add them again? I mean the people there knew you.” Ilea suggested.

“Few would care to do so. Knowing that I escaped will seal their lips and I doubt Rickson would go look for my records. Even if, he’d be glad any mention of me was stripped.” Elise said.

They walked into a square, finding a loud group of adventurers drinking on the terrace of a pub. “You’re terribly optimistic.” Ilea said, a little more quietly which made Elise stop and look at her.

“Ilea I know them, all of them. They’re too smart for their own good and pride can be as blinding as a high level light spell. As long as I’m not discovered by an imperial on my way out I think I’m fine” Elise said.

“Don’t jinx it.” Ilea added as they approached the adventurers.

“What’s a jinx?” Elise asked, intrigue in her question.

“Any of you lads a stone mage?” Ilea asked, her armor switched for the usual leather one.

“Who’s askin?” One of them answered.

“This fella.” Ilea said, twirling a golden coin through her fingers. The man answered with a smile.

“How long will this take? I’ve got places to be.” He said.

“Fifteen minutes at most.” Ilea said and smiled her best smile.

# Chapter 194 Dangerous Flight

## Chapter 194 Dangerous Flight

“There you go. Good as new.” The man said with a bit of a slur in his speech. Ilea couldn’t deny his craftsmanship, leaving the stone wall behind as if it had never been touched.

“Good. And this is for your silence.” She said, flinging another gold coin towards the man.

“Two reasons why this wasn’t a bad idea.” The man said and shook his head. “I’ll leave now, lest I remember you two.” He said and touched the wall, melding with the stone before he was completely absorbed.

“What a weird way to teleport.” Ilea said and shook her head, not seeing the man anymore through her sphere.

“You mean opposed to ripping through the fabric of reality and appearing at your destination? From thin air?” Elise commented and chuckled.

“I suppose you’re right.” Ilea said and blinked to the side street above.

“Arthur Redleaf hmm? So you’re involved in the recent attacks against nobles all over the city?” Elise asked.

“One or two of them, yes.” Ilea said as they walked towards one of the possible exits from the city.



“It’s the lost son isn’t it, Edwin Redleaf.” Elise commented as they watched the checkpoint from afar. The dome was closed already, the soldiers clearing away the remaining tables, traps and supplies.

“Checkpoints are closed then. Come, let’s see if it’s all of them.” Ilea said, turning around. “What do you know of the man?”

“Little, I read his file around five years ago. Noble son but the Redleafs don’t favor their own children. Same rigorous training or well, torture more like as the child soldiers and assassins they usually groom. It’s not really an unusual story if you look at him as one of them. Still, he hasn’t been killed yet so that’s unusual enough. The ones that normally disobey do so earlier and get taken care of by the families or an imperial assassin. He took his time to strike. Smart that one.” Elise explained.

“You knew that from something you read five years ago?” Ilea asked doubtfully.

“I’m a librarian.” Elise said as if it was the most normal thing in the world. “We’ve got skills for that.” She added.

*There it is.* Ilea thought, accepting it now. Perhaps they had their own library in their mind with all the information they had ever consumed.

“I don’t think the man escaped because of the torture.” Ilea said more to herself as they reached the next checkpoint. Just that there wasn’t one in the first place.

“The sewage then.” Ilea sighed and walked off.

“Now just focus on me and follow. No spells other than teleportation.” Ilea whispered to Elise while filling the whole tunnel with ash, condensing it again and again. The librarian watched the ash in fascination and nodded.

When she had gathered enough, Ilea walked towards the exit. A large group of imperial mages and soldiers occupied the room before the tunnel Ilea had previously visited from the other side. Some of them looked at the newcomers but it was already too late, Ilea's ash expanding and distributing in the room with a flash before she blinked to the shield mages, ramming one of them into the close wall before blinking to the other one, hitting him in the stomach without any spells, the force sending him flying for a couple meters.

The defensive shield flickered and Ilea was through, Elise close behind before it stabilized again, a flood of fire following the two of them as they vanished and appeared in an unoccupied apartment outside the central district.

"Come on, you can celebrate when we're further away." Ilea said, blinking again. Some Baralia soldiers noticed them, some even trying to follow for a while but the two of them were simply too fast, escaping towards the clock tower where Kyrian was probably still waiting for Ilea.

"Where are we going?" Elise asked after a while.

"Still have a friend in the city." Ilea answered, blinking again.

"Edwin?" Elise asked with a smirk.

"Edwin is more like an abusive ex friend you sadly still sometimes have to see." Ilea said in a monotone voice.

"Did he rape you?" Elise asked in confusion.

"That's not what I... no, he didn't rape me." Ilea said. "You should really look into psychology."

"I'm not about to break any slaves." Elise said with disgust.

"Forget about it." Ilea said, not about to explain the misunderstanding from her standpoint coming from Earth. At least they knew what psychology was, just that it was likely used in a purely military way. *It's a different*

*world and by now I'm not really one to talk about morals.* She thought to herself as they reached the street with the clock tower.

Kyrian was meditating on the top floor, metal spinning around him as they appeared nearby.

“You’re back early.” He said as he got up.

“We have to leave immediately. This is Elise, librarian and a friend.” Ilea said as he approached them.

“It’s nice to meet you Elise. You really make friends everywhere you go.” He said looking at her.

“And enemies.” Ilea said but he waved her off.

“That I know how to do too.” Kyrian said.

“You must be Edwin then.” Elise said. “I didn’t know you were a metal mage, quite a rare class.” She added with respect. “To think a noble like you has hid in the Shadow’s Hand.”

“My name is Kyrian. I can see where your priorities lie though.” He said, the second part towards Ilea.

“Kyrian I’m sorr...,” She started but he just put his hands up.

“I’m joking. Now come, I assume her knowing about Edwin means we’ll visit him first?” Kyrian asked.

“I hadn’t planned on it but why not. I have something on his father and who knows how long we’d need to find them again if we don’t visit the hideout now.” Ilea said, thinking about it.

“Can you fly?” She asked Elise.

“Most useless skill I’ve ever gotten.” She replied but Ilea just smiled.

“Oh you’ll like it. Trust me. Reason enough to get out of that bloody library.” Ilea said.

“I doubt it, excitement about something like that really diminishes after a couple decades you know.” Elise said, the others activating her flying skills.

“We’ll see.”

Ilea reduced her speed and turned around, checking on the laughing Elise as she moved up and down in the air, twirling and nearly losing control from time to time. Flying was as expected not an experience diminished by years of waiting to finally do it. Ilea still enjoyed it and she’s been doing it for over half a year now. She doubted even a pilot’s experience would come close to what she could do. Perhaps skydiving but the speeds were on a completely different level.

Plus she wasn’t just falling, she could go wherever she wanted. Elise suddenly veered downwards before she crashed into a set of trees, branches snapping before she came to an abrupt stop, rolling on the ground with at least some broken bones.

“Kyrian wait!” Ilea shouted to the man ahead of them and landed next to the injured Elise, shooing away the bear like creature that had approached carefully. The monster roared at her but Ilea simply knelt down next to the nearly unconscious woman and checked her for injuries. Several ribs had been broken, as was one of her arms.

“I flew...,” Elise stammered out. “It hurts.”

“Flying doesn’t hurt.” Ilea said as she focused healing the most pressing injuries. “You should invest in Vitality. Some tree branches shouldn’t injure you that much.”

“If you’re in a... ah, fuck... if you’re in a library, other stats seem much more vital.” The woman said.

“Well you’re not anymore.” Ilea said when the bearwolf roared again, Elise lifting her hand before a beam of red energy disintegrated the creature, not even leaving bones behind.

“I can see how focusing your stats can be beneficial.” Ilea said but she was still rather happy about her own spread out stats. She would’ve been dead ten times over without it. Elise would soon be too if she didn’t change her approach.

“Still, you need to survive. And you won’t have a healer around every time you fly into trees.” Ilea said, helping Elise get up.

“Thank you. I’m quite aware of my shortcomings Ilea. I’ll get it to two hundred first thing I do.” She said.

“Make that five hundred and I won’t bother you about it anymore.” Ilea murmured before her wings spread again. She didn’t listen to the woman’s response, joining Kyrian a moment later.

“Is she alright?” The man asked.

“She is.” Ilea answered and continued onwards to the hideout they had used the week before.

“Anybody home?” Ilea said while opening the camouflaged entrance to the Alymie hideout. Considering all the nobles in and around Virilya there must’ve been a lot of these places around these plains and forests.

“Ilea?” Felicia asked, checking the hallway from their room. “It’s you! I’m glad you’re still alive. Come, Aliana just finished cooking.”

*When isn't she?* Ilea thought but nonetheless joined Felicia on the big table. “Where’s Edwin and Maria?” She asked, looking around but finding nobody other than the two through both eyes and sphere.

“They’ve been out since early morning. But Edwin said it’s a small task only today. The war messed up their plans I think.” Felicia explained before starting to eat. “You brought someone new? Did the war get in the way as well?”

“Not exactly. We finished what we came here for.” Ilea said, sitting down. “I guess we can wait for them to return. Elise what’s that magic you’re using? Arcane?”

“Yes, why?” The woman replied, a little uncertain about the new people around. Still, she sat down and got a plate of food. Aliana seemed all the more happy to feed more people. Their residence in the hideout would leave behind the smell of cooked and grilled meat for a year at least. Longer if Felicia wouldn’t use her magic to create some sort of ventilation system.

“My resistance to that element is only at level six. I could use some training.” Ilea said between chewing.

“You want me to attack you?” Elise said and then nodded. “I guess I can do that but don’t underestimate it, my magic packs quite a bit of power. And it’s going to hurt.”

“I doubt the second part.” Ilea said with a grin. “And I hope the first part is right.”

“Is it alright if I join you in that?” Kyrian asked.

Ilea looked at the man sideways. “Ah yes, your healing curse. You can use that on me and we’ll get the system down. Doubly effective for both of us.” She said and gave him a thumbs up.

“Wanna start after the meal?” Kyrian asked and Ilea nodded.

“Thanks by the way Aliana. Your cooking is marvelous.” The man said and smiled at the woman who blushed quite a bit but didn’t reply.

Ilea just looked at him with a sly grin before finishing her food.

“Why aren’t you wearing your armor?” Elise asked, all of them standing or sitting around the clearing a couple hundred meters away from the hideout, having left behind a note in case the others come back.

“I don’t want to have it repaired again. Plus the damage will be higher like this.” Ilea said. Kyrian nodded in thought and switched to more casual clothes as well, shivering right after.

“Not a fan of the cooling system.” He said, referring to his new storage ring.

“Just wait until it’s summer.” Ilea commented. “Where did you get those clothes anyway?”

“You think I just sat in the tower and waited for you?” Kyrian said and chuckled. “The whole district was empty, except for a bunch of soldiers.”

“Are you two done?” Elise asked, red energy flowing around her form. Felicia giggled from the side, apparently enjoying the sight.

“Me first, start as low as possible.” Ilea said right before a beam of red energy hit her in the left arm. The attack barely burnt into her flesh. The clothes would be ruined, that was for sure. Kyrian had been right though, perhaps she would visit the capital once more after all. Just to fill up her wardrobe with some spares.

“More, until you my arm is ripped off.” Ilea said, the wound healing quickly.

Elise shook her head with a smile, looking at Felicia and then Kyrian.  
“She’s joking right?”

“I’m afraid not.” The man replied. “She can take it, trust me.”

“The Shadow’s Hand. Seems like the jokes and rumors weren’t exaggerated at all...,” Elise murmured to herself before a stronger attack hit Ilea’s arm.

Again and again they tested until finally her flesh was ripped off, the bone below refusing to go.

“Anything stronger and I won’t be able to specifically aim the attack at your arm.” Elise said. “Are you sure you’re alright?” She asked.

“Yes, quite fine. And this is good. You can aim this at my torso as well, the damage will be more extensive that way. I’m pretty much immune to pain by the way.” Ilea said. “Kyrian you can use your drain now, it won’t be a problem.” She added, looking at her teammate. The first notifications had already appeared in her mind. It made sense, as losing an arm to a specific magic attack would certainly constitute some amount of skill gain. She was a little annoyed that not even flinching at it didn’t give her an additional thing. *Her face is pretty good at least.* She thought, looking at Elise.

The drain set in and every fifth spell was aimed at Kyrian from now on, albeit at a much lower intensity. Having the flesh stripped off your arm wasn’t a nice experience even without any pain. Plus his resilience wasn’t exactly comparable to Ilea’s, even though his defense was excellent for a mage. The same attack Elise used on Ilea would likely disintegrate his bones as well.

After twenty minutes of this, Kyrian set out to get a breather, the constant pain a little much for him. Elise moved on to target Ilea’s stomach and chest, ripping through her unprotected flesh again and again. With time, the attacks dealt less and less damage. Not noticeable to the eye and barely different in Ilea’s health meter but to her healing skill, the difference was like night and day.



Ilea ignored the notifications in her mind as she had started to do a while ago. It distracted from the training and while she could do little else but stand there and take it, she could increase her knowledge about her healing skill, learning more about her body and which parts needed to be healed first in different scenarios. Bloody scenarios for sure. The ground around her was littered with guts and blood but she stood there like nothing happened. Well her clothes were ripped up of course but other than that, her mana recreated her flesh perfectly through Hunter Recovery.

When the suns were setting, her eyes moved up to the trees behind Elise where her Sphere had picked something up. A fleeting feeling at best but having trained extensively with Eve, Ilea was an expert at spotting hard to find people.

“Welcome back.” She said. “Guess our little session is over.”

Maria appeared on the tree and jumped down, looking around. Elise was on guard but seeing Ilea’s casual behavior and Kyrian’s continued meditation let her know that the newcomer wasn’t an enemy.

“I need to take care of something.” Elise said, walking to a nearby bush before she puked her guts out.

“You don’t waste any time, do you?” Maria asked with a smile. “How’d it go with you? The war certainly brought a lot of chaos into this whole operation.”

“And opportunities.” Ilea said. “We were successful. Trian has already left. I possibly have something for you two.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Maria said in a monotone voice. “Found a new friend as well I see.” She added in a very obviously annoyed tone.

“Ah shut it girl. I couldn’t give two shits about you and the Redleaf boy. Very effective murdering in the past months though. You must be one of the survivors then?” Elise said while cleaning her mouth. Ilea threw her a flask with water.

“You told her our names?” Maria asked and stared at Ilea.

“And here I thought we started to have a thing here.” Ilea said smiling.

“You really are a liability. I thought so from the start but...,” Maria started but just sighed. “Who is she anyway?”

“I’m right here you know. Elise, ex librarian of the Library of Souls. Perhaps you’ve heard of it.” The woman said with a smile, Maria’s expression turning to stone.

“The library of S...,” She started and looked at Ilea. “You didn’t...,”

“I have no idea where your thoughts are. I have the latest gossip on Arthur if that helps.” Ilea said.

“You glorious idiot.” Maria said, leaving Ilea with the question if she should take that as a compliment or an insult.

“Call me idiot again and I’ll smash your tits right off your chest.” Ilea said.

“Apologies.” Maria said, actually bowing to her. “For doubting you. As free spirited and impulsive as you are, your ways are efficient. To think a member of the library would defect the empire...,”

“Is that just who you are? Constantly insulting people?” Ilea asked but smiled. The woman reminded her of a bully she had put in her place back in primary school.

“What? I didn’t insult you?” Maria said confused.

“As free spirited and impulsive as you are. Those were your words. Do you not see the possibly offensive content?” Elise asked as she joined Ilea and handed back the water.

“Oh I see. I’m sorry. I’ve spent the last couple years being tortured and raped. My social etiquette lacks its previous splendor.” Maria said.

“See, I knew I started to like you.” Ilea said, both of them grinning.

“You scare me.” Kyrian said as he got up. “Both of you. I don’t envy your enemies.”

“You’re not exactly harmless either. You can stop cursing me now by the way. It’s unpleasant.” Ilea said and the feeling left immediately, as did the constant health drain.

“Thanks, got four levels today.” Kyrian said with a smile, his armor appearing on his body an instant later.

“Opportunities hmm?” Maria asked as she looked at the man. “Well we’ve not been idle either. Edwin is at the hideout, planning the next move now that Virilya is under siege. A lot of buildings and room has been freed up and a lot of important people have fled and are isolated. Perhaps what you found may help as well.” Maria said to the group.

# Chapter 195 Detour

## Chapter 195 Detour

“Perfect. This is the missing piece.” Edwin said as he read through the letter again. “I owe you my life and now you’re even giving me this piece of the hunt.” The man added, looking at Ilea.

“Stop flattering me. You’ll be able to repay me one day or the other. I’m sure you won’t sit idle after your father has been taken care of.” Ilea said, sitting casually in her chair.

“Oh I won’t and I’ll be there when you call on me, no matter who or what the target is. That is my word.” Edwin said and Ilea just snorted which made Maria laugh in turn.

“Why exactly is she helping them? I thought he abused her?” Elise asked Kyrian, the two of them sitting next to each other while Aliana sat next to Kyrian, closer than he seemed to like.

“Abused her? As far as I heard he just took advantage of her to clear out some dungeon at some point. Ilea was a lot weaker a couple years ago, or so I’ve heard.” The man answered. “Arthur Redleaf is part of the Golden Lily.” He added.

“Ah, now that makes sense. The man is very influential though, I doubt the group of you together will be able to take down the Redleaves, no offense.” Elise said.

“I appreciate your concern librarian. It is not my family that I want to take down, it is merely my father. And that I feel quite capable of doing. At least together with Maria and some other help if they’re willing.” Edwin said, looking at all three of them in turn.

“We’re gone as soon as it smells too dangerous, you know that.” Ilea said. “I won’t risk my life for you, not again.”

“You’ll be happy to face a dangerous opponent.” Maria commented, drinking a cup of tea.

“I am, yes. Still I’d rather face something less intelligent than a human. Easier to predict and flee from.” Ilea said.

“She’s not wrong. Although the opportunity of facing my father makes my blood boil.” Edwin said with a rare smile on his face.

*Hey I can actually do that now.* Ilea thought, looking at her arm. She had changed into more comfortable leather armor after they had returned, throwing away the ripped shirt she had used to train.

“So you have the location?” Kyrian asked. “I’ll join as well but my own life and Ilea’s have a higher priority than the mission.”

“That is understood. And I appreciate the manpower, I promise to pay you according to a Shadow’s worth. Additional to any favors you’ll need in the future.” Edwin said.

“Should you survive.” Maria commented again.

“Should we survive. Yes. You should be on my side you know?” He added but she just smirked and shrugged. “And yes, I have the location. At least I think I do. An island off the coast near the Naraza mountain chain. The letter mentions the Isle of Garath. The locals might know where exactly that is.”

“We’re going to escort Elise to Ravenhall first.” Ilea said. “Should we join you here again or in a town near the isle?”

“Here, I’m sure the whole city will know why you’re there after ten minutes. No offense.” Maria said.

“I can help sooth the pain of your lost child if you want, no reason to be such a bitch.” Ilea answered with a smile.

“Ah, don’t worry. They destroyed that part when I was a kid. Not good to have distractions as a future assassin.” Maria said completely seriously.

Ilea didn’t retort but nodded to the woman.

“Thought so.” Maria said and finished her cup of whatever brew she was drinking.

“I can find my own way to Ravenhall.” Elise said but Ilea shook her head.

“I’m sure you could but I know people that can get you set up and hidden away.” Ilea said. “Plus I want to see it when you finally meet him.” She added with a smile. Maria snorted and left the table.

“I agree, as much as you’ve helped you’re not the most discreet of people.” Edwin said. “We’ll wait here. How long do you need to Ravenhall and back?”

“A week, maybe longer.” Ilea answered.

“I don’t think I can fly that fast. The skill is barely at level four.” Elise joked.

“I’ll carry you, don’t worry. Wanna join too Kyrian?” Ilea asked and he shrugged.

“Why not, I’d like to see how Ravenhall is doing. Perhaps the imperial influence has lessened now that war broke out.” He said.

“Perhaps.” Ilea said and got up. “See you in a week then.” She said to Edwin who nodded. “Maybe go loot some better armor in Virilya.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The man asked, looking down on himself but Ilea didn’t elaborate, leaving the hideout and breathing in some fresh air.

*‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7’*

*‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8’*

Neither her Curse nor Health Drain resistances had increased but considering their already high level it was a given. She’d get them higher soon. Perhaps Trian was looking to stay occupied in Ravenhall. She thought about asking both him and Claire to help with Arthur but it didn’t feel right. Going alone seemed like the right thing to do but she wouldn’t stop Kyrian if he wanted to join. He wanted to find out more about Eve’s killers just as much as her. Neither would she stop any of the others if they wanted to join.

The impact that this mission would have on the lives of everybody who was involved would be quite extensive. At least if the powers that be found out who exactly they were. Ilea at least didn’t plan to visit any big human city anymore until she was ready to face the worst of them, except for maybe Ravenhall. The thought made her sigh and take a deep breath of air. Perhaps it was an excuse to get away? *It’s good enough.* She thought. To go explore again. Maybe with Kyrian as a teammate? Or another team? *No, either alone or with Kyrian.*

“Ready?” The man asked when he joined her outside, clad in his black armor.

Ilea nodded and looked to Elise. “Hop on.” She said and motioned towards her back.

“I’ll make sure that the next time we meet, this won’t be necessary.” Elise said as she held on to Ilea whose ashen wings spread in the dark forest.

“Do that, try to train somewhere without trees though.” Ilea said before they took off, quickly reaching their top speed on their way to the southern mountain chain housing Ravenhall and Morhill, most of the population in the area completely wiped out by the demon summoning. There were surely

still straggler demons around, likely still decimating or completely destroying cities and villages around the empire and beyond.

Their path of travel didn't bring them close to the fleeing citizens of Virilya but Ilea didn't doubt they would meet the first ones in Ravenhall soon. Some might've fled even before the actual attacks had happened.

The night stretched over the plains of the empire, some clouds visible while the moon bathed their way in a pale light. They didn't rest, nor did they slow down. Kyrian at some point used a curse on Ilea to keep himself going, reaching the end of his resources a little earlier than her. Metal manipulation was apparently more draining than an actual flying skill like Ilea had. Plus she didn't need any mana to keep it going. Still, they paused a couple hours later to quickly recover through Meditation additional to some food and drink.

Another one and a half days of travel finally brought them into the southern mountain chain. Snow still clung to the higher parts of the rocky terrain, not ready to leave even with the spring suns shining down on them. Cold winds from the ocean would secure the white veil throughout the year. A cat and her growing kittens played near a snow covered house quite a while away from the city of Ravenhall, their first experiences in hunting small critters carefully observed by their mother.

Three individuals neared the walled mountain city of Ravenhall and slowed down, descending towards the peaks overlooking the city.

"They've certainly been busy." Kyrian said, the noise coming from the city combined with the winds pushing on their small forms nearly drowned out his voice.



“The walls are higher.” Ilea said, noticing that there were more than one wall now. Like Virilya, Ravenhall was now sectioned into more than a single part. Three thick walls now towered over all but the most central area. Hundreds of people, carts, mercenaries and soldiers could be seen on the road leading to the city, craters and fires still visible in the massive field of battle that had decided the fate of the town. Possibly forgotten, a fortress of demons in the now cursed southern mountains of the human plains. Retaken and made into a fortress of human power. While part of the empire, a statement to the mercenaries of the Shadow’s Hand. Ilea couldn’t help but smile when she saw the black flags fluttering in the wind above the city gates.

Of course it was the Hand that brought ruin to not only Ravenhall in the first place. Or at least it was one of theirs who did it. The people coming to the city didn’t seem to care, Ilea and her companions joining the refugees, adventurers and merchants coming from all over and watching their relief of finishing a perilous and long journey.

They got some looks when they landed near the gate but considering Ravenhall was the home town of the Shadows, it was excitement and relief instead of apprehension and fear that they saw in the spectators’ eyes. The guards on the gate greeted them and waved them inside.

“No toll for the Hand.” One of them said and nodded with respect. The influence had certainly increased, that much was sure. The town itself, while many traveled towards it seemed nearly deserted. Compared to the bustling streets and shops, Ilea found many a storefront still destroyed and empty. Merchants put up their stalls in the streets themselves while architects, builders and mages of all sorts walked around, discussing improvements and repairs.

It didn’t look like many an imperial was inside, only the odd soldier showing and they were all running around. News of the capital must’ve reached Ravenhall already but most of the people would remain unconcerned until the city was actually taken. Something that with what Ilea saw in the central district, might take more than a couple days or weeks.

The center most wall held the tallest government and guard buildings, including the main buildings of all the big guilds and to Ilea's surprise, a massive stronghold of the Shadow's Hand. As far as she knew, they didn't have any other buildings in the city other than Virilya. Surely that was still their headquarters but now they were part of the city's leadership it seemed, compared to the mercenary guild it was known for in the first place.

A guard clad in black armor nodded towards Ilea. The man was at level one eighty, not quite enough to join the order but more buildings and influence definitely required more personnel as well.

"Your badge." He said before they entered and Ilea summoned the thing and handed it over.

"Thank you. Go on." The guard said, not asking anything of Kyrian and Elise. They seemed to trust their members enough to let them in with company.

Ilea smiled as soon as she was inside, having checked through the rooms her Sphere could reach, she quickly made out a big office on the top floor, one woman sitting on her neatly organized desk while a girl painted near one of the windows.

"Found her. Follow me please." Ilea said to the others, switching to more comfortable leather armor as they made their way up the beautiful wooden stairs.

*They really made sure to leave a good impression. Or rich I suppose.* The thought was confirmed again when they actually exited the stairwell to reach Claire's office. The furnishing and even the magical lights on the top of the hallway looked expensive. The woman looked up even before Ilea reached the door, smiling and motioning for them to enter. All this completely unknown to Kyrian and Elise. At least Ilea thought Elise couldn't see moves like that through closed doors.

She entered when Claire got up and went to hug Ilea immediately. "Back so soon." She said. "I heard about Trian. And Eve. I'm so sorry dear." She said and let go of her.

“You could’ve come and asked me for help as well Ilea. You know that.” Claire said as she went on to greet Kyrian and Elise before the door closed behind them automatically. She really had made her office her own. The different magic fields Ilea felt around her, even without magic perception, told her that this was likely Claire’s permanent office.

“I hope you’re not mad Claire. I know you have your obligations here.” Ilea said, waving to Cless who just now noticed the newcomers. The girl smiled and rushed towards her, stopping abruptly with a big hug.

“I was mad. Damn near came and looked for you. Trian talked me out of it.” Claire replied. “I assume she is trustworthy?” She added, motioning towards Elise.

“I sure hope so.” Ilea said and chuckled. “You’ll have time to make sure of that. Or Dagon has. She’s a librarian from the Library of Souls, here to meet with him.”

“Very brave. Last I heard the only people possibly allowed to leave the library were men. You’ve left then? A fugitive of the empire.” Claire stated as she approached the woman and shook her hand.

“Well...,” Elise started but Claire just waved her off.

“We’ll find a place for you, new name and all. Your hair will have to be colored and new glasses. Plus some training to raise your levels a little. Destroyed your records?” Claire asked and Elise nodded. “Good. That’ll give us a week or two. With Virilya at war perhaps we won’t have to deal with assassins or hunters for a while. Please. Make yourselves comfortable.” She said, gesturing to the sofa and collection of drinks on the table nearby.

“Thank you.” Ilea said, letting go of Cless.

“Don’t mention it. I’ll have to talk to you alone later. How long will you stay?” Claire asked.

“Just a couple days, maybe even less.” Ilea answered. “Elise will be staying though. Main reason we’re here really.”

“Good, good. Elise... you know Dagon?” Claire asked.

“I.. yes, it’s been. About forty years. I’m not sure he’ll remember me.” Elise said, looking towards Ilea.

“We’ll visit him right after I’m done. Just give me a couple minutes. I’m serious though, sit down and drink something. Kyrian, there’s non alcoholic things as well.” She said, the man nodding his thanks as he went to look at the bottles.

“You’ve gotten better.” Ilea said, looking at the half done painting near the window. It depicted a demon fighting against a warrior in black, ice and fire raining from the sky above them.

“I’m already level thirty! Claire said that’s great for my age.” The girl said with a big smile.

“That’s great. Keep training and in no time you’ll reach even me.” Ilea said.

“I think I’m already stronger than you. But you should train more too, the question marks above your head haven’t changed since last time.” Cless said in a very British accent.

*Little shit.* Ilea thought but smiled at the girl before walking back to the others.

“Are you alright?” Claire asked between looking through papers, quickly glancing at her.

Ilea sat down on the desk and sighed. “No. It’s been difficult,” she started. “But I’m sure I’ll get there. Don’t worry, I won’t jump into the lion’s den and get myself killed.” She said. “At least not yet.”

Claire just wordlessly put her papers down and walked to the other side of the table, hugging Ilea again. This time she didn’t let go for a while.

“Thanks.” Ilea said, hugging the woman back. “Sorry for not contacting you earlier.”

“I won’t forget that one but don’t worry about it too much. I think we all knew she had this coming for her at one point or the other. I just didn’t expect it to happen so soon. Let’s take care of Elise for now, afterwards we can discuss Eve.” Claire said before walking over to Kyrian and hugging him as well.

“I appreciate it.” Kyrian said. “What do you think about all this?”

“I’ve started looking into her as soon as I’ve gained access to more records. To find out if she survived the demon summoning at all. I’ve found out that she did when I heard from Trian.” Claire explained. “We were never… close.” She added and let that stand.

“Come with me then. Dagon is back in Viscera.”

“Can I take this with me?” Kyrian asked, motioning to his cup.

“Of course, of course.” Claire answered as the door opened again.

“New walls?” Ilea asked when they exited the building together, all of them wearing hoods to at least keep their general appearances hidden.

“Yes, my idea and I managed to push it through in the end. Like this we can brace against attacks from both outside and inside. Takes more guards to man of course but considering the recent events, the push back was minimal at best. Even without guards. Against the tragedy of the demon summoning by our beloved elder, it would’ve saved thousands if not the whole city.” Claire explained.

“Merchants have been coming from day one and with Virilya I believe the city will be just as populated if not more by the end of this year.” Claire said.

“And is it prepared for that?” Kyrian asked, sceptically looking at the fortifications and guards.

“A broken city on the rise harbors a lot of opportunities. For many. It could go either way but with the name of the Hand and many of its members residing or at least regularly traveling here, I hope the worst are kept out.” Claire said as they exited the central walled off part.

“Well let’s hope your predictions come true then.” The man said.

“At the very least the empire won’t care much anymore if we take things into our own hands a little more. I’d say they’ll be happy for that too. The imperials responsible have been easy enough to deal with so far. There will be push of course for the Hand to assist in defending the capital but the impact on Ravenhall itself will likely be minimal other than a lot of well paying jobs for our members.” Claire added.

They talked about some more of the changes going on in the city, new numbers of surviving members and citizens who somehow escaped the fate of most of the city during the demon attack. Many of them had returned, as did survivors from Morhill and other cities and villages from the mountain chain. The general public didn’t know that an elder of the Shadow’s Hand had caused the demon attack, simply knowing that it had come from Ravenhall. Most of the people doubting or blaming the order had changed their minds when they heard about the retaking of the city and the following systematic extermination of demons going as far as the nearest western kingdoms.

# Chapter 196 Rebuilding

## Chapter 196 Rebuilding

Viscera itself was walled off as well now, the entrance to the main quarters opening only after a guard had confirmed the identity of Claire, activating a nearby enchantment to open the heavy metal gate.

“To keep in and out.” Claire said, nodding to the guard who was also clad in black armor.

“Requirements lowered?” Ilea asked, seeing that the guard again wasn’t close to level two hundred.

“No, not for the actual members. They’re the Shadowguard. I know the name isn’t the best, we’re still working on it. A guard added to the city guard, employed, trained and selected by the Shadow’s Hand. Benefits and possible jobs and later membership are enough incentive for many to join. I imagine the war with Baralia will sway more than one mind to join us instead of the empire.” Claire explained, leading them through the halls. No demon corpses remained and Viscera itself was cleaner than Ilea had ever seen it. It was impressive in the first place, all of Ravenhall but knowing how it had looked like just about a month ago made it damn near unbelievable.

Magic really showed its power in production and if enough powerful people pulled on the same string, impossible results could be accomplished. Most of that power was usually focused on destruction, killing and warring. Here

too the growth will come to an end at some point, at least the explosive growth the city currently experienced.

“He had the window repaired.” Ilea commented, looking up at the library.

“Any other kids survive?” She asked Claire when they were a little ahead of the others, Cless riding on Kyrian’s shoulders.

“Few. Most of them traumatized I’m afraid. A couple members volunteered to take care of them for now.” Claire said. The deaths and individual tragedies caused by Adam Strand were unimaginable. Mere numbers to Ilea’s mind. The waves it had already sent over the empire and beyond would only be observable through future history.

“Any news on Strand or any of the other elders?” She asked but Claire shook her head.

“Nothing. Dagon and Sulivhaan are doing a decent enough job. Verena is the only one who cared about managing in the first place. I’ve not worked under her so I don’t know if we’re a good replacement or not.” Claire explained as they made their way through the headquarters, coming up to the elevators.

“We? So you’re an elder already? Thought you’d need another couple months or years.” Ilea said jokingly.

“Oh I’ll get there. Though I’ll need ways to increase my level too. The demon pool in the Haven might come in handy for that. Personnel has to be there at all times to take care of them but the positions are surprisingly always taken. Even in the Hand it seems like people won’t turn down an easy way to gain experience.” Claire explained as they entered the elevator.

“It’s not real experience.” Ilea said. “Even if they’re getting stronger, they won’t get used to the power if they don’t use it.”

“Many have climbed high by using an advantage over others or a certain kind of monster. Many of them are with the Hand and trust me, most of them could still beat down a whole squad of imperial scouts. Even with that



lacking experience. That's what sparring is for." Claire said and Ilea didn't have an argument against that. She wondered how they kept the demons under control when they came out, otherwise it wouldn't be an easy fight.

*They're pretty stupid, a wall around it and mages on top would already do it.* She thought but didn't ask. If it was such a desired spot then it wouldn't do her much. Plus she would have to gain more than a couple of levels to get where she wanted to be. More training and experience than sitting in a safe place training with friends would give her.

The elevator ride commenced in silence other than Cless' humming. A popular song that Ilea remembered but couldn't place at the moment. *Something with dinosaurs perhaps?* The question remained unanswered when they exited and made their way to Dagon's office.

The man was sitting on his desk just like Ilea had found him the first time she had visited. He looked tired, more tired than usual but she found the look good on him. Gave him a more serious flair. His massive form and the frown on his face were certainly not inviting. *The brooding librarian.* Ilea titled the picture as she waved at him. Elise had stopped at the entrance she noticed, staring at the man behind his desk who completely ignored the visitors.

"Leave me alone, tomorrow is a better time." He grumbled before taking a sip of tea.

"We've brought some reinforcements for you." Ilea said, making him look up at her, either because of the voice or the content of what she had said. His eyes flickered from her to the group and lastly to the person looking back at him at the entrance to the library of Viscera. A middle aged woman with a weary smile.

"Elise." Dagon said and got up, moving around the table quickly, a pile of papers nearly falling down before Ilea blinked closer and stopped them. The

librarian ignored it and quickly walked to the woman before he stopped around half a meter before her.

“Elise, what are you doing here? The Library of Souls...,” He started, obviously dumbfounded at seeing her here.

“I didn’t know if you’d remember.” Elise said in a whisper. He just smiled and went to hug her.

“We have the same skills dummy. How could I forget?” Dagon asked, the two embracing each other happily.

“So she actually came back for me. Virilya will be under siege for a while, enough perhaps for me to be efficiently hidden away.” Elise finished retelling the events since she met Ilea.

“You’re already safe. With your records removed I doubt many will care for you, nor invest heavily to bring you back. Still, you’ll be staying in Viscera for now, get used to things. I’ll have a place ready for you by tonight.” Dagon said, his step a little lighter as he went back to his desk.

“I thought I could stay with you. Would save you the trouble of organizing. I don’t need much.” Elise said nonchalantly which made him stop and put down the papers.

“We haven’t seen each other in forty years Elise... I think that’s a bit quick no?” Dagon asked, a little unsure of the situation and obviously uncomfortable with all the other people in the room.

“What better way to get to know each other again then? If you want I’ll stay in a separate place of course.” Elise said but he waved her off.

“Let’s discuss that later, alright?” He asked. The woman didn’t seem opposed to that.

“Ilea, you have first hand reports from the city? Is it really as bad as the scout reports?” Dagon asked, now finally sitting down again. His eyes still lingered on Elise as he asked the question.

“Not sure what the scouts are saying. Baralia is attacking, hard. The empire is already in the center but I doubt it’ll be a short battle for either side. Most of the city’s population is fleeing, the rest I’d assume enslaved or killed already or in the span of the next weeks. Many will probably be coming here.” Ilea said.

“So much work. Cless can you be a dear and get Sully? He’s down in the Haven I think.” Dagon asked and smiled at the girl.

“Yes sir.” Cless said and saluted the man before she jumped off Kyrian’s shoulders and vanished in a mist of blue.

“Can everybody except for me do that now?” Kyrian asked and shook his head.

“Can’t do that either. Well not exactly, working on a rune.” Claire said, looking away from the man after she said that. “Speaking of, Ilea can you show me your teleport again later?”

“Of course. Guess I’ll be staying for today at least.” Ilea said.

“If what you’re saying is true then Ravenhall will soon be flooded with people again. How is the work going Claire, are we ready?” Dagon asked as he looked at the woman.

“As ready as we can be. The reconstruction of the Haven is going well, the soil and ambient mana is impressive. I don’t know why we never used more of it to grow crops. Compared to manually growing through magic it’s much more efficient.” Claire said.

“Because the guilds didn’t want us to flood the market, neither did the empire. Plus I doubt the elders wanted to use Eregar’s Haven for something mundane like that.” Dagon explained but shook his head in the process.

“Not sure what exactly they wanted to do in the first place.” Claire said but didn’t elaborate.

“Ask Verena when she’s back. I hope she doesn’t throw us out immediately.” The librarian said but didn’t seem too serious about it. “Seeing the results she might agree to leave some of the work and decisions to others.” He added.

“We’ll need her power.” Claire said. “I don’t think we have anything to fear from any of the members, not with the retaking of the city. Still, other interested parties might try to gain influence.”

“We’re not going to make it easy for them. While we have lost many in the summoning, the Hand has never been more powerful.” Dagon said.

“Good. Now Dagon, Eve has been killed. I’m sure you’ve heard already.” Ilea started. “We suspect it was the organization called the Golden Lily. Let me know if you have anything on them, for now add Arthur Redleaf to that list. He should be part of the organization.”

The man nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I’ve heard and I’m terribly sorry for your loss Ilea. For our loss really. Although I doubt she would’ve stayed with the Hand for much longer. We’ll look for records on the order and Arthur right away.” He said as he got up.

“Thank you Ilea. For what you did for Elise.” The man said and touched her shoulder. “Now come, I’ll show you around.” He said, looking at the other librarian. Ilea didn’t reply to anything he said but she would return in a couple hours to see if they found anything. She doubted it, considering even the empire’s own library had little to no records. Perhaps they didn’t have much influence in Ravenhall, or at least not with Dagon. She trusted him enough to at least tell her she shouldn’t ask questions about it were he a part of it.

“Dagon, the glasses, dress and hair. It’ll have to change and soon.” Claire reminded the man but he was already lost in conversation, leaving Claire to shake her head.

“Guess you’ll have to check in on them again.” Kyrian said as he sat down in the nearby armchair.

“Of course I have to.” The woman replied. “So you’re going to hunt Arthur Redleaf. I doubt you could take down a family like that on your own, are you sure you’re not running into the lion’s den like you promised?” Claire asked.

“We’re working together with Edwin, the man’s son. Him and some of his friends will hunt Arthur down, hopefully taking him down. He’s the only link we have to the Golden Lily right now and while I won’t face him alone, Edwin won’t wait for me to get stronger. And I won’t ignore the opportunity.” Ilea explained.

“We? You, Kyrian and Trian I assume?” Claire asked as she leaned on Dagon’s desk.

“Just me.” Kyrian said.

“Trian needs some time I think. After what happened to his family.” Ilea said. Claire nodded absentmindedly.

“I can’t leave my post for this. Not now. We’re in a very delicate situation and we have to steer the city and the Hand into the right direction. I’m truly sorry.” Claire said and by the tone of her voice, Ilea believed her.

“I didn’t intend to ask you in the first place. You have obligations now. Your mother is here too I heard?” Ilea asked, distracting the woman from the topic of Eve. She didn’t want her to change her opinion on it, lest there be another person she could lose in the mission. The thought quickly passed through her mind, glancing at Kyrian right after.

“She is and I think something finally changed.” Claire said happily. “She sometimes visibly reacts to Cless, especially when the girl shows her the new paintings. And somehow she likes the Haven. You know, she was a nature mage before... I think maybe using the Haven to grow all kinds of foods might help her too. You two could meet her later, how much time do you have?” Claire asked.

“Today, we could do longer but only if absolutely necessary.” Ilea said.

“I’d be up for meeting her. What’s her name anyway?” Kyrian asked.

“Leia. And thank you, for understanding. I hope you don’t hold it against me either Kyrian.” Claire said when Cless returned with Sulivhaan.

“Of course not. I’m glad you’re safe here. You’re not mobile enough for this mission.” Kyrian commented with a smile, getting an eye roll from Claire.

“Welcome back. Come here.” Sulivhaan said and walked to Ilea before he hugged her lightly. “I’m so sorry to hear. I remember the first time I lost a teammate. A horrible experience.” He said in an understanding tone. His mask even looked somewhat sympathetic.

“Thanks. I’ll keep myself busy.” Ilea said to which he nodded.

“Let me know if you need anything. It was me who tried to have you join the order in the first place.” Sulivhaan said.

“Were you working in the Haven?” Claire asked.

“I was.” Sulivhaan replied.

“Then perhaps we can combine things. Let’s walk.” Claire said and went to the door. “Sorry for getting you up here. Now Kyrian and Ilea confirm the attack on Virilya and it might be an actual threat to the empire. This war is happening and I doubt other big cities will be exempt.”

“That is concerning news. Until the empire falls we will likely not be a significant target. Not if we don’t interfere.” Sulivhaan said as they made their way down to the Haven.

“Each side will pay mercenaries to fight for them.” Claire said.

“And we won’t stop them. Humans fighting humans is of no concern to the Shadow’s Hand. Or do you disagree?” Sulivhaan asked.

“In this case I don’t. In other situations I might.” The woman replied.

“Then you are free to convince them to join your cause or pay them yourself.” Sulivhaan said. “The Empire is just as corrupt as Baralia. The only difference worth mentioning is the slave trade. A difficult thing to implement in the empire’s cities for sure. I doubt they would risk it even if they took all of them, lest a civil war will possibly result. Baralia still wants profit and they have their own enemies in the west.”

“You talk as if they’ve already won.” Claire said, the group now descending in the last elevator, Eregar’s Haven opening up before them. Fields now dotted the landscape closest to the elevator but far fewer than Ilea had thought.

“How will we feed the whole city with such a small amount of fields?” She asked to the confusion of the others.

“I’m not sure how you do it where you’re from Ilea but a field like that manned by a nature mage can feed thousands.” Kyrian said, obviously understanding that there was some difference between her homeland and how it worked in Elos.

*Magical farming.* Ilea thought. Hunger wouldn’t be a problem. And much easier to control for the leading class.

“We’re planning to expand to five times what we currently have but it takes time to nurture the ground to the right conditions. As soon as the fields are ready our nature, earth and plant mages will be able to sustain it indefinitely. Especially with the rich ambient mana in the Haven. If need be we’ll be able to expand even further. I just don’t want it to get close enough to the spawning pool.” Sulivhaan explained.

There was a high wall built around the farming area with a couple of guards on it. The rule that only full members were allowed down here apparently didn’t apply anymore either.

“We will be ready to take on refugees from the war in no time. Many stores are standing without personnel, their runes and machines unused and their

shelves remaining empty. There is housing already furnished and hundreds of positions to fill in both the Hand and the local government. Even the Guilds will likely recruit refugees.” Sulivhaan continued.

“The contracts are ready as well, anybody choosing to own a shop, apartment or house will have to work to pay it off. It’s in our favor enough to be mostly fair.” Claire added.

“Mostly?” Kyrian asked, a smile showing on the woman’s face.

“Well it would be foolish not to use their refugee status to our advantage at least a little. Not enough for them to resent the city or the Hand but enough to bind them a little tighter and for a little longer.” She explained.

“I can see why you’re not bothered by the slavery part.” Ilea said absentmindedly.

“I won’t justify myself to a mercenary.” Claire jabbed back.

“Just don’t overdo it.” Ilea said.

“I won’t. You can look at the contracts too if you want to. Change things up as well. Many of your own properties will be housing refugees.” Claire said.

“Just make sure they’re not unhappy. That decreases productivity. Who would want to go to a glum feeling inn?” Ilea asked.

“At least you understand some things. As I said, I’m not planning for the short term. I want these people to stay and thrive.” Claire said. “Don’t worry.”

“I’ll return to work if that’s all you wanted to tell me.” Sulivhaan said.

“We need to discuss some of the plans regarding housing and the logistics of arming new guards. I’ll be back later today for that. Will you be here?” Claire asked.

“I will be, or in my study.” Sulivhaan said as he turned to Ilea.



“You’ve grown so much in this short time I’ve known you. Do remember to be careful and don’t let revenge consume you. Take your time to train, to plan your enemy’s demise and execute it ruthlessly. That is how you will survive.” Sulivhaan said to Ilea as he took her hand.

“I’ll take it to heart. Thank you Sulivhaan. Don’t overwork yourself.” Ilea replied, holding his hand tight.

# Chapter 197 Preparations

## Chapter 197 Preparations

The man left again to continue his work and the rest of them visited Leia. She was a frail woman looking to be in her seventies, her eyes without focus nor any reaction to their approach. Ilea didn't know anything about her condition but it was doubtlessly connected to some traumatic even in her past. Seeing Claire care for her and talk to her lovingly made her remember her own parents. Not a lot of pleasant memories but it made her feel a little nostalgic still.

“Cless, can you look after her for a while. You know she loves your paintings.” Claire said after a while, smiling at the girl who seemed to beam at the suggestion. She nodded quickly and ran to a nearby shed, getting a canvas. Ilea didn't see any colors or brushes but she figured the girl had her own ways.

“Will you two be leaving again?” Cless asked after she had prepared everything.

“We will.” Kyrian said and lifted her up again, one of his spheres forming a round plate below her feet. He let her fall a moment later, making her shriek before she landed just two centimeters further down.

“I hate this!” She shouted while laughing and hit the man on his chest, making him chuckle as well.

“We'll be back in no time.” He said and hugged the girl.

*He's gotten close to her. Ilea thought, enjoying the scene. Hopefully it's not the wrong decision. For both of them.*

“Bye Ilea. Next time you should be stronger.” Cless said, waving at her.

“I'll try my very best M.” She said, saluting to the girl with a little less enthusiasm than Cless had shown earlier. They both high fived the girl before they made their way back.

“Let me know if you need gold, there's already a substantial amount coming in each day.” Claire said to Ilea as they walked towards the elevators.

“I'm fine for the moment.” Ilea replied. “Reinvest a big part of it.”

“Of course.” Claire said, likely already thinking about how specifically to spend the gold.

“Where's Trian, I'd like to meet him before we go.” Ilea said to her when they exited into Viscera. Again there were gates put into place to trap something in the Haven, or to protect someone against whatever came into Viscera. *A good addition.* Ilea thought. A lot of demons had been summoned into the city itself when Adam Strand had executed whatever plans he had. Still, sections could be blocked off and cleared out easier like this.

“He's here actually. Deeper inside, staying with his friends.” Claire said, looking at Ilea when she said the word friends. “I'll take you to them.” She added, leading them to another lift that led downwards, to the training halls.

Unknown to her, there were hidden passages leading further down into the mountain, passages that not even her sphere picked up. “Were those here

before?” Ilea asked as the stone wall melded back into place behind them, leaving no trace and cutting off her sphere.

“No. Most of them are new additions. A combination of rune magic and enchantments. Can they block out your skill?” Claire asked and smiled when Ilea confirmed. “Good. Seems like the efforts weren’t in vain. I doubt many have something more potent than yours. Elise will get something similar in the library above. Just in case.”

“So you’re going for him.” Trian said, still looking at the same spot on the wall he had been staring at for the whole duration of their conversation. Ilea didn’t really want to call it that either, the man only barely reacting to what she said.

“We are. Just wanted you to know that I guess. It was nice seeing you.” She said and got up, not receiving a further response from the man.

“He’s not quite himself, is he?” Kyrian asked when she joined him in the hallway.

“No. He needs time. Come on, let’s see if Dagon and Elise found out anything or if they rather busied themselves with other things.” Ilea said, walking to Claire when Aurelia came running from the room.

“Ilea. Thank you for visiting.” She said, closing the door behind herself. “I’ll get him back to his old self in no time. He’s always been too hard on himself.” Aurelia said and punched Ilea on her shoulder.

“I’ll get stronger, for him and you.” She added.

“Perhaps next time I won’t have to hold back as much then.” Ilea said, grinning at the girl who just shook her head.

“You’ll see.” She answered with a perfect smile before she went back to the others. Perhaps they were the first refugees in Ravenhall after all.

As expected no new information on either Arthur or the Golden Lily was unearthed by the two librarians. A lack of influential nobles in the Hand was likely the reason, as well as the privacy of the rare noble that actually joined. Dagon's knowledge and research was more focused on skills, classes, stats and most importantly monsters. Enemies to humanity itself, other intelligent races, their possible goals, philosophies, culture, weaknesses and preferences. They were an order of mercenaries, not bound to one country or another. However they were bound to humanity, to protect their species against anyone that would come to destroy them. Elves were the main focus of course, especially since the destruction of the western independent cities. Still there were other races, some of them trading with humans or even living in their cities. No major war had happened in the last several hundred years. The dwarves resided in the Naraza mountain chain or wherever they decided to dig themselves into the stone.

They had no interest in the human plains and had stated so on several occasions. The elves were a mystery still, their intentions differing with every attack it seemed and the results varying just as much. Dagon was convinced they could end humanity as a whole if they decided to put all their energy towards that goal but so far nothing spoke for such an effort.

The Shadow's Hand was one thing that would stand in their way should they decide to execute such a plan. There were dangerous monsters in the north, several expeditions not coming back at all, others defeated and decimated. No expedition east and into the ocean had succeeded so far, everyone vanishing without a trace. Monsters of the deep would attack port cities from time to time but at least for a couple kilometers off the coast, the sea was considered safe. At least as safe as the wild in the human plains.

Cities and walls would protect against the normal kind of monsters, either too weak to get over or through the walls, taken down by a group effort of the defenders or hunters or simply disliking the high number of people

inside. Most predators liked to isolate targets instead of invading the middle of the herd after all.

“You said before that I need five skills at second tier level twenty for third tier becoming available?” Ilea asked after Dagon had told her about the lack of information regarding the Golden Lily and Arthur Redleaf.

“It’s usually the case, yes. For most people, at least the ones who shared this information with me, they have at least one or two available skills to advance. There are likely some conditions that one needs to fulfill for the third tier becoming available. Either that or it’s random. The fact that some people have the option to advance any one of their ten skills, none at all or anything in between makes me think it’s the former.” Dagon explained. “Your second class getting close then? Why not stay and train for a while, I’m sure you could reach it soon. Couple weeks or months maybe.” He suggested but Ilea shook her head.

“I’m gonna get there when I do and I already have a couple favorites should the time be inconvenient. I already have plenty of options to flee and survive, I hope it’s enough.” She said and sighed.

“You really have that many skills at the end of the second tier already?” Kyrian asked. “Took me most of our missions and training to just get a third to that level.”

“I focused more on skills than leveling for quite a while.” Ilea said. “Didn’t the training do a lot for you as well?” She asked.

“I mean yes, it definitely did. To get to two hundred I generally didn’t use more than five of all my skills though so most of them were lagging behind quite a bit.” The man explained. “The training definitely helped but I’ll need a while longer to use either of my third tier points. Got nothing available either.”

“Good to know we’re in a similar boat then. Are you sure you’re up for this then? You lack a teleportation ability.” Ilea said and looked at him.

“I thought we discussed this before. Of course I am. You don’t need a teleportation ability when you can bust through walls with metal. Plus being trapped in a room with me isn’t good for anybody. You remember when you didn’t have your curse resistance and tried to walk into my runes?” He asked. “It’s not a common ability.”

“Yea but we’re not fighting common people.” Ilea said. “I trust you though. And your abilities. Let’s just hope they didn’t already heavily train against curse and metal magic.”

“It’s painful to do that. I doubt many nobles have experienced such or would like to do so when they can get more powerful by killing people and monsters delivered to them.” Kyrian suggested. “Plus we’re together, we’ve got each others’ backs”

“Alright. Sorry about this, it’s just that...,” Ilea started but he just punched her shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it. Plus it’s just this mission. Afterwards we’ll train. To get strong enough to face them we’ll have to face death many times. This is just the first.” Kyrian said.

“Arthur Redleaf took over from his father. He’s not self made which makes me doubt he has suffered the pain of curses quite as much as you have as a hobby.” Dagon added.

“It’s not exactly a hobby.” Ilea said but smiled. “Fucking idiots.”

“We’ll look through the records and see if we can find anything related to Eve, the Golden Lily or Arthur Redleaf. Perhaps something pops up. Just make sure to come back again at some point. May you prevail.” Dagon said as he got up, walking around the table and hugging Ilea tightly. Her rib cage groaned under the strength of his arms.

“I don’t have to tell you not to die, it’s probably easier to destroy this city again than it is to kill you.” Dagon said when he let go and turned to Kyrian. “You, you don’t die kid.” He said. “Now leave my office, I have to catch up on forty lost years.

“Of intercourse?” Ilea asked.

“Imbecile. Forty years of romance and conversation.” Dagon said but the light shade of red on his face wasn’t lost to her.

Ilea’s instinct would’ve liked to add another comment to the situation, especially considering his body size in relation to hers but she simply didn’t feel like it. Not after all that has happened. *Maybe I’m becoming less of an insufferable twat.* The thought made her chuckle to herself to the confusion of the others.

“Of course, then I will let you get to it. Thank you for the help and for taking care of her and Trian.” She said, to both Dagon and Claire.

“You brought the news from Ravenhall. I doubt we’d be standing here without you. You rescued Elise from the dungeons and you helped avenge Trian’s family. If anybody should be receiving thanks, it’s you.” Dagon said.

“Don’t encourage her, she was finally becoming a little more humble.” Kyrian said and laughed as he touched Ilea’s shoulder.

“You’re living a dangerous life Kyrian.” Claire said. “We’re here for you two and anybody you consider a friend. To you or to the order. And you will have a place here always.”

“Thank you. I have to admit that I kind of fell in love with danger.” He said, winking at Ilea at the last part.

She groaned and pushed his arm away. “I’m not ready for a committed relationship Kyrian. Even without all the shit that has happened.”

“I said danger, not you.” The man said and smiled.

“Alright, we’re leaving. Thanks again and don’t let demons destroy the city again. Remember, there was one incredibly tough one and it’s still around somewhere.” Ilea warned as she walked to the door.



“We have scouts around and in the city. Plus we took down those giants, I think we can handle a single demon.” Claire said. Ilea didn’t doubt her, not with all the changes she and the others had brought to Ravenhall. Still, that demon was dangerous. Similar as with the Praetorians, the normal size of them and their speed made for a much more dangerous enemy than a massive, high leveled and powerful monster.

They could be taken down with teamwork, distraction and tactics. For human sized or slightly larger enemies, that was much more difficult. Especially if they could think and that demon spoke. They still gave her more of an uneasy feeling than the monster whale or the Basilisk she had faced so long ago. *And I was weak then compared to now.* Still it hadn’t killed her. Had it been a Praetorian, she doubted anybody in that cave would’ve come out alive.

With their business concluded in Ravenhall, the two of them finished their preparations for the journey and the eventual destination. Food and drink was bought, as well as necessities like bandages, cloth, weak health potions in case their mana ran dry or healing spells were interrupted. Cloaks to hide and some spare clothes. Ilea had initially planned to get some things in Virilya but decided on getting them here instead. It was quicker and wouldn’t result in possible fights. Plus putting some money into the local economy would benefit her too in the end.

“Ready to go?” She asked the man when they met up again near the northern gate.

“Yep, although all my stuff is going to be cold. Sure you don’t want to trade your necklace against my ring?” He asked jokingly.

Ilea just grinned under her hood. “I doubt you’d look as smashing in it.”

“You’re covered in bloody armor all the time. Nobody ever sees it.” Kyrian said as they exited the city, seeing more than a couple people on the road leading towards the city. An unusual sight considering the dangers involved in traveling. They had grouped up but looked to be far from the same making, some clad in armor, others freezing in the cold weather as they clutched to the thin shirts they had, showing no further possessions.

“You’ve seen it.” Ilea said absentmindedly as she watched the newcomers. Hope and exhaustion on their faces as they gazed upon the high walls of Ravenhall a city that might soon rival Virilya in defensive capabilities. *They need some more shield mages for that I think.*

“Which is why I wish you’d show it off more.” Kyrian said. “The first refugees are already here. Hey, where are you from?” He asked when they reached the closest group. The man who was spoken to looked around and shied back a little but managed to stammer out the name Harptown.

“Where’s that?” Ilea asked.

“Right next to the mountain chain. Not far from Morhill actually. Well it’s far if you’re moving like these guys are. Thanks.” He said, nodding to the man who seemed happy that the conversation had ended.

“If people from that town are already coming here...,” Ilea started, the two of them walking away from the road and towards the forest lying north of Ravenhall.

“Well Claire might have to get some more fields ready.” Kyrian completed her sentence.

“Maybe all that space below the city might be used finally.” Ilea said and he grunted.

“Half of it was destroyed. I doubt they rebuilt it all. But yea, there’s certainly enough space.” Kyrian said when they entered the forest, his body starting to levitate from the ground as his magic activated. Ilea’s wings spread in turn and she started flying too.

“Let’s stay low until we’ve crossed the mountains.” She said and he didn’t reply, just starting off towards their destination.

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“Are you sure about this?” Walter asked after looking over the combination of runes. “I can barely read them and they give me a massive headache. We’ve summoned a demon before by accident.”

“I can take over most demons, should one show up.” Weavy said, his mind racing through the runes again and again. He had planned for this the entire week.

“Master I trust in you.” The boy said into his mind. An annoying trick he had learned. *Perhaps I shouldn’t have taught him at all. Now he can annoy me through walls.* Weavy thought and sighed, a gesture he liked more and more. He still didn’t quite know what exactly it meant but the humans did it to show frustration.

“Master Skorn. Please trust in my abilities. One more try.” He telepathically said to the human next to him. Walter frowned and looked at the big black sockets in Weavy’s head.

“Last time we had to clean the room six times to get the smell of blood out.” He grumbled as he left the room, closing the door behind himself.

“That is a yes then. Ein, step aside and watch carefully how I circulate my mana through these runes. More and more I gain understanding of the Old ones.” Weavy said before he went to the door and listened. Walter’s footsteps decreased in volume, meaning that he would have some time for

himself. *Good.* He thought, his facial muscles deforming his mouth into a scary smile.

The boy stepped aside as he started activating the runes, their light humming fueling his excitement. *They will understand soon.* He thought as his teeth started to show.

# Chapter 198 Demonic Fishes

## Chapter 198 Demonic Fishes

A loud noise and an incredible magical discharge rushed through his whole body just moments after he left the demon to his rune magic. *That damn monster.* He thought and rushed back to the room, his dark magic flowing through and around him, turning his eyes black and his muscles to steel. The lock cracked when his spell hit the door, sending the whole thing flying and into the opposite wall.

Walter entered the room and prepared another spell. The bizarre scene before him made him freeze in his step. *An illusion?* He asked himself, probing his mind for any intrusion, the magic flowing through his body for any inconsistencies. Nothing came up.

“Ah hahahahaha!” The sound of laughter rang through his head. The demon spoke to him through his telepathic ability.

“What’s so funny. Boy what are you doing?! That’s raw!” Walter shouted and walked to the boy but the demon stopped him.

“It is as it should be. Now join us, Walter of Skorn. It is the tastiest flesh of the great salt. The only thing I have missed from that barren world.” The demon said, not taking his massive maw from the big fish’s corpse even for a second, the sound of flesh being ripped through the only noise in the room. Chewing and gulping following right after.

“The... that’s a massive fish.” Walter said. “How the hell did you get this massive fish into this room?” He asked but the runes he had even inspected beforehand were of course the answer. “Why did you summon a fish?”

“QUIET!” The demon said and ripped out a piece of the fish’s body, turning around to face the dark sorcerer with blood dripping down his maw, blackness staring back at Walter.

“Taste and all will be understood.” The demon said in a telepathic whisper. The demon was a little lower in level than him but just the look of the thing terrified him. He took the fish and bit into it. Chewing and finally swallowing.

“Wow...,” He said, unsheathing the knife he had on his belt and kneeling down next to the boy. A piece of flesh was cut off and eaten, the kid, man and demon sharing the moment of pure bliss.

“I summoned it, I claim the eyes and bones.” Weavy said after a while.

“Whatever demon. What even is this creature?” Walter asked with a full mouth. It was the best meal he had in years.

“The famed Blackfish. Well famed among us demons, not much to compare it to in the Salt. After eating your world’s creatures, I have found that swimming creatures have not reached its deep flavor and satisfying texture.” The demon explained and continued his meal, the crunching of bones adding to the musical of consumption.

Neeto joined them a moment later, ignoring the bizarre scene before him. “Walter. We have found a group of mercenaries in the dungeon. They have been looking for Ilea it seems.”

The leader of the Vultures stopped his meal and got up. “Weavy, you summon more of those fish if you can. Let’s look at the runes together later. Do invest some time to work with Indra as well, he really wants to learn from your expertise.”

“Human. He irritates me. I do not understand his obsession with the long eared ones. Their teeth are nothing special compared to mine.” Weavy replied, continuing his meal as he slurped up the seven eyes of the fish individually.

“Oh that’s disgusting.” Walter said. “Just try ok, he would appreciate it and you’re part of our group now, try to play nice. Ok?”

“Alright, I will try Skorn. Communication is key in relationships after all.” Weavy said.

*His adaption to humanity is still weird to see... that fish though.* Walter thought and looked at the monsters. “Where are they? Still in the dungeon or apprehended?” He turned and looked at Neeto.

“Three were killed by the hounds, the other two apprehended by the undead. They are injured but nothing life threatening. I claimed their bones already, should they perish.” Neeto said, his empty eye sockets sometimes nearly as unsettling as the demon’s. Still, Walter had gotten used to them and he will get used to Weavy.

*You wanted an open minded society removed from humanity’s restrictions and rules.* He thought, sighing as they made their way to the guest rooms.

“It’s going to be ok Walter. The demon has a good heart. Figuratively speaking of course. Haha.” Neeto said. “That fish’s bones looked interesting.”

“He has already claimed those bones. Perhaps you may trade them?” Walter asked which made the skeleton stop and consider.

“I will do so.” He said and left the man on his own. Walter didn’t try to convince the skeleton otherwise, he knew better than that.

*Last time he nearly took my arm. Damn strong magic for a level 140. Bone magic is special after all.* The thought went through his head when he opened the door to the guest room, finding Lucia already there, talking to

the two guests that were chained up and in their underwear, bleeding from several wounds.

“Stop screaming you dumb fuck. Shouldn’t have come here in the first place, the dogs are hungry all the time.” Lucia said as she cleaned a nasty bite wound.

*[Warrior – lvl 101]*

*[Mage – lvl 89]*

*Should be manageable.* Walter thought but it of course depended on their reason to be here.

“Take your hands off me witch!” The warrior shouted and spit at Lucia’s face.

She carefully cleaned it off with the cloth she had used to clean his wounds and looked at Walter, a smile on her face.

“No manners in the god damned fucking human kingdoms is it?” She asked. “I’ll take this one for enchantments. Any problem with that?”

“Do as you please Lucia. I don’t think it would be a good idea for him to leave this place.” Walter said in a resigning tone. She had taken this role since the beginning and he had to quiet the small voice inside of him that wanted to let the man go with a pat on his back. *Remember the last time you did that.*

“What do you mean? You can’t do this! The Forkspears will never forgive this!” The warrior shouted, damn near frothing at his mouth.

“So we know about the people paying you. Why are you here then?” Walter asked as he closed the distance to the two guests.

“We’re supposed to look for Alice Forkspear, she’s one of the daughters of the noble house. Fled when the elves attacked it seemed. I’ve got no idea why she’d do something like that.” The mage said, in a very calm way. The man didn’t seem to be afraid at all.



“Come on.” Lucia said, her arm starting to glow a little before her fist slammed the warrior’s head back and into the wall, knocking him out cold. The chains unlocked and the man fell down with a hard thud. “Ah fuck, always forget to catch them.” Lucia said and dragged him out of the room as the other two watched the scene, more curses and dragging the only noise between them. She briefly got stuck on the door frame but another head trauma for the warrior solved that problem.

“She’s quite the powerhouse ain’t she.” The mage said and smiled.

“You have no idea.” Walter remarked. “You were looking for Alice? I don’t know her, never heard the name really.”

“You haven’t. Well I believe you. To be honest, finding you lot here I think this mission is beyond what we’re being paid for. Forkspears have a reputation for being cheapskates but this is just ridiculous. The only lead we got was a girl called Lilith, a healer warrior or something that went on a mission for the noble girl damn near a year ago. You know her?” The mage asked.

“I have a suspicion, yes. I’m not sure, I know she went into a Taleen dungeon once in Dawntree. That the one?” Walter asked as he sat down on the nearby bed.

“Yea, that’ll be her.” The mage said.

“And you were sent? No offense but...,” Walter said and smiled.

“What? She’s supposed to be a healer near level one hundred. I think we should be able to handle that.” The mage said.

“What’s your name?” Walter asked as he sat back.

“Theo usually. People call me different things.” The man said.

“Well Theo. If it’s really the person you’re looking for then she’s not a healer anymore, she’s a warrior with the Shadow’s Hand.” He said.

“A Shadow? Of course she is. Just my luck with missions.” Theo said and laughed out loud. “Oh well, to find my death in this crypt is not the worst way to go. May I have a little time before you kill me?” He asked.

“Theo, we’re not that uncivilized here. You seem like a decent man. All we want is to make sure you don’t go around and tell people about our location. Your friend here already showed us that he likely wouldn’t be agreeable to that idea.” Walter said. “Now if you behave yourself we’ll see where that leads you.” He said and got up to unshackle the man.

“Really?” Theo asked and laughed again. “Well that is a surprise. I thought it would be poetic to find my end at the hands of death worshippers.

“We’re more a community of the unlife. We don’t discriminate against people that are alive. I’m alive too.” Walter explained. “I’ll have to find your clothes. Lucia always throws them out somewhere. Come with me, so I can have an eye on you.” Walter said.

“As long as my harmonica is still around somewhere.” Theo joked.

“You play? I’m a bard, guitar and the lute mostly. Perhaps your time here won’t be as unbearable as you thought.” Walter said, his step already a little lighter. The appreciation of music was something he had always tried to change in the Vulture Brotherhood. As long as people had their passions, he wouldn’t be pushy but sometimes he did feel a little lonely being the only musical person around.

“Wonderful, I’ve dabbled in both of them too but my talent just isn’t there.” Theo said.

“Ah by the way, we reported to the Riverwatch guard where we’d be, should we not come back after a week or two. If you want to stay hidden I might have to report back with a story.” Theo said.

“We’ll see about that when the time comes. Do you hold no grudge because your team died?” Walter asked.

“You should’ve seen their lack of coordination. A young rowdy pack of meatheads. I’m glad no more of those stalker hounds have died. They are beautiful creatures aren’t they?” Theo asked, lost in thought as he nearly walked into the wall.

*I don’t think this one will be a problem.* Walter thought and smiled to himself. *Lucia, I swear if you burnt those clothes again....*

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Ilea and Kyrian needed two days of traveling to return to the outskirts of Virilya. Smoke was still rising from the distant city, alarming everybody about the state of the city. They didn’t get close enough to see anything but Ilea was sure that Maria had news about the current developments ready when they arrived. The two of them traveled the last part of their journey at a very low altitude, using every bit of cover they could find.

It wasn’t necessary as it turned out, the two of them not spotting a single scout or soldier to the east of Virilya. A couple of wild cats the size of bears trailed them for a while but Ilea thought it was more out of curiosity than anything. They never came close enough to strike and couldn’t keep up with their speed whenever they moved on open land.

“Silver cats eh?” Kyrian asked when they slowed down near the hideout.

“Yep. Beautiful creatures aren’t they?” She asked. “Though I still prefer Swordmouth Tigers.”

“Can’t think of a reason why.” Kyrian said dryly when they landed.

“Are you there?” Ilea asked towards the hideout, the door opening to reveal Felicia with a big smile on her face.

“Welcome back!” She shouted and walked towards them.

“Felicia.” Ilea heard Edwin’s voice coming from behind the woman and watched her stop and sigh. She didn’t seem any less enthusiastic to see them though.

“I know brother.” She said towards her back. “Come on in, they’ve been preparing for days. What’s your wind magic resistance at by the way?” Felicia asked as she hugged Ilea.

“Level eight currently why? Do you want to train some?” Ilea asked, letting go of the woman and staring into her near yellow eyes.

“I mean sure, I’d love to see you dodge my attacks again. It’s been so long since I seriously tried to kill you.” She said with a perfect smile. “Father is a wind mage.” She added in a much more subdued tone.

“Ah he is.” Ilea said, Kyrian closing the door behind them before the illusion enchantment snapped back into place, hiding them from unknowing eyes.

“And a terrifying one at that. I think he’s also a blood mage but what noble isn’t.” Felicia added as they joined the others.

“You’re earlier than expected. Good.” Edwin said when she sat down. Kyrian went over to Aliana who was of course cooking. She looked at him and then back to her food a little too quickly.

*Perhaps he’ll find his relationship sooner than he thought.* Ilea mused. Her interest in the man had waned somewhat. At least from a sexual standpoint. He had become a dear friend and she wouldn’t hurt a friend like that. Not when she knew they were looking for something different entirely.

“We’re leaving in an hour. The journey will take us several days to the north. We’ll stay close to the sea and will avoid any cities and villages we come by.” Edwin explained.

“You mean several days for us, while we’re carrying you.” Ilea said. She watched the weird thing in her Sphere turn into Maria behind her before her hands landed on her shoulders. The smile to frown transformation on her face amused her greatly. *She thought I didn’t see her.*

“You are SO provocative aren’t you.” Maria said before she let go of her.

“Not with everybody. This guy has worked hard to earn my most annoying self.” Ilea said.

“Thanks for coming.” Maria said in a quieter voice before she sat down next to Edwin.

“I’m surprised you didn’t leave alone already.” Ilea said.

“Flight will save us more time in the end.” Maria said. “Simple as that.” The grin on her face was like a reflection of herself.

“You have beautiful purple eyes Maria.” Ilea said, watching the woman’s brain gears start to turn. She tried hard not to smile herself. Maria was smart, smarter than her probably. A random remark like that without any other purpose than to compliment her was like cryptonite she imagined.

“She’s fucking with you.” Edwin said and sighed. “One hour.” He added and got up.

“Will Felicia and Aliana join us this time? You could use some more firepower. I doubt the man will be alone, not that that wouldn’t be dangerous enough.” Ilea said, turning in her chair.

“They won’t be.” Edwin stated.

“Why not? Felicia is at two hundred and Aliana is close enough.” Ilea said, looking at Felicia who smiled at her.

“I said they won’t be joining us.” Edwin said and left the room after a hard stare at her.

Ilea just rolled her eyes and relaxed in her chair, taking off her helmet. Manually to not show off her necklace unnecessarily. Felicia moved closer and put a hand on her leg.

“I’m glad you’re going with him.” She said in a quiet voice.

“You’re strong too, why not come as well?” Ilea asked.

“What did he mean you’re fucking with me? What’s with my purple eyes?” Maria asked, standing up and staring at her with ice cold eyes.

“Maria sit down, you DO have beautiful eyes, as do you Ilea. Calm down and accept a simple compliment.” Felicia said, staring back at her. Surprisingly the woman did sit down but seemed to still think about it. “Ilea, don’t think too bad of him ok? He just wants to protect us.”

“Does he now?” Ilea asked, smiling again.

“Yes. And while he’s willing to trample and murder everyone in his way, he does care about the people here. Sans you and the metal curse mage who has taken our cook’s heart.” Felicia explained before she got up. “Excuse me.” She said and walked over to the two cooks who were talking about different combinations of sauces and meat.

“I’ll kill you if you hurt her.” Maria said, appearing next to Ilea and sitting down.

“What?” Ilea asked, seriously confused. “You’re aware that the only reason I’m even working with you guys is her don’t you?” She asked.

“You are?” Maria said. “You’re seriously confusing me today.”

“You’re not the most perceptive social analyst are you. And no, you don’t have to mention your years of torture. I’m aware, not the best teacher of things like that.” She said.

“Don’t take away my dark humor. All that’s left otherwise is void magic and you don’t want to have that in your face.” Maria said with a smile.

“Sorry for reacting like this. We’ve all been... well on edge. Years of planning went into this and I’ve imagined ripping out that horrible fucker’s throat for so long...”

“Don’t worry about it. Takes more than that to offend me. We can have a bout to clear our heads a little if you feel like it.” Ilea suggested but she waved her off.

“No. We shouldn’t compromise our hideout any more than we already have.” Maria said.

# Chapter 199 The Island

## Chapter 199 The Island

“How’s Virilya doing?” Ilea asked after a while of silence, her watching the other three talk about food while Felicia tried to subtly squeeze herself between Aliana and Kyrian.

Maria didn’t reply and just stared at the room’s wall for a while. “You there?” Ilea asked, waving her hand before her face. A sudden move of Maria’s hands grabbed her arm and turned it in a motion that would usually break it. Ilea resisted it, her bones and muscles too strong for the move to work, at least by someone like Maria.

“Oh... what. Sorry. I didn’t mean to.” The woman said but Ilea just looked at her with interest.

“No worries. You need a little more strength to use that on me.” She said, their faces rather close at this point.

“What was the question?”

“How is Virilya doing.” Ilea repeated while they both let go of each other.

“They’re holding. Completely surrounded now but they’re holding. Doesn’t seem like Baralia is backing down though. They’re gonna try everything their mages and alchemists can cook up to get inside that barrier.” She explained.



“Interesting. Do you think they will succeed?” Ilea asked. Felicia had finally managed to pry off Kyrian from Aliana, the two of them going outside for what Ilea imagined a dangerous talk for the man.

“Don’t know. They can destroy each other to the last man for all I care.” Maria said.

“Ravenhall will be affected for sure, as well as any city in the empire. They have slaves in Baralia you know.” Ilea said but Maria didn’t react to that. She noticed that Aliana seemed suspiciously quiet, having stopped her cooking.

“Then they should fight harder.” Maria said simply. Ilea didn’t reply. She didn’t really know how she felt about it herself. On the one hand it was similar to people refusing to fight and hiding behind city walls against the monsters outside. The slavers were simply monsters themselves, at least in a certain sense. Still, if Ilea saw someone enslaving people, she’d probably smash their head in just for good measure. Her power allowed for such actions now, at least if the slaver wasn’t at level two hundred as well. She’d probably still do it anyway.

It was different than wild beasts though. People doing this to other people. *Really makes you proud to be human.* She thought and smiled, somehow happy that she cared enough to think about it at all. A couple weeks ago she would’ve just ignored it all.

Ilea wanted to reply but heard metal falling to the ground, Aliana staring at them with anger in her eyes, tears running down her cheeks.

“Not all of them can fight.” She said and advanced on the two of them.

“No, not all of them can.” Ilea said, remembering the people and kids she had saved in Virilya. The soldiers a hundred levels higher, trained in killing and fighting coming into the homes of civilians who knew nothing but the safety of their city walls.

Maria rolled her eyes when Aliana left the room. *She was a slave wasn’t she?* Ilea asked herself. A bad topic to bring up with her in the room. Still,

she couldn't shake off Maria's opinion completely. Her of all people, to hold the opinion that one needs to stand up and fight. In this world, where you could become stronger with discipline and training. Where guns and money weren't the one and all standing over the weak. People were still people of course and it takes courage and some recklessness to go against the powerful.

Eve flashed through her mind for a moment. *A bit too reckless perhaps.* She thought, hoping that she would learn from her friend's mistakes. Ilea blew out air from her nose as she got up. Of the two of them, Eve died because she offended the wrong people? *I'm on my way to offend exactly the same people.* She thought. *At least I know how strong Eve was and if I can't beat her in my sleep, then I won't try to go at them on my own.*

"What's so funny?" Maria asked.

"The fact that I'm an idiot?" Ilea asked and went after Aliana.

"That IS funny." Maria said, leaning back. "Don't encourage her." She added but Ilea didn't listen to her anymore.

*A bitter warrior, scarred by her experiences. Same as me.* She thought and found Aliana in the hallway, having regained her composure again. Ilea leaned on the wall next to her. *But I won't let them take me down. I won't.*

"Doing better?" Ilea asked, not getting a reaction for a while. "She's a bit of a cunt isn't she?"

That made her laugh, a good start. "She is." Aliana said and turned around. "I didn't mean to interrupt you two." She added.

"You didn't. Speak up when you disagree. Perhaps you'll convince even her at some point." Ilea said, debating if such a thing was possible at all.

"You think so?" Aliana asked, rubbing away the tears from her eyes.

"Not really." Ilea replied.

Felicia and Kyrian returned by then. *Back from fucking?* Ilea thought but didn't voice the line for the sake of Aliana. Their reactions would certainly be funny. *Perhaps next time.*

"Aliana, are you alright?" Felicia immediately rushed to her and hugged the woman.

"Maria?" Kyrian asked, getting a nod from Ilea.

"I figured. She's like a broodier and meaner you. Less beautiful of course." Kyrian said.

"I think she's quite beautiful." Ilea replied. "I don't think we're much alike at all." She added.

"Did you get permission to ask her out?" Ilea asked after a short pause.

"To what her now?" Kyrian asked.

"To ask the maiden's hand." Ilea clarified but the man seemed just as lost.

"Are you not interested in Aliana or have my intuitions become completely incapable?" Ilea asked plainly but in a whisper to not alert the other two. She knew that Felicia could probably hear her but didn't remember Aliana to be particularly perceptive.

Kyrian actually got a little bit red as he stammered to find a response. "I... I don't. Ilea it's..."

"I don't mind. She seems to like you as well." She said and punched his shoulder.

"I... alright. I like her. I do. What about you though, we..." Kyrian started but she stopped him.

"We had some fun. Quite a while ago actually. And you've grown to be a good friend. I trust you and I know you have my back Kyrian." Ilea said, looking into his eyes as understanding dawned on him.

“Interesting. It still hurts you know.” He said, chuckling.

“If it doesn’t crush you then you know there was nothing serious.” Ilea said and smiled at him. “I’ve got your back too. I’m just not ready for what I think you’re looking for.”

The man chuckled at that and smiled. “I’m not sure what I’m looking for myself. We have a mission to do first anyway.” He said and looked at her. “I appreciate you being blunt though. One of the things I like about you.”

“I might not get in trouble that much if I weren’t.” Ilea said. “But where’s the fun in that?”

“Seems like you’re doing a little better.” Kyrian said and touched her shoulder.

They left after saying their goodbyes to Felicia and Aliana, the two remaining in the hideout until they would return. Ilea was sure Edwin had plans in place should he not make it but the man didn’t share anything with her. *Why would he.* She thought, watching the man hold on to the flying metal Kyrian so kindly provided.

All parties involved had clearly outlined their priorities in this endeavor. Her own was information on the Golden Lily. The fact that Arthur Redleaf was a horrible parent to Felicia was another reason for her to be there but she didn’t know either of them well enough to warrant putting her life on the line. Kyrian had even less reason to be there.

Edwin was quite aware of that, putting them on the sideline in his plan that mostly put recon on Maria and then hopefully a lot of murder on their part without causing too much of a commotion. Ilea and Kyrian would be the support, healing the group and distracting the enemy wherever they could

and if willing, helping them defeat Arthur himself. It was simple enough but without any further information it was all the man could come up with at the moment.

It was at least clear the man understood their positions, utilizing the two Shadows to the fullest without putting their life on the line. At least not initially. Both Ilea and Kyrian knew that they would certainly come close to dying. If they fucked up or ran into a trap, they could die. *Just like Eve did.*

Ilea reminded herself not to be overconfident, to prioritize her own life above those around her. Looking over at Kyrian made it hard. She knew she would blink to his defense should he be overwhelmed. Still, she trusted him. And knowing that he had recently gained a self healing skill, at least at the expense of others' life made her feel a little more at ease. The man's power would come in handy in any fight and him having her back gave her more confidence in their survival at least.

He drifted over towards her a couple hours into the silent journey to point out the lands below. "I think that's the kingdom of Asila." He said.

"Doesn't ring a bell. And doesn't look any different than any of the plains so far. Your home?" She asked in turn, her wings moving in the wind as they crossed over small patches of forest and sprouting green heralding the might of Spring.

"It is." He said simply but didn't elaborate. She didn't pry any further and neither did he ask to stop or go to any of the cities. Ilea knew some of his past. Child labor or close enough to slavery as far as he told, abusive parents or foster parents. Considering the little bits and pieces she knew about the friends she had made in the Hand, most of them had a much harsher childhood than she herself had experienced.

*Hard lives make hard people. She thought. Or at least strong ones.* Trian understandably didn't seem to be handling the recent developments incredibly well. Ilea put him out of her mind again quickly. She had her own demons to deal with, both real ones and figurative ones. And if she lost focus, she would endanger herself. *And how would that help with anything?*

The group traveled for another six hours before finally, Edwin motioned for them to land, the last stretch to be traveled on foot. It was nighttime when they landed, the weather clear. It would be simple for even an average guard to spot them in the skies. The four of them moved quietly and quickly over the field and towards the ocean in the east.

A group of boulders stood near the cliffs overlooking the body of endless water, illuminated by the moons above and the only cover for hundreds of meters for the group of would be assassins.

Ilea appeared near one of the rocks and sat down in front of it, stretching her arms before she rested her back on the stone. Kyrian sat down near her and Edwin walked towards the edge of the cliff, his eyes focused on the distant islands barely visible to them. One of the small dots would be their target or at least hey hoped it was.

“There’s more than one.” Maria said as she stepped up to the man.

“And that’s very good for us.” He answered. “You and Ilea will fly out to see if there is a good base for us there, perhaps check for villages, towns or castles nearby as well.”

Maria nodded and looked towards Ilea. “Coming?”

“If you ask nicely.” Ilea replied, looking at Kyrian as she said it.

“Don’t act difficult. We’re here for a reason, your petty issues don’t matter.” Maria said in a hiss while Ilea got up.

“I wasn’t talking to you.” Ilea said and looked towards Edwin, her wings spreading. He looked at her and nodded.

“They matter to her. And I’m sure that when the situation needs it, this won’t be an issue.” Edwin said. “So please, could you take Maria and scout the islands?” The man added, surprising her a little.

Either he was less stubborn than she thought or more reasonably thinking, he simply cared less about his pride than his ultimate goal of killing his father.

Ilea grabbed Maria and jumped off the cliff, neither of them making a sound before her wings spread in the last moment, the two of them speeding up tremendously as they silently glided over the waves.

The flight wasn't long, the two of them landing on a rocky beach a couple minutes later and quickly finding cover. "That rules out an army defending the whole group of islands." Ilea said as they stopped running, hidden behind the rocky terrain.

"Or they leading us into a trap." Maria said in a quiet voice.

"Or that, sure." Ilea said, the two of them walking over the barren landscape and scanning their surroundings for movements or any sign of life.

"You don't seem convinced. Arthur isn't a fool and I doubt he'd be here alone." Maria said as they climbed one of the higher hills around them.

"Costs money to hire people. If he's not paranoid then I don't think they'd watch the whole bloody island. What are they doing here anyway?" Ilea asked and Maria shrugged.

"I don't know him well, never really spared much time for his little soldiers and assassins. Edwin doesn't talk much about him either. What little I know the man's obsessed with the Taleen dwarves and their technology." Maria explained.

"That why Edwin was going into the dungeon when I met him?" Ilea asked. Maria was silent for a while when they reached the top of the hill. There were lights in the distance, a different island though but it looked like a port village.

"I don't think that's our target." Ilea said as she stepped up next to Maria.

“No, but they might know where it is. I want you to stay here and wait for me to get back. Is that agreeable?” Maria asked, looking Ilea in the eyes.

“Sure you don’t want someone to have your back?” Ilea asked but Maria shook her head.

“I need a quick lift if someone discovers or attacks me. I know you dislike Edwin and as far as I know you have good reasons for that. So can I trust you to be here when I come back?” Maria asked.

“I told you before I’m not here for him. How long do you need?” Ilea asked.

“An hour. If I’m not back by then report to Edwin.” She said. Ilea nodded and sat down on a nearby rock, watching Maria disappear before her sight. She was not quite as good as Eve had been.

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Maurice spat on the ground as he stepped out of the tavern to take a piss. Looking around he saw only a couple people still awake in the shit fisher village he had found himself in. The pay was good of course, second to none he had worked for so far. At least considering the low risks usually involved.

With Zoy in their team he didn’t even have to worry about seeing a single Taleen machine approach him. The damn things terrified him. “But that doesn’t matter to you guys does it?” He asked the raven sitting on the stone next to him, raising his eyebrow. “Nah, didn’t think so.” He said, pulling up his pants again as he looked into the distance.



“Fucking shit village.” He said and turned around, looking to get more of the mead. He wasn’t on duty tonight which allowed him to roam freely around the group of islands. “Come on.” He said towards the raven which happily hopped after him before it fluttered to his shoulder.

“Maurice. Come back for more?” The woman said with a sly smile as she tapped the very silver he had paid her before on the wooden table.

“More ale.” He said simply, going to the bar. *Quite decent whores for a backwater place like this.* He thought. The ale on the other hand wasn’t anything special, neither were the fighters. He could probably wipe out half the damn village on his own before anybody even noticed.

“The Shadow is back I see.” One of the resident drunkards said, pounding his mug on the table. “Mysterious as always I see, no words for the common folk hah!”

“I’m not one of those damn Shadows. And I swear if you say that to me one more time I’ll have this bird rip out your balls and eyes before I shove all of it down your bloody throat.” He said to the man.

“I meant no offense crow man...,” The man said.

*Wearing black makes you a shadow now.* Maurice thought as he downed his mug of ale. He hoped the Redleaf would be done with this ruin before the month was through. Now that spring had come it would bring back some life into the nearby cities. And a lot of work for a mercenary like him. Work that paid less but was more fun than guarding a worn down castle.

“Heard the empire of Lys is at war again.” Someone said, his ears picking up the line in the myriad of conversations.

“Ah fuck off, news like that reach us every other month. Nobody can take the Empire, not Kroll, not Baralia and not the damn elves, if they even

exist.” Another man said, bringing a stop to the interesting rumor.

War was always a great opportunity to make money. To purchase a castle or two for rather low prices. Lys had some nice parts after all.

“Elves are real, saw one myself...,” Another voice proclaimed but Maurice had lost interest already. Had the man seen an elf, he wouldn’t be here to tell the tale. Even Maurice wasn’t about to face one of those monsters himself. Most of the reason he was working so far east. *Time to get the boy.* He thought as he finished his second mug. The responsibility had fallen on him, as it usually did. Still, he had his fun for today and it would do the guy some good to be amongst normal people.

# Chapter 200 The Baker

## Chapter 200 The Baker

“Popi, are you done yet?” Maurice shouted as he leaned on the door to the small wooden cabin near the outskirts of the village. He heard giggling in response before the door finally opened and three young women walked out, saying their goodbyes to Popi.

“Strange man. He didn’t even look at my chest.” One of them said when they were a little further away. Not exactly whores but they were willing to spend an evening with Popi for a couple copper coins.

“If only they were...,” He said as he looked after them.

“You are being indecent Maurice Cindercoat.” Popi said as he stepped out of the cabin with a big smile on his chubby little face.

“Seems like you had a good evening.” He said and watched the man nod before he smacked his belly.

“I did. They liked the new cakes.” The man said, looking nostalgically to the village houses in the distance.

“Cakes. Popi if you spend all your money on baking for free you might as well stop...,” Maurice started when he spun around and looked towards the pathway leading to the village.

“Did you find a new birdie?” Popi asked.

“Maybe.” Maurice said and cracked his neck before he whispered something into Popi’s ear.

“Sure, can do!” The man said as his shirt and pants were replaced with heavy red armor adorned with tubes.

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Maria stood completely still, all her cloaking skills working at their fullest as she watched the two men before her talk. She had followed the one whose name apparently was Maurice from the tavern in the village to this small hut. Level two hundred and ten and the fat boy named Popi was at one ninety. It might be possible for her to handle them alone but she had no clue about their abilities.

The two of them were so out of place in this village that there was a good chance they were either connected to Arthur or at least knew about his machinations on these isles. The young man suddenly summoned heavy full plate armor with metal tubes connected to his arms and back.

*Storage ring.* Maria instantly thought and stood her ground, waiting for something to happen. The man in light armor and a raven on his shoulder looked in her direction but not directly at her. *Keen senses.* She thought before the temperature around her suddenly rose. Magic surged from the armored man as hot air exited from the tubes on his arms, the surroundings heating up to a scorching degree near instantly. Sweat started forming but evaporated instantly as her skin began to melt to her armor.

The damage was manageable so far and she wasn’t about to expose herself. The mission could be compromised and with her second stage of Pain Resistance, Maria could endure this for quite a while, her vitality and heat resistance relatively high as well.

Popi continued his spell for another minute before he stopped and looked at Maurice next to him.

“Are you sure there’s something there? It’s all burnt now.” The mage said. Maria watched as Maurice scratched his unkempt beard, his near black eyes staring at a point very close to her.

“Guess not.” He said, Maria breathing out when two blades suddenly exited from his light armor, starting at his hands and ending near his shoulders. He rushed towards her and spun in the air, leaving Maria no choice but to teleport away. Landing on the stone ground made a noise that made Maurice look at her and smile.

“A little hunter in the wild. Now what are we looking at here.” He said before a swarm of ravens were summoned from thin air, the birds advancing on her position as she turned tail and rushed towards Ilea as fast as she could. She had been found in the first hour of their scouting. A failure they would pay for dearly.

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Ilea finished her meal while she watched the tranquil village on the other isle, sitting on her stone and finally enjoying better cooking. *At least it’s kind of thanks to Edwin and the others that I have my beautiful necklace.* She thought when she heard a noise. The first thing she did was put her bowl back into her necklace. Her helmet on her head, she checked the surroundings with her sphere and sure enough someone entered it just a moment later.

According to the shape, lack of visual and the fact that she knew where Ilea was let her think of nobody else but Maria.

The two people following let her know that something had gone terribly wrong. “You alright?” She asked Maria whose skills deactivated one after the other, her face a complete mess. “Flee, fight or talk?” Ilea asked but didn’t get an answer while she started to heal. A bunch of ravens advanced on the two of them and started attacking, Ilea waving at them with one arm while healing Maria. Either her face was too messed up to talk or she just didn’t want to. The damage wasn’t serious but it certainly looked that way.

“Hey raven guy, stop for a minute will you!” Ilea shouted as she grabbed one of the birds out of the air, looking at it closely. *Fucking rabid ravens or what?* She thought, the mage stopping after he heard her talk. The second man was still quite a distance away.

“Don’t touch my fucking birds.” He said. “Or I’ll cut the invisible one apart and shove her up your ass.”

“Piece by piece?” Ilea asked, the man’s remark resonating with her somewhat. It wasn’t said with as much hostility as the meaning implied.

“Yes. Piece by fucking piece. Let go of my bird, will ya.” He said and she shrugged.

“If you promise not to be such an aggressive little shit.” Ilea said and let go of the bird. She thought it was the right move.

“Good. I don’t promise anything. Now who the hell are you and why was that one spying on us?” The man asked, pointing at her when the second man arrived in very heavy looking armor. He stopped and breathed heavily, his arms going to his knees as he recovered from his run.

“Here on a job, Shadow’s Hand. Who are you?” Ilea asked, identifying them each.

***[Mage – lvl 210]***

***[Baker – lvl 190]***

She didn't give the man time to respond. "What's a baker doing out here? Are you like a high level delivery service?" She asked.

"No we're..." The man started but Ilea interrupted him and instead addressed the baker.

"Can I buy some bread or a cake from you? Food's been rather boring." Ilea said and watched his helmet vanish suddenly. The man had grayish hair and green eyes. *Certainly looks like a baker.* Ilea thought. Considering he seemed to enjoy his own creations made her even more interested. His face lit up at her request and he summoned both bread and a piece of cake.

"I do I do. You can try for free even. I like to share." He said in a voice that suggested he wasn't exactly a high librarian.

"That's very nice of you but you'll never earn money like that. I can pay you. That cake looks very delicious." Ilea said as she finished healing Maria who had activated her cloaking skills again but was still standing next to her, nearly still.

The mage scratched his head and sighed. "Look, can we first clear up why your friend spied on us? After that you can buy all the cake you like."

"Ah yes. One, that's not my friend. And two, she's just very shy. And curious. She likes to follow interesting men around. Why are you on this island anyway and you didn't answer my previous question, who are you two?" Ilea continued as she advanced on the baker as non threateningly as possible, reaching him and accepting the piece of cake he was holding towards her.

She smiled and bowed her head. "Thank you very much. I don't have money with me right now but I promise to come and pay you."

"We're here to guard the castle." The baker said and smiled. "You should come visit us sometime. My name is Popi."

"Nice to meet you Popi. My name is Lilith and I'd love to come visit you." Ilea replied and started eating the cake, a small part of her expecting to get

poisoned. Her judgment of character seemed to have improved though. The cake was delicious and neither poisonous nor paralyzing.

“Popi I told you not to talk to strangers so openly, what if they’re coming to attack us?” The mage asked.

“I’m sorry for burning your friend. He told me to do it.” Popi said and looked down.

“It’s alright. She’s going to be alright. Look, we meant no offense ok.” Ilea said and smiled.

“For fuck’s sake.” The mage said and scratched the back of his head. “I’m Maurice. We’re guards from nearby. You should tell her not to spy on people.” He said. “Come Popi, we’re supposed to be back in two hours. Arthur will get mad at you if we’re out for so long.” He added, Ilea trying hard not to show any change on her face at the mention of the name.

“Let’s incapacitate them.” Maria said to her in a whisper, Ilea noticing immediately how Maurice tensed up, signaling something to the other man.

“Calm down there. Just because they burned your face doesn’t mean we should attack them.” Ilea said out loud and waved to Maurice in a calming way. “You’re crazy sometimes.” She said and laughed.

“Look, I’m sorry we attacked you. Just make sure not to come too close to the Isle of Garath, our employer doesn’t take kindly to uninvited visitors. So whatever job you have just steer clear.” Maurice said and scratched his beard.

“Ah don’t mention it. More importantly Popi, do you have more of that cake? That was fantastic.” Ilea said and went to the man again. “I’m willing to pay you twenty coppers for each cake, or how much do the ingredients cost? I don’t want to rob you.”

“Lilith, forget about the fucking cake.” Maria said in a hissing tone.

“Already healed I see. You’re full of surprises.” Maurice said.



“Fuck off, he’s got great cake.” Ilea said. “I have to go, mission and stuff. Visit me in Ravenhall if you’re ever there.” She said as her wings spread before she grabbed the near invisible Maria and ascended, waving to the two mercenaries she’ll likely have to face in battle in the following days. *I do hope I won’t have to kill them.* She thought as she sped up, not to her full speed to not reveal anything. Neither did she fly towards Edwin and Kyrian, instead taking a massive detour to throw Maurice off. *Perhaps Popi was just playing the fool.* She wasn’t sure about it. A part of her wanted to believe he was as innocent as he acted but this world had changed her impressions of people.

“Why the fuck didn’t you attack them!?” Maria said loudly as soon as they were out of earshot.

“Honestly?” Ilea asked. “That cake was dope, I won’t kill a bloody baker if it’s not absolutely necessary.”

“And now they know we’re coming.” Maria complained.

“You’re not exactly the brightest flame for someone calling me stupid.” Ilea said and left it at that. The fact that Maria shut up right after let her know that maybe she thought about what she had said.

“We could’ve forced a search or held them hostage.” Maria said as they walked back to Kyrian’s and Edwin’s location.

“The two of Them? Did we meet different people. They’re expendable mercenaries. If Arthur Redleaf is anything like you say then he wouldn’t care about them. If we had killed them, they would know we’re coming. All they know now is that the Shadow’s Hand is on the isle. If he’s so obsessed with the Taleen, then perhaps we’re here because of that. Maybe we can use it somehow.” Ilea said. While her reasoning was sound to her, she really just didn’t feel like fighting the two of them. Especially Popi.

They soon reached the others and explained what had happened. To her surprise, Edwin didn't care much about the mercenary encounter.

"He really is here..." He said after they had finished, withdrawing into his own thoughts as he got a notebook from his pack, starting to write.

"So he has one mercenary team at least. I think it might've been for the best not to attack them. Ilea you'll distract them when we attack, as it seems you already somehow made friends, they might be less inclined to fight you." Edwin started explaining after a while. "I would assume the team is four to six people, let's hope for fewer."

"We'll easily find the location of the Isle of Garath in the village. Then Maria will scout again, this time alone and from further away. Don't risk getting spotted this time. We know they have ways to find you now." He said, pointing at her.

"Ilea, do you think you could take the two of them in a straight up fight?" Edwin asked and she shrugged.

"No idea. I think talking to them might be more effective. How much gold do you have? If they're mercenaries then maybe we can convince them that way." Ilea suggested.

"I doubt my father would hire easily bought people. Still, it's always a possibility. You may offer up to five gold coins per person to abandon their duty." Edwin said.

"Edwin... are you sure?" Maria asked but he just waved her off.

"We have to use whatever means we can." He said and nodded to Ilea, his openness surprising her.

*Whatever means.* She thought, smiling.

"When do we move?" She asked the man.

"As soon as the suns are up. We'll be able to better scout the isle."

---

Ravens spread out to scout the surroundings as they crossed the last hill before the Isle of Garath. “Here we are. Piss poor boring shit island.” Maurice said as he took a deep breath. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for his team, not even after an easy going night out.

The suns wouldn’t be up for another couple hours but the torches could be seen from afar. Their isle was small and technically more a half isle. While not connected by land, there was a narrow stone pathway leading to it from the closest other isle. *Guess that makes it one bigger isle doesn’t it?* He asked himself and looked back to find Popi a dozen meters further back, looking at something under an entirely too heavy rock.

“Found something?” He asked and walked up to the man.

“Spring.” Popi said and smiled, picking the little flower from near the rock before he let go of the massive thing.

“Spring.” Maurice said before he laughed and shook his head.

“Spring is when we’re done with this job.” He said and walked towards the island. The broken down castle ruin in the center gave the place an eerie feeling, just like most things that led to a Taleen dungeon. A good thing this one had been empty and small. Rare for the fucking dwarves.

“I like Zoy.” Popi said in a happy tone.

“I know I know. You like the pretty girls you big fat fuck.” Maurice said in response as they crossed the pathway to the rocky terrain. Certainly not the worst foundation for a defensible position. Looking down though, the ocean looked back, making him shiver. *Why out here.*

“You are being mean Maurice. She’s nice.” Popi argued.

“Nice and creepy. Just don’t get too close, she won’t come with us after this is over.” Maurice replied when they came onto the platform on the other side of the path. Welk was playing his harmonica as most nights but knowing the man a little better by now made the hairs on his neck stand up.

“Welcome back. How were the whores.” Welk asked, stopping to play for the remark. He did continue right after, not listening to Maurice’s lack of a response. The fire was still burning, giving off some heat in the cold night. Though it was spring, as Popi apparently found out, so close to the ocean it was still rather cool in the night. Not that anybody at their levels would be bothered much by that.

The fire kept off creatures and some of the inhabitants of the isles, human and not.

“Anything to report?” Welk asked and Maurice looked at him.

“Met some people. Shadow’s Hand.” He said as he sat down, glancing at Zoy who was sitting in silence, her white eyes staring at nothing.

“Shadow’s Hand?” Welk stopped playing. “Why are they here?”

“On a mission.” Maurice said and opened his pack, getting out some bread and dried meat.

“Yea I could figure that one out myself smartass. What mission? Anything to do with Mr. Redleaf or the Taleen dungeon?” Welk asked but Maurice just shrugged.

“Couldn’t tell ya. If they come here we’ll ask. Seemed the girl was more eager to try Popi’s baking.” He said, thinking about that weird encounter. He had definitely met a bunch of eccentric high level people but most Shadows so far had been less than talkative and mostly professional. Why he never thought about joining the fuckers. That and them imitating his style.

*She did have some pretty rad looking armor. If they supply that at this point maybe I'll join. A hundred gold though....*

“Popi’s baking. You should’ve found out more, interrogated them. What if they’re our enemy?” Welk asked as he got up and walked in a circle.

“And how exactly should I have done that? One of them was a rogue, damn near invisible and Popi burnt her... bad. She didn’t seem to care about that and was healed a couple minutes later. Both were above my level and the one who talked was so casual she just walked up to him and ate some cake. I’m here to do my job and my job is to guard this castle and help Arthur explore his bloody dungeon.” Maurice explained.

# Chapter 201 Engage

## Chapter 201 Engage

“Still... you should’ve found out more.” Welk complained and walked to the castle, likely to tell his lord about it.

*Maybe we’ll lose this job earlier than expected.* Maurice thought, smiling at the idea.

“Any news from inside?” He asked the silent woman.

There was no response or reaction at all. “Nothing then. Well I’m sure they’ll get you when they find any of those killer machines.”

“How do they not scare you?” He asked in a joking manner, finishing his meal when a couple guards walked by, armored in red and gray. Colors of house Redleaf. *What a stupid fucking name.* He thought and smiled.

“They are just machines.” Zoy said, gracing them with her voice. Popi perched up and summoned a cupcake.

“I made a new one. You said you didn’t hate lemon.” The man said and shyly walked over to where Zoy was sitting. The woman didn’t look at him but didn’t stop him setting the cupcake down next to her on the stone.

“Thank you Popi.” She said before she placed her hand near the cupcake, moving it a little before she finally found it.

*Don't have to fool us lady.* Maurice thought but he had that talk with her several times already. Maybe he would've believed it before he saw her fight.

"I'm gonna catch some sleep. Wake me when something interesting happens." He said and lied down on his mat.

"Will do Maurice. Sweet dreams." Popi said which made him smile.

---

"At least fifteen guards looking over the castle. And they're just hanging out in front of it?" Ilea asked as they looked over their target isle.

"They have Redleaf colors. Likely not as high level as the others. That's why we go in and check it out." Kyrian said.

"Yea." Ilea said and glided down to the tiny stone connection that bridged the two islands. Kyrian followed and landed behind her.

"Are you with me if I improvise a little?" Ilea asked the man a moment later.

"Like completely ignoring Edwin's plan to fight him yourself?" Kyrian asked but she waved him off.

"I just don't know if I'll get an opportunity to talk to the man otherwise." Ilea explained.

"Of course I'm with you. I'm here for Eve. And for you." He said. Ilea felt the burden lessen a little. Hopefully she wasn't dragging them both to death.

*Well, Edwin will intervene at one point or the other anyway. Just depends who's quicker.* She thought and smiled as they made their way over the pathway.

There were three people near the fire, two of them she knew already. Two guards on the top of the stairs leading to the castle pointed at them but didn't do anything yet. The third person sitting near the fire was a woman with somewhat short blond hair. None of them reacted before she shouted towards them.

“Hey Popi!” She waved and smiled when he turned towards her, taking off her helmet in the process.

“Lilith!” Popi answered and smiled as well, kicking at the third person who had been soundly asleep. Maurice grumbled and sat up with a skeptical look on his face.

“The Shadowgirl.” He said. “She's pretty.”

“Thanks old man.” Ilea said. “This is Joe.” She said, pointing at Kyrian behind her.

“Old man. Ah well you're right. The invisible angry one here too?” He asked, a little apprehension clear in his voice. The woman sitting in her white metal armor hadn't moved at all so far, her eyes white as she stared into the distance.

“She didn't feel like seeing your faces. Is she blind?” Ilea asked.

“You're being rude.” Kyrian said and nodded to the woman. “It's nice to meet you all. I apologize for her behavior.”

“No I think it's cool actually.” Ilea said and tensed her body slightly, turning it a little towards the woman. Her Sphere told her enough. There was a slight twitch in the woman's fingers and her breathing slowed down a bit.

“Hahaha. I knew it.” Ilea said and relaxed her body. “Popi how are you doing? I'm here to pay you and to buy more if you have anything else.” Ilea



said and smiled at the man as she sat down next to him, opening her pack and getting her pouch.

“Your spending habits haven’t changed at all.” Kyrian said and sighed.

“Where did you get that armor?” The woman in white asked suddenly.

“Her or me?” Kyrian asked as he sat down as well. The two guards from the stairs had walked towards them in the meantime.

“What’s the meaning of this? Who are those people?” One of the guards asked.

*[Warrior – lvl 141]*

*[Warrior – lvl 148]*

*Guards at a lower level.* Ilea thought and smiled at them.

“Fuck off, they’re just here to buy cake.” Maurice said.

“What do you mean they’re just...,” The guard was interrupted when the woman in white held up her hand.

“Her armor.” She stated in a tense voice.

“Smith friend made it for me, why?” Ilea said as she bit into the cupcake Popi had handed to her.

“The metal.” The woman said.

*Interesting. Not even Balduur knew what it was and this chick points it out immediately.*

*[Warrior – lvl ??]*

*Which means she’s higher than two fifty at least.* Ilea thought and debated on how to handle this interaction. The truth seemed as good as anything.

“Found it in a Taleen dungeon about a year ago. Belonged to an elf I think. Wore it until it was too messed up and had it reforged. This is the result. Do you like it?” She asked and studied the woman’s reaction.

“Where is the dungeon?” The woman asked.

“Maybe I’ll tell you if you tell me your name?” Ilea asked and smiled. The guards looked at each other and shook their heads before they went back to their posts, entirely out of their comfort zone it seemed.

*Shit guards.* Ilea thought as she watched them leave, taking another bite of the cupcake. “That’s fucking delicious.” She said.

“Zoy.” The woman said after a while.

“Zoy... like in soy sauce? Interesting name. The dungeon is inside the massive mountain Karth. I wouldn’t recommend going in though, there’s two Praetorians waiting.” Ilea said and finished the cupcake, not missing the sudden tension in Zoy’s body, moving her head for the first time as she looked up to the sky.

“You. Fought them?” She asked after a while, looking at the same nothing again before her.

“You really are something.” Maurice said as he sat up and put something that looked like coffee into one of the pans, filling it with water from a flask. “Never seen the mute talk that much.”

“Means she’s not a mute.” Kyrian interjected and smiled when Maurice looked at him.

“Got bloody mauled by them. Centurions are one thing but Praetorians...,” Ilea started. “They seemed... intelligent. Dangerous.” Ilea said.

“Do you fear them?” Zoy asked, holding her breath.

“Fear them? I did, yes. For a while.” Ilea said and thought back on the two machines decimating the expedition. There was nothing she could do back then. And she doubted she could do anything now. Not yet.

“You do not fear them anymore?” Zoy asked.

“No. As soon as I’m ready, I’ll go there and take them apart, piece by piece. Until nothing remains.” Ilea said and looked at the woman.

“Good. Then I leave them to you. Huntress named Lilith.” Zoy said and nodded.

“Wow and she used your name. You’re an ice whisperer or something?” Maurice asked as he stirred his brew.

“Smells nice, can I have some?” Ilea asked.

“If you pay me. One silver for a cup.” Maurice answered with a grin on his face.

“You’re overcharging me. Five copper.” Ilea said.

“Eighty.”

“Ten”

“Seventy five.”

“Twenty” Ilea said. “Not more. His cakes are better.”

“Twenty it is for the lady huntress.” Maurice said and gave her a cup of the brew.

It smelled and tasted close to coffee. Not that she missed it specifically but it made her think of earth, of hanging out in a cafe with a friend, enjoying a peaceful summer day while the birds chirped in the background. *Pink glasses*. She thought and turned serious.

“A friend of mine. She got murdered.” She started, Kyrian glancing over to her with a stone faced expression. Maurice picked up on the tension immediately but neither Popi nor Zoy seemed to care much.

“Your employer I assume. Arthur Redleaf. He might know who did it.” Ilea said and watched their reactions. Maurice looked at her and then towards Zoy and then the castle.

“Are you here to kill him?” He asked after a moment. “Cause we can’t have you do that.”

“Not primarily.” Ilea said. “I want to talk to him.”

“I’m afraid he hates visitors and I do like to get paid for a job.” Maurice said as he got up, magic gathering around him. Nobody else made a move yet.

“How much is he paying you?” Ilea asked and smiled at him. “And don’t lie to me.”

“Three gold coins for three weeks of guard duty.” He said but didn’t stop his skills.

“A partner is paying five. Would you reconsider your allegiance, I would not like to fight you just to talk to the old man.” Ilea said, watching him as he considered her offer.

“I fucking hate this island and I hate that old fucker and that cunt Welk.” Maurice said and sighed.

“I won’t help you fight her.” Maurice said, pointing at Zoy. “And I won’t fight him or the rest of them. And you make that ten gold for both me and Popi.”

“Deal.” Ilea said. “Who else is here apart from the guards and Arthur?” She asked.

“One guy from our team, Arthur has his own protector as well. Creepy girl that one, even more than her.” Maurice said and looked at Zoy.

“You don’t seem bothered by our talk.” Ilea said, looking at the woman. “Will you stop me if I go up those stairs?”

“Yes.” She answered simply.

“Why?” Ilea asked.

“The Taleen network.” Zoy said.

“You mean the teleportation gates? There’s one here?” Ilea asked and interpreted her lack of response as a yes.

“There’s no problem then as long as I just talk to him, is there?” Ilea asked.

“There is not.” Zoy answered which made her grin.

“Great, can you bring us to him then? Joe, come on.” Ilea said when the castle’s wall suddenly exploded outwards, sending bricks into the ocean below.

“Great.” She said when Zoy vanished. “We’ve waited too long.” She said and spread ash around their group. “You two should leave, here’s your gold.” Ilea said and handed Maurice twenty pieces of gold, ten from Edwin and ten from her own pockets, leaving her at thirty one gold pieces. “If you’re looking for a new place, Ravenhall has great ones for sale.” She said as she ran towards the opening in the wall. The guards did the same, as did Kyrian behind her.

Ilea’s wings spread and she flew outwards and around the castle, looking into the big hall where Edwin stood, his blades interlocked with the greatsword of a heavily armored woman. Landing in the hall behind him, her ash spread out around her as her skills activated all at once. Kyrian’s metal spheres moved out as well while she glanced around.

*A middle aged man with a bald spot, a viking looking guy with no hair at all, the angry chick with the greatsword and a bunch of Redleaf guards appearing and coming into the hall. Surprise attack officially failed.*

Her ash was blown away by a strong wind originating from the middle aged man himself who lifted his hand to stop the approaching guards.

“Son! You disappoint me.” He said and glanced at both Kyrian and Ilea in turn. “The Shadow’s Hand? Not even revenge you could manage on your own.”

The hypocrisy of his words weren’t lost to Ilea as she watched the guards take positions around the man, aiming their bows, swords and spells at Edwin and herself.

“Doesn’t look good.” Kyrian whispered to her.

“Easy way to escape though. Let’s see what he does.” Ilea whispered back.

Zoy stood to the side of the enemy group, two short curved blades in her hands.

“You’re right, I’m not alone.” Edwin said as he pushed away the blade and slashed one of his blades across the woman’s armor. She started screaming and Ilea remembered his ability to inflict damage with his blood magic, even through armor.

“Take him down.” Arthur said when the chest of a guard next to him suddenly exploded, splattering blood and guts over him and the floor.

*There she is.* Ilea thought as she vanished, feeling the curse on her immediately when she appeared among the mages of the guards. The effect seemed much worse on them than on her as she punched the first one, sending him into the wall behind him like a rag doll, breaking several bones with her attack. Ash spread again, this time not immediately washed away as she blinked to the next mage, frantically sending beams of light outwards before her fist smacked into his chest, his energy shield breaking with the first punch before her second one broke his chest.

The third punch didn’t land when a blade came dangerously close. A blade shimmering white in the dark ash around her. Two blades to be exact. “Are you sure about this Zoy?” Ilea asked but her answer were two quick slashes that she dodged backwards. She was unwilling yet to engage her, using the guards around them as cover and targets at the same time.

Maria used her magic from somewhere hidden, one after the other dropping dead or screaming with missing limbs as Ilea blinked between them, seeing the red blades of Edwin flash through her ash as she continued to spread it wherever she appeared. Kyrian's curses were affecting her and the enemy wherever she stood, his metal spikes and needles filling the hall. A blast of wind sent a part of her ash, several guards and herself flying.

Wings spread before she blinked away, avoiding the white blades of the mercenary when she spotted Arthur sending a massive blast of wind her way. Blinking away, she looked back at the ceiling that wasn't there anymore, pieces of still visible in the air some hundred meters higher up. Her ears popped and a sharp pain went through her head when a wave of magic went over her, originating at the bald man next to Arthur.

*Sound.* She thought as she watched him play his harmonica with a smile, her second stage of pain tolerance activated as she blinked closer to the two of them, coming to a stop only to be engaged with Zoy again. The woman in heavy armor and her greatsword screamed and rushed at Kyrian who flew out of the castle to avoid her.

The blades rushed at her and Ilea dodged right, jabbing at Zoy's left hand with her own to send the blade past herself. Her left fist landed on the woman and the punch destabilized her and sent her destructive man into the woman. Something blocked most of it, Ilea felt as she spread her ash around and heated it up as much as she could, a flurry of attacks following by Zoy and leaving her defending and dodging the short blades with little opportunity to strike back.

Her wings moved forward and held back Zoy's arms in a moment of surprise, letting her get a kick in that sent the woman stumbling backwards. Another wave of sound came over her before all the air around them was pushed backwards in an instant, sending Ilea crashing through the wall behind her and out towards the ocean. Zoy and an unfortunate guard had been hit as well, the latter screaming as he was flung into the water.

She stabilized quickly and healed the damage to both her ears and the rest of her body, internal bleedings in several places and even a cracked rib from the wind alone. *Impressive magic old man.*

Ilea watched Zoy teleport back to the castle in intervals, using her ability in a similar fashion to her own blink as Ilea rushed back, her wings and blink combined getting her there much quicker than her adversary before she crashed her whole weight into the bald mage who was focused on Edwin who was engaged with the armored woman. He turned a little in the last moment to avoid critical damage but she still punched herself and the man through the wall behind him and into another room.

A noise so loud her ears went deaf again immediately and blood came from all openings in her head as she felt her brain squeeze together was released from the man she held beneath her. He was bloodied and one of his arms was mangled when she smashed his face with both fists, the impact sending a shock wave back that nearly sent her flying but her wings pushed against it and her fists landed again, cracking through whatever barrier he had put up before his face was caved inwards. A third hit with both fists sent the remainder of his skull and brains to the nearby walls.

Several messages popped up in her mind as she healed the damage to her body, nearly falling down again after she had stood up, her head spinning as she blinked her eyes. A sword hit her in the shoulder, the force sending her to one knee as she focused on her Sphere to see the enemy. The sword was lifted and came down again when Ilea vanished, appearing behind the guard, her fist impacting hard on his leather armor and breaking his neck.

Right when she stepped out of the room and back into the hall, a blast of wind send her right back inside, bracing herself against the impact. Her wings combined with a blink were enough to prevent that as she slid to a stop and blinked out into the hall.

Some of the guards were moaning in pain, parts of the room covered in ash, some of it still floating. Edwin had one of his swords stuck through the woman's neck and pulled it out slowly, letting the corpse drop to the ground.

Arthur and Zoy were nowhere to be seen when Kyrian landed next to them.

“Where's Maria?” Ilea asked.



“On the hunt.” Edwin said before he ran to the stairs leading down.

# Chapter 202 Old Friend

## Chapter 202 Old Friend

The stairs led down for quite a while, parts of them covered in blood and one or two corpses of Redleaf guards lying in the way. Finally, the exit opened up into a big white room, Arthur standing at the end of it.

“You really are a disappointment. Years of research ruined because of your petty revenge. Grow up!” Arthur said in a harsh tone.

*This room isn't good for us.* Ilea thought when his magic was released, a cone of wind pushing against them as she dug her hand into the ground, her Veil unable to keep the damage off completely as she was pushed backwards even with her hands in the stone. Edwin had been pushed away completely but Kyrian stood next to her, his metal forming a barrier before him that split the wind, his armor digging into the stone as he looked at her.

“Well we'll see if any of them survive.” Arthur said when Zoy appeared in front of Ilea, her back towards her.

*No* The thought went through her head as she activated her blink but it was too late. Instant. Even her heightened reactions weren't quick enough as a white light enveloped her before there was darkness.

Darkness only to her eyes, her Sphere recognizing the ground below her, her feet standing as securely as before as she crouched down and kept as still as possible. Something in her vision moved and Ilea blinked to the side, again and again she blinked until she found rock, cover.

She stayed as quiet as she could, her sphere not delivering any more information but the fact that she was standing on an even floor, next to her natural rock and a space to hide. Her healing took care of the injuries the wind blast had caused. *Kyrian and Zoy*. The thought went through her when she heard a clicking. Metal on stone. She looked towards where the noise came from and her whole body went still. Her eyes widened and she knew what stood before her before Identify kicked off.

***[Taleen Praetorian - ???]***

The thing looked at her in that moment as well, lifting its scythe as its glowing green eyes locked with her own blue ones.

“Intruder.” It said.

Ilea instinctively took a step back but stopped herself. *Get a grip*. She thought as her eyes steeled.

*No Kyrian, no Zoy. No Arthur or Edwin*. “Being teleported against my will seems to be a common theme at this point hmm?” She asked the machine, the hairs on her neck standing up as it slowly advanced. Slowly at first and then quick, like the wind.

All her skills were pushed to the max, her third tier State of Azarinth activating as she sacrificed a chunk of health. The blade rushed over her as she slid under it, ash spreading around her to distract the machine. She blinked and found the blade waiting for her, crossing her arms as it impacted her and sent her flying. Her gauntlets were scratched and a little dented as she slid to a stop, the Praetorian advancing even faster than she was flying backwards from its previous attack.

Again the blade came at her but this time she blinked towards its head in the last moment, her fist landing on the green metal with a loud clang. Nearly none of her destructive mana made it inside she noticed, either a barrier or an enchantment placed on the machine. The scythe moved again when she landed on the ground, bracing for the blade. Her hand moved upwards as she ducked slightly, impacting the blade and sending it over her as she moved closer, a kick delivered to one of the machine's legs, its counter avoided with a swift twirl to the right.

The Praetorian moved backwards to be able to use its weapon again but Ilea didn't let it get away, delivering attack after attack against the same leg, her whole being one with her skills, all her conscious focused on destroying the enemy. A sudden burst of magic sending a shock wave of arcane energy out in a sphere around the machine made her stop. She wasn't pushed back but her Veil was destroyed, quickly rebuilding as she continued onwards. She didn't deal a lot of damage, she knew that much but as the ash spread around her, Ilea knew that she would win. She would fight this damned thing for however long it took.

At least that was the plan but when a second scythe suddenly appeared in her Sphere, spinning and getting dangerously close to splitting her in two, Ilea blinked away and watched not one but four of the damned fuckers approaching her from a distance, only their bright green eyes visible in the darkness.

A feeling of despair spread in her body and mind but she soothed it with her Healing and Meditation skills. *Just a bunch of drakes.* She told herself and retreated, dodging the blades whenever necessary. The things were fast, definitely but with her Sphere and knowing them a little better by now, she felt confident to show her back as she ran off, her wings spreading and taking her upwards and away from the monsters lurking in the dark.

Further and further she went, flying scythes being dodged even a hundred meters in the air. Metal spheres shot from turrets and machines invisible to her joined in as she rushed and blinked through the dark space. *There you are.* She thought and rushed to the wall, her fist smashing through one of the turrets before she continued her way up.

*I have to get back to the others.* She thought, her head clearing up a little after her encounter below. Ilea reached the top of the wall and glided over it, the bullets behind her impacting the stone she now knew to be white.

Stunned and in silence, Ilea was kept in the air by her wings that slowly flapped up and down on her back. Her small form was lost in the vast space of green and gold she had found herself in. A golden sphere shined in the distance, levitating over an endless space of darkness below. Around her a city spread, more massive than anything she had ever seen. Definitely Taleen in nature but nothing like the ruins she had visited so far.

The golden sphere seemed so far away she had no idea how big it actually was. The walls of the cave weren't visible but she saw roads and houses, buildings as big as mountains and thousands of Guardians standing motionless on top of it all. Fields filled only with machines, many of them even Praetorian or even bigger in size. Most of the light came from the golden sphere itself but little lights in the sky and on the ground gave the scene a busy look.

Some of the flying lights seemed to move towards her as well. *Move.* The thought didn't seem to do anything as she gasped. *Move.*

This time she heard it and her body followed. *I just fucking hope Kyrian wasn't teleported as well.*

Noise came from the walls behind her and as she turned, she saw at least ten Praetorians climb over, on the hunt for her. *I need to get out of here.* She thought and sped up, going to the first set of houses she found that didn't swarm with Guardians.

One of them was inside, its eyes starting to glow green when her fist smashed its torso, denting the metal inwards when its green lights vanished again.

*A single hit now...,* She thought. *If anybody knows where the fuck I am and how the fuck I got here, it's Arthur.*

Ilea looked outside and saw a sea of green light in the distance. Flying machines with mechanical arms and flood lights searched the surroundings, Guardians and worse hanging on their bellies, ready to drop at any sight of her.

*What the hell is this place.* She thought and walked around the room. *It's too big and probably too dangerous to search for a single person. If he really was teleported then I have to get back to Arthur, back to whatever he used to teleport me. Find out where Kyrian went and go there.* The plan was a gamble of course but she didn't expect to be sent to this magical fucking city in the first place.

*I have to go back.*

She sat down and activated the third tier of her Blink ability. *Let's see if this works.* The skill charged up and her mana flowed into it. More and more of it as she started to become anxious. It takes around twenty to thirty minutes to activate and if she interrupted it, she had to start from scratch. Ten minutes passed as she saw lights float by from time to time.

Twenty minutes passed when she heard a machine move right beside the house she was in. It crawled on the walls outside for a minute before it reached her floor.

### ***[Taleen Guardian – lvl 150]***

The machine turned its torso towards her, its green soulless eyes staring at her, the opening on its chest letting her know that it was one of the ranged machines. Her wings, ash and Veil formed before her as she continued to funnel mana into her teleportation skill.

The first slug was fired, crashing through her hastily built wall of ash before it was stopped by her Veil, the piece of metal falling down before a second one hit. More noises came from outside and soon the tapping of metal against stone was all she heard. The room was flooded in greenish light a moment later, her eyes nearly blinded by the flying machine hovering right outside the house. A sharp noise drowned out the metal tapping as energy gathered in its core.

The world went white again and Ilea let herself fall on her back, touching the wooden floor of her home as her breathing slowly calmed down. Her helmet vanished into her necklace as she stared at the ceiling.

“What the actual fuck was that?” The question remained in the room as she let her Meditation take care of her adrenaline filled body. A minute later, she stumbled up and went to the table, summoning some of Walter’s ale and pouring herself a cup and then another one.

“Found the fucking motherload didn’t I. First demons then taleen, what the fuck is next?” She asked and poured herself another. Meditation was still working, mostly to get half the mana back that she lost in the use of her Blink ability.

“You need to get to that island again.” She said to herself and hoped that Arthur wasn’t dead already. She needed to know what the fuck had just happened. Although she could guess some things.

Her wings spread as she appeared outside. At least she could simply follow the coast and would find the isles at some point. And this time she didn’t have to hold back her speed.

A hundred health left her and were near instantly replaced by her healing skill, red runes visible on her face as her wings spread. She blinked northwards, reaching her top speed quickly as she continued to use her teleportation to cover over thirty meters every other second. More and more health was sacrificed to keep her speed at the maximum. She would have to stop at some point to recharge but seeing how little mana she had to use to keep both her blink and healing active made her smile. A good thing she opted for more balanced stats than explosive but short lived power.

Still, she would need several hours to reach the Isle of Garath. Enough time to decide on her first third tier ashen skill.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has killed [Harmony Mage – lvl 225 / Blood Enhancer – lvl 218]’*

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has killed [Barricade Berserker – lvl 205 / Blood Berserker – lvl 183]’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have killed [Taleen Guardian – lvl 150]’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 227 – Five stat points awarded.’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 222 – Five stat points awarded.’*

*‘ding’ ‘State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have entered Iz dungeon’*

She immediately thought about the third tier of her second class. A big grin spread on her face despite the circumstances.



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

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:***

***3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points available [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 2***

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]:***

- Veil of Ash***
- Ash Creation***

*Only two of them. For now the choice is easy. Ilea thought and selected Veil of Ash, one of the few defensive skills she had available and the skill that next to Blink had saved her life just a couple minutes ago in the newly discovered Taleen dungeon. Well I do have no bloody idea where it is. Though considering what she had seen, it was currently at the very bottom of her list of places to go.*

***‘ding’ ‘Veil of Ash advances to 3<sup>rd</sup> tier’***

***‘Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 1***

***A thin mist of ash forms around you to both protect you and attack nearby enemies. You are in full control. The veil greatly increases your resilience.***

***2nd stage: The strength of your Resistance skills also benefit from the Veil of Ash.***

***3rd stage: The density of your Veil of Ash increases, now affected by your Ash and Ember Manipulation. Increases the defensive capabilities of all ash and ember you control.***

***Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic’***

*So the walls of ash I create might actually do something other than look cool.* Ilea asked herself, quite happy about the change. She quickly activated her Veil in flight, just in case anything changed so drastically that it would surprise her as soon as she was back in the fight. The ash formed around her a little more quickly than it did before, not hovering barely visible in front of her armor but a little closer to it and more visible while being darker than before. She couldn't see herself but looking at her arms, the ash as before didn't cover it completely, instead twirling around it and moving to give the impression of a living element.

Checking her third tier advancements again, Ilea found the expected result.

***3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points available [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1***

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]:***

She had advanced one skill which meant that now she only had four skills in her second class at the highest level of the second tier. She would have to advance another skill to level twenty before she could chose her second skill. *Seems like Ash Creation is the only one available for now anyway.*

Ilea kept up her speed as she looked through her stats.

***Status:***

***Vitality: 600***

***Endurance: 350***

***Strength 266***

***Dexterity 350***

***Intelligence 525***

***Wisdom 415***

She had enough Vitality to tank nearly everything she had been confronted with so far. Of course at some point she'd invest into it again but for now it was her highest leveled skill. For good reason of course and she'd keep it that way. Thinking about earlier, she remembered the mage she had killed with just three attacks. Not something she wanted to happen to herself when someone of a similar level attacked her.

*Although Arthur's Wind magic fucked me up pretty badly as well. Even the Sound mage's attacks were pretty bad. Without her healing she would've had issues continuing the fight at the same efficiency. It made sense why a lot of mages seemed to put all their stats towards attack power. But I'm the one still alive and that magical music guy isn't.*

Still, she didn't quite understand why someone at this level of strength would disregard Vitality to such an extent. You only had one life after all, at least she was pretty sure about that.

Endurance and Wisdom kind of went hand in hand and so far she had rarely experienced stamina exhaustion before her mana ran out. Meditation was good for both so she saw little reason to increase the former for now. Strength and Dexterity let her move quickly and punch hard. Things that didn't as much contribute to her damage as Intelligence did but still paramount parts to her power.

They were both at a good base, where even if the enemy had near complete mana intrusion defense, her hits would cause a reaction. Her speed combined with all the skills that enhanced it allowed for effective dodging and movement. Leaving the stat she chose for the newly gained ten points to distribute, Intelligence. Now at 535, it was closing in on Vitality and would enhance most of her skills. She found that a combination of Strength, Dexterity and Intelligence were necessary to allow for efficient fighting, at least with the necessity of moving around and getting in close compared to shooting a laserbeam from your forehead while standing still.

*Combined with Meditation long ranged magic seems like such an overpowered skillset.* She thought and smiled. It made sense why so many people were mages compared to warriors. And also why it seemed to easy to deal with those exact long ranged mages. They rarely fought people

capable of avoiding their attacks or circumvent them entirely, at least lower level ones.

# Chapter 203 Hunters and Prey

## Chapter 203 Hunters and Prey

Ilea thought about her skills and the short lived but very intense fights she had just been in. Zoy seemed to have a very similar skillset to her own and it definitely showed. Between the two of them there was nothing other than their fighting skills going against each other. Her ash didn't make a difference and neither did her ability to teleport. It would've likely come down to one of them making a severe mistake or simply a battle of attrition.

Perhaps her healing ability would give her the edge but who knew if the woman didn't have such a skill as well. *Maybe shoving ash down her throat would be an idea...*, Ilea thought, generally choosing a more direct approach. Her control over both ash and ember would be cut off immediately upon entering an enemy's body but it would certainly be an annoying distraction. She doubted that with her current ash control, someone at the power of Zoy would be inconvenienced at all but it would be worth a shot in the next encounter.

Her wings and Veil would also be skills she should utilize more to attack but again, they were somewhat bound to what her ashen skills could do. *Perhaps getting Ash Creation to the third tier will change that.* Ilea questioned but right now she was at least confident in facing enemies unable to deal with her speed and maneuverability combined with her high defense and stamina.

The plains and ocean below rushed by in the afternoon light, the rare animal or monster looking up at the low flying passerby close to the coast. None of them chose to pursue the fast potential prey. Most would've likely found it not to be worth the trouble.

Several hours passed with Ilea flying at her highest possible speed, having to slow down from time to time to recover her mana and health a little. Finally seeing the island group in the distance, she slowed down to a complete stop and observed, her Meditation skill working quick to recover her lost mana and in turn health as her Hunter Recovery took care of the sacrificed life force. No big fire or spells could be seen in the distance as she slowly moved closer, her health and mana reaching acceptable levels to join a fight again.

The busted wall of the castle showed the big hall they had initially fought in, a couple people standing near one of the walls. People she knew.

Ilea sped up again and landed casually next to the seemingly injured Edwin, the man leaning on the wall behind him, a rather large pool of his own blood converging under the man as he enthusiastically bit into a pastry.

“Maurice, didn't think I'd see you again so soon.” Ilea said to the man in his black feathery armor. “Hey Popi.” She added to the baker who handed more pastries to Edwin. Maria was around as well she noticed, breathing hard but nearly invisible standing close to Edwin.

“Ilea...,” Edwin said, gulping down his food as he focused on her, trying to get up but wincing as a wound on his stomach opened again.

“So that's your name.” Maurice said and chuckled. “He's probably trying to say that the windy chick that followed Arthur out is in danger. Went that way.” He added and pointed towards the mainland.

“Windy chick. Felicia?” Ilea asked and blinked out, not waiting for a response as she sacrificed health again to speed up. The girl hadn’t listened to her brother after all. She was proud and worried at the same time. The woman wasn’t on the same level as Edwin and Maria. She reached the mainland less than a minute of flying later, looking around only to find much of the vegetation destroyed and dead.

Following the destruction and upturned earth, she finally saw them and landed close to the two.

“Felicia.” She said simply, taking a couple steps towards the two women. The burnt corpse lying on the ground before them told enough of the story for her to grasp the situation.

“You did it.” Ilea added, coming up next to them when Felicia turned to her, brushing away tears on her face before she nodded. Ilea hugged her immediately, patting her back as the woman sobbed into her shoulder. Aliana nodded to her before she sat down on the ground.

“Are you injured?” Ilea asked, healing the bruises and broken shoulder Felicia had suffered in their fight.

“Nothing serious.” Aliana said as she looked at the corpse of Arthur Redleaf, his remains much less imposing than he had been when he was still alive.

“Is Kyrian still here?” Ilea asked, knowing that the man was likely trapped in whatever Taleen dungeon he had wound up in. Hopefully the man hadn’t been transported to Iz as well.

“I don’t know. We didn’t see him when we arrived.” Aliana answered her when Felicia let go of her, brushing away the last tears as she breathed in harshly.

With Arthur dead, she didn’t know if anybody could give her the necessary answers to Kyrian’s location or the teleportation gate used but perhaps there was still something left in the castle. She was glad at least that Felicia and Aliana were alright and that they had gotten their revenge after all. “Come

on, let's get you to the others and heal up everybody." Ilea said, checking on Aliana when Felicia spoke, pointing towards a spot in the distance.

"Someone is coming, quickly." She said and Ilea checked out the approaching people.

"Two of them, what is that?" She asked and grabbed both Aliana and Felicia in the meantime. "Let's regroup, if they're hostile we'll have a better chance if the others help as well." She added before flying off, letting go of Felicia a moment later as the woman flew on her own, carried by the winds around her.

They reached the others and Ilea immediately went to Maria, checking her injuries and healing them as quickly as she could, focusing on the most severe ones and completely ignoring the small stuff. "We've got incoming. One flying woman and a massive beast with teeth as long as my arms." Ilea said. "Know anything about them?" She asked, finishing up with Maria who was breathing much lighter and moved on the Edwin.

Surprising her, the man stood up on his own, his wounds mostly mended as she touched him and finished healing the cracked bones in his chest. "You two got fucked up pretty badly."

"Where's Arthur... Felicia, I told you to...," Edwin said and walked towards the woman when she pushed him back with a gust of wind.

"He is gone. Dead. You started it and we finished it." Felicia said and looked him in the eye, shocking the man to a standstill.

"The two you mentioned, Kyle and Tiana. Hunters in the employ of Arthur. They won't like it when they find his corpse." Maria said, cracking her neck as she turned visible.

"She's a pretty one too eh?" Maurice asked and pointed towards Maria who stared at the man with focused hatred. "Maybe give her some time to warm up. Popi see, told you we should work with them instead." He added and smiled at his friend.



“Yes, and they all like my baking.” Popi said and summoned a piece of cake, handing it to Ilea who started eating it immediately.

“Mediate your mana and health. Would be good if we killed those two before they can inform anybody.” Ilea suggested with a mouth full of delicious cake.

“We could also leave.” Maurice suggested but she shook her head.

“I need whatever I can find in this castle, maybe there’s some gold for you left as well. If you help I’m sure Edwin here will pay you handsomely.” She said, punching the man’s shoulder who apparently woke up again just then.

“You killed him?” He asked and then smiled brightly before he hugged Felicia. “I’m proud of you.” He whispered when Maria clapped.

“Edwin, we’ve got visitors and they’re here in a minute or two.” She said.

“I know, I know. My mana is recovering as we speak. Maurice, was it? I’ll pay you each another two gold coins if you help us kill those two pests.” He said and turned around, unsheathing his blades and twirling them in his hands.

“We should get out of this room, the monster is a necromancer and he can, well turn into a monster. Be careful of the flying woman, she’s an ice mage of some kind, more dangerous than any I’ve fought before. Plus I think she might be a silver mage. She won’t go down easily. Me, Maria and Aliana will take care of the monster, the rest try to go for the woman. I hear you’re good at heating up areas?” He asked and looked towards Popi.

The man nodded and smiled, his armor appearing on his body right after. “I’ll melt the ice.” He said.

“Good, Ilea, where’s the metal mage?” Edwin asked as he looked around.

“Teleported away, just like I was. I assume the woman in white armor was as well, or you managed to kill her?” Ilea asked, Maurice snorting at that.

“Yea, good luck with that.” He said.

“Up.” Edwin said as he rushed to the stairwell. “He’s always been obsessed with these dwarven teleportation devices. I’m sure you’ll find your friend. We can look for clues as soon as we took care of the intruders.” Edwin said as they came out in the open, the castle ruin towering around them on the terrace of the big structure.

“Start heating up the area.” Edwin said and Popi spread his arms, the temperature rising drastically.

“I claim her silver things if what you say is true.” Maurice said with a smile as he shrouded himself in a dark mist, ravens, eagles and monster like birds of prey appeared out of nowhere around him as he talked, Ilea summoning her ash in turn, condensing as much of it as she could in small spheres to be expanded or used at a later time.

Maria was already out of sight, Edwin’s blades burning with a red flame as he walked to the front of the group. Felicia hovered in the air behind them and Aliana positioned herself behind some broken down walls that would give her a little cover.

“Don’t let them escape.” Edwin said when the creature of blood and claws appeared on the ramparts, growling deeply at the group before it when the woman Ilea had seen in the distance flew up behind the beast, a little of the surrounding heat flowing away immediately. Her eyes opened wide as she looked at the group.

“Go.” Ilea said and rushed out, teleporting as close as she could, speeding up with her wings as a sphere of ash spread out before her, covering both herself and Tiana in a cloud. Ilea smirked as the woman vanished. *Of course.* She thought when a freezing cold spread through her, making her blink away as well and orienting herself to find the enemy.

Tiana was floating a little bit away, raining a shower of ice spikes onto the terrace below, most of them stopped by the winds Felicia had summoned. Edwin and Aliana were engaged with the beast already, none of Ilea’s concern for now as she rushed at the mage again.

A group of birds rushed at her as well, blades of wind and flashes of heat appearing around the mage as she retreated more and more, the group now engaged in their hunt above the ocean. Popi couldn't fly it seemed, focusing his attention on the monster instead.

Ilea found it hard to catch the woman without risking being damaged by one of her ice spells. She left behind a growing rose of the element whenever she vanished, spreading freezing cold where she left and appeared. After half a minute of engagement, the enemy mage was fully on the defense, trying to catch any of her pursuers in one of her traps as she cooled down the air around her.

It would only be a matter of time until she ran out of mana. The thought kept Ilea at a distance, summoning her bow instead as she continuously formed ashen projectiles that shot towards the woman, not letting her use her meditation skill. One of her arrows actually hit and was blocked by a growing plate of silver, the exploding projectile sending the woman off balance before two windblades cut into her chest.

She turned in the air, trying to gain control again when a swarm of crows smashed into her, forcing the woman to use her magic. A sphere of ice suddenly formed around her, trapping herself and the birds within before it fell down towards the water. The three hunters followed, hovering around the sphere that stuck itself in the water as more and more of it froze, keeping the sphere at the surface but the woman inside unable to move away.

“She can recover her mana this way.” Felicia said, sending a couple blades of wind into the icy sphere. Cuts formed but froze up again quickly.

“Let's see. Pull me out if I get stuck.” Ilea said as she landed next to the sphere. Her ash spread out around herself and the sphere of ice, Embered Body Heat activating and heating up both her blood and the ash around her before her fist crashed into the ice, destructive mana flowing into the sphere, combating the mana that in turn tried to get to her.

Ilea's healing and Resistance pushed against the icicles forming on her arm with every punch, the ash around her helping against the biting cold that

threatened to freeze her in place with every moment she continued to stand there. Cracks formed with every hit, reforming but unable to completely alleviate the damage, mana wrestling against each other until finally, Ilea reached her opponent's body, her fist hitting the silver that spread around her target.

The element hissed and burnt her hand, even below her armor but she kept on attacking, Destruction and Wave of Ember continuing to damage the silver mage's defenses as birds picked away on the ice, many of them freezing in place, blades of wind slashing into the sphere around them.

Finally, the ice cracked, Ilea's fist hitting the silver armor when it got swallowed up by the metal, her whole arm stuck when a burning pain shot through her, her arm freezing up while her flesh melted from the acidic attack coming likely from the silver. She pushed her recovery to the max while pumping destructive mana into her enemy who was additionally occupied with Felicia's and Maurice's attacks now only blocked by fields of silver that formed and retracted around her.

Ilea focused on the ash around her, pushing it towards the woman's eyes and throat while she used her legs to kick at her armored shins. Finally, she got a good kick in on the coughing woman, destabilizing her enough to let Ilea get her free left arm around the silver. Grabbing around the woman's arm, she crushed it with all her enhanced strength, standing firm on the ice and pulling the mage around, smashing her on the very ground she had created.

The silver around her right arm dropped off and her healing continued to fight the ice crystals forming inside of her body, the enemy magic somewhat slowed by the near boiling blood. Ilea's ash continued to assault the woman who was on the ground with a broken shoulder.

The assault from the other two mages flying around them continued and the silver mage barely managed to block the hits with her magic. Ilea's left arm was still firmly holding her enemy hostage, likely disabling her ability to simply teleport away. The position didn't allow Ilea to get in a kick or even knee the woman but her head was close enough. Her brow smashed against the silver expanding out of the woman's hair ornament, again and again,

Destruction and Wave of Ember withering down her defenses as her healing fought the spreading cold in her body and the acidic deconstruction of her cells.

The woman's eyes turned from determined to fearful as Ilea didn't relent, not after half a minute and not after two. It was obviously becoming hard for the mage to keep up her defenses when Maurice appeared in a smoke of feathers, blades flashing in the sunlight as silver expanded to deflect the attack. The second blade was stuck in the metal as it expanded to trap his arm as well.

As soon as it reached his flesh, he winced, the cold spreading fast, reaching his shoulder in but a moment. He clenched his teeth as Ilea continued to bash her bleeding head against the defenses, the flesh having come off long ago. A massive gust of wind crashed into them, sending the three flying and destabilizing Tiana's silver magic. Maurice was sent to the side, gasping for air as he struggled to fly away from the woman, his right side frozen solid. He landed in the water a moment later, Ilea still holding on to Tiana, the woman's right arm destroyed and Ilea's reversed healing spreading through her foe's body continuously.

Both of them were likely using their meditation to recover mana that they immediately channeled to attack the other. Still, the state of Tiana, both there for everybody to see but specifically for Ilea and her healing magic, didn't look great. While Ilea had to concentrate on keeping several skills active while trying to counteract the ice crystals forming, she'd be good for quite a while.

# Chapter 204 Ice, Silver and Blood

## Chapter 204 Ice, Silver and Blood

Then they hit the water. Ice spread immediately, encasing the both of them in a prison of frozen water, Ilea now being attacked from all sides. Still, she held on, still she channeled her mana into the woman who more and more lacked the capability to counteract it.

In a moment of despair, silver formed in the tight space between the ice and her body before it cut through her arm right below her shoulder, separating Ilea's direct connection to her body and allowing her to finally take a breather. Contrary to Ilea, she didn't need a physical link for her magic to work, Ilea now exposed to her magic.

Still, with her Veil, Ice Resistance, healing and the ash spreading in the minuscule space between her body and the freezing cold, Ilea persevered. The spikes of ice that formed and stabbed at her were mostly stopped by her veil already and the ones that didn't were stopped by her armor. It seemed her enemy was panicked enough not to focus on her weak spots, being her eyes and the small spaces connecting her armor pieces.

*We're sinking...*, The thought reached Ilea's mind as her sphere was unable to perceive anything else but water anymore. She had to get out. She let go of the separated arm and started moving, punching at the ice around her, moving her body as much as she could, her ash heating up and trying to counteract the ice magic. To no avail.

Summoning an explosive arrow into her hand, she activated it right before the thing was frozen solid. The explosion ripped through her and the ice, not as strong as she expected and barely damaging herself. Sadly the effect on the ice was similar. Still, there was an effect. Especially compressed to such a small space, the arrows punched harder than they would against a high level ice mage's creation. Ilea grinned and summoned all the arrows she had left, fire, explosive and lightning. And then she activated all of them at the same time, her mana reaching the enchantments and lighting up the small sphere of ice below the surface of the ocean.

She was free, for but a moment and the ice formed again just a second later. Enough time for her to blink out. Out and upwards, again and again before she spread her wings above the water, continuing to heal the damage she had sustained from both the enemy and her own attempts to free herself.

“Are you alright!” Felicia shouted from a distance, looking down at the water before a rain of ice lashed out from below, the spikes deflected by a whirlwind of air around the mage, Ilea simply holding up her arms to block the attack. No ice spread after the impact, leading her to believe that Tiana was injured rather badly.

“Don't worry about me! She's lost an arm. Don't let her get away.” Ilea said and looked around, blinking twice and grabbing Maurice out of the water, the cold having spread nearly through his whole right side before her mana started healing the damage, counteracting the terrifying power devouring the man.

“Would've thought you're less stupid.” She said, her wings flapping as they got higher, watching Felicia in the distance when Tiana came out from below, the water around her freezing, her arm replaced by a silver one, mixed with blood. Her eyes were unfocused and bloodied, a scream leaving her lungs before ice spikes rushed out towards them.

Ilea moved her body in front of Maurice, continuing to heal him as the magical attack glanced off the Veil behind her, some even stuck at the ash she had formed between them and the enemy.

Tiana of course didn't stop, focusing on Felicia who deflected as well as she could. Maurice stopped Ilea with a gesture, his birds appearing from above, rushing to get at the ice and silver mage. "I'm fine." He said, Ilea nodding and letting go of him before she vanished and rushed at Tiana again. She wouldn't get trapped below the water again this time. The silver mage was running on fumes, the pain of her lost arm visibly getting to her and her health at a point where her concentration would likely be inhibited as well.

Felicia had actually managed to get the upper hand in their ranged battle, Tiana's ice attacks rather useless when they could be deflected without touching them physically. Ilea appeared next to her, swinging her fist at her, moving slightly to avoid the silver arm that was raised to block the attack, instead ducking and using her left hand to attack. The hit wasn't deflected and Ilea felt bones crack when her fist impacted the woman's ribcage, air and blood spit out before the silver arm grabbed at her. Ilea had already blinked away, a flurry of wind blades slashing at the beat down woman, blood spurting from new wounds that formed when her armor was pierced.

And then she vanished, appearing closer to the mainland before she vanished again. The three pursuers followed, some of Maurice's birds actually keeping up with both Ilea and Tiana who were traveling at a similar speed. Ilea didn't want to go in recklessly, knowing that the silver mage was at her last strength. Maurice didn't have to worry about that, an eagle like creature crashing into the woman right after she had used her teleportation ability, the bird picking and clawing at her in a battle to the death.

It slowly froze along the blood and bits of flesh and cloth that were ripped out before the two of them spiraled to the ground, the impact sending the silver mage tumbling as the bird of prey shattered to pieces of black and red. Ilea watched as the woman struggled to get up when a group of crows started picking at her, meeting a similar fate as the eagle had just moments before. Maurice's onslaught didn't stop before a blast of wind sent the bird spiraling through the air and the silver mage on her knees, struggling against the attack. A second blast pushed her arms aside, the woman unable to respond to the wind magic that right after cut through her neck.

The ding resounding in Ilea's mind let her know the fight had ended, Tiana's head unceremoniously falling to the ground. "One down." Ilea said



and blinked to Maurice, who collapsed to his knees and coughed up blood. He shivered and sighed when she started healing him.

“Damn cunt nearly got me.” The man said, looking over at the corpse.

“Recover your mana, we’re going back to help the others.” Felicia said as she walked over.

Ilea nodded and finished up healing Maurice which took longer than expected. The damage to his organs and tissue had been extensive. *If anybody else had gotten caught in that ice ball.* The thought lingered only for a moment. It had to be her. Checking through her messages, she found her Ice Resistance had increased again but decided to check on all that after the fight had ended.

*I need something other than a bunch of arrows to counter a situation like that. Like a death switch but with a massive explosion to get me out. I can heal, most others can't.* The thought was something she’d have to bring up with Balduur, Iana or perhaps Claire. She wasn’t sure if enchantments could be activated by other people. At least explosive ones like the woman used. Then again, water stones in her bath, the explosive arrows, certain gates she had opened, they were all enchantments that she could activate with her mana.

“You’re good, come on.” Ilea said as she walked over to the corpse of Tiana, grabbing the head and body before she ascended, the three of them rushing towards the island of Garath.

The bestial screams could be heard from several hundred meters away. The terrace was in ruins, even more than it had before. The beast was still alive, though barely it seemed. Burnt to the bone in some parts, missing one of its arms and eyes. Their own group didn’t look much better though. Popi was eating a pastry with a massive cut in his chest that bled through his armor, the man leaning on the ramparts to the side.

Edwin had lost an arm in turn but the wound looked nastier than what the beast had been granted. Maria looked to drop any second, blood streaming from her nose as her void magic blocked the beast from advancing on them, Aliana standing before her and Edwin, small but high pressured streams of water forming and lashing into the beast, burning its defensive mantle of flesh and muscle.

Ilea landed next to Popi, as did Maurice. “You alright there big guy?” She asked, touching him on his shoulder as she examined him, healing mana flooding into the man while she activated her meditation skill.

“Popi... is tired.” He said after a moment and closed his eyes.

“Popi, don’t give up. We’ve been through too much shit for you to die here!” Maurice said as he clutched the man’s hand, Ilea just looking at him with interest.

“He’s fine. I think he literally just is tired.” She said, the man looking at her with a shocked expression before the hand slipped from his own.

“I knew that.” He said and got up, dusting himself off.

“Go help the others.” Ilea said and smiled at him. Nobody had died though Edwin looked close enough. It made sense. They knew the enemy and it was four on one. Three on one for Ilea’s group and two of them were nearly goners. *You really have to be careful facing enemies at our level.* She thought, looking at the corpse of Tiana she had dumped on the ramparts. She’d ask Aliana to take care of it later. No reason in leaving evidence behind.

The beast looked terrifying. At least to her former self it would’ve. Now she was more impressed with its speed and endurance. It was a man no doubt, a man who had turned himself into that. And despite the heavy injuries and magic from three dangerous attackers raining in on him, he stood. He stood and still kept them at a distance, slashing with his one arm at his foes as he circled them, using stone and walls as defensive measures while wind, water and void magic rushed his way.

And he didn't even try to get away. Commendable but stupid. Ilea would've been out of there as soon as she would've spotted more than two enemies her level. *Tiana tried and failed.* She thought. Then again Tiana wasn't exactly as quick as she was. Neither was she as enduring. Bad luck on her part to find Felicia and herself here. Two people that could keep up with her. Ilea even with the incredible damage she dealt. *With all the monsters out there you'd think more people would go the defensive route.* She thought and shook her head, the wounds on Popi closed as the man breathed steadily.

*Now, let's finish that beast.* Ilea thought and appeared next to the monster, punching at its already heavily injured side without an arm, her offensive skills pushing mana into it as it roared in pain, wind cutting into it while a murder of crows finally latched onto it, starting their picking and clawing into the burnt wounds and exposed skin.

The beast howled in pain and anger, flinging its body at Ilea with all its strength, the woman disappearing right outside its range before she punched again. The monster turned and rushed towards the standing group of mages, Ilea right behind it when Edwin's remaining sword flared up in red flame. The remaining clawed arm rushed at him when the warrior vanished and appeared just a meter ahead, his blade swinging upwards and cleaving through the remaining arm of the beast before its massive form slammed into him.

The man was pushed down, his sword clanging onto the stone floor. Maria touched the injured beast and closed her eyes, a surge of mana leaving her body before she collapsed to one knee.

A ding resounded in Ilea's mind, the monster's head sinking in to an unnatural degree right after. She grinned and looked at Maria who was now sitting down, breathing hard. *I wonder if she can rip out my brain that easily.* Then again, she doubted the beast had void resistance and a Veil of Ash to increase that resistance even more.

Ilea moved to the beast's front and checked on Edwin. He looked close to death, his eyes focusing on her as she walked up. "You look utter shit." She said and lifted the monster up with one arm.

“I don’t need your...,” The man said and coughed. “... help.” He finished.

“Oh, okay.” Ilea said and let go of the monster again, Edwin wincing as the weight came down on him again.

Felicia rushed to him and shot her an angry glance before air gathered around her, pushing the massive creature back and away from her brother.

Ilea wordlessly checked on Aliana, healing the minor injuries she had sustained in the fight before she moved on to Maria, doing the same for her.

“Ilea.” Felicia said, looking up at her. “Please.” She added, tears in her eyes. Ilea rolled her eyes a little but appeared next to the two, starting to heal Edwin who was of course the closest to death out of all of them. His pride would’ve been his undoing today were it not for his dear sister. Ilea was sure she had saved him more than once already. Even today, she shouldn’t have been here at all. The fights against Tiana and the big bastard could’ve gone quite a lot worse without Aliana and Felicia there to help, let alone Popi and Maurice.

*Then again, we planned for Kyrian to be here.* Ilea said, her grin wiped off her face at the thought. *He’s fine.* She thought. The man had a storage item, an ability to heal himself as long as there were enemies to fight and he had enough experience to survive on his own. Even in a place like Iz. At least Ilea hoped so.

“Do we know anything about the teleportation gate that was used on me, Kyrian and that white armored woman?” Ilea asked, taking her absence as proof that she was teleported as well. Neither of them being in Iz with her, at least at that particular exit point gave her some hope that they weren’t in that place at all.

“No.” Maria said as she stepped up. “There are still people in the castle, perhaps they’ll be of use to answer that question. Is Arthur dead?”

“Arthur is dead. Felicia finished the job.” Ilea said, making the woman turn to the wind mage, her eyebrows rising in surprise. They locked eyes for a moment before Maria turned away.

“I’ll talk to them then. He should be fine in a minute or two. You recover your mana.” Ilea said to Maria, Edwin’s missing arm regrowing before them. A sight to see apparently, all of them except Popi watching the process with emotions ranging from disgust to fascination.

“Edwin and me will take care of them.” Maria retorted.

“No, you will not. Arthur Redleaf is dead. Your goal is fulfilled. Kyrian vanished and I know nothing more about the god damned Golden Lily. Whatever remains in this castle is mine.” Ilea said calmly, without looking at the woman.

“I will go with you.” Felicia said.

“As will I. If we can f... find him.” Aliana said. “We should try.” She added.

“Fuck it, I’ll come too. I know the place, can show you around. Perhaps there will be stuff you won’t want. Won’t say no to some gold.” Maurice chimed in and chuckled.

“Don’t but in mercenary.” Maria said but didn’t say anything else as she stood there and watched Edwin get healed.

“He seems to be exhausted. Perhaps you should take care of him for a while.” Ilea said. “We also have to get Arthur’s corpse and get rid of it. I think you two would like to see him before you do that.” Ilea said and stood up, Edwin looking somewhat well again, despite his armor being in tatters.

*Told him his gear sucks.* Ilea thought and pointed towards the plains. “You’ll find the battlefield near the coastline.”

Maria looked at her angrily but shook her head. “Thank you. For the help.” She said, looking at Ilea, Felicia and Aliana in turn before she knelt down next to Edwin, taking his hand in hers.

“What about us. Popi damn near died for you.” Maurice murmured and shook his head. “Damn ungrateful wenches.”

“Wenches, as in plural?” Ilea asked, standing up and walking to the castle entrance, the man, Felicia and Aliana following behind.

“Wench doesn’t necessarily mean female.” Maurice said.

“I think it does.” Felicia said.

The man ignored the remark and looked towards Popi “Will he be alright? He burnt her remember.”

“I won’t harm your friend and neither will he.” Maria said, having heard their conversation.

“And when has believing a wench ever been a good idea?” Maurice asked.

“She can be difficult but Maria is not a liar.” Felicia said.

“I sometimes wish she were.” Aliana whispered and walked to the door.

“Coming, castle guide? I booked at tour.” Ilea said to the man who was still glancing over to Popi.

“That’s two silvers by the way. Tour guide isn’t an easy job.” Maurice said as he turned towards her.

“So, this bloody fucking castle was build two thousand years ago by the gods of castles themselves. The stone is actually their dried shit. If you smell carefully, you’ll notice the resemblance with your own crap.” He continued as Ilea handed him two silver coins, surprising the man and halting his speech.

“Do go on.” She said and yawned. “I want to hear all about the castle gods.” Ilea said. She was new to the world after all. “I’m interested in the indigenous religions of this land.”

The man closed his eyes and smiled before he shook his head. “From an obsessed plant enthusiast to a sarcastic indestructible smartass.” He murmured. “The gods chose this place because it was close to the sea, the

smell easily spread through the winds of the ocean. It offended the men nearby, simple fishers unknowing of magic and the wide world...,”

# Chapter 205 Discovery Channel

## Chapter 205 Discovery Channel

“Who are you guys anyway? You said Shadow’s Hand before but your name wasn’t Lilith either.” Maurice said as they walked through the dark and dilapidated hallways that led into the island’s very foundations.

“I’m Ilea. I am with the Hand actually but not here on related business. They were just here to kill Arthur.” She said.

The man snorted and kicked open the door before them. “That was his workspace. Why kill the man? Seemed like more or less a decent fellow.”

“He tortured and abused me and my brother. Imprisoned Maria for years, had her raped and tortured.” Felicia explained as they entered the simply decorated room. Ilea noticed the Taleen furniture immediately. This wasn’t a castle built or made for humans.

“Ah, nobles. Lucky I grew up in the slums of shit Virilya.” Maurice said as he took an expensive looking letter opener.

“I didn’t know the dwarves built outside of mountains.” Ilea said, walking around the table to look at the letters and notes.

“They do. Never heard of the city of gold?” Maurice asked.

“I haven’t, no.” Ilea said and picked out a booklet from the table. The writing style made her think it was a diary.



“Supposed to be at the top of a mountain. The sun reflecting off its splendor.” Maurice told in a mocking voice as he opened the drawers on the table.

*‘The motivations behind the Taleen’s actions are yet to make sense to me. What they created was incredible but again, this island is devoid of the creators and only teeming with their machines. Piles of dust that my botanists say were bones at one point but who knows if it really was them? Did they vanish, living in a place far away or a completely different realm altogether? Perhaps this gate will lead us to new answers. I fear more questions is all that I will find...,’*

One of the entries in the diary from a couple weeks back according to the date. Ilea skimmed through the pages after that date, learning about their conquest of the Taleen dungeon spread below the island, going deeper than Arthur had anticipated.

*‘Another three of my strongest guards were vanquished today. The mercenary named Zoy has proven vital to this operation again. It is a miracle that I found such a willing soldier for this mission. Were it not for our aligning goals I wouldn’t even dare talk to her. The magic she wields is dangerous to any mage. To any man. To see her heal from fatal wounds on her own in mere hours, even regrowing lost limbs without a healer. The lack of her sight just a distraction from her all seeing powers, ready to appear behind her enemies and slash through their necks.’*

He did seem to hold Zoy in high regards. To find that he apparently more than just respected her was news to Ilea.

“Did you and Zoy work together long Maurice?” She asked, leaning back in the chair.

“Zoy? No, first time I’ve seen the woman. She’s a creepy one that. Couldn’t identify her either but she opened up to Popi a little. Hates the Taleen machines I think. Probably something that happened to her at one point or another.” He explained.

“The Taleen machines don’t come out of their dungeons though.” Felicia said as she too read through some of the documents on the table.

“Beats me. Maybe her family fell into one and got butchered.” Maurice added. “Can we move on? There’s nothing else here.”

Ilea nodded and put all the documents into her necklace. Seeing Edwin and Maria fight let her know that even if they wanted the necklace, it wouldn’t be worth fighting her over it. Perhaps she had been too paranoid after all.

“Ilea, I will want to look through all that as well.” Felicia said.

“As will your brother. You can have it all as soon as I’m done with it. I doubt much will be of interest. The man seemed to be obsessed with his work.” Ilea said and continued reading while Maurice led them further through the castle.

*‘The teleportation unit in this dungeon is in tact. To find I’ve wasted all of those mercenaries and guards when it was at the very top of it all. A costly error. It looks different than the ones we’ve uncovered so far, not as noticeable but the runes are in place nonetheless. Though similar it’s different, more nuanced. Testing will begin in the morrow.’*

That part was from four days ago. Ilea sighed. It seemed the man didn’t know much about the teleportation either. *Let’s see how productive you were in those days.*

There was nothing written for the two days after that.

*‘The gate can be activated but it looks like the destination cannot be chosen, not anymore. A defensive mechanism activated by my most trusted rune mage. He paid with his life and it nearly took two others with him. The gate after all is more advanced than the previous ones we’ve found. Connected to more than a single destination. To think we were this close and to fail nonetheless. Another expedition north has failed, only two survivors telling of unsightly beasts, the freezing cold and burning suns. Incapable all of them. Another dungeon in the plains is unlikely, too much of it uncovered. Dawntree refused to comply and the mercenaries sent*

*despite the city's cooperation haven't returned either. The Shadow's Hand may be my last resort, despite the order's complaints. I'm sure they will understand if it's for the good of mankind. What we've found here, it has to be enough.'*

Ilea stopped walking and read through the part again. A defensive measure and the destination cannot be chosen anymore. Did that mean it chose one at random? What was his goal in all this? Why the expeditions north, to find more of the Taleen dungeons? He knows about the dungeon in Dawntree but with the Praetorians likely still lurking below it would be impossible for anybody but perhaps the whole remaining Shadow's Hand to storm in there and destroy them. Ilea somehow doubted even that was enough. A chilling cold ran down her back when she thought about it. Despite them winning against the demon horde, even taking out that massive whale, at a likely higher level than the Praetorians. Still, in an enclosed space with their speed, destructive capabilities and highly advanced defenses, she didn't know how they'd fare. With enough preparation it might be possible. Were the machines alone, there were hundreds if not more normal Guardians around though.

The order Arthur mentioned, was it the Golden Lily? It was likely, or perhaps something that could still give Ilea some answers. They didn't like the Shadow's Hand it seemed. *For the good of mankind? Isn't the Hand exactly for that?* Ilea's thoughts were interrupted when Maurice slowly opened another wooden door, this one leading into a somewhat large hall. Ilea saw people moving inside, moving into a formation as soon as they heard the door opening.

"They're scared." She said, feeling their distress through Hunter's Sight.

"Yea, they're the caretakers of the plants. I'd be shitting my pants by now as well." Maurice said and opened the door with a grin on his face.

"Fellas!" He bellowed out, some of the people showing relief on their faces before the rest of the group walked into the room, despair spreading immediately. One of their group, a nervous woman moved her hand, a barbed root moving out of her robes towards them.

Ilea stepped forward and caught the root, using her free hand to do a calming gesture. “We’re not here to kill you. Arthur Redleaf is dead. Choose wisely how you act now.” She said, looking towards the woman with her icy eyes, ignoring the root that tried to claw into her armor, entirely ineffective.

“I’m Felicia Redleaf. If you served my father then I ask you to do the same for me.” She said, the root letting go of Ilea a moment later.

“I’m s...,” The woman who had attacked said when Ilea appeared next to her, grabbed her neck and simply threw her backwards into the nearest wall. The woman hit her head and landed on the stone floor with an unhealthy sound, unconscious from the blow. She was below level one hundred but should survive the blow.

“Go take care of your friend, I think she fell.” Ilea said to the others, two of them nodding quickly and running to the woman.

“What are all those plants?” Aliana asked as she paced around the room.

“Father was obsessed with them always. That’s why he was still keeping an entourage of vegetation mages around. Mages that could be used to feed thousands, instead kept for his own hobby. He always talked about bettering humanity but it seems he himself was above that.” Felicia said as she touched one of the plants. Two of the mages instantly winced, another one moving his hand towards her.

“You mustn’t!” He exclaimed.

“He is dead. You no longer have to worry.” Felicia said and removed her hand from the plant.

“Why would they worry?” Ilea asked, turning away from the woman bleeding on the floor. They looked like they had some healing ability. She was worried there for a second that she had killed the poor frightened girl.

“He beat them, tortured them. And killed them if any of his plants died.” Maurice explained. “Weirdly he was less inclined to punish failure in the

real mission.” He shrugged. “At least that’s what I’ve heard.” He added.

“It’s true.” Felicia said. “He treated them as harshly as us children.” She added and walked to the closest of the mages, touching their face.

“Ravenhall could use them.” Ilea said off handedly before she looked at the group. “Do you know about the portal?” She asked but none replied. “He said there was more than a single rune mage.”

“Ser... I... I am a rune mage under Lord Redleaf.” One of them said and stepped forward. “Please spare my life and those of the others.” The man knelt before her making her a little uncomfortable.

She grabbed him by his robe and lifted him up. “I won’t be killing any of you without good reason.” She said. “Come with me.” Ilea said and walked back to the hallway they had come from, closing the door as Felicia started talking to some of the other mages.

The man before her seemed terrified, his eyes averting her own, his whole body language basically submitting to her. “Were you tortured as well?” Ilea asked.

“I was... beaten. Rarely... not as often as the others.” He replied.

“Look. I’m not going to hurt you ok? And if you want something out of this situation then maybe I can help you with it. If you help me first.” Ilea said and let him think about it for a moment.

“The gate you found here. It was activated and sent me and a friend away.” She said, the statement making him look up for the first time in their talk.

“You were sent away? When? How did you get back? Did you find another dungeon?” He asked the questions before he started talking to himself.

“You sent people away too didn’t you?” Ilea asked.

“None of them returned. The runes... I was sure the destinations were random, the gate perhaps even completely shut down.” He explained.

“I was sent to another Taleen dungeon. A place called Iz. My friend wasn’t there. Is it possible he was sent to the same dungeon?” Ilea asked.

“Iz... Iz. Are you sure that was the name? That’s unprecedented... one syllable...,” The man asked.

“My friend.” Ilea stated which got him back.

“Yes... I mean no. The chances of him appearing in the same dungeon... with what we assume is hundreds if not more of them in Elos, no, I don’t think statistically speaking he was in the same dungeon. But are you sure it was Iz?”

“I am sure, yes. Why is it relevant?” Ilea asked. “And can you help me find him?”

“It is relevant, very relevant. The dungeon below us is called Iztacalis. There are references we’ve found related to a major city, a stronghold with the name Iztaca. You speaking of Iz, if our theories are right then you might have found the core... the very center...,” He spoke quickly now and Ilea calmed him down again.

“Perhaps that’s true. I’ll tell you everything I know about it as soon as you tell me about my friend.” Ilea said.

“Yes, well he was sent somewhere else. To another Taleen teleportation gate somewhere. It is possible that the gate isn’t able to send him back. Not all of them are meant for more than a single destination. The one we found here was but it is useless to us now.” The man said.

“Are you sure about that?” Ilea asked.

“Certain, all of us were. More study of the runes is necessary but my knowledge is limited and my ability inhibited by my lacking levels. The master rune mage died when he activated the gate.” The man said. “I won’t be able to determine where your friend went but perhaps with more understanding, we might be able to achieve Arthur Redleaf’s goal after all.”

“And what was that exactly?” Ilea asked, a little skeptical of his optimism.

“A copy of the Taleen teleportation technology. A network between human cities to further trade and diplomatic relations. I believe Lord Redleaf had his own plans regarding the diplomatic parts but can you imagine the economic and military advantages of whoever holds a technology like that? It’s unprecedented. Elven attacks, we could...,” The man explained.

“We could summon a force to fight them in an instant. The land masses between the cities wouldn’t matter. I can see the appeal. Now mister?”

“My name is Christopher Volaris.” He said and bowed deeply.

“My name is Ilea, have you ever been to Ravenhall?” She asked with a smile, her helmet vanishing.

“The city of the Shadow, holding Eregar’s Haven..., no. Sadly I have not been there before.” He said.

“I happen to know a rune mage above the two hundreds, perhaps she will be of use. Do you need to be here, near the gate to continue your research?” Ilea asked.

“No, no. The inscriptions, mana pathways, everything is documented to the last bit. While we theorized earlier that the material is relevant, that was dismissed at a later time. I cannot be definitive but we are somewhat sure the material used is irrelevant.” The man explained.

“Good. Then would you like to work under my employ? To continue your research and find a way to replicate the teleportation gates used by the Taleen dwarves?” She asked and watched his face light up.

“And here I thought you to be a monster... incapable of thought and merely trapped by her lust for blood and destruction.” He said and she smiled, storing her helmet in her necklace.

“What a lovely assumption. We’ll talk about the details in Ravenhall. Don’t say a word of this to anybody here. Where are your notes on the runes?”

Ilea asked.

“Welcome back, I see you’ve found a new guide.” Maurice said and looked at Christopher who looked to be very interested in the stone floor.

“There doesn’t seem to be anybody else in the castle as far as they know.” Felicia said, walking towards Ilea.

“You mentioned Ravenhall being in need of vegetation mages?” She asked.

“I mean Ravenhall is basically empty right now so they’re in need of most mages.” Ilea answered, looking at Christopher.

“Three of them dislike the idea of serving the Redleaves still. We can’t use people unwilling to work with us.” Felicia said simply. “If you are willing to take them, you can.”

*What is this? Slave auction after the conquest has ended?* Ilea asked herself and looked towards Aliana. The woman didn’t seem to be bothered in any way by the proceedings. Considering Edwin would’ve likely just slaughtered everyone there, perhaps they were lucky after all. Ilea sighed and looked at the three people standing a little separated from the group.

“Sure, I’ll take them with me.” Ilea said. She watched them visibly wince when they heard her speak. Her helmet was back on and her Veil looked much more threatening now that it was at its third stage, still, literally causing fear wasn’t her goal. *I’m gonna be happy when I can finally switch to leather armor again. Although this armor is so fucking comfortable.*

*Thinking of third tier, maybe?* She finally checked the numerous messages still lingering in the back of her mind.



***‘ding’ ‘Your group has killed [Inheritor of the Storm – lvl 250 / Child of Blood – lvl 241] – For killing an enemy twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*So Felicia killing Arthur still gave her experience? At least one good thing remained about his untimely demise. Then again, getting answers out of him would’ve likely proved difficult.*

***‘ding’ ‘Your group has killed [Rose of Everlasting Winter – lvl 224 / Champion of Silver – lvl 220]***

***‘ding’ ‘Your group has killed [Necromantic Enhancer – lvl 248 / Blood Monster - lvl 240] – For killing an enemy twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*Two of them near two fifty and still they had each lost against their group of barely two twenties. The fights didn’t even seem close, at least with the blood monster it didn’t. Note to self, don’t get mobbed.*

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 228 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 229 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 223 – Five stat points awarded’***

The fifteen stat points were put into Intelligence immediately before Ilea continued through the notifications.

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’***

***‘ding’ ‘Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15’***

***‘ding’ ‘Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16’***

***‘ding’ ‘Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18’***

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*So damn close.* She thought and bit her lip under her helmet. Another Ashen Warrior level and she'd be able to advance another skill to the third tier. At least it was a likely assumption. There were still more messages remaining.

*'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'You have learned the General Skill Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1  
A rare magic to be sure and just as deadly. Not quite corrosion or poison,  
silver magic can be devious, its effects complex. You have survived and  
are one of few who have been exposed and lived.'*

*Another one for the defensive arsenal.* Ilea thought and smiled before she got back to work. There was still plenty of castle to be searched through, plenty of documents to be read. It would be a long day. Likely without any more battles, sadly.

# Chapter 206 Pancakes? Pancakes.

Chapter 206 Pancakes? Pancakes.

Ilea sat back in her chair, her feet on the table as she dropped the letter back on the pile. Aliana was sleeping wrapped in a blanket in the corner of the room. *Why did she get the comfortable arm chair?*

Ilea scratched her hair when Edwin knocked on the door. Felicia went to open it, rubbing her eyes in the process.

“We found more supplies if you need any food or drink. Not sure how long that will last with those two mercenaries down there. And well, Maria.” He said, looking at the documents on the table.

“Are you sure you want to go through all that Felicia?” He asked, touching her back.

“We talked about this enough Ed. You already read half of it too, why shouldn’t I?” The woman asked.

“I’m the male heir. I’m supposed to...,” Felicia stopped him right there.

“Heir to a forsaken house. And who gives a damn, you never wanted to lead it. I don’t think you planned beyond killing father. You know my plans, think about it and give me an answer. Don’t act so uncertain, it’s very unlike you brother.” She said in an annoyed tone and went back to her chair, grabbing the next letter.

“I’ll come check on... those supplies.” Ilea said while rubbing her eyes, grabbing the helmet she had put next to her chair. Standing up, she grabbed Edwin’s arm and dragged him out. “You come too.”

“Ilea I really don’t need berating from anyone, let alone you.” The man said as soon as she closed the door.

“Edwin. Frankly, I don’t give a flying fuck about where you’re going from here or what you’ll do. What I know is that Felicia was annoyed and she’s busy. You think about your things while you leave her alone for a bit, ok?” Ilea asked and looked around.

The man didn’t respond but closed his eyes for a moment. “Why are you still dressed in tatters? And where’s the supply room. Come on, maybe we’ll find some armor for you.” She added.

He actually seemed kind of lost now that she thought about it. The always confident and mysterious Edwin Redleaf, reduced to a wandering unsure shell of his former self now that his likely lifelong goal was fulfilled. *Did he really not plan for anything that happened after?* Ilea asked herself. She was quite sure he did but perhaps actually succeeding was never in the cards, not really.

The man likely just needed some time to process everything. He led her downstairs and through another big hall, noises already coming from the open room at the end of it. The group of mages they had found were sitting in the hall awkwardly, looking around with anxious glances.

“A maaaaan for only he could satisfy my neeeeds!” The singing voice belonged to nobody else but Maria, the woman sitting on a table inside the spacious storage room, bottles of wine and ale opened, some already shattered and on the ground.

“Ohhh Lady Ilea, what a pleassur...,” Maurice said, bowing down lightly before he nearly fell, staggering until he met the wall of the room.

Popi had claimed his own table, carefully mixing ingredients together in a metal bowl.

“Does literally everyone have a storage item at this point?” Edwin asked when they entered the room, Popi summoning flour and eggs out of thin air. Ilea just looked at him with a smirk.

“This looks fun. A break from work.” She said and took off her helmet, throwing it into one of the shelves, grabbing a bottle of ale before she sat on the table with Maria.

“Cheers.” She said and opened the bottle, Maria smiling at her and downing the rest of her wine.

“Aaaah, what a sight.” Maurice said as he stumbled towards them.

*To be young and lacking a high level Poison Resistance.* Ilea thought and smiled at the man barely able to stand. Still, the amount of bottles already empty were impressive. Enough to kill most normal people to be sure.

“I think you’ve had enough Maria.” Edwin said as he grabbed her shoulders.

“Ed... you’re so mean. Always so mean.” She said and closed her eyes while she fell onto his chest, hugging him close. “So nice.” She murmured as he walked out of the room with her.

“There goesch half the party...,” Maurice said and took Maria’s place next to Ilea. “Hi there ssschugar.” He said and looked at her with a drunken smile.

Ilea sighed and watched Popi work while she enjoyed the good ale, thinking of Eve and Kyrian and remembering the rare times they had in the bars of Viscera and Ravenhall. Most of the people there were dead now. She quickly broke Maurice’s hand that fumbled on her armor. The man whined but then laughed.

“Ah you’re a cold one eh...,” He said, Popi turning around at the noise.

“Please don’t kill him, he means no harm.” The man said and smiled, handing Maurice a cupcake that the mercenary gladly took and ate.

“Don’t worry Popi.” Ilea said and got up, grabbing a crate full of ale and walking out of the room, putting it onto the long table in front of the mages.

“Want a drink? Would be a waste if we left it here.” She said, knowing that they could easily take it all back to wherever they went. Storage items gave them that luxury. Nonetheless, Ilea went back and grabbed each crate before putting them on the table, Christopher the first of the mages to join her, grabbing a bottle of ale and lifting it high and towards her.

“To Ilea, to Felicia, the ones to kill Lord Redleaf.” He said and smiled. Ilea mirrored the gesture and went back to the storage room, getting a chair and sitting near the door.

Maurice soon joined the mages, telling stories of adventures and grandeur. Far away kingdoms, exotic beasts and women. One of the mages looked at him a little too interested, Ilea noticed as she grabbed another bottle of ale from the crate next to her chair. *Smashed her head a bit too hard didn’t I?* She thought, smiling when the woman looked at her and quickly away again.

*To team thirty four.* She thought and lifted her bottle up high.

“These all have mentions of the order, none state a specific name but I would assume it’s the one you’re looking for. Sadly none mention any names, cities or anything else really. Just materials transferred, slaves and money exchanged. Information about decisions either accepted or refused, all in a code. I’m afraid you’ll find it difficult getting to them through any of this.” Felicia explained when Ilea joined her again a couple hours later. Most of the mages were passed out or sleeping by now. Maurice had retired with the woman Ilea had nearly killed and Popi had provided a beautiful chocolate cake for everybody.

“I’ll take them if you don’t mind.” Ilea said, putting them all into her necklace.

“They have no use to us.” Felicia said. “I’d like the diary though if you don’t need it.”

“I don’t.” Ilea said, having read through the whole thing. Lord Redleaf had certainly been a capable man, strict and harsh but if his own words were to be believed, he was successful. She was doubtful if Felicia and Edwin could fill the role of their house again, if that was at all what they intended to do.

She handed the diary to Felicia who took it thankfully. “Whatever you do, you and Aliana will always have a place in Ravenhall. Just go to the Hand and ask for Claire. Let her know about us and she’ll do what she can.” Ilea said.

“You are very kind Ilea. After we treated you this way.” Felicia said.

“You didn’t, neither did Aliana.” Ilea said.

“Neither did we stop it.” Felicia said but Ilea waved her off.

“What happened, happened. Anyway, I doubt that offer will ever come to fruition. Lady Redleaf.” She said and smiled.

Felicia giggled and looked away a little embarrassed. “It will be difficult to convince the nobles. This order, the Golden Lily, they’re a wildcard as well. I believe in us though, me and my brother. Aliana and Maria. Come visit us in Virilya when you come by the place again.”

“Virilya... did you forget the city is under siege?” Ilea asked, leaning back in her chair but Felicia just smiled.

“As it has been many times before. This war will not be decided in mere weeks or months Ilea. And war brings a lot of opportunities for the children of a noble house, its lord suddenly gone.” She said.

“Perhaps you’re right.” Ilea said and got up. “I’ll catch some sleep as well, you should do the same.” She added. Felicia didn’t reply, opening her deceased father’s diary when Ilea closed the door and blinked upwards. Looking through her sphere and teleporting through the castle, she soon

found a suitable room furnished with a bed and dresser. They were still technically on enemy territory, Edwin and his crew not being the most trustworthy people around to add to that. Both reasons she kept on her armor as she covered herself with a blanket in the dark room, sleep taking her a couple minutes later.

*I want some pancakes...* The thought was the first thing going through her mind when rays of sunshine slowly invaded her space the next morning. The room looked utterly medieval and barren. “Where’s the shitbucket...,” She murmured and flowed healing magic through her body, activating meditation at the same time. The two had been more than a blessing with both getting up in the morning, alcohol consumption and last but not least her monthly red invasion.

Granted, with her Pain resistance none of it mattered much anymore but as her body got more powerful, so did the cramps. Enough to cripple a lesser woman, kill her even. But what woman didn’t think that of herself? All of them are probably right too.

*I need to wash my armor again.* She thought, blinking twice to get outside. Her helmet vanished, the rough ocean air brushing against her skin as her wings spread. She flew downwards, looking for a shoreline where she could stand. Just in case a massive sea monster would try to nibble on her. *Popi might be able to make pancakes...*

Her feet planted firmly on the rock, she summoned her helmet and held it into the ocean water, filling and duping it out a couple times before she shook it off. Ash came into existence around her before it moved into her helmet, clinging to the sides and swiftly cleaning out the salt and other filth out. A move that got easier the more she used it. Putting the helmet on afterwards, Ilea started doing the same with her chest armor, then her



gauntlets and bracers and finally the metal covering her thighs, shins and her boots.

The process didn't take long but she sat down for a moment afterwards, enjoying the view of the morning suns hanging low on the horizon, shining onto the endless ocean that spread before her. The vikings, Columbus and many others must've asked themselves what lay beyond the endless depths. Looking out on it, she for the first time thought she could empathize with those people. There was no world map available, no satellites giving a clear picture of the land masses in Elos.

At least none she knew about. With all that had happened, including her realm traveling, even seeing Earth when they had used that teleportation device in the demon realm, Ilea still wasn't sure what this all was. Perhaps just a different dimension or maybe she was still in the same universe, just on a planet far away. That wouldn't really explain the magic and the status and skills she had acquired on the way. Not the way it appeared in her mind as if it was part of her very biology.

She had asked those questions when she had first appeared here but with time, only new questions arose. Already she had the opportunity to go back but had chosen to stay. Still, she would look for answers nonetheless. That was human nature after all and Ilea was a curious one at that. *Maybe Christopher will be able to shine some light on long range teleportation at least.* She thought, hoping that by experimenting with it they wouldn't accidentally repeat something like what that Elder did to Ravenhall, Adam Strand.

With all the new defenses and preparation going into the city as of late, perhaps it was the best place to experiment. Wouldn't want to summon an eldritch army into an empty desert. Who knows what they would do.

No major new insights had been found regarding the golden lily, despite actively hunting down one of their members. Kyrian had vanished as a result, as had she. Operation Eve was on ice, for now at least. That much was necessary. Ilea didn't think too much on Kyrian. She trusted in him and his strength. He would find back sooner or later, getting stronger on the way. As much as she wanted to feel guilty, she didn't let herself. He had

made his choice and knew the risks and it would be an insult to him, for her to place responsibility on herself.

Ilea stood up and looked at the suns, rolling her shoulders and cracking her neck. “Let’s get those pancakes.” She said, her wings spreading before she flew upwards near the rocky cliff side, towards the castle standing atop.

“Milk, egg, flour, molten butter... that should be mostly it. The dough should be thick but liquidy. Don’t heat it up for too long, you want it fluffy.” Ilea explained as well as she could remember. There was neither syrup nor fruits available but the man had sugar at least.

“Ok, I’ll try.” Popi said with a smile and got to mixing the batter.

“Breakfast?” Maurice asked, entering the big hall with one hand on his head. There was no throne but it could just as well have been a throne room. The remnants of one at least. Most of the windows were broken in or had at least lost most of their once magnificent color. Green probably, as it was either built by the Taleen or inspired by them.

“Breakfast, yes.” Popi answered and smiled at the man who sat next to him.

“Her recipe.” He added.

“Her recipe hmm... missy, got a recipe for a headache too?” Maurice asked.

“Of course, I have healing magic. You’ll have to come over to me though.” Ilea answered with a smile. She was wearing her armor, her helmet placed on the big table as she lounged in her fancy chair.

“Fucking bitch ass pissy... I know you can teleport you know...,” The man murmured as he got up and walked all the way around the table.

“And I know you can fly.” Ilea said, rolling her eyes at his complaints.

“Height differences hurt.” He said, flinging a silver coin her way. She touched his armored belly and poured healing magic towards his head. “Oh my god...,” He said and sat down on the chair next to her. “You did that in ten seconds?” He asked, his spirits lifted considerably according to his facial expression.

“I did. You’re welcome.” Ilea said and watched Popi heat up the first pancake on the little heating plate he had, his magic pulsing below the metal.

“Thanks Ilea. You’re really useful, want to join our little crew?” Maurice said, theatrically smelling the browning pancake.

“You’re not the first one to ask me that.” Ilea said, her stomach rumbling as she remembered the advances from other adventurers whenever she showed up at the guilds. A big fat healer tag identifying her as the most useful asset to anybody’s party. Those days were over. Now it was her black armor and the question marks that would create such situations.

“Popi is certainly a damn good reason to consider it.” She said and then looked at Maurice. “You on the other hand, that’s more than a couple minus points.”

“We could travel around the lands, get easy jobs, kill a bunch of people and get rich. Easy with the war going on.” The man said, leaning back in his chair.

“What lands?” Ilea asked.

“The empire, Baralia, Kroll, the Nipha empire, wherever you want to go. Even the northern plains, you’d like them I’m sure.” Maurice said.

“The northern plains? Where are they? And don’t say north.”

“Pretty close from here actually. I think these lands are part of Baralia or Asila, north of that.” He said.

Ilea thought about it for a moment and then looked at him. “I want to go north, the real north. Beyond the mountain chain overlooking the Navali forest. I want to go west, through the forest of the elves and south, into the desert and to the Foundation of Glass. I want to raid dungeons and fight monsters only legends talk about. I want to go east, cross the ocean that no expedition has before. I’m done with killing humans, for a while at least.” Ilea said when Popi slid a plate with the first pancake her way. She smiled and thanked him before she started eating.

“That’s certainly something. You’re not the first to think that way I’m sure. Known some of those idiots myself.” Maurice said and looked at her food with envy. “You will die, as all of them have before. At one point or another.”

“I might.” Ilea said, doubting that the man was omnipresent to support such a statement. Adam Strand traveled to the demon realm and for all she knew he was still alive. The man Albert, who rescued Cless, he had some sort of longer range teleportation and she was sure he had been to places no other humans dared go. And then there was Verena, another elder of the Shadow’s Hand, charging at that massive demon with her fire axes. She’s probably seen more than the human plains. Ilea was certain they all had, and many more.

“We humans should stay where we belong.” Maurice said when he too received a pancake. He thanked Popi and smiled as he started eating. “This is good.”

“Squabbling amongst ourselves.” Ilea said with a sigh.

“Exactly.” Maurice said with a full mouth and pointed his fork at her. She couldn’t help but chuckle. She’d be squabbling with them sooner or later too but those revenge tours definitely taken a toll on her.

“I think I’ll travel alone for a while.” Ilea said.

“Uuuuh, the lone wolf. The silent hunter, alone and dangerous.” Maurice mocked and laughed.

“At least I don’t freeze to death when someone touches me once.” Ilea retorted with a smile.

“Touche. That bitch was a tough one I tell ya.” Maurice said.

“Where are the others by the way?” Ilea asked. Popi was the one to answer.

“Asleep still. Felicia told me they’d hold a small ceremony later. She asked me to burn the bodies.” He said.

“What little is left of them.” Maurice said and laughed. Ilea didn’t.

# Chapter 207 Farewells

## Chapter 207 Farewells

“There’s a Taleen dungeon below this castle right?” Ilea asked after a while. They had eaten their fill and Popi had put away his kitchen aids and the rest of the batter.

“Was.” Maurice said, holding his belly. “That Zoy girl took care of that. Although there weren’t that many machines I suppose.”

“Were you even down there.” Ilea asked.

“The damn fuckers scare me.” He said, not answering the question.

“They can be pretty scary.” Ilea said and got up.

“You’re going down there?” Maurice asked and she nodded. “Well don’t die to a trap.”

That made her laugh. *A fitting end I suppose.* She thought, smiling before she blinked downwards. Again and again before she appeared in the very room she had been teleported away from. Without her Sphere, the teleportation gate looked just like a hallway. The runes and machinery below the white stone was more intricate but she doubted even with more attention in the moment that she’d have realized what it was. She understood why Arthur hadn’t known immediately what it was either, despite the control panel somewhat prominent a little further down the hallway.

It looked similar to the one she had seen in her first Taleen dungeon. Where Edwin had activated it to get away. *To save Maria*. Perhaps she wouldn't have disliked him so much if he had just explained himself. That was too late now of course. Beating the man down while they demolished the Birmingham's home had helped with that sentiment somewhat.

A chasm opened up behind the platform with the control panel, leading downwards into a black void. Ilea walked off, her wings spreading a moment later and stabilizing her in the air. On the other side of the chasm there was a lit up entrance but she ignored that for now, instead delving deeper, looking into the walls with her Sphere as she went.

A couple minutes of searching later she had found nothing. Except for the bottom of the chasm that was lined with pointy rocks. A couple skeletons and some rusty gear told a sad story, though none of it useful in any way.

*'ding' 'You have entered Iztacalis dungeon.'*

The message sprung up in her mind as soon as she entered the lit door. Green light of course. The dwarves just fucking loved their green. It was a nearly nostalgic feeling, stepping into the hall beyond the entrance.

She had of course visited a dungeon the day before but that was more rushed and certainly more dangerous than this endeavor. Already destroyed and cut through parts of Taleen Guardians littered the white marble floor. Green and in some parts golden pipes and gears looked out from the walls.

This wasn't a city, this was something else. Ilea walked on, through empty corridors and barely lit halls. Vegetation had started taking over in some parts, leaks in the cracking walls letting in water from the ocean around and above. The atmosphere was certainly eerie but that was nothing new to her Taleen dungeon experience. She was just waiting for green eyes lighting up in the dark corners of the room. This time though, she wasn't scared. She was prepared, all her skills active.

Nothing happened. Not a single guardian assaulted her, the few she found lay dismantled on the floor, burnt, frozen, corroded or cut apart. They certainly had been thorough. More halls, storage rooms, what looked like a

factory, worn down and rusty before finally she reached a dead end. Well not exactly a dead end.

In one corner of the room, she found something with her Sphere. A vague idea of something. Her mind wandered off and her eyes looked away whenever she wanted to look directly at the corner. An enchantment to be sure, one still working and one to keep her away from something hidden. She was surprised Arthur and his crew had apparently not found this but perhaps it had to do with them realizing they had found the teleportation gate all along. According to his diary it was the only reason for them to even explore the Taleen dungeons.

Ilea had some more ideas to use their amazing technology, robotics and trap design but Arthur Redleaf didn't seem to share her opinions. Or he thought it impossible to replicate the machines themselves. Why would he though? The question remained as Ilea pushed her mana into the wall. Nothing happened, so she used her next reasonable way to get inside. Her fist landed on the stone, a passive crack forming and a chunk of rock pulverized on impact.

Again and again she punched, congratulating the dwarves on the incredibly durable construction and material. Compared to the factories she had destroyed in Virilya, this was like what metal was to drywall. Still, she destroyed the wall in a couple more punches, creating a big enough hole to look through. It seemed like another empty hallway, so she blinked inside, her sphere able to look through the wall now.

An empty room. It ended a couple dozen meters further back and this time her Sphere didn't report anything special. There were skeletons on the ground, more than one. Six to be exact and in her Sphere it looked like they were dwarves. One of the room's walls looked a little different to her Sphere but she couldn't quite make out what it was.

Ilea summoned the golden lighter she had gotten in Salia and lit it. The flame wasn't very bright but enough to answer her questions. The wall had a painting on it, crude and faded. It looked like a man, armed with an ax, fighting against a spider like creature with six blades. The limbs too straight



to be a spider. *A guardian*. She thought, tapping the top of her helmet. “You know anything about that?” She asked the skeleton closest to her.

They were all dressed in Taleen clothing, some even in armor but nothing as fancy as the Legate’s armor she had found so long ago. The writing was partially faded as well but summoning the diary she still had, it was definitely the Taleen language. Ilea placed the lighter on the ground and summoned her notebook, writing down the runes as well as she could before she sketched down the painting on the wall.

The skeleton didn’t answer her sadly and soon she closed her notebook and made one last round in the room. Before she left, she quickly stored the corpses in her necklace. Rotting in a forgotten and closed off tomb like this was dwarf like to be sure but she felt they deserved better. They would have a farewell ceremony anyway, why not add a couple more corpses to the flames.

All the remaining people on the Isle of Garath were gathered on the terrace they had started their battle with the monster and the ice lady. A pyre had been build from wood donated by Aliana, all the corpses they had produced were on it, with the addition of some dwarven skeletons. The winds were strong and it looked like a storm would soon be upon them. As much as she had talked about going east, Ilea would postpone her voyage across the ocean to the very last. The wild waves breaking on the cliffs below were just the cloak masking whatever lurked deep down.

The heat of the rising flames distracted her from the thought, Popi’s magic setting the pyre ablaze from all sides before the whole thing turned into a raging inferno.

The wind and waves were the only sound around them.

“He was a horrible father.” Felicia said as the fires burned.

“Ice lady was a tough one.” Maurice whispered to Ilea.

“She was.” Ilea answered. “Didn’t help her in the end.” She added and stared into the flames.

“May they find their rest.” Popi said, increasing the heat until only ash remained.

“Did you find anything in the dungeon?” Felicia asked after Ilea had sent the ash towards the ocean.

“Only bones and broken machines.” She answered, the woman nodding in response.

“A shame. You will find him.” Felicia said and touched her shoulder.

“Or he will find me.” Ilea said and smiled at her friend.

“I wish you good fortune on your journey Ilea. May our paths cross again.” Felicia said and hugged her.

Ilea hugged her back. “To you too. I’m sure they will. Just don’t get killed.”

“I think the chances of that happening are significantly lower than you dying.” Felicia answered and giggled.

“Well then let’s hope I don’t die.” Ilea said, letting go of the woman.

Felicia laughed at that. “I’d like to see the beast that manages that feat.”

*I've seen plenty capable enough.* Ilea thought but didn't want to bring it up. Felicia's optimism was a nice change of pace, something she needed now.

Christopher and the vegetation mages that wanted to come to Ravenhall had gathered together, ready to leave with their bags and equipment. Everybody else prepared to leave as well, the longer they stayed near the castle, the more dangerous it would become.

Ilea went to Maurice and Popi, shaking the former man's hand and hugging Popi right after. "Don't be too stupid out there. If you ever want to open a store, I'm sure we can arrange something in Ravenhall." She said and let go.

"It was nice meeting you Ilea." Popi said and smiled. "I made this for you." He added and summoned a cheesecake. "It's my secret recipe."

Ilea damn near choked up at seeing the gift but kept herself together. "Thank you Popi." She said and took the cake, making it vanish into her necklace.

"Damn shame that you're going out there alone. We could use you." Maurice said and grinned.

"I'm sure a level two hundred adventurer will be fine without me." Ilea said and waved him off.

"Yea but we'd be finer with you." Maurice answered.

Aliana came up to her and bowed her head lightly. "Thank you for the help on this mission." She said.

"Of course. I'll find him Aliana, don't worry too much." She said to the woman who looked up, her eyes locking with Ilea's.

"You won't be the only one looking." Aliana said. "Plus he can handle himself."

"I know he can." Ilea said, glad she wasn't the only one who cared about Kyrian. "Are you sure you want to stay with them?"

“I go where Felicia goes.” Aliana said and that was that.

Edwin and Maria were standing a little to the side, Ilea waving to Christopher and the mages coming with them as she walked to the blood mage.

“Ilea.” He said and bowed lightly. “I’ll be forever in your debt. If you want to look for the order or hunt down a target, I’ll come with you as promised.”

“True to your word? Interesting. Perhaps I will call on you at some point. I hope you’ll remember your word then still.” She said and nodded towards Felicia. “In the meantime, keep her safe.”

“I fear that my help isn’t necessary with that anymore. Still, I will do what is necessary.” Edwin said and smirked.

“Good luck Maria.” Ilea said, the woman’s eyes opening wide at that but she didn’t respond.

“Give me that.” Ilea said to the mages when she walked towards them, putting all their baggage into her necklace.

“Son of a bitch.” Edwin murmured to her amusement.

“Grab onto me.” Ilea said to the group, each grabbing her arms or legs without a lack of awkward glances and uncertainty. “Safe journeys to you all.” Ilea said, specifically smiling at Felicia, Aliana and Popi before her wings spread out and she ascended, slightly weighed down by the people hanging off her body. *Kyrian you dumb fuck, leaving me to do this myself.*

They flew higher and higher, some of the group below waving towards them before Ilea sped up towards the south. Towards Ravenhall.

The flight back took significantly longer than Ilea's rushed arrival. She didn't particularly mind it, pausing after the first six hours of traveling in a small forest's clearing near the cliffs. The trees were small and scrawny but still provided some shelter against the ocean winds and possible creatures on the hunt for prey. Ilea would keep watch of course but unnecessary danger was something she would reserve for herself.

Her wings crumbled away, the ash vanishing as she stepped on the ground, the four people hanging off her limbs letting go, stumbling on the ground and breathing hard. One of them, a big bellied man in his thirties fell on his back, his chest heaving up and down as he struggled to keep his lungs working.

The red haired woman next to Ilea recovered the quickest, rubbing her arms before she cracked her knuckles and neck. "You used healing magic didn't you?" She asked, Ilea focusing on her as she spoke.

"I did. I don't think you'd have lasted six hours otherwise." She said and looked around, checking the area through her sphere and hunter's sight. It seemed safe enough. Monsters had a good instinct, the one screaming at them not to approach her.

"Any of you know fire magic?" Ilea asked as she walked towards one of the trees, looking up to the top of it before she stabilized the trunk with both hands. One powerful kick and the groaning of wood later, the only thing holding up the small tree were her very arms.

"Gods." The red haired woman said, staring at the scene. Christopher and the last mage they had taken with them, a young boy in his teens looked on in shock as well. Ilea was a little confused but concentrated on turning the trunk sideways, chucking it on the ground before she summoned one of her remaining Taleen greatswords. The blade was massive, reflecting the afternoon suns in its greenish metal. The nearly one and a half meter long blade came crashing down on the wood, sending splinters to the side, Ilea's enhanced strength cleaving the frail tree in two with three strikes.

"Instead of staring at me you could gather some stones and small sticks to start a fire." Ilea said, glancing back at the group who quickly sprung into

action. She continued her work wordlessly for another ten minutes, some of the strikes missing and digging into the ground or glancing off her armored leg. Even with her high dexterity, she wasn't good with swords. As soon as it came to making actual logs, she stored the greatsword again and used her hands instead, ripping the chunks of wood apart to get sizable pieces.

A scream rang through the clearing, making Ilea blink towards the sound immediately. A second blink and she saw the scene in her sphere. The big man had alerted something that looked like a mutated boar. Mutated in the sense that it was bigger than what Ilea imagine a boar to be. Then again, she hadn't ever seen one on Earth.

The thing was easily one meter fifty high and over two meters long and it looked pissed. Ilea appeared before the bald man and casually looked at the beast.

### ***[Fanged Boar – lvl 59]***

“Shouldn't you be able to handle that?” She asked, looking at the man who was at level one hundred and nine, blood streaming down from an injured thigh. Ilea quickly crouched down and checked on him, stopping the bleeding for now with her healing magic. The boar stood defiantly, a bit of blood dripping from one of its fangs.

“Why are you not running away?” Ilea asked as she got up again and turned around. She didn't see any young nearby and identified the beast to be quite obviously male.

“Th.... They don't leave...,” The man behind her said through gritted teeth, the pain from the wound quite obviously discomfoting. “... once they draw blood.” He added, looking down on his leg.

“Well there's our meal then.” Ilea said, appearing next to the boar and smashing in its head with a single precise strike, crushing its skull and brain as its body twitched and was sent to the ground.

***'ding' 'You have killed [Fanged Boar – lvl 59]'***

Ilea stored the beast in her necklace and walked back to the man who was just staring at her in a combination of awe and terror. "Come on." She said, healing his injury in the next minute, helping him up as he carefully tried stepping on his previously mangled leg.

"You're a healer too...," He said and shook his head. "I'm so... sorry." He added, looking for anything else to say.

"Don't worry about it. I'm human too though, might as well treat me that way." Ilea said as she walked back to her pile of wood.

"Any of you know how to treat a boar corpse, could be lunch." She said and dumped the corpse near the stone circle the others were building.

"I do. Got a knife?" The red haired woman asked, Ilea noticing the scar on her cheek for the first time. She looked at the woman for a moment before she nodded and summoned a Taleen dagger and sword respectively, handing both of them to the woman hilts forward.

"Cheers." She said and placed the sword on the ground carefully, starting to cut into the thick boar hide with the dagger. The smell of blood joined the scent of the trees and ocean soon after, the woman sometimes glancing at the boar's crushed head, looking towards Ilea in turn. She didn't know Ilea saw all this through her Sphere but decided not to react.

The way their squad was looked at and greeted on their missions was indication enough as to how Shadows were treated by normal people. Hell, she had experienced it herself in Riverwatch when they had encountered the squad hunting for elves. *What happened to them I wonder...*, She thought but put the thought away for now. All she remembered were a bunch of people in black. It could've been anybody.

# Chapter 208 The Journey South

## Chapter 208 The Journey South

The fire started to take over the bigger logs, the group gathered around the fire, sitting on big stones Ilea had gotten from the cliffs below. Two Taleen greatswords had been rammed into the earth next to the fire to balance a Taleen spear atop them. The gutted and skinned boar would be placed on it as soon as the flames had been reduced to hot embers.

*I could save that time if I had Ash and Ember Creation instead of just ash.* Ilea thought. Perhaps staying a fire enhancer would've been the better choice for utility skills but she didn't regret it of course. Perhaps a suitable skill to heat things up or a usable flamethrower would pop up in the future. For now she had her necklace to store a high amount of food anyway.

Not that she needed much in the first place. *Do I even have to eat?* The thought made her smile under her helmet.

“Why isn't anybody talking?” She asked after a while. Not that she disliked silence but having a group of people sitting quietly around a fire wasn't exactly fun. More appropriate for the last meal before a mission or war, not for being saved and returning to a city full of opportunities.

“What will be the conditions for our new... employ?” The woman asked, her eyes intently staring at Ilea's who looked into the fire.

“No idea. Claire will handle that. I'm sure you will be adequately paid. Ravenhall's population was slaughtered upon the demon summoning and



with the war in the empire there will be tons of people coming to the city. Your skills will be in high demand.” Ilea explained. “Perhaps you’ll be working in Eregar’s Haven to produce crops for the population.”

Christopher snorted at that but looked down again quickly, averting his eyes from Ilea who looked at him. “What’s so funny?” She asked.

“Please forgive me my lady. I didn’t mean no offense.” He actively trembled, Ilea looking at him in disbelief.

“Wow.” She said. “Arthur really was a cunt wasn’t he.” She added and took off her helmet. “Look, I’m not that man and I won’t hurt you just because you say something I don’t like. Not badly anyway. I just didn’t get why you snorted, is it weird for the Hand to grow crops in the Haven?”

The man looked at her and then on the ground again. “It’s a sacred place... with an important purpose to be sure. I... I heard of it only from others and from history books. It’s said to be magnificent. To think it would be used to grow crops...,” Christopher said and now it was Ilea who chuckled.

“Well tournaments and training sessions for members of the Hand were held in there. I think growing crops is an upgrade for its purpose.” She said and smiled. The bald man started laughing then and even Christopher smiled a little at that.

“Thanks for getting us out of there.” The middle aged woman said and looked at Ilea with a smirk.

“Thank Edwin. I wouldn’t even have known about the man otherwise.” Ilea said.

“Still, you came and you fought. For your own reasons to be sure but now a dozen or so people will have a better life thanks in part to you.” The woman said.

“And even more lost theirs in our assault.” Ilea added, looking at her. The red haired mage looked to the ground at that. “I think the embers are good, what do you say?” Ilea asked and the bald man nodded.

She got up and took the spear with her armored hand, the metal sizzling lightly at the touch, having been heated by the fire. Walking over to the boar that had been hanged up on a tree, blood still dripping down, she aimed and smashed the spear through the animal. The spear was placed on the greatswords' handles carefully as it started to roast, some of the flames still licking on the flesh.

“If you want to go to a city between here and Ravenhall I’m happy to drop you off too. I just think you’ll have the best opportunity with us.” Ilea said, turning the spear offhandedly.

“Just think of it... Eregar’s Haven...,” Christopher said. “I hear it’s massive, it’s supposed to have its own dungeons, whole herds of animals and even its own artificial sun.” He said, nearly glowing with excitement.

“It’s pretty impressive.” Ilea said, remembering the first time she entered the big cave.

“Can you imagine how they built it? How they power the sun... the mana density is probably enormous.” Christopher went on.

“Probably slaves.” The bald man said and shrugged. “Most impressive things were built with slaves.”

“Or machines.” Ilea added, making the group look at her.

“Mana crystals in insane numbers would be required. Or mages fueling them. Slaves are less expensive, easier to get.” Christopher said.

“How do you explain the Taleen machines then? I’ve fought hundreds of them and they didn’t seem to run out of battery power.” Ilea suggested.

“What’s a battery? I agree, the Taleen are a mystery. Not even the dwarves from today have reached their technological levels. Yet they do have machines but mostly to enhance their own bodies and amplify their strength.” Christopher explained.

“Batteries are machines that store energy. Like mana crystals but instead of mana, they store lightning.” Ilea tried to explain.

“Lightning is volatile and dangerous. Not as stable a source of energy as mana crystals. Are you suggesting then that the Taleen have found a way to store mana or another form of energy inside machines? It’s certainly possible... as you say, their Guardians are active still and we have records dating the Taleen back for hundreds if not thousands of years...,” Christopher said.

“Another thing for you to figure out. Can you imagine the impact if mana sources could be produced that work independently of mages operating them?” Ilea asked.

“It would certainly change a lot. Still, I doubt the extent would be too drastic.” Christopher said but Ilea doubted that. If it was only about weapons, it was the equivalent of handing a rifle to a peasant compared to only long and hard trained veterans being able to fire a bow efficiently.

Then again, a peasant wouldn’t have the skills required to enhance the damage. Perhaps it would be enough to kill a boar like they were about to eat but certainly not enough to stop someone like the ice mage Ilea had fought the day before. Or herself for that matter.

“For city defenses maybe. Or to power transportation machines.” Ilea suggested.

“True. Neither of which we’ll need if a teleportation gate can be developed.” Christopher said with a smile.

“Perhaps.” Ilea said.

“What if the machines themselves could be replicated. Having Taleen Guardians produced by humans?” The boy said, his voice trembling.

“That would be cool.” Ilea said and smiled. “Let’s just not develop Skynet.” She added and laughed at her own joke. None of the others understood it of course but they were intimidated enough not to ask.

“They are extraordinarily complicated.” Christopher said. “The power source alone is still unknown to us and restraining and examining a working machine is impossible.”

“Why?” Ilea asked.

“They shut down, just cease to work if sufficiently restricted. We tried, Arthur tried.” Christopher said.

“Well I’m sure you’ll figure something out that he didn’t.” Ilea said. “Claire might be able to help as well. She’s a two hundred rune mage after all.” His eyes lit up at that and he smiled again.

“Incredible... how did she reach such heights I wonder...,”

“Lots of explosions ripping apart monsters instead of tinkering in a safe place I suspect.” Ilea suggested and watched him lose some of his enthusiasm.

“The laws of this world are sometimes infuriating...,” He murmured to himself and Ilea couldn’t agree more. Her lifestyle she had started to follow here in Elos, the constant fighting, exploring, live threatening situations. The laws of this world made her powerful through all of that but someone like Christopher, who could’ve been an esteemed genius working for a big corporation was limited by the fighting he did to enhance his classes. Fighting he likely didn’t like to do.

“I’m sure you’ll be able to work together.” Ilea reassured him and left it at that.

They continued to talk and eat, Ilea storing the remains of the meat in her necklace. It would even stay warm. Another four hours of flying passes afterwards, the weather taking a turn to the worse as it started raining quite heavily. Her healing supported the group throughout the flight and would

likely prevent them of catching a cold. Another quick break came and went before they continued, this time flying for seven hours straight and coming out at the top of the mountain with a view of Ravenhall in the distant valley stretching before them.

It was night still but dawn would soon come. One of Elos' moons was visible between the clouds, shining onto the lake stretching a couple hundred meters before Ravenhall, its light reflecting off the water. The forest following the shoreline on their side of the lake was still partially destroyed by the demon whale's attacks and it didn't look like a restoration was in the works. To the east of the city lay the lake and forest, beyond another mountain and even further that way lay Ilea's house and the ocean. To the west was the big valley, stretching far and down along the mountains towering above it, still covered in snow. They would likely remain that way throughout the year but Ilea hadn't seen a summer in Ravenhall yet. The city itself was barely visible for the group except for Ilea. Its walls were higher than before and she could even spot the second and third sets of walls further inwards.

The buildings and fortifications looked like a proper medieval fortress to her, pumped up to eleven by builders using magic to elevate the size and form. Just like with Virilya, Ilea wasn't sure humans on Earth could actually build something like that. Knowing how it looked after they had dealt with the demons, Ilea couldn't help but feel a bit of pride. She had a role in retaking the city and investing a bunch of gold into it. It was out of her hands now mostly but she'd be hardpressed to believe even a group of elves could take it down.

*Well they couldn't even conquer Dawntree... how would they get through this?* The thought made her smile but she pushed it away not to jinx it, otherwise some oversized demonelf would be summoned to destroy it in a single spell. They certainly did what they could though. Ilea also liked the darker looking tone of it all, as if the Hand had given the city its own personal edgy touch.

The defensive capabilities would come down to the people manning the walls of course, the people fueling the runes and barriers but if the Shadow's Hand proved anything in the retaking of the city, then that their

personnel was second to none. None Ilea knew about at least but Virilya certainly came close. The damn near laser weapons they had used to attack the Baralia troops had looked nasty.

*Perhaps Claire is already planning on building such weapons herself. Maybe Christopher can be handy there as well.* Ilea thought as she looked at the group, most of them exhausted from the traveling. They were faring better than on their first stop and now it was a matter of fifteen minutes to get to the city.

“We’re nearly there. Come on guys, you’ll be in a bed in an hour’s time.” Ilea said and clapped her hands together. The groaning from each individual member made her sigh. *I hope they’re getting some skills out of this suffering at least.*

She wasn’t going to slow down completely for the group but she couldn’t deny the worth they’d bring to the city. After the Hand being somewhat responsible for the demon summoning it was the laest she could do. The consequences to the elder’s actions were terrifying but she didn’t think about it too much. She had murdered people herself and would do so again in the future. Burdening herself with guilt over another’s deliberate actions wasn’t going to be in her plans for the future.

“Two minutes then we’re leaving. If you want to stay here then you’re welcome to do so.” She added and sat down in the snow, storing her helmet and rubbing her face with some of the cristalized water.

The whole group stood ready to leave when she got up again, her helmet back on before her wings spread. They held onto her and her wings flapped, taking them upwards and then towards the dark city in the distance.

The group landed near the center of the city, coming from straight above after Ilea had skipped over the first two sets of walls. They were quickly greeted by a group of flying guards and even a squad running on the roofs towards them.

“Let me talk.” Ilea said and summoned her Shadow’s Hand badge, waiting for the guards to arrive.

The flying squad landed, surrounding the group quickly and readying their skills. “Identify yourself.” One of them said but another looked over and talked.

“Captain, I know her. She was with the Hand when the city was retaken.” The woman said and nodded towards Ilea. They were wearing black, just like the Shadow’s Hand.

“Shadowguard. Good to see the city’s reaction to a night landing is finally existent. Here’s the badge.” Ilea said and threw the thing towards the supposed captain who caught it casually.

“Alright. You’re good. The imperial guard will want to get their silver.” He said and pointed towards the guards still running on the rooftops.

“And you don’t?” Ilea asked, catching the badge again.

“No miss, we’re paid directly by the Hand. Some mercenary work is available as well if you need it. That would cost you though.” The man said and bowed lightly. It seemed being a full member demanded some respect from the guards.

“Interesting. Well if I need something I’ll be sure to hire you.” Ilea said and smiled under her helmet. All of them were above level one twenty at least, quite a capable force for the simple task of guarding a city. She didn’t quite know how Sulivhaan and Dagon managed to fund something like this but it seemed to work for now.

“Halt, for entering the city through forbidden means you’re under arrest.” A new arrival said, the man in light steel armor, some red paint on his

breastplate as he unsheathed his blade.

Ilea just looked at him while the rest of the guard squad surrounded the already surrounded group, the mages with her and Christopher taking a step back.

“I wasn’t aware there were forbidden means. Must be a new law.” Ilea said, locking eyes with the man.

“Indeed. Security has been increased, the empire is in a state of war.” He said.

“Interesting, well then pardon my intrusion, I’ll be glad to walk my group back to the gate and enter from there.” Ilea said.

“You will come with me Shadow. One way or the other.” The man said, pointing his sword at her.

Ilea looked around the roof, cocking her head to the side when she met the Shadowguard captain. “Is he for real?” She asked but the man just shrugged.

“Mate, I’ve fought in Virilya and fought in retaking the city you’re trying to protect.” Ilea said and took a casual step towards the man. Their levels ranged from sixty to eighty and their demeanor didn’t suggest them to be veterans, one of them already taking a step back at her approach.

“Think carefully what you’re going to do now Shadow.” The captain said when another person landed, with the same silver armor. There were more symbols on his arms and legs.

“Officer.” The captain said, not looking away from Ilea.

“Captain. Please explain to me what is going on.” The newcomer said, taking a step between the captain and Ilea, his gait casual and his posture relaxed.

*Good move.* Ilea thought and relaxed her posture as well.



“Sir, this Shadow has entered the city through flight, an action forbidden by martial law.” He stated.

“Yet the Shadow is not acting hostile. It seems she did not know about said law being enforced.” The man said. “Is that true?” He added, looking at Ilea directly. She nodded in response.

“May I see your badge?” The officer asked and she threw it towards him. “It’s genuine. I’ll deal with this captain. Do return to your posts.”

“Yes sir.” The captain said and turned around, jumping to the ground and his squad following.

The officer waited for a while before he turned towards Ilea. “Please excuse the hostile behavior.” He said and walked towards her. “Officer Tarken.”

“Lilith. Nice to meet you officer. Martial law hmm?” She asked, curious about this newfound information.

“Indeed, the capital of Lys is under attack.” He said but she waved him off.

“Baralia, yes. Seen them and fought them. It’s gonna take them a while to break through the defenses though, if they even manage it. The central district looked rather formidable.” Ilea said and watched his eyes go wide.

He shook his head and looked up at the one visible moon. “Not everybody shares my views on the Hand and Ravenhall. It would be easier on everybody if you tried to follow the martial law as long as you’re here and not in Viscera. I’d, well I’d appreciate it.” The man said and chuckled before he awkwardly clapped his hands together.

“A good night to you all.” He said and turned around but stopped again right after. “Ah, I nearly forgot. It’s ten coppers each to enter the city.”

Ilea flung a silver coin his way. “Keep the rest officer. And have a good night too.” The man jumped off the roof and left the group to their own devices.

# Chapter 209 Technological Possibilities

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“You’re not the first one they’ve bothered. That officer barely catches any sleep as far as I can tell. Trying to stop the bloodshed.” The captain of the Shadowguard said.

“Bloodshed?” Ilea asked.

“Don’t tell me you weren’t about to kill those fools.” One of the other guards said and smirked but Ilea ignored him.

“A couple guards have been injured, some vanished completely. It’s likely that members are responsible.” The captain said.

“Ah, yea I can see that if they behave like that.” Ilea said. She would’ve scared them a little but the comment by the shadowguard made her a little uneasy. Seemed like the situation in Ravenhall wasn’t exactly the most relaxed either. She sighed and closed her eyes.

“Come on guys, the suns are coming up soon and the woman responsible is likely the least busy this time of day.” Ilea said and grabbed two of the mages before she jumped down, getting the other two right after.

Magical lights had been placed around the streets where no lanterns illuminated the surroundings, giving the city a more advanced technological

feel than it had before the demon attack. The suns not being up, the whole town was clad in darkness but it looked like some of the storefronts were decidedly more colorful than previously. Perhaps an influence by refugees from closer to Virilya. A welcome change for Ilea, who despite the rare painted houses in Ravenhall preferred the looks of Virilya's streets. *Maybe it's the lack of trees...*

The thought and other possible changes to the looks of the city occupied her mind before they entered the main building of the Shadow's Hand outside Viscera, near the center of the rebuilt city of Ravenhall. Most of the buildings residing inside the innermost walls were guild or government related, so far leaving little room for interesting architectural designs. A more practical approach seemed prevalent but with time and money, that too could change.

The guard just waved them in, seeing Ilea in her black armor. Considering all actual members had to be at level two hundred, security on this building by anybody below that wouldn't be terribly effective. The guard was at one forty, enough to keep out and check on most people that would desire to enter the building.

"Not sure if she's still here. We'll go check Viscera if not." Ilea said as they went up the stairs. She couldn't check some of the rooms through her Sphere, the vision either murky or completely blocked off. It could be enchantments put in place or someone actively using a skill. Knocking on Claire's previously used office, she received an answer.

"Come in Ilea." Claire said. "The door is unlocked."

"Welcome to Ravenhall my friends." Ilea said to the others with a smile and entered the room, gesturing for them to follow. Two more shelves had been placed to store books and documents, the corner for refreshments no longer part of the design. Claire's desk was as full as always but the woman looked more energetic than ever. Her black hair was bound in a ponytail as usual and her expression was as serious as ever. Ilea could see the very slight smirk in her expression when she greeted her.

“Don’t tell me Kyrian is dead, I might just blow you out of the window.” The woman said, putting away her work and looking at Ilea. She believed the threat, not that such an action would do her much harm.

“He’s not. We both got teleported away and I have no fucking idea where he is.” Ilea said, introducing the four people in tow.

“It’s a long story and I’ll have to talk about most of it with you if you’ve got time but this takes precedence. I don’t want to share all the information with them so we can take care of it now.” Ilea said, for the latter part bending closer to Claire and whispering it. The woman nodded and gestured for her to continue.

“They’re vegetation mages, three of them are. Previously worked under Arthur Redleaf but they chose to come with me to Viscera. Any use for their talents?” Ilea asked, watching all three of the mages tense up, some more obviously than others. Their fate was in the air, a stable employment or hard work. With their talents they really didn’t have to worry but considering their past with Arthur and his abuse, Ilea somewhat understood their behavior.

“Of course, that’s great news. The Haven has a lot of space and the current team will surely love the newcomers. It’s going well but if our predictions for refugees is even close to reasonable, we’ll be swamped in less than half a year. We have to work on a sustainable food source and few are as capable at that than vegetation mages.” Claire said and got up. She was wearing an outfit close to her armor but while similar in design, this one was made with cloth instead of metal.

The color was mostly focused on black of course but there was some blue interspersed. Compared to the hidden portions and spacious room for runed stones and metal, with this outfit it was part of the design. Darkened plates of runed metal adorned many a part of her outfit making her prepared for a fight whenever but looking non threatening.

“I’m glad you’ve chosen to work with us. I’ll be joining you in the course of the morning to discuss your employment. In the meantime would you mind waiting in an adjacent room until I’ve finished my business with our

friend here?” Claire asked and the three mages just looked at each other, not used to the respectful manner in which they’ve been talked to.

“Let me lead you there then. You may help yourselves to any refreshments or food.” She said and smiled, quickly bringing them to the other room. Ilea took some of the papers off her table and looked through them. Suggestions on new legislation, approval for funds for a public training area for the Hand in the city itself, plans for city expansion into the mountain below and the restoration of the destroyed underground.

“That is not for your eyes young lady.” Claire said after she returned, closing the door behind herself. She glanced at Christopher with interest but didn’t say anything, the man very concerned with a specific spot on the blue carpet.

“I like your outfit. Where did you get it?” Ilea asked, putting the papers down.

“New tailor in the city, he survived in the forests around Morhil if you can believe that. I employed him in one of the shops bought... how far do you trust that man?” Claire stopped herself and pointed towards Christopher.

“Ah, share away. He’s going to be working under you soon enough anyway.” Ilea said. She’d give the man a choice of course but with the chance of seeing Eregar’s Haven she knew his answer already.

“Alright. If you’re sure about it.” Claire said.

“His name is Christopher by the way.” Ilea said, the man looking up at the mention of his name.

“I’m Claire, it’s nice to meet you Christopher.” Claire said, looking at him.

“S... Same ma’am.” He replied.

“We’ll get to him later, now the tailor?” Ilea asked and smirked.

“Employed in a shop bought through your money. So you basically own the establishment. As many others. My pull in the Hand and our incredibly high

influence in the first weeks after the fall have gotten me some ridiculous deals. It's almost like you fabricated the whole thing to get wealth quick and easy."

"And have hundreds of thousands die." Ilea said with a serious expression.

"Sometimes I don't know when to joke with you and when not to." Claire said, shaking her head. A gesture made more difficult by the hand holding up her head on the table.

"It's not been an easy time lately. Don't worry though, I'm not smart enough to pull such a move." Ilea said and smiled.

"That's what you have me for." Claire said.

"Don't scare me. I hope the war isn't something you three cooked up." Ilea replied.

"I try to stay local with political scheming. No reason to make the empire or any other power even more focused on this little town in the mountains. Economic though... well let's just say you don't just own property in Ravenhall." Claire added. "Now tell me what happened to Kyrian."

Ilea sighed and summoned a bottle of mead. "Edwin Redleaf, well we found his father, the one he wanted to kill. The one who might've known something about Eve. Well it doesn't matter now. He's dead." Ilea started. "During the fight, he activated a Taleen teleportation gate in the dungeon below the island he was staying at, sending me to a place called Iz. A massive likely underground city or whatever it was, thousands of Taleen Guardians and more dangerous machines down there, ready to rip me apart. Well a good thing I have the third tier in my teleportation ability." Ilea said, Claire making big eyes at that.

"All terrifying but you have a long range teleportation ability?" She asked, her head now supported only by her neck, hands on the table.

"I do. It's very limited in usability though but it got me out of damn nasty situation." Ilea said. Claire sat back in her chair.

“So Kyrian’s been teleported away too. To another Taleen Dungeon. You didn’t see him I assume?” She asked. Ilea shook her head. Claire sighed at that.

“Well he is capable, just as much as you are. He can’t heal himself though. I just hope he isn’t being worn down and killed by monsters or machines. He doesn’t even have a teleportation skill.” Claire said.

“He can heal himself, learned it a couple weeks ago actually.” Ilea said with a smile. “I’m sure he’ll make it. If he dies I’ll have him reanimated and kill him again.”

“That’s not... well at least I’m less worried knowing he can heal himself. Any idea where he is?” Claire asked.

“None sadly. But, and this is where Christopher over here comes in, we might have a way to create a working gate to these dungeons. Arthur was obsessed with it, with replicating the Taleen teleportation technology, with creating long ranged teleportation between human cities. He’s been working on it for a long time and this man here was in the midst of it.” Ilea said, Christopher instinctively taking a step back.

“That would be... in the hands of Viscera...,” Claire said, already thinking about a dozen possibilities.

“It... it’s far... it’s far from realized... mere theories and for a working gate we first have to create one that links into the Taleen network. To understand how it works, we have to use it and reverse engineer it so that we can reproduce it. The resources, knowledge and time...,” He started but Claire stopped him.

“I will move everything aside for this. We’ll talk in depth about how far you are and about the theories. Is it rune based or something completely different?” Claire asked.

“Runes and enchantments. Both of my classes are related to that.”

Claire smiled wide at that, even a little too wide. “Well I have a high level in rune magic so I’ll be able to support you whenever your theories need a little more practical punch.” She said.

“I know a good enchantress too. Iana Birch in the village of Indur, near Morhil.” Ilea added.

“I’ll get in touch with her too then. Anything else you have Ilea, I kind of want to talk to him now.” Claire said, still smiling.

“You power hungry explosion fanatic.” Ilea said and shook her head. “I have a couple things but first, how would you even use a teleportation gate? Let me tell you that if a Taleen Pratetorian comes out of that gate the city is fucked.”

“If we get it working we connect major cities together or the outskirts at least. Guilds in the empire at first I would assume and then gradually more and more. Adventurers could theoretically appear near a dungeon or the area near their job without having to travel weeks or months beforehand. Especially for the Shadow’s Hand and our members it would be incredible. A guard nearby could get help or healers instead of another expedition completely vanishing.” Claire said, mentioning some of the possibilities.

“The power required is too high. Even for a group of mages it would be difficult to activate. The gates could only be build in places of high mana density. I believe the Taleen dungeons as we know them are mostly dungeons because they build only where the mana density was incredibly high. Otherwise we’d just find the ruins of their city instead of developed dungeons.” Christopher explained, having gained a little more confidence in the talk.

“You’re right. Well that complicates things somewhat. A good thing that Eregar’s Haven is one of the highest mana dense places we know. A start at least. I’m very aware of the dangers as well Ilea. A lot of the rebuilding considerations came up simply to prevent another demon situation. I would think a teleportation gate to an unknown Taleen dungeon would be a similar situation.” Claire said.



“It is unlikely that a machine would be transported to a working gate if activated.” Christopher reassured.

“Unlikely but not impossible?” Ilea asked.

“Highly unlikely but the possibility remains. As does our lack of knowledge about the dwarven race known only as the Taleen.” Christopher said.

“Or other races or things that might come out of that hole in space.” Ilea said, thinking of the demon realm and the possibility of other such places. *Can't get viruses if you're not connected to the network.*

Then again, whatever built the teleportation system in the demon realm could go to whatever random place, even different realms it seemed. Of course most of that was what Ilea had felt when she used the machine but somehow she was sure of it.

“We will build in one of the dungeons then. Build and test deep enough to be able to collapse the whole thing. I'll rig it with enough explosive runes to take out whatever comes through.” Claire said, a disaster already in Ilea's mind. She sighed and nodded.

“Just promise to be safe. I don't want to be responsible for the next calamity befalling this city.” Ilea said.

“Our actions are our own. You simply brought me here. Does my mother share responsibility should such calamity befall us?” Christopher asked.

“Calm down. This is all only relevant anyway if he succeeds. None have before, at least to my knowledge. I'm sure some have tried at least.” Claire said.

“Fewer than would be expected. Funds for these kind of expeditions and research have been scarce. Arthur complained about it often. That he is the only one caring about this incredible technology. Local politics and war proceed research such as this.” The man explained.

“We are human after all.” Ilea said and smirked.

“That we are.” Claire confirmed and looked at her. “I might even be able to convince Sulivhaan and Dagon to evacuate the city before we actually do test runs. Just in case. I agree that while the chance is low, the risk is enormous.”

“Good. Now I have some other things as well. You can start planning as soon as I’m done.” Ilea said. “I need to train my resistances, is there a way for me to hire Hand members for them to use their magic on me?”

“That sounds more like one of your requests.” Claire said and thought about it for a minute. “Why not have them pay? Or wait, another idea. You could be the one testing new joiners’ abilities. Remember when you tested?”

“I do, I think the very same Adam Strand who destroyed the city used his summons to test my destructive power.” Ilea answered.

“Exactly and what better way to test than actually facing the magic and swords yourself? Talk to Sulivhaan about this, he’s in Viscera. I’m sure you could figure out a way to get paid for getting attacked as well. It’s skill growth after all and sparring with dangerous magic gets more and more risky the stronger people get. Tanks and healers at your level are somewhat rare and certainly not willing to work with people outside their team.” Claire explained.

“Why not? It would benefit them as well.” Ilea wondered.

“Different reasons I assume. I regularly check the list of jobs and requests at the Hand and for the Hand. I can only say it’s rare. Getting blasted in the face repeatedly with deadly magic doesn’t sound very fun either.” Claire said.

“What? No that sounds like a perfectly enjoyable experience.” Ilea refuted.

“And that is exactly why people might even pay you to do this.” Claire added, smiling.

“I’ll talk to Sulivhaan then. On another note, is the underwater training session available or are classes not running again?”

“Some are, you’ll have to check in Viscera. I’m not up to date on the schedule. William Hendricks should know about this, he took over some responsibilities in that matter.” Claire said.

“I think I’ve heard that name before.” Ilea said and thought about it but nothing came to mind. Perhaps when she saw the man.

“Anything else?” Claire asked.

“I need some local jobs. Anything for someone like me?” She asked.

“It’s mostly for elemental mages. If you want to carry some stones around then sure but it’s not that well paid. Protecting the refugees on the way here is a way to make some money. Those jobs are offered by the empire though, not by us. Check with the guard or the adventurer guild for those. I think Resistance training might be your best bet anyway.” Claire explained.

“Good. Thanks for all that. Keep me updated on the research.” Ilea said to Claire. “It’s good to have you here. Sorry for losing Kyrian.”

“You didn’t lose him. You both were stupid enough to get teleported away.” Claire said in a matter of fact way. “And you brought a possibility to find him.”

“We’d have to raze down every Taleen dungeon to find the man. If he even is in one.” Ilea said, shaking her head.

“Then you better start training.” Claire said and smiled.

“Will do.” Ilea said and turned to Christopher. “You’re in good hands. Good luck, rune mage.” She said and touched his shoulder.

“Thank you Ilea, for everything.” The man said, making her smile right before she vanished out of the room. Her helmet appeared and she blinked again, out onto the square near the center of the city. The suns were coming up on the horizon and already there were people going about their business.

# Chapter 210 Evaluation from the other Side

## Chapter 210 Evaluation from the other Side

The city soon came to life as the sounds of construction magic intertwined with merchants shouting about their low priced goods. Ilea slowly made her way towards Viscera, thinking about the possible second doom she had brought to the city. Christopher had been right though, their actions weren't hers and the advantages of a working teleportation system between human cities would certainly increase the power of the whole species ten fold.

Ilea just wasn't sure if that was good. *We will see what the future brings.* She thought, stopping near a line of people waiting for the food sold by a somewhat young looking cook. The girl couldn't have been older than fifteen but she handled the wok like she was born with the ability. The smell was nice and Ilea's stomach would've grumbled were it not for her enhanced body barely needing any sustenance anymore.

Still, eating was nice either way so she waited until she was first in line.

"It's noodles with meat sir." The cook said, a little uneasy having a member of the Hand standing before her.

"I'll have a portion please." Ilea said as nicely as she could, smiling under her helmet. The girl filled a wooden bowl to the brim and handed it to her.

"Next." The cook said.

"I didn't pay." Ilea said, summoning a silver piece and handing it to the girl.

"Shadows don't pay." The girl said.

“I insist.” Ilea refused and put the coin on the table, walking away with the food. *I keep on throwing out money like that.* Ilea thought but smiled, blinking into an alley and switching into a more comfortable set of leather armor. Mostly to be able to eat the food as she strolled through the city.

Compared to Salia it was certainly a cold town, less artistry in the architecture and less color. The streets were mostly cobbled with gray stone, the houses and buildings put up closely due to the constricting space of the city walls. It was similar in Salia of course but Ravenhall was likely an older city, more time to fill it than Salia had. Both had been emptied by either elves or demons.

Ilea wondered how Salia was doing by now. Was it just a ruin, maybe even cursed with undead? Or did someone retake it? Perhaps someday she will go back and see what happened to it all. The meal consisted of cooked noodles with different vegetables and chicken. The sauce reminded Ilea more of something western than asian but the rest of the meal certainly didn't. With Ravenhall now getting repopulated by refugees, she imagined a lot of the foods to be from different places all over the empire and beyond.

With magic being a thing, growing what would need a completely different climate likely wasn't much of a problem here. The variety in the meals Keyla cooked certainly spoke for that. Loud noises could be heard when a man angrily pushed open a door, someone else shouting behind him as he drunkenly walked out into the street. The man shouting run out and tackled the drunk guy, both of them falling to the floor hard.

A guard from a nearby street rushed out, sword flashing as he yelled at the two men.

“Stop it at once! In the name of the empire.” He reached them when one of the men sent a wind blade his way, the guard dodging to the side before his sword came down on the attacker. Ilea stood by and watched the ensuing battle with interest, eating her noodles as more and more people stopped to watch. A stray wind blade was sent towards a group of civilians, Ilea appearing before them before it smashed into her Veil of Ash, the food safely held to the side.

She continued eating, the people behind her a little shocked at both the wind blade and her sudden appearance. A second guard appeared after a while, the mage overwhelmed as he was pushed back, taking to the air finally while the guards followed on the rooftops below.

“Thanks!” A kid said behind her, handing her a copper coin.

“Keep the money.” Ilea said and walked on. Life had returned to the city of Ravenhall. Humanity wouldn’t fall so easily after all, as long as they had some walls to hide behind.

Yet walls wouldn’t keep them safe and neither will they make them stronger. The guard before Viscera nodded at her approach, checking the badge quickly that she handed to him. “A good day to you ma’am.” The woman said, handing back the badge.

“Same to you.” Ilea replied, patting the guard on her shoulder before she entered Viscera. The entrance hall didn’t look much different than when she had first seen it. A bunch of massive metal gears had been added, likely to put the even bigger steel wall in front of the entrance should the need arise. Something that would’ve delayed some of the demons but ultimately the fate of the city would’ve likely remained the same. Even with such devices in place.

*With everyone fighting and better coordination...* The thought somewhat justified the new additions to Ilea. If whatever enemy or monster attacked, the new walls would help. At least for the Hand and the guards to group up and prepare a defense.

“May I help you ma’am?” The trainee with receptionist duties asked, the young man respectfully bowing when she approached.

“Looking for Sulivhaan.” She said.

“He should be at his office this time of day.” The man replied.

“And where is that exactly?” Ilea asked again.

“Near the library. Take the same elevator.” He said, Ilea nodding and going towards the actual Viscera. Again, there were bunker like gates in place just in case they were needed. The town itself was less busy than she was used to. More people in black armor and gear walked around than when she had first come here, people still prepared for a fight it seemed. She made her way towards the elevator, glancing quickly at the apartment she had initially gotten. Ilea held little interest in it now.

Having had her house built, the feeling of having a safe place to go back to was satisfied. Sleeping outside and traveling to unknown places was likely going to be a big part of her life but it was nice knowing that she could go back. The board mentioning different classes wasn't set up but perhaps Sulivhaan or William had more answers regarding that.

“She came with a friend. One is a healer and tank, the other an arcane mage.” William told her, handing her the two files. The man had informed her that most classes weren't available yet but he had another suggestion.

Ilea looked over them briefly and nodded. “She looks like a noble.” Ilea was to help him evaluate some potential new members.

“Paid in advance but we don't know about her family status. She says she's from the north.”

“The northern plains?” Ilea asked, remembering Maurice talking about them.

“Perhaps. Many strong tribes there fight and change territories. Information on them is scarce and not worth a lot considering the quick shifts in power.” William explained.

“Interesting. Maybe I should go there at some point.” Ilea mused and handed back the papers.

“Would you like to continue your lessons until they're here?” The man asked, making Ilea gulp.

“After.” She said. Her arrogance had been paid with terror. She’d get the better of it but five hours in the morning had been quite enough to justify a small break.

Luckily the two possible new joiners entered the training hall a moment later, dashing any argument the strict and sadistic teacher could bring up. He stroked his gray mustache as he looked at them with his cold, unfeeling, evil, terrible, sadistic eyes. At least it looked like that to Ilea. She shifted her attention to the newcomers, cracking her neck in preparation for what was to come.

“What do we have here. So you two are supposed to test our strength?” The woman asked, her long black hair flowing beautifully behind her. She had rugged looking light steel armor on and walked with visible confidence. The man next to her didn’t say anything, full plate steel armor covering his whole body, his eyes focused on William.

“She is mostly. Gan and Bataar of the north. Welcome to the Shadow’s Hand.” William spoke.

“She is? When do we start.” The woman asked.

“Right now.” Ilea said and stepped to the middle of the hall. “One at a time, first you attack me.”

The woman followed Ilea and spoke when she stood a couple meters in front of her. “I am Gan, warrior of the Hand, face me.”

“Ilea, nice to meet you.” She answered and activated her Veil while creating some ash around her.

“Your name does not matter, don’t stand in my way or you will be destroyed.” Gan said, making Ilea roll her eyes.

“Ok ok. Whatever you say. Just attack me, start with the lowest power and ramp it up with each strike, leave five or so seconds in between.” Ilea instructed, knowing full well that some of the people wouldn’t listen to her.



Gan's hand went up, her black eyes flashing quickly with a little bit of red before a beam of the same color shot at Ilea, impacting a fraction of a second later. Her Veil stopped the blast of pure energy. Her Arcane Magic Resistance was at level eight and the mage that gave her that resistance was at a considerably lower level than the woman standing before her. His magic had looked quite a bit more impressive.

The next blast was like a confirmation, the beam of energy much wider and more destructive, burning through part of her Veil. Gan lifted one of her eyebrows, apparently already impressed with Ilea's defenses. Spreading out ash before her, Ilea formed three walls and condensed them into smaller plates.

The next blast shredded through all three plates and part of her Veil, likely enough to pass her Veil had it been alone. The woman's eyes glowed red for a second after the blast this time.

"Your defenses are adequate Ilea of the Hand." Gan spoke before red runes formed on her body, visible wherever her skin was exposed. Her eyes turned dark red before she lifted her hands in front of her, mana surging through the surroundings and Ilea waiting for the blast behind her repaired shields of ash.

The surge of raw mana smashed through her defenses, hammering into her black armor and pushing her backwards for a meter before she stopped. Her healing skill activated and took care of the slight burns her body had sustained. Compared to Arthur's wind blows that managed to break her bones even with her armor and all defenses ready, this was child's play.

"Come on, that's not all you've got." Ilea said as she remade the ashen shields. This time Gan grinned, crouching a little as her eyes stayed red. A big surge of mana left her before a ball of red light condensed between her hands, the woman continuing her grin as she channeled more and more mana into the attack. Ilea debated if she should blink away as more and more time passed but this day was already filled with defeat.

*I hate drowning.* She thought and braced herself, crouching to receive the energy blast that followed a second later. The light bit through the ash and

her Veil like through paper, smashing into her and sending her skidding backwards as her insides were cooked and burnt by the unstable energy that sizzled off into the air and ground around her. *Not as bad as expected.* She thought, her healing taking care of the wounds immediately, her Pain Resistance removing the terrible reaction she would normally have felt from most of her skin melting.

“Not bad.” Ilea said, looking at the bent over woman who was breathing hard. She had invested a lot of her mana for that strike it seemed, not something she would do in a normal fight.

“Invest in some more Wisdom.” Ilea said. “A seven in attack power.” She said to William who noted it down.

“A bit of a low score no?” He asked, walking a little closer.

“You agreed didn’t you.” Ilea asked, having rated some of the current members while comparing their scores to the initial ones given out. Hers were usually lower, by quite a bit. “If we have a bunch of eights and nines and no fours then what do the ratings even mean?” Ilea asked rhetorically.

“Now let’s see about speed. Move around and attack me, I’ll do the same but won’t attack.” Ilea explained, the woman looking at her with an unreadable expression. And then she vanished, appearing at an angle behind Ilea while floating in the air. Arcane magic shot out in a beam before Ilea dodged it. She wouldn’t use her blink or flight skills if it wasn’t necessary. It was part of the grading process.

She did however run. More and more arcane beams smashed into the ground, leaving behind burnt and even glassy stone as the woman appeared and vanished, flew through the air in great speeds while Ilea tried to catch up, nearly getting close enough for a punch a couple times. After twenty minutes of the cat and mouse game, Gan seemed to slow down but she didn’t ask for the test to stop, instead using her teleportation skill more to evade Ilea who jumped through the air to get to her. Another five minutes and she was done, Ilea finally getting a grip on the woman’s armor with her right hand. The left followed around the neck, the two of them stabilizing in the air as her ashen wings spread behind her.

“Good.” She said and let go of her, floating to the ground as the woman landed, wobbling on her legs a little.

“Maneuverability six, speed five.” Ilea said, William writing it all down.

“You’re not filling a tank role I suspect. Would you still like to do the defense test?” Ilea asked as she turned around to Gan who was up again, ready to fight. *There’s a reason people get to two hundred, isn’t there.*

“I would like to. May I recharge my mana? It will take five minutes.” Gan asked and Ilea nodded, waving the man over. He was about her height but quite a bit broader. Not overly so but under that armor was quite a bit of muscle.

“I am Bataar.” He said and bowed to her lightly.

“Ilea.” She said and copied the gesture. “Hit me with what you have.” She said.

The man nodded and walked up to her, one hand holding the massive shield that looked heavier than a car and the other one holding a somewhat short nasty looking barbed mace. There was still blood on it.

“That’s unsanitary.” She said, pointing at the mace as he stopped a meter in front of her. He looked down and grunted.

“Yes, more effective like this.” Bataar said.

“Guess that makes sense.” Ilea said, her Veil ready to take the hit.

The man screamed and brought the mace down, the spikes pushing through her Veil but the overall hit blocked, the metal screeching against her armored shoulder. A pulse of mana was felt before a second strike hit her Veil, this time breaking through. Her shoulder was injured lightly but the blunt force wasn’t something that could threaten her life, not even without armor or the veil.

She waited for a while but he simply stepped back a little to signal that he was done. “Two in attack.” Ilea said.

“Now move and attack me.” Ilea said. The man was quicker than she ever though possible but still a long way behind the woman or herself. For his armor’s weight though it was impressive.

“Three in speed and maneuverability.” Ilea said. “Who wants to go first in defense?”

“Me, you’ll just waste your mana on him.” Gan said from the side. Ilea looked at the man with interest, willing to test that with all she had.

“I will simply stand here.” Gan said as Ilea approached.

“Good.” She answered, her fist rushing at the woman before a shield intercepted the attack, the energy even partially burning her Veil.

“Interesting.” She said and attacked again, this time with her buffs active but without Destruction or Wave of Ember. A dull sound could be heard on impact. Ilea felt the shield waver a little and punched again. Five punches later, it was overwhelmed and Gan vanished.

“Defense, three.” Ilea said. “You would do well to increase that skill a bit more. And invest in Vitality, personal suggestion.” Ilea said to the woman who had appeared a couple steps next to her.

“Your advice is not needed.” Gan said in a respectful tone.

“Alright.” Ilea said and turned to Bataar. “You’re gonna be a tough nut to crack I imagine.” She said but he just grunted before he held his huge shield in front of himself. Ilea blinked in front of him and smashed her fist into it. Gan’s eyebrows rose a little at the sudden use of teleportation.

The shield however didn’t move much. Ilea repeated the five punches before she activated Wave of Ember and Destruction on impact. Some of it was deflected, she felt it. The shield had a mana intrusion enchantment but with time it would fall. Using her third tier State of Azarinth, she sacrificed a hundred points of health to deliver one punch. The impact pushed the man back a little. Just a step but it was something.

Her relentless assault continued for another minute before she deemed it worthless. “May I use all means?” Ilea asked.

“Go ahead Shadow.” The man said with respect. Ash started spreading around him before Ilea appeared on his side, her fully powered punch landing on his side. The man’s mace lashed out but she had already vanished, kicking at his left leg from behind before she ducked below the shield bash that followed, delivering an uppercut to his chin with the next punch, sending him flying into the air. He came down two meters further back, shaking his head but getting back up quickly.

He wasn’t done and neither was she. Ilea continued to bash into the man for a whole three minutes, his lacking speed and one sided defense near his shield made it trivial for her to deliver her attacks but he didn’t seem to react much. Whenever she got him to the ground, he would get up and continue. Ilea blinked in once more, this time carefully checking the angle as she held his arm with one hand and jabbed with the other. A cracking sound could be heard, his bone giving in.

Bataar winced but lashed out at her regardless, Ilea jumping back to observe him. His shield dropped to the ground and he used his left hand to correct the broken right one. He locked eyes with her, a golden light quickly shining in them before he started moving his right hand again.

“A healer? Or a paladin?” Ilea asked. With his reactions the man could probably tank Arthur’s Wind magic without being moved as long as he was behind his shield. Any damage to his body he could heal, at least that’s what it looked like.

“Healer and tank.” He said. “You are an impressive warrior and a healer as well. I commend you.” Bataar said and bowed. “I would die were this not a mock fight.”

“Defense seven, nine with his shield up.” Ilea said to William who noted it all down.

“Good, then we’re done here.” He said with a grin. “Back to training.”

# Chapter 211 Drowning for Fun

## Chapter 211 Drowning for Fun

The two new members of the Shadow's Hand left and would receive their team information and further instructions from William or someone else. Ilea looked at her fist and frowned.

“What is it? Dreading the underwater lesson so much?” William asked but she was preoccupied with the lack of her fist's impact. The man of course had been a level two hundred tank and healer, focused completely on defense while she was more of a mix, both incredibly resilient but also having a strong punch.

*If I want to fight a Praetorian, if I want to find and fight Eve's killers I'll need to shatter his shield with a single punch.* The thought was refreshing. Scary in a way but she felt good. Her power had crept up on her a little. While many of her enemies could fight her or even win against her, this experience here, rating the other's defense and attack, it made her realize how long of a way she still had to go.

“Alright water bender, drown me.” Ilea said, impressed again by William's perfect straight face when he gathered water from the air around him. She summoned her **[Drowning Bear Ring]** which apparently made her drown less quickly and stood there as the water enveloped her.

The two had talked about this method quite a bit and while William would've preferred her to use a more conventional means to gain skills related to underwater survival and combat, this was definitely the fastest

and most dangerous one. Perhaps she could gain other levels as well. After the first twenty minutes in the morning, Ilea had asked the man to attack her with ice and water magic while she was drowning and he had obliged.

The water flowed around her before she switched out her Ashen Hunter armor with a simple shirt and pants. It would allow for his attacks to actually inflict damage.

As soon as the water closed before her, Ilea calmed herself down. Meditation and her Healing magic flowed through her body, her eyes focused on the mage before her as he summoned small spikes of ice that shot into the water and slammed into her unprotected skin. Ilea's Ice Resistance was at level seven, not quite as high as some of her other resistances but certainly nothing to scoff at. She wondered if it would protect her against natural ice buildup as well considering it wasn't called Ice Magic Resistance.

The oxygen she had left slowly rose through the water around her that started mixing with blood as bigger and more dense ice spikes started slamming into her, some managing to pierce her already armor like skin. She didn't use her Veil, instead allowing for the full attack to get through, knowing that it would be beneficial for her resistance leveling.

"Five minutes." She heard the muffled noise through the water. Still, she had some breath left. An impressive result already for Ilea personally but she had realized her body was capable of much more already. In the morning she managed to keep her breath for a whopping thirty minutes which was likely already more than any human had any right to stay underwater.

The ring helped but didn't change the result more than a minute or two. Time continued to pass, more and more injuries covering her body as William focused his aim on her stomach area to avoid any awkward situations, not that Ilea would've cared. Still, she appreciated the intent.

This time she could keep her lungs water free for thirty two minutes straight. A cough sent out the last of the air as her body gasped for more, finding bloody water instead. Ilea continued coughing but her skills kept

her focused, the growing pain and discomfort something she focused on just like she had focused on the pain of burning herself to gain the Fire Mage class so long ago. Drowning wasn't fun for sure and Ilea didn't feel like picking a favorite between it and burning alive.

A minute passed and then another. Her body became less and less responsive while her health dwindled. Hunter Recovery fought against the drain but it became harder and harder, her mind growing heavier with every passing second.

“Thirty Five minutes.” She barely heard the sound coming from the mage as her consciousness slipped from her, right before she blinked out.

The following coughing fit didn't subside for a whole two minutes or until all the water was gone from her airways. Her head still felt heavy and her body shivered as air finally came back to it. She could tell that her body was damaged, her healing spell the only reason she would walk away from this unscathed. Well at least physically.

“Still nothing...,” She said, getting up slowly and stumbling a little as the mage came up to her.

“It takes months if not longer to gain a skill related to underwater fighting. While I have never trained anybody with this method, it will likely still take a week at least.

“A fucking week of this. Give me back my torch.” Ilea said, confusing the man a little. He didn't ask and went back to his pack, getting out more papers to work on.

“Are you sure you have time for this?” Ilea asked a couple minutes later, recovered enough to continue.

“Of course. With all this newfound paperwork I have barely any time to train my skills. Neither are there many subjects near my level that can take as much abuse and do so willingly. I actually believe I owe you something for this whole process.” He said and looked up before he scratched his beard. “It's somehow quite meditative as well.” He added and laughed.



“Interesting. Maybe I should try to drown you for some meditation too.” Ilea said a little annoyed. Not at him of course, this was one hundred percent her choice. That sadly didn’t make it any easier to go through.

“You would find that rather difficult.” William said and lifted the water back up, the blood cleared out of it as Ilea rolled her eyes and let it flow around her.

*Three more hours...* The thought wasn’t very comforting. As shitty as the experience was, mostly it was boring. This time Ilea summoned ash outside of the sphere of water and started moving it around with her Manipulation. Sadly she wasn’t an oxygen creator or wind mage but she was sure that the training was worth it at least. William confirmed it to her, mentioning the existence of several skills that could be beneficial.

One thing was for sure, Ilea didn’t want to die drowning as some eldritch horror dragged her to the bottom of the demon realm’s endless ocean.

“Not a lot of useful shit on the board this week.” A man in black armor complained next to Ilea while she read through the requests posted in the adventurer’s guild. Most of the jobs for mercenaries like her were posted here, in the central inn owned by the guild. Several people were sitting around, having a chat or a drink as they waited for their group members or someone to hire.

*Perhaps better jobs as well.* Ilea thought, finishing with the third construction job request already. Monster slaying didn’t seem to be on the menu. There were of course jobs directly from the Shadow’s Hand but most of them weren’t local and would require weeks if not months of commitment. Travel times alone would be extensive and Ilea didn’t really plan on leaving Ravenhall for a little while. At least not the mountain range containing it.

Not with the possibility of the Birmingales, the Golden Lily and the Forkspears looking for her. Here at least she was protected by the anonymity provided by other people around her level. In most towns she would stand out like a tiger in a chicken coop.

The man next to her grunted and took one of the papers before he walked to one of the counters. Ilea didn't find anything reasonable for her abilities but she wasn't exactly here for that either. People avoided looking at her as she made her way to one of the clerks. Even while in Ravenhall, Shadow's certainly demanded respect. Perhaps here even more so than in other places, most people in the know regarding their abilities and what it meant to be part of the mercenary guild.

"Welcome to the adventurer's guild Sir Shadow. What can I do for you today?" The woman asked with a smile. Ilea could tell her heart rate had gotten a little higher upon talking to her. Considering the previous employees were likely made demons and wiped out by the Hand, the workforce of Ravenhall likely consisted of newcomers, opportunists and trainees. This one seemed like a trainee to her.

"Sir Shadow?" Ilea asked and chuckled, the woman smiling as her discomfort grew. "Ah don't worry, Shadow is fine though. I need to post a request or well, an offer." Ilea said and watched the woman relax a little.

"Of course. Posting on the main board costs ten silver coins, one of the smaller ones one silver. Five percent of the reward goes to the guild, we'll deduct that in the description." The woman explained.

"There is no reward." Ilea said and handed over the page she had taken out of her notebook to describe her request.

"Hmm...", The woman said as she read through the page, her eyes opening wide before she looked at Ilea again. "Yes well... it's another three silvers then as a fee to the guild."

"How long will it stay up?" Ilea asked.

“Twelve hours normally but you may extend the duration for ten coppers her hour.” The woman explained and she nodded, handing over the thirteen silver coins from her pouch.

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Viper sighed as he entered the adventurer’s guild. His black eyes took in the inn and its occupants in a moment, registering a couple interesting individuals, a couple dangerous ones as well. A fiery flash went through his eyes as he felt a magical pulse from one of the people. Realizing it was only someone working on a weapon’s enchantment, he continued and walked to the board listing the most prominent jobs.

The four people standing near the board made space after they noticed his approach, none of them Shadows like him. Of course there were people wearing black that weren’t part of the Shadow’s Hand but when you were in Ravenhall you better assumed everyone in black was part of the order. Offending one of theirs wasn’t a smart move, never was. With the demons and now the war between the Empire and Baralia, such a move was becoming more stupid by the day.

*Perhaps today.* He thought, glancing over the jobs he had already gone through. More construction and guarding jobs. There was of course the arena but people on his level usually didn’t participate. He wasn’t sure if it was beneficial for Philipp anyway. The man wasn’t the same anymore after the demon summoning. War and refugees aren’t helping.

Viper was about to leave again when his eyes fixated on a new posting. One without a reward, the reason he hadn’t immediately looked at it.

*Train your magic against a Shadow. Healer and Tank ready. One silver coin per hour per person.*

There was a location as well. One of the training halls below the small arena in the second ring of the city. The man smiled a little before he closed his fist. *Maybe we can finally improve a little there. Without scaring the poor guy.* He thought and left the guild. There was no time frame on the paper but it was worth a shot to be sure. If the tank and healer were there he'd ask Philipp if he wanted to join as well.

The guard standing next to the central wall's gate nodded to him as he exited into the second circle. The city was getting busier again. Every day it felt like the population recovered by another ten percent. The war certainly was doing wonders to the recovery of Ravenhall. He had believed the city would be retaken and turned into a ghost town, a city standing empty except for the Shadows in Viscera.

He was wrong as it turned out. Soon Ravenhall would be back to its former glory and likely beyond even. Fresh hopeful people scarred by war and angry at the Empire or Baralia would bring a boom in economic power. With the experienced and strong administrators of the Hand that had pretty much taken over the city by now, it was bound to flourish. He and Philipp were there when the demons had been summoned. They had been there when a hundred thousand people were slaughtered by their own mutated neighbors and family members.

Something Viper knew the new leadership would invest highly to prevent. The new walls were just a part of it. The Shadowguard and the gates separating Viscera, Eregar's Haven and the city itself were another part. He didn't know what else they had come up with but was certain there was more. Not a single elder remained but perhaps that was exactly what the Shadow's Hand had needed. A fresh start.

Thoughts of the demon summoning being a conspiracy by the elders to bring about exactly said new start flowed through his mind as he entered the underground arenas, an establishment build and rented out to various guilds and rich people. It had been partially destroyed in the demon attack but had been rebuilt to be even more extensive, now reaching seven floors below ground.

Viper paid the fee to enter arena 8B, the one mentioned on the job description. The lady took the five coppers and grunted, motioning towards the entrance.

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The now nearly thirty people watching cheered as a stone the size of Ilea's head smashed into her leather armor's chest, the light damage nearly immediately healed as she brushed off the remaining pebbles. She hadn't visited the arenas in Ravenhall often, her team and the Haven sufficient for training but now that most members of the Hand were out and about while new adventurers came to the city, it was the perfect location for her little training.

The circular arena was surrounded by a stone wall with several cracks in it, seating provided for any spectators further above. The whole place had actually been repaired but this training session wasn't exactly friendly to the construction work around it.

"That's shit!" One of the drunk adventurers watching shouted to the stone mage who just stared angrily at Ilea.

"You're shit!" He shouted back and focused on her again, magic condensing as a piece of stone cracked out of the ground before it twirled and was sent her way. This time he aimed for her knee but she simply braced for the impact and let it happen. With all her skills and the light protection her leather armor provided, this wasn't nearly enough to bring her out of balance.

The mage before her was dressed in leather armor as well, his face red and puffy, sweat dripping down his brow as a vein popped on his forehead. The man was a little above level one hundred but his damage output wasn't exactly anything to worry about. Ilea remembered how a bunch of demons

on the same level could rip through her flesh with ease back in Virilya. Both a testament to their strength, even at lower levels but also to this man's lack thereof.

Then again, this was blunt damage, much harder to damage her with that with her enhanced bones. "Are you done?" She asked the man and smiled, her blue eyes sparkling as she watched him finally snap. Nearly all of them did and would at some point use whatever attack they thought too dangerous to throw against another human in a sparring match or in this case, a training session to improve their skills.

Ilea noticed a new face in the crowd and smiled, seeing the black robe the man was wearing as he looked at the scene in the arena. Her feet prepared for the impact as they pushed against the sand and stone below. The mage had switched his approach to spears. A worthy change indeed but with what little impact he showed thus far, Ilea doubted this would bring much of a change.

She focused and watched the stone spears crack as they became smaller and started to spin, reminding her of her own ashen projectiles. And then they came, shooting towards her as quickly as the Taleen machines sent out their projectiles. Not enough to prevent her from dodging but in this case it didn't matter. She was here to improve her resistances and nothing else.

The spears punched through her leather armor and dug into her flesh before they shattered against her rib cage. She was pushed a step backwards by the impact, a small cloud of dust and pulverized stone floating before her as she ripped out the pieces still inside of her chest. The wounds closed as the flesh rebuilt, pushing out the fragments and pieces of bones she hadn't gotten with her hands. Blood dripped on the ground but soon stopped again. Another couple drops on the slowly reddening sand and stone below.

"Nice try." Ilea said and watched the man's eyes go wide. Relief filled his eyes when he realized she was fine.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." He said and swallowed.

“That was the first attack worth your silver. Calm down and come back. I’m here until midnight. Again tomorrow evening. One silver per hour.” Ilea said and smiled at the man. He was a little overwhelmed by the situation it seemed and nodded quickly before he walked to the stairs leading to the seating.

“You fucking useless shit stick, I bet four silvers you could at least pierce through her body! What about that story of you defeating a troll with that spell?!” One of the adventurers shouted as he punched the mage before two others stopped him. It seemed in good fun though as they all started laughing right after.

Ilea watched them all, having endured nearly all of their magical attacks already. Some even in groups of five. When it became overwhelming she had used her Veil but that had only happened twice so far today.

# Chapter 212 Resistance Roulette

## Chapter 212 Resistance Roulette

In that moment the Shadow in black robes appeared next to the bucket standing a little to the side. He let a silver coin fall into it, adding to her earnings for the day before he walked several steps to face her.

“Oy lads, give that one a look!” The attention of the crowd was taken immediately by the appearance of another Shadow.

“Welcome.” Ilea said and smiled. Identifying the man, she found him to be at two twenty. Very near her own level. “Please start with weak attacks and go from there. I’m not wearing my good armor.” Ilea said for the first time since coming to the arena.

“Do I know you?” The man asked, his eyes flashing fiery below his hood.

“Perhaps you do. Were you here when we retook the city?” Ilea asked. He didn’t react for a moment.

“I was. But no, I do not know you from then. The healer and the tank, it’s all you then?” He asked before he thought again for a while. “Ah, I remember. Blue eyes and an attitude I wouldn’t forget immediately.” He said as the air around both him and her grew hotter. Ilea wasn’t sure from where he knew her but decided to activate her Veil of Ash just in case she was facing someone with a grudge.



The man chuckled as the air grew cool again. “Don’t be alarmed. I merely want to see how far you’ve gotten.” He said before a flaming beam of light hit her stomach, burning through her armor in seconds before her healing kicked in, counteracting the disintegration of her flesh and bones as her skill fought against his.

The fire surrounding the beam of light grew more intense and chaotic but focused on a smaller spot as she continued to counterheal the damage dealt. Her eyes could barely focus as her retinas burnt out, forcing her to use her Sphere to see. The man didn’t move, simply keeping his spell active and intensifying the beam every minute or so while she stood there, her clothes and skin on fire as she resisted.

With time, the damage became more manageable, not only because of the notifications Ilea heard about likely Resistances rising but also because of her learning more about how she could deal with her burnt tissue and how she could recreate and treat it through her healing magic. Ten minutes passed before the beam subsided, Ilea quickly rebuilding her stomach while the man forced a large amount of mana between his hands, adding more and more to it for a solid minute.

A beam of white light surrounded by white flame burnt through her body in an instant, burning the very air on its way and burning into the stone wall behind her, further than her sphere could see. Her spine lay exposed, smoking and slightly damaged before she began healing herself. Most of the onlookers had missed the spectacle thanks to the mage’s bright magic but when they looked at Ilea now, they could see a still burning woman regrowing her missing stomach and parts of her back.

“Truly, worthy of the name Shadow.” The mage said and bowed his head before he lifted it again with a smile. “I’ve only known a handful of people that could stop what you just endured with their bodies alone. Two of them elves.”

Ilea patted out the flames clinging to her armor and hair before the mage lifted his hand, killing the fire near instantly. “Was that the strongest you had?” She asked, her belly nearly back to normal by now.

“Your recovery is impressive too. Not a surprise knowing you were a healer once.” The man said and smiled again.

“You’re making me more and more interested. Who are you?” Ilea asked.

“My name is Viper. We’ve met near the city of Riverwatch. An elven attack had occurred and the city had hired a Shadow squad to look into it and to hunt the enemy.” Viper said.

Ilea thought back and remembered the suddenly appearing squad in the forest on their way back from the Calys mine.

“Makes sense how someone as reckless as you survived until today.” Viper said.

“Why reckless? My healing is just part of it.” Ilea said.

“I’m sure. You were below level one hundred if I remember correctly. An impressive growth. One usually stopped abruptly. Yet yours didn’t and now you are even past my own power.” The man said.

“Levels are not everything to someone’s strength.” Ilea replied.

“And you’ve gained some wisdom on the way as well.” The mage said.

“You said you’re here until midnight?” He asked. Ilea nodded in response.

“Good. A friend of mine might be of service to you, while you might be of service to him.” He said and vanished.

*Attracted the right kind of people.* She thought and smiled, looking through her gains so far. This ordeal had really proven itself to be a very good idea.

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 3’***

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 4’***

***‘ding’ ‘Fear Resistance reaches lvl 5’***

*'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches lvl 8'*  
*'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches lvl 9'*

Gains from her training with William. While she wasn't in a dark flooded cave, being drowned was pretty scary on its own.

*'ding' 'Wind Resistance reaches lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7'*

A good evening already and there were several more hours to go. She just wished the adventurers had more diverse abilities to actually give her new resistances as well. Or was she already prepared for most classes that were out there? Ilea heavily doubted that but more common elements like fire and ice were useful to her nonetheless. Still, an obscure resistance might just be the difference between living or dying against something she had never encountered before.

Her Mental Resistance or Silver Magic Resistance were examples for that. An additional problem was her rather high general resistance to damage anyway. Her Vitality, strong skin and bones were hard to damage for pretty much anybody, which in turn made it harder for her to train her resistances against mages below a certain level of strength. The stone mage was one of

the first who managed to so easily pierce her skin but it didn't look like he could use that attack often and in succession.

Ilea checked through her stats while she waited for the next group to get ready. The problem at this point wasn't that there weren't enough people there to train with her but that they had started focusing more on the betting amongst themselves. Which meant they would actually try to kill her but needed time to prepare first. In the end, Ilea supposed it was a good thing. The closer she got to death the better.

***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 229***

- ***Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 3***
- ***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 9***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 18***

***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 223***

- ***Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 1***
- ***Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Active: Embered Body Heat – 2 rd lvl 1***
- ***Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 15***

- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 16*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 19*

### *General Skills:*

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – lvl 2nd 17*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 20*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 20*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 10*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 9*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Ice Resistance – lvl 9*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 13*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Veteran – lvl 3*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 600***

***Endurance: 350***

***Strength 266***

***Dexterity 350***

***Intelligence 550***

***Wisdom 415***

***Health: 6000/6000***

***Stamina: 3500/3500***

***Mana: 3810/4150***

Her resistances amassed a rather long list already but Ilea focused more on the nearly fully leveled Ashen Warrior. She assumed that as soon as five skills were maxed again, she could use her remaining third tier skill point for her ashen class.

A group had finally formed and moved to face her. Eight adventurers in total, the highest leveled one being at a little above one hundred. Most of them had faced her before so she knew the extent of their abilities. Ilea just hoped that Viper would return with the promised friend. His magic alone could push her Heat and Light resistances quicker than any of these people. They all threw a silver coin each into the bucket before they started.

Fire quickly enveloped her as spikes of stone and crystal punched into her belly. Nothing managed to pierce her skin so far, an explosion pushing her a couple steps back and heating up her face. She simply walked back under the magical assault and continued to take their abuse. Well it wasn't much of an abuse. As Ilea continued to watch the mages, she felt that her nonchalance was more damaging to their psyche than any of their magic was to her body.

Perhaps some of them will try to improve and expose themselves to a little more danger than attacking a willing suspect like herself. Or they might just visit her again and again to improve their magic. Maybe she could hire an instructor that could give the adventurers some pointers while they paid for that service as well.

The group gave up after twenty minutes, exhausted and defeated. “You can meditate and try again you know?” Ilea said as she brushed off the dust from her burnt leather armor. It wouldn’t last much longer but she still had another one in her necklace. Plus she was sure the Hand wouldn’t mind much if she touch a couple of their armors. She had paid them handsomely after all.

Viper was already back she noticed while cleaning up. And he had brought someone else. He wore black leather armor with a hood but she could see the greasy brown hair hanging out of it. His shoulders hung low as he was pushed by Viper to go towards the bottom of the arena.

The second man didn’t have any weapons but Ilea quickly noticed the bracelets. As soon as they were standing before her, she identified the man.

### ***[Hunter – lvl 214]***

A hunter. Ilea thought back but couldn’t remember anybody that had that description when she identified them.

“Welcome back Viper and friend.” Ilea said. “I’m glad you returned. My Heat Resistance is at a breaking point and you might just make the difference.”

The mage smiled under his hood. “It’s good to let loose against someone again. Been a while.” He gently touched his friend’s shoulder and motioned to Ilea.

“She wants to train with us. Gain resistances against different sorts of magic. I immediately thought of you. What do you think?” Viper asked. The second man looked up to the mage and then towards Ilea. He had green

eyes and looked to be in his late twenties. It seemed like he looked right through her.

“This is Philipp, my teammate.” Viper said and smiled as he pulled back his own hood.

“Nice to meet you Philipp.” Ilea said and smiled. “You may start whenever.” She added. The man nodded as his expression turned serious.

“Now I’ll show you what she can do.” He said before a beam of burning light formed in an instant, Ilea immediately healing herself, flesh stripped off and reforming again and again. A process that would be excruciatingly painful were it not for her second stage in that particular resistance. Then again it was a bit of a detriment as well, were it not for her healing skill, she would have no idea how damaged exactly she was. Of course everybody could see how much Health they had left but the numbers didn’t exactly convey two missing legs and several liters of one’s own blood pouring on the ground very accurately. Her Hunter Recovery on the other hand did just that.

As quickly as it had formed, the beam subsided. It hadn’t reached the same intensity as it had previously but this time it wasn’t about testing her defenses. Philipp looked at her as the flesh on her stomach reformed, quickly coming back to the natural skin color it had previously. He then looked at her face, his eyes focused compared to before. Ilea looked at him and then at Viper, the mage having a slight grin on his face, his hand still resting on his friend’s shoulder.

“I don’t think you’ll be able to hurt her.” Viper said in a whisper. “I couldn’t with the white flame, not really.” He added. Philipp looked up to him at that, the man quite a bit smaller than the mage next to him. Smaller even than Ilea. His body language didn’t help either.

“I’m not sure Viper...,” Philipp said.

“It will be good to hold your bow again.” Viper replied and patted his back. “Nobody’s getting hurt either.”



*Not permanently at least.* Ilea thought. Something had happened to Philipp, that was clear. She wasn't about to squander a chance of perhaps regularly training with Shadows and simply waited.

“My attacks have curses, acid and bleeding enhancing properties.” The hunter said, unsure how to proceed.

“And I have resistances against all that.” Ilea lied. She didn't have anything against bleeding but would be happy to gain that one too. The man smiled a little at that and looked at Viper again, the latter stepping back and motioning for Philipp to take the stage.

Still a little unsure, the man extended his hand and a bow appeared. A wooden bow with metal lines intertwined, runes decorating its whole surface and a string that looked to be absorbing the light around it. In his right hand the man summoned an arrow, the metal head just as intricately decorated as the bow.

“Give me your best shot.” Ilea said and smiled. The corners of his mouth twitched a little but he didn't smile, the arrow placed on his bow before he pulled back with a practiced motion. Ilea could tell that magic was pushed into the weapon and the arrow itself before it was loosed.

It flew straight and true, cutting into her stomach and stopped by her spine after it pierced through several of her organs. She left it in for a moment and felt the curse creep through her. With her resistance in the second stage, the duration would be halved and the effects in general would be greatly diminished by all the levels already. She saw through her healing magic that her insides were being corroded, eaten alive by a substance expelled by the arrow itself or an enchantment placed on it.

There was another effect she noticed, her blood became thinner. Something that wouldn't be an issue until she would rip out the nasty forked arrow. Her healing was a little influenced as well, the curse doing its work on her even with all the resistance she had against it. Seemed like she wasn't done training that one either. Still, her magic wasn't disturbed enough to greatly diminish its effects as she reformed the corroded parts of her interior and

mended the damaged organs she would rip apart again as soon as she got the arrow out.

“Is it not working?” Philipp asked with a mixture of emotions showing on his face.

“It’s eroding my body and the curse is disturbing my healing a little. It’s gonna be a fountain of blood as soon as I rip it out.” Ilea said and smiled.

“You are crazy.” Philipp said and laughed, Viper looking at him immediately when he heard the noise. “Then leave it in for another ten seconds. Let’s see if that is still nothing to you.” He said and grinned.

“It’s gonna explode isn’t it?” Ilea asked and three seconds later her prediction proved to be accurate, an explosion ripping through her body as splinters of metal pierced through her heart. The ones going as far as her head were stopped by her skull, her bones too much for the shrapnel to pierce or damage but her stomach was a complete mess, guts spilling out onto the ground and her blood running out as if it had the consistency of water.

*That’s a lot of blood.* She thought and sank to one knee, holding the guts back in as her healing took over completely, flesh and blood being restored as her mind became a little cloudy. Meditation kicked in as well and she refocused. Her body was a mess. The combination of corrosion, curses and her blood running out in a mere moment was a combination as nasty as any she had ever seen. A smile came to her face.

# Chapter 213 Blood Clotting

## Chapter 213 Blood Clotting

Viper watched the scene with mixed feelings. Philipp had laughed for the first time in months but it looked like he hadn't held back at all, using his most deadly combination of skills and getting piercing her core out of all places. The explosion would be devastating and it certainly had been.

Anybody else, himself included would've collapsed from that one very much dead but he refused to believe this one would go so easily, not after his white flame had done little more than reduce her waistline to an impossible standard for a little while. Still, Philipp's combination of curse, bleed and corrosion enchantments were certainly nasty. Something that got their team the upper hand in many an encounter.

Sadly against hordes of demons it hadn't exactly been very useful. The woman sank to one knee, her eyes going a little cloudy for a second before they refocused on the hunter. She held her guts in while blood continued to pour out of her like from a shattered bottle of wine. *Does she even have any blood left?* The question didn't really matter. Viper knew that with a healer, the actual amount of blood wouldn't matter much. It mattered for staying conscious usually but that didn't seem to bother the woman much.

Her shattered core reformed bit by bit, pieces of shrapnel falling to the ground as her wounds closed. A minute passed in silence, the people watching from their seats fascinated by the scene just as much as the two Shadows standing in the arena itself. More surprising than her quick

recovery from such an attack was the sudden appearance of two rogues, brandishing their daggers after they had teleported from their seats in the stands.

Viper hadn't categorized them to be a danger to him or Philipp but with the woman in such a state he wasn't so sure about her. His magic surged as he aimed at the two only to find them slashing at air alone.

"Don't." The woman said, standing ten meters to the right, blood still dripping to the ground as her body slowly recovered. "Sorry about your arrow." She said and spit out a piece of shrapnel. The rogues looked at her in disbelief before she appeared in front of one of them, her arm lashing out and punching one of them in his throat. The other one vanished and appeared in the stands, the woman appearing next to him and grabbing his arm. The crack of a broken bone couldn't be misheard before she tossed the man down into the arena, walking down the stairs slowly as her wounds continued to heal.

Viper stopped channeling his mana and watched the scene unfold. They had tried to kill her in her most vulnerable moment and had failed spectacularly. To think another Shadow wouldn't intervene when they tried to kill one of theirs was idiocy but he supposed attacking her in the first place was just the same. The woman could recover from his and Philipp's most powerful attacks, how exactly had they thought this was possible?

"Are you alright?" He asked as he walked towards the woman.

"Yes. Thanks for the help." The woman said and winked at him.

*She saw me. Another form of perception?* He asked himself. A formidable warrior indeed. He was starting to doubt if he would win a fight against her or if he could even get away. She wouldn't let an arrow hit her were they going at it for real.

"We don't let Shadow's die without a fight." He said as the woman stepped on the injured rogue's leg, the man crying out in pain as his shin was shattered.

Viper watched the woman check on the first rogue, finding him unconscious.

“Why would they attack me?” She asked confused.

“I’m sure you’ve made enemies along the way?” Viper asked before he checked on Philipp. The man was looking away but he hadn’t left the arena entirely. *Not the best start to his recovery... well he had laughed for fuck’s sake.*

“Oh yes, certainly. It’s just weird for them to send assassins this weak.” She replied. “Wait, could it be them again?”

“Them who?” Viper asked, the woman mostly talking to herself.

“Ah forget about it. Hey, who are you working for?” She asked the crying rogue with two broken bones.

“I might not kill you if you talk.” She said again, holding the man up by his neck and looking into his eyes. Viper noted that her body was back to normal, nothing other than her ripped clothing and ruined leather armor indicated that she had been injured at all.

“Baralia...,” The man said and Viper watched her face change to confusion.

“What?” She asked and looked at Viper.

“The kingdom of Baralia, the ones starting the war with the Empire.” He said and she looked back at the rogue.

“I know who they are, I fought them in Virilya. But why? Why me?” Ilea asked.

“You were in...,” He moaned in pain. “...injured... they pay for dead Shadows and imperials.”

“Talkative fellow. None of my enemies then.” The woman said and let go of the man. “Stupid to assume I was injured.” She said and shook her head.

“You lost more than half of your blood and your body was blown apart.” Viper said dryly.

“True. Still stupid.” She said and he agreed. “What should we do with them?” She asked.

“Bring them to the guards I suppose. I don’t think any members of the Hand are seriously threatened by something like this but I’m a little worried about the imperial part. If any cutthroat looking for quick coin is going to kill guards and officers we’re gonna have a problem.” Viper explained and took one of them.

“Can you bring that one to the Shadowguard?” He asked the woman pointing to the unconscious guard.

“I don’t think he’ll wake up for a while. Plus I’ve just found a new training partner.” She said making him sigh.

“Alright, I’ll do the bloody work.” Viper said and grabbed the crying man. “Come on. You’re alive at least.”

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Ilea watched Viper leave with the heavily injured man in tow. “I’m ready for the next hit.” Ilea said to Philipp. “Maybe we can later change to a normal sparring session?” Ilea said. Viper stopped and looked at Philipp but left anyway. Ilea moved the unconscious rogue to the side of the arena. “Hey anybody got some rope with them?”

Someone walked down from the seats and quickly bound the rogue, nodding to her with a bit of a scared smile. *At least nobody else will try this shit today.* Ilea thought. It was of course a dangerous move to expose herself like this, to have her body destroyed while others could take

advantage and attack her. On the other hand it would keep her on her toes. She'd need to be on alert even if half of her body was missing and that was exactly the kind of training she needed. If she wanted to travel through places few or none had been before, she needed to be as ready as she could get.

Yet still, at least she could gain something out of it. "Anybody who's watching it costs a silver per hour as well. Leave if you don't like it." She said which created a chatter immediately. The overarching sentiment seemed to be that it was simply too expensive. Ilea was sure some were willing to pay were she to fight another Shadow but as it stood most of the people watching didn't feel like staying anymore.

The ones who did walked down into the arena and let her know they'd be training their magic as well. "Just take turns with that guy." Ilea said, motioning to Philipp.

"Thanks." He said in a whisper, audible to her only because of the skills he didn't know she possessed. Ilea didn't reply. Perhaps that statement was meant for him more so than it was meant for her.

"Alright hunter, use your next arrow. Might as well not make them explode if you want to reuse them. I'd appreciate it if you still do of course." Ilea said and smiled while he summoned an arrow, aiming at her and loosing it.

This time he shot another one which made the process of healing herself quite a bit more difficult already. It wouldn't be enough to take her out but his destructive capabilities were certainly nothing to scoff at. Ten seconds later two successive explosions rocked through her, ripping through flesh and muscle as her organs were turned to mush and her blood sprayed around her.

Ilea focused on all her skills to keep herself conscious and focused on the man who was preparing another arrow. *Fucker* The thought was sluggish in her brain, everything slowed down due to the heavy blood loss. She activated Veil of Ash and created the element around her, a wall of it forming before her to intercept the arrow.

“Not nearly as helpless as you look.” The man said as he put down his bow with a grin. “If only...,” He started, in a whisper again but didn’t continue.

Ilea healed herself and concentrated on keeping herself conscious, Meditation flowing through her mind and body as she slowly recovered, focusing on rebuilding the important parts first. It seemed that her bones at least were significantly harder to destroy than anything else. The second stage of Body of the First Hunter was the main reason for that.

She could still recover even if her bones were destroyed but it made it easier to build the flesh around the existing skeleton compared to regrowing a new leg for example. *I wonder how my blink ability works with half a body...* She thought and decided to use it with most of her core missing. The result was as expected, Ilea flopping to the ground half a meter to her left before she continued healing herself. Blink still worked, just as it had against the two rogues who had tried to kill the easy prey earlier.

The ash settled a couple minutes later, Ilea standing up with a fresh set of leather armor. “Maybe leave out the explosions for now.” She said and smiled at the man. One of the mages had puked after seeing the spectacle up close. Another one had been splattered by blood and looked white as snow. There were only five of them left. Ilea clapped, trying to get them to focus on her.

She accidentally woke up the rogue to the side of the arena instead. He vanished and reappeared ten meters to his left but still bound, his head smashing on the ground when Ilea appeared above him. “Don’t do that again or I’ll kill you. Alright?” She asked and threw him back to his previous position.

“Two arrows enough? I can do three for a couple minutes before my mana runs out. Ten to fifteen if I meditate.” Philipp said, summoning an arrow.

“Two is difficult already.” Ilea said but nodded. “The rest just attack me with whatever you have. I’ll start defending if I am about to die. If you blow me up without warning I’ll rip off your head Philipp.” She added and pointed at him.



“Yes ma’am.” He said, his eyes now focused and a bit of a grin on his lips. The action seemed to help with whatever he had been dealing with.

Three of the mages started attacking, first hesitantly but then more and more vigorous as they noticed the lack of an impact their attacks were having. It was a good way for them to train their skills just as much as it was a good way for Ilea to train hers. Resistances wouldn’t have the same impact as her class skills but they could make the difference between life and death in a tricky situation.

An arrow was sticking out of each of her arms, trying hard to curse and corrode her from within while each piercing strike from another attack by the mages made her lose a significant amount of blood. The rogue had a shocked expression on his face through the whole training session as he sat completely still and reconsidered his choices in life.

“You’re an element creator?” Philipp asked after a while, his arrows having lost their destructive effect while he regenerated his mana. Ilea nodded, a blast of fire smashing into her face without much of a reaction. The mage that threw it was long past doubting his own abilities as she continued to fire blast after blast. Two of the others had left already, having paid their fees in the silver bucket. A lucrative way to train as much as it was effective.

“I knew a creator once. Old teammate of ours.” He said but left it at that, firing two new arrows her way. The old ones didn’t seem to be working anymore so Ilea ripped them out with junks of flesh, throwing them his way afterwards.

“Do you not feel pain?” He asked, the new arrows taking effect.

“My Pain Tolerance is very high. The healing magic helps, as does Meditation.” Ilea replied without mentioning the second tier and her literal ability to nullify pain should she wish it. At the moment she did. While she thought about leveling her Pain Tolerance even higher, the prospect of feeling that if she didn’t have to wasn’t a pleasant idea. Knowing how little sense it made, made her very curious about a possible third tier of her Pain Tolerance though, if such a thing even existed.

“Know anything about third tier general skills?” She asked after a while, two of the mages sitting on the ground to recover their stamina and mana.

“I heard you have to be level two hundred to get those.” One of the mages said, looking a little anxious after having talked.

“You’ve been attacking me for an hour, I think you shouldn’t feel bad about talking.” Ilea said and smiled at the man.

“You’re right...,” He said and scratched his head before he laughed.

“I haven’t heard of anybody with one so far. My highest general skill is at the second tier and level ten.” Philipp said.

“Which one?” Ilea asked immediately.

“Meditation of course. What else even is there other than resistance skills?” He replied.

“Identify for example.” Ilea said. “I even have an archery skill.”

The man laughed at that. “Archery? You don’t have a class for that though do you? Why invest all that time then?”

“Seemed fun to me.” Ilea said and summoned her heavy bow.

“Ah yes, that makes sense I suppose.” The man said and shook his head.

“Speaking of, I need more arrows. Used them all up.” Ilea said and looked at her bow before she stored it again in her necklace. She only had alloy arrows and ice arrows remaining.

“I’m an enchanter if you want help.” Philipp said and summoned some arrows.

“Really? That would be terrific. Explosion ones would be good but if you can give them all the things yours have...,” Ilea said but he shook his head already.

“Everything is linked to my own abilities. Even the explosion will be less powerful than the one my arrows create. Perks of my enchanter class.” He said. “Plus I don’t have arrows for a bow that big.”

Ilea summoned twenty of her arrows and threw them his way. “Use those.” She said and smiled. “Between attacking me. Might be good to level other skills as well.”

He smiled and grabbed some of the arrows before he sat down and started carving into them with a small sparkly knife. “That would take a while.” He said.

“I’ll be here again tomorrow.” Ilea said which seemed to satisfy the man.

“Good, I think I might visit again. I’ve already gained a level for my corrosion enchantment.” He said.

Viper came back after a while to get the second rogue, checking in on Philipp and her before he was on his way again. His mood seemed very gloomy. Likely because of the implication these two had exposed. Ilea didn’t think she was the first and only one to be targeted. If Baralia used money to destabilize the empire like this, with all the refugees and opportunists, it would give them good results, that was sure. Right now though she didn’t want to care too much. As long as they didn’t pay well enough to persuade Shadows to attack their own or citizens of the empire it wouldn’t affect her or the people she cared about much.

Ilea was here to train, she wasn’t about to get involved in another revenge adventure or murder spree. At least for now. Midnight soon came and she stopped the people attacking, summoning her Veil of Ash making the mages’ attacks wholly ineffective before she ripped out the arrows and healed the wounds, handing the enchanted weapons back to the hunter. Viper didn’t return anymore after leaving with the rogue but she didn’t assume anything bad had happened.

“You going to be alright?” She asked Philipp and he nodded.

“Don’t you worry about me, we don’t even know each other.” He said and smiled.

“My name is Ilea, it’s nice to make your acquaintance then, Philipp.” She said and offered her hand. He looked at it a little confused but then grabbed it. The gesture wasn’t a complicated one, even people who had never seen or used it grasped the concept quickly.

*Making Elos into an unsanitary place one person at a time.* Ilea joked to herself. “Feel free to join again tomorrow.” She said and went to get her bucket. “Thanks for coming everyone.” She added a little louder to the other mages who prepared to leave as well. Two had remained until midnight.

She counted the money and put it into her necklace. Fifty six silvers. According to what Dale had told her a healer got less than a couple silvers for a day’s work. Then again Riverwatch was somewhat small and she was below level fifty then. With that she was sitting at 32 gold coins, 14 silver and 62 copper. Not quite the spending power she had before investing into Claire and the city but it would pay out in time, she was sure. It certainly was enough to buy whatever she needed. And what she needed right now was a drink and some food.

# Chapter 214 A Winter Night

## Chapter 214 A Winter Night

The night was rather bright, the moons illuminating the still busy city when Ilea walked out of the arena complex in the second circle of Ravenhall. The construction noises weren't audible anymore but there were shouts here and there, most of them coming from more than a little intoxicated individuals. Checking the gains for the evening, Ilea was rather happy.

*'ding' 'Wind Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Crystal Resistance reaches lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'You have learned the General Skill: Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 1'*

*'A rare gift similar to poisons having an effect with dangerous results. Your blood was tampered with through magic but you have survived, making it harder for the next attempt by your enemy.'*

It was a sign for what was to come in the next weeks. Without a sudden invasion of demons or Baralia marching this far south to take the city, she might actually enjoy her stay for once. Ilea could've easily trained through the night but she wanted to do some other things than getting blasted with magic as well. Maybe work on her ashen manipulation or simple getting some air while flying over the mountains.

*Could also go home and read for a while.* She thought, being so close to her house again. In the end she decided against it, walking through the streets of Ravenhall instead. Her remaining leather armor was pretty fucked up and she'd have to get new ones the next day. Other than a bunch of holes near her stomach area, it at least still covered her up.

*Maybe Philipp can help me with an explosion enchantment.* Ilea thought as she turned a corner, going through the gate leading to the outermost circle of the city. Claire would likely be the better bet but considering how busy the woman was Ilea considered to at least ask the man first. He had taken the arrows with him and if he came back the next day she might just ask him about a last ditch grenade.

Ilea followed the noises and soon came up on a big open square close to the city walls. A fire was lit in the middle of it, refugees residing near it in the cool spring night. Some of them were talking or cooking while most simply slept. Guards from the city and the Shadow's Hand were distributing blankets and even food. It looked like a collecting point for the people arriving even now. The magical lights distributed among the square illuminated the newly built or reopened stores at the sides of it. Their light was less warm than the fire burning at the center.

Laughter and yelling could be heard from the two or three inns in the square, people drinking and celebrating while others arrived, fleeing from the horrors of war. The overarching air wasn't gloomy at all Ilea found, the people awake talking excitedly about new opportunities while they encouraged the ones in a more downtrodden mood. Perhaps they would find their optimism repaid. With what Ilea had seen in this world, the chances of that sadly looked slim.

When a monster could breach city walls or another kingdom could attack at any moment, a helpless civilian wouldn't be much more than collateral damage. Claire and the others would work their asses off to prevent something like that but in the end, Ilea knew that to protect them, each and every one of them would have to grow in strength. To protect themselves and their families, or to become strong enough to escape a catastrophe like the elder's demon summoning.

Many of them likely knew that and as she listened in on the conversations between the guards and newcomers, many of them talked about becoming adventurers, guards, soldiers or even aspired to join the Shadow's Hand. It was a good thing Ilea supposed, for humanity as a whole. The leisure and comfort she had experienced on Earth was mostly due to them being the highest on the food chain. Even then, many of her comforts were resting on the suffering of less fortunate humans far away. A reality that she often ignored.

Here, every soul sitting on this cold square in a city they've likely never been before, each one had the power and opportunity to rise above their predestined fate. *And many of them will.* The thought was encouraging to her. Something positive to think about in all the chaos and loss she had experienced in the past months. All the death she had caused. It certainly had changed her but perhaps there was still a small part of her idealism left deep within. As unrealistic it may be, she herself had proven that it was possible.

Albeit with enough luck to gain such a powerful class, her knowledge of fighting and her love for it. Still, if one wanted to join the guard or become an adventurer, training would likely be provided. With a basic education and a sword or magic in hand, a lot was possible. Ilea reached the wall and listened to the commotion near the gate. A group of refugees had stumbled inside, fear in their eyes as the guards tried to stop them.

"What's going on, talk!" An imperial guard said while holding a man in his mid twenties.

"The road... spirits... they kill everyone is frozen...," The man stammered out and the guard nodded.

“Spirits of Winter.” He confirmed and Ilea thought back on her monster education classes. They were beasts appearing around the start of spring, bringing back the cold wherever they resided. More often they would appear near mountains, sometimes keeping a village or a lake frozen and covered in snow for months into spring and even summer before they vanished again. A seasonal anomaly and one quite deadly. They usually ranged from levels at around 150 to unknown heights.

It’s advised to leave them alone until they go but it seems one or more of them had chosen the road to Ravenhall as their place of residence.

“We will request a strike team to go out and destroy it. Send out a scout around the area and advise the refugees to take a detour. Where exactly is the spirit?” The guard asked, shouting orders to some of the men and women around him before he focused on the survivor again.

“I ran for two hours to get here... we were two days off from Morhill. It suddenly got awfully cold, we thought it was just the mountain at first but then the first babe stopped crying and soon some of our group stopped moving, frozen in their tracks.” The man stammered out as Ilea approached.

“I’ll have a look.” She said, getting their attention. The guard looked confused but when he saw the black leather armor he nodded.

“There is no reward we can offer Shadow.” He said to her but Ilea had already vanished, appearing outside of the city before her wings spread, taking her along the road to Morhill. Her armor was replaced a moment later by her Ashen Hunter set, already too far away for any of the guards to see.

*The hunt is its own reward.* She thought, smiling at how cheesy the line sounded. A little disappointed she hadn’t come up with it when the guard was still there to hear it. Her skills all activated, she reached the first frozen corpses in a matter of minutes. Some were still moving, albeit barely.

Ilea appeared next to one of them, checking on their body with her healing ability before she worked on recovering their health. The sound of metal hitting something made her jerk around. She couldn’t see anything in the



snowstorm that suddenly surrounded her. The cold was barely noticeable to her but the visible breath before her mouth told her enough. She used Embered Body Heat to cool her body down as much as she could. A spirit of winter would likely see heat in some way.

The person before her stirred but as soon as she stopped healing, their health started to drop again slowly. *I have to get rid of the source.* The thought pushed her forward and she ignored the dying people around her for now, following the sound of fighting.

The cold started to become stronger, the surface of her armor starting to freeze over, ice cracking with each step she took but Ilea kept her body cold. Soon she could make something out through her sphere. The whirling snow and ice around her made it impossible for her to see further than a couple meters with her eyes alone but she recognized the man immediately. It was the tank she had evaluated earlier that day. *Bat something, Bataar?* She asked herself when she realized that he was crouching over the woman he had arrived with. Her eyes were cold and her body was frozen over. Metal again resounded when he was pushed back several meters, a thin gash showing on his shield where something had impacted it.

The man rushed back to the woman and crouched above her again, his healing skill doubtlessly trying to keep her alive. *This thing took her out and has enough force to damage his shield...*, Those facts made her apprehensive but so far nothing had attacked her. Ilea moved around the man, trying to find something through her sphere when she started to create ash around her, forming it into a person of ash. Using her manipulation skill, she made the ash move in a realistic manner, away from her for another five meters until her control started to lessen. Trying to heat the ash with her Embered Body Heat proved difficult but upon forming a thin ashen connection with the projection, she found it much easier.

It heated up immediately and was disturbed just as quickly when a wave of cold air pushed it aside, Ilea reforming the thing again right after. Again a wave of cold destroyed her ashen creation but she didn't relent. This time swords of ice rushed through the ash, leaving it mostly intact before she finally saw it in her sphere. A misty form looking similar to a man but over two meters tall, its limbs unnaturally long ending in spiked hands. It moved

through the storm of ice nearly as fast as her highest flying speed. And then the control over her ash vanished, only frozen particles of it remaining where the creature stood.

*[Spirit of Winter – lvl ??]*

It was above her level then but not yet three question marks. *At least I'm not hopelessly outclassed. Let's be honest, I'd engage it one way or the other.* A smile crept up on her lips as she stood unmoving in the cold, the storm raging around her, her body close to the same temperature. The creature turned and looked towards the other Shadow but didn't seem to see her at all.

It moved quickly again, closing in on the defending man before it reached out to him. He stood and held up his shield as the ice spread into it. The man screamed in defiance while Ilea used her blink to get right behind the creature, spreading ash around herself and the monster. Right before the cold broke through Bataar's shield, she enveloped the spirit with ash and smashed her fists into its back, finding little purchase but some cracking ice. A moment later her reversed healing spread into the creature and the ash heated up as much as she could make it, her Veil protecting her against the ice while more and more ash appeared around the monster, replacing the frozen particles still sticking to it, giving it a more visible form to the eye.

Finding a grip with her left hand, Ilea started punching with her right one, each hit spreading the fire of her Wave of Ember through the creature while her left one continued sending destructive mana into it. The damage she herself sustained was continuously healed through her recovery. The spirit tried to turn around, lashing out behind it with its massive clawed arms but its attacks glanced off her Veil, the ones managing to pierce sprang off her armor, leaving behind spreading ice that was soon melting from her heated body and boiling blood within, her Veil just as hot as the ash that slowly ate into the icy monster.

Its struggles became more and more desperate and wild, one of its arms slamming backwards and getting a clean hit in on the Veil around her head. Ilea was slammed to the side but held on to her grip to its bone or whatever she had managed to grab onto. Another hit sent her flying before she could

stabilize in the cold. She quickly created heated ash all around her while cooling her body down again, blinking out of the way of the incoming tide of cold air, swords and spikes of ice slashing through the ash.

A loud howl resounded when the beast started slashing all around itself, hitting the warrior's shield who had managed to get the woman behind him again while he had retreated a couple steps. Ilea formed ash around her and slowly moved it closer to the beast before she blinked behind it, trying to grab the same spot as before while the ash enveloped it. This time she held onto it with both hands and simply focused on not losing her grip anymore while she pumped mana into it.

Her healing spell told her that her attack was having an effect, albeit a somewhat small one. If she could keep it up for a while, she could kill the thing. The storm of ice started to condense around the two of them, splinters and swords of magically frozen water slammed into her Veil and armor but it was a chaotic attack, one of a beast in panic while she focused purely on keeping her Veil functioning while more and more destructive mana damaged and broke down the monster's body.

Ilea tried to focus on the core she felt in the beast but her mana struggled to get where it needed to be, her healing much more refined than the reversed alternative, the enemy body and its flow of mana fighting hard at repulsing its invasive counterpart. Ilea continued forming fake bodies of heated ash around the monster to get its attention away from her and found the tactic worked wonders, the storm of swords and ice focusing on the apparitions instead of the real Ilea clinging to its back.

She was right assuming its perception was tied to heat somehow. Information she'd gladly share with Dagon to add to any monster encyclopedia should she survive the encounter. The smile on her face didn't leave. She hadn't even come close to dying yet, this was a fight as easy as they came.

Ten minutes turned into twenty and soon Ilea's mana was getting lower and lower. Ilea could leave and recover but she had invested too much into this fight to leave her prey a chance at escape or recovery. Everyone else around her would likely die as well. Her own health would come first but she had

some time left before she would get into any danger and the feeling she got from her healing spell was that the monster was close to death, or whatever it was that was going to happen to it.

As its struggles became weaker, Ilea started to use one of her arms again to deliver wave of ember into the creature, its slowing movements allowing her to use Meditation in turn, saving her from the choice of leaving and returning to finish the job or find no monster anymore to begin with. It had lost and she had prevailed. Her high Mana and recovery had proven a barrier too high for the spirit to overcome.

Another minute passed before the beast turned, having stopped its attacks it moved through the mist of ice and upwards to the closest mountain. Ilea was dragged with it and held on, continuing her assault as its speed slowed more and more. Bataar had the freedom and ability to take care of the other Shadow including all the refugees that still lived. Ilea would join him as soon as she was done but risking the monster's recovery and return was the worse choice in the long run. Plus Ilea couldn't deny that she wanted the kill.

The spirit dragged her upwards on the mountain side, stone scratching on her veil as her body was smashed against the cliff side again and again while the magical beast climbed upwards to the colder altitudes with all it had left. A deathly struggle it would lose. She knew it and the beast would too, soon enough. Five minutes later they came out high above the valley, the snow lying high, undisturbed by travelers, the winds smashing into them with unrelenting force. Something Ilea noted but something that didn't impact her strengthened body in the least. Her Ice Resistance coupled with her Veil, her high Vitality and all her body enhancement skills made the spirit of winter coupled with the storm of ice around her into a cool autumn breeze.

And then the beast died, Ilea's hands gripping nothing as she clamped her fingers together and released them again, the winds taking away the frozen particles around her as it suddenly grew warmer, the ice on her armor cracking as she moved her body.

# Chapter 215 Of Ash and Ember

## Chapter 215 Of Ash and Ember

Healing the minor damages she had sustained from the ascent, she looked around as her smile vanished. Three creatures of the same form as the one that had just vanished exited from an opening in the cold stone, their unfeeling forms looking around as they tried to find their fallen kin.

Ilea's ash spread around her, her body cooling as ice reformed on her armor and the very stone she stood on, the air growing still as their magic took hold of the environment around them. Silently, she checked the messages in her mind and thought about how to proceed.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Spirit of Winter – lvl 312] – For killing an enemy eighty levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*There it is...* The thought made her focus on her ashen class' third tier advancements and her grin returned as she looked at the possibilities.

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

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:***

***3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points available [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1***

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]:***

- Ash Creation**
- Ash and Ember Manipulation**

She had to make a quick decision. Either didn't seem that amazing and while she was annoyed that none of her more directly damaging skills had the third tier available, she was at least somewhat content that Ash and Ember Manipulation had popped up, a skill she had previously not been able to advance to the third tier. Either could give her a damage increase but it was a gamble as no further information was available. So Ilea gambled.

***'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation advances to the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier'***

***Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3rd lvl 1:***

***Your control over Ash and Ember increases dramatically. Bend it to your wishes and shroud the path before you.***

***2nd stage: Ash and Ember have become your ally. Your control increases greatly.***

***3rd stage: You have proven to be a master of ash and ember. The elements themselves become an extension of your body, an extension of your will, for as long as they stay in physical contact with you.***

***Category: Ashen magic***

Ilea barely read through the skill when the still air turned into a whirlwind of ice. Her eyes opened wide when the first blades of ice shattered against the ash around her. Not the Veil of Ash that clung to her body but the loose ash that hung around her while the apparitions further away were shredded and frozen by the assault.

She was pushed back a step when the spirits howled, the ice on the surface of the cliff cracking, the splinters floating in the air as if moved by telekinesis before they joined the maelstrom of frozen swords and stones around her. *Trust your skills.* Ilea remembered Dale's words and closed her eyes, her sight utterly useless in the growing storm as her Sphere told her exactly where she was and where the spirits were.

She was too close to the edge of the cliff. While she could fly, she preferred hard ground and blinked into the very midst of the magical creatures that threatened her and the people on their way to Ravenhall. Her smile widened when she found the ash around her had come with her, moved by the teleportation skill as if it was her very own self. Adding more ash to her own whirlwind of elements that fought against the icy storm around her, she found the ash easier to move while it felt more substantial to her mind. She didn't know what exactly that meant before three tendrils of ash broke through the icy around her, punching into the creatures like swords, releasing Wave of Ember before her reversed healing spell sent destructive mana into them through the connections.

They howled in pain as her ash heated up, her mana recovering constantly due to her stationary position and her Meditation skill while she pushed as much of it into the creatures as she could. The spirits moved their element to attack the ash connected to them but found it troublesome to sever the connections, their blades glancing off the ash as if it was solid, the cuts that formed recovering through Ilea's healing in turn, helped by ash creation to rebuild it right before more of the enemy spells hit.

Two of the spirits destroyed the ash and started focusing on her but while the ash she used to attack them was heated, she herself was not. Many of the magical ice beams and bigger swords failed to hit their target but what

they lacked in perception and tactics, they packed doubly in attack power. A shard of ice as big as Ilea herself smashed into the ash around her, digging through the element as it slowed down until it was stopped completely by the veil clinging close to her, expanding to block the ice before it reached her armor.

The properties of her ash had changed without a doubt but while Ilea's instincts taught her about the new possibilities with her skills, she had three elemental creatures of ice trying to get the best of her. Another ice shard nearly made it to her armor while she tried extending ashen tendrils to the two spirits that had managed to sever the connections. Her ash fought its way through the storm, rebuilding again and again while the magic shredded off layer after layer. Ilea activated her second stage Pain Tolerance, finding the feeling more than a little unpleasant.

To her relief, the feeling subsided letting her focus on the task at hand, or as she thought. *The task at ash.* She giggled, a beam of ice and magic digging into her defenses before it sent her stumbling backwards. A second one followed while she focused the ash before her into a shield like form, pushed back again by the raw power of her foes.

The first tendril was still connected and Ilea decided to focus on that one spirit when her other tendrils were cut short time and time again by the magic around her. The lack of movement allowed her to meditate while she pumped the recovered mana straight back into the creature, rebuilding the ash around her in turn. Her cooled down body made for a hard target, Ilea sending off parts of the created ash towards the beasts, keeping a thin connection to herself before she heated up the part and watched them throw all their might at the apparition until there was nothing left of it.

While her ash froze to its last atoms when she had faced the first and single spirit of winter, this time it took them considerably longer to destroy her decoys, the time allowing her to whittle down one of them. Their approach didn't seem to change as time went on, their rage only increasing as they wailed and howled in pain and fury. The sheer magical prowess of them pushed her around, some of the blades and shards cutting through all her defenses before they shattered against her armor, her body squashed below by the tremendous power and weight before she could heal it again.



Embered Body Heat allowed her to stand still, all the hits coming her way random strays in the destructive environment the three elemental creatures had created. She made out a shout from a new voice before a beam of red cut through the cold, arcane magic pulsing before it burnt into one of the creatures, its body pushed backwards as the ice and stone cracked below. Ilea could make out a floating red dot in the distance before another three beams hit the wailing creature, its corporeal body standing in defiance against the newcomer clearly visible to it before it channeled its mana into an icy beam towards the flying enemy.

All three of them focused on the mage immediately, Ilea not squandering the opportunity as she blinked to the one she had been working on, enveloping it entirely in ash before she heated all of it up, small tendrils hitting the beast as each of them released Wave of Ember, building up the second stage of internal fire with frightening speed, the spirit glowing quickly from within while Ilea punched it to add Destruction. Her connected tendril of ash never stopped releasing reversed healing into it and now that their attention wasn't on her, she could fully focus on attacking.

The beast quickly noticed her of course, now that the heat around it was obvious but that didn't change its fate as Ilea released a third of her mana faster than she ever had, consecutive executions of Wave of Ember coupled with all her other skills burnt down its health in a quick manner, the heat around it and building from within its barely graspable body reduced the effect of any magic coming its way while its brethren were focused on the arcane mage using up at least as much mana as Ilea in their unstoppable assault. She had a good idea who it was and understood the rage completely.

The spirit before her dissolved into nothing, making one of the others turn her way but Ilea was faster, blinking behind it and continuing with the next one in the same manner. A sudden beam of magic freezing the ash around her and sending both her and the spirit through the snowy cliff made her spin in the air before she smashed into stone, her veil taking the brunt of the force as the stone broke and splintered from the force of the impact. The second remaining spirit had apparently looked her way as well.

Ilea coughed up blood as she healed the internal injuries. She checked her surroundings before she ripped herself out of the stone prison around her, ash forming immediately as she cooled down her body again. The spirit she had fought was getting up as well, the creature of course barely impacted by its kin's attack as it looked around to find its enemy. A ball of fire exploded near the monster making it howl and turn to find the source. Ilea looked as well and found a group of barely visible people sending all sorts of magic their way. Ilea's ash split into several tendrils before they rushed towards the creature, each ending with an impact and Wave of Ember before she added reversed healing and all the heat she could summon into the element.

Ice swords were sent towards the flying attackers but the spirit quickly turned to face Ilea again as she stopped cooling down her body. The magical power of the fireball had been considerably lower than the arcane beams distracting the spirits at first, letting her know enough about the people coming to help them. A shard of ice flew her way and she stepped to the right, twirling as it rushed past her, cutting into the mountainside with a loud noise.

The tendrils of ash rushed out, two of them destroyed on the way before they impacted the spirit and sent another set of spells into it while Ilea slowly advanced, her meditation recovering a big part of what she had just spent on the attack. More spells came flying from above, impacting the raging beast as its health lowered under the assault. It sent out a group of flying swords of ice to all attackers before it stopped its focus and started moving towards the mountain.

Contrary to Ilea, the spirit didn't have any teleportation skills nor quick flight or movements making it an easy target for the first hunter who blinked next to it and enveloped it in ash, grabbing into the beast and using all her strength and ash to stop its movements while her destructive spells quickly brought it to its end. The ranged supporters didn't continue their attacks in fear of hitting her instead but when the ash lifted and the tendrils moved around her in the air, there was nothing left of the spirit of winter.

Ilea's wings spread before she jumped off, blinking towards the last remaining enemy as her speed increased, the cold winds pushing against her

ash and armor. All she found was burnt and glassy ground, the arcane mage flying over where she assumed the spirit had found its end.

The woman turned her head and her red eyes met Ilea's before she nodded approvingly. "You did not show that kind of power in our sparring." She said with a frown.

"I just learned it." Ilea said, feeling the ash around her and smiling at the newfound power. She had gambled between two skills and it had paid off. Perhaps she could've waited until she unlocked something like Form of Ash and Ember for a third tier advancement but at this point she doubted it would've had an effect even close to what she got.

*Sometimes the impulsive approach is still the most rewarding.* She thought. In the end she knew that planning was the better way to go but little accidents happen and sometimes, they weren't all that bad. *Thank you kind afro painter man.* She thought and looked up, nodding towards the sky.

"So you did not mock us? And you would have me believe that?" Gan said as she landed.

"I don't care mate." Ilea said and jumped off the cliff, flying straight towards the area where the initial attack had happened. There where at least four people moving, one of them being the tank healer that had protected the Gan. He was kneeling over a young girl's body when Ilea landed.

"Anybody still alive, I can heal." She said and he immediately pointed at two frozen people, Ilea blinking to the latter of the two and checking them with her magic. His heart was barely active but a focused channel of healing mana helped the man out as his body immediately strengthened. She spread her ash in the surroundings and heated it up a little to heighten the still near freezing temperatures to help the survivors recover quicker.

One healer from the city guard was there as well, the woman looking at the spreading ash in awe while she channeled her magic into four people simultaneously. Ilea touched two more people with tendrils of ash and send her healing mana their way but found it hard to focus it on specific parts of their bodies. Still, it would likely save their lives as her healing still helped

stabilize them while she focused primarily on the man before her. It would take practice and experience to use her ash efficiently in such a manner but Ilea was sure she'd find a way.

The healer was done a minute later, moving over towards Ilea and focusing her magic on the people the hunter was already working on. She was at level one twenty but Ilea felt how the people around her recovered, their frozen flesh and stopped organs finding their life again when the mage's spells touched them. The woman breathed heavily as the sweat on her brow joined the frozen water in her eyebrows. The people they healed started coughing, one of them sinking to his knees when their health reached a reasonable height.

“There are more, come.” The healer said to Ilea and walked past her. Ilea blinked further down the valley and checked the ice and snow for corpses and possible survivors as she continued heating up the surroundings with the bed of ash that covered an over ten meter radius around her. Her sphere let her see the people and her blink let her reach them before her healing skill checked on any vital signs. Many of them were dead but she called out to the healer whenever she found someone still alive, trusting in the woman's ability to get them back to life as she continued looking for more, outclassing the healer in that skill.

They found twelve more people still alive, twice that dead. “What's your name?” Ilea asked the woman when they finished healing the last of the victims but didn't get a response. The healer's eyes were glassy and she poured her mana into the little boy before she fell forwards. Ilea caught her and divided her healing to both of them. The woman wasn't injured but Ilea knew her spell had a pleasant effect anyway. She looked at the woman with a serious expression before she helped up the young boy, patting away the snow on his head as he looked around, starting to cry right after.

“It's alright. Come, you're safe now.” Ilea said, grabbing his arm and moving him away from the frozen corpses she could only hope weren't related to him. Bataar joined them and looked around.

“All of them?” He asked and she nodded in response, the man looking at the boy before turning his gaze to the bulges in the snow around them.

“Back to the city.” He added, his expression unreadable under his helmet.

The squad of flying guards joined them a minute later, as did Gan. Their armor told Ilea they were likely the strike team the imperial guard had called for when the spirit was reported about an hour earlier. They all nodded towards them respectfully, helping the survivors move towards Ravenhall, some of them still digging in the snow and ice as they cried out or cried in silence. Ilea focused on her meditation skill. There was nothing she could do, not anymore.

“She lied to us Bataar. The bitch could have defeated you easily.” Gan said when she joined them, smiling towards Ilea.

“This woman saved my life, as did she save yours.” The man said after a couple seconds of consideration, making her frown and roll her eyes. She did however not insult her any further. Ilea didn't feel like acknowledging the remarks and simply carried the healer while holding the crying boy's arm. She wouldn't forget it either.

# Chapter 216 Ashen Considerations

## Chapter 216 Ashen Considerations

“Two of them? That’s insane... there is a dungeon in the vicinity but to think spirits of winter came out of there. We’ll have to check with the Guild and the Hand, their records might clear it up.” The guard captain said upon their return, hearing the short report from one of the flying mages who had supported Ilea previously.

“There were four spirits actually.” Ilea said, still carrying the healer and holding on to the boy.

“F... four of them... do you know their levels and were they destroyed?” The captain asked, moving over to her immediately.

“Oran! Where did you c...,” A woman shouted as she walked briskly towards Ilea and the guards, stopping in her tracks when she noticed the woman in her black armor. “I didn’t...,” She started but Ilea touched the boy’s back and moved him a little closer to her.

“Do you know him?” She asked as the woman tried to avoid looking at her.

“I traveled with his father and older brother... they?” The woman asked and looked up as she wrung her hands together. Ilea just looked at her without saying anything. “I... understand.”

“Can you take care of him?” Ilea asked and watched her reaction. Tears came close to the woman’s eyes but she nodded quickly.

“Of course. My sisters and I will take care of him. Oran come, say goodbye to the nice lady.” The woman said and approached the boy, taking his hand before he waved towards Ilea, his eyes still puffy as he sobbed once. He would understand in time, Ilea was sure. She had no knowledge in psychology but an event like this, with the boy being maybe seven, eight years old? She didn’t let it get to her, instead focusing on the fact that she had saved several people’s lives today. Lives that were now full of opportunities. She just hoped that some of them would welcome that fate.

The guard waited patiently for her to finish with her business but Ilea wasn’t quite done. Checking her messages, she quickly found out what the guard had wanted to know.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Spirit of Winter – lvl 341] – For killing an enemy one hundred and ten levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Spirit of Winter – lvl 330] – For killing an enemy one hundred levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Spirit of Winter – lvl 327] – For killing an enemy ninety levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 230 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 224 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16’*

*'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

“Between three twelve and three forty one. All destroyed. You mentioned a dungeon?” Ilea asked after she had answered the man.

“I’m glad you were there then...,” The man said and scratched the back of his head, moving his hand back down after hitting his helmet.

“We will conquer the dungeon.” Gan said after she and Bataar had entered the city walls as well. “After this lazy one recovered.” She said and laughed, hitting Bataar who didn’t react in the slightest.

“Have to prepare, buy tools and hire a team.” He said, the man’s voice a murmur.

“Good luck with that, just don’t get as close as you did the first time.” Ilea said.

“I can handle myself.” Gan said, raising her eyebrows and staring at her.

Ilea just looked at her for a while before she smiled “This is not a challenge mage, you were about to die were it not for Bataar and me.”

The mage’s eyes turned into daggers but Bataar interrupted her before she started talking, holding out his hand before her.

“Gan, leave. You are embarrassing our tribe.” He said. The woman stared at him with an open mouth but then bowed lightly and left, Ilea lifting her eyebrow at the behavior.

“I apologize for her. She is young, battle hungry and inexperienced. One to be nurtured and taught. She will learn in time. May I ask for you to leave the dungeon to us? It would be good for her to struggle against an enemy, learn about necessary preparations and to regret her behavior towards you. I will pay you for the loss of the opportunity.” He said.



“Her actions are hers alone. I won’t kill her if that’s what you’re worried about, not if she’s just an idiot. I won’t promise anything but this is a start. Finish your preparations quickly, perhaps that will make it a little more dangerous.” Ilea said, taking the pouch of coins he handed to her with her free hand. She respected the man for how he had treated the survivors and her in the whole situation, enough to at least consider his offer.

“I thank you for the consideration. You have my respect Ilea of the Hand and we are in your debt.” He said and bowed deeply before he left without another word.

Ilea watched his back for a little while before she turned to the guard again “This one yours?” She asked, looking at the healer she still held, the woman was alright but still knocked out. The pouch of thirty silver coins was put into her necklace behind her back.

“Indeed. Marvelous healer that one. You saved her too?” The captain asked.

“Nothing of the like. She saved several people herself. What’s her name?” Ilea asked.

“Dany, joined the guard a week ago actually.” He explained.

“Dany... Thanks for letting me know. Take care of her, she’s a good one.” Ilea said and handed her to the man.

“We know that already, saved several of our own in this week alone. Healers are always welcome.” He said and nodded towards her. “Thank you again for your help Shadow.”

Ilea nodded and turned away, thinking about testing her newfound third tier ability in Viscera. Looking up at the bright and visible stars, she changed her mind and walked back out of the city. The guards nodded towards her, having heard about what she did earlier.

Looking around the area, her wings spread and made her ascend a little before she flew towards the lake and the surrounding forest. The part where she had found Kyrian training his curse magic and where she had played

hide and seek with the team was near completely destroyed still. Snow covered parts of it but it still looked like a storm had gone through. Trees that had been snapped, half of them remaining with a thin layer of snow. They would start to rot soon, when the temperatures would further rise.

Ilea stopped near the field of destruction. One demonic monster had been responsible for all this, one attack had destroyed a big part of the forest, another a part of the city. *If something like that can just randomly pop up, I wonder why not more cities just up and vanish from such an attack.* Even something like the werewolf they had encountered would deal considerable damage in a human settlement. The beast just likely had no interest in doing so, lacking either the intelligence or the instincts to go after a brightly lit city with thousands of people in it.

The elves did it, Ilea knew. They had destroyed many of the western independent cities just a couple months ago. And then they went silent again, as if it had just been a warning. She wasn't particularly interested in the political and environmental reasons the monsters had but there was the question why they had suddenly stopped. The way they talked whenever she encountered one of their race sounded like they thought less of humans than insects. If she thought about it pragmatically then she knew that some insects or critters were important for the ecosystem but if they expanded too much and too fast, they could destroy the living space of other beings.

Still, she had the more conventional idea of the elven protector of the forest and all living beings in her mind. The fact that they slaughtered whole cities undermined that thought considerably. She just didn't want to believe it was without reason. Ilea herself would kill and decimate whole monster populations just to enhance her strength and levels but the beings she hunted didn't speak in her tongue, didn't show intelligence beyond hunt or be hunted. *Perhaps I'll find out in time.* She thought, not going further into the depths of her own morality.

She lifted her hand and watched as a small orb of ash formed in it, created from her own mana as the energy was converted into an element some system, god or the very nature of magic allowed her to control. It was dense and she concentrated on making it even more so while she went through her list of skills. In the fight against the spirits it had been instinct but now she

wanted to know how exactly her ash had changed from the convenient distraction to her enemies it had been before.

Her healing and the reversal of said skill already proved to work, effectively allowing her to now heal and attack from a distance. As well as increasing her targets to more than a single one. It would need some testing to see how far exactly her tendrils of ash could reach. She knew already that the ash had to be connected to her for it all to work, the skill description was clear on that. Still, she would certainly test the limits. Having more than a single target would of course drain her mana quicker as well. So far even with using all her skills, she had found few that could outlast her in battle but if she used several of her magical abilities against several opponents, she might have to invest into Wisdom and Endurance again soon enough.

*Thinking of that, I still have ten stat points I can invest.* She thought and smiled. Following her own advice, she put them into Wisdom, bringing the stat to 425 and an equal of 4250 mana to be at her disposal. Meditation of course was the main reason she could fight for so long, the skill allowing her to recover quickly if only she had a quiet minute or two. A skill that was available to any mage but her added healing skill converted that insane mana recovery into health recovery at the same level. Few she had met so far could match that.

*I should start a school for battle mages, seems like humanity would benefit from a higher popularity of this combination.* Perhaps she had already inspired some but she knew that flashy attack magic would still be the preference, young nobles and talented kids thinking themselves invincible before they were struck down by a monster just like the one responsible for her current surroundings. Ilea sighed. It wasn't her problem. Not really. She had people she cared about now and most of them resided in Ravenhall, the soon to be best defended city of the human empire, likely coming close to what Virilya could spew out.

*Don't jinx it Ilea.* She thought and chuckled before her dense ashen sphere extended around her, the loose ash forming into four, then six and then eight shadowy tendrils that moved around. It felt a little weird to be in control of them. Even with her high skill in manipulation it lacked a natural feel now that she had to have it be connected to her body. *Perhaps...* She

remembered a movie she had watched where a guy tried to harness the power of the sun or something. Ilea just hoped her own tentacles didn't try to take over her mind and manipulate her into nearly destroying a city.

Then again, her Mental Resistance was leveled higher than most. Moving the ashen arms to start at her spine and extend over her arms, shoulders and hips made it feel a little more natural. As if she was a spider or something, just with ashen arms instead of real ones. She wouldn't use them to move either but simply to attack and defend. "Hold up a minute." She said before the ashen limbs moved down to the ground, her mind making them push down as she tried to lift up her body.

To her surprise it actually worked. Not terribly well but she could lift herself up. With her wings and strong body there was little this would add to her mobility but she could already think of some applications. To change directions rapidly in a forest for example or to allow movement when all her real limbs had been cut off, not that such a scenario was desirable. *Let's be honest, it'll happen soon enough, I should train to move with this.*

Ilea removed some of the ash from one of the arms and used her healing skill to fix the missing part. She had used this in the fight before but was a little surprised to find it actually worked. With it being a part of her body, her Hunter Recovery recognized it as such and actually managed to heal it. The mana expenditure for healing or creating the ash anew with her Ash Creation was similar, healing actually being a little more exhaustive. Still, the way she had used it against the ice spirits was a combination of both to allow for faster rebuilding all in all.

The pain she had felt through her ash was something others would certainly see as a major weakness but to her it was an asset. To feel through the ash allowed her to see should her sphere fail somehow, it allowed her to assess an enemy's resilience depending on the impact she felt. Should the pain be too much she could simply disable her perception of it. Healing the flying ash she had removed from the arm didn't do anything, her skill neither sending her any information about the floating ash nor healing it in any way.

Touching the ash, she could immediately feel the mana flow into it, letting her know about its properties and how the element could be healed. *Weird concept, healing ash that I myself created from mana alone.* It reminded Ilea of fantasies of alchemy, creating something out of something else. Something close certainly existed on earth with chemistry but it was either combining or splitting elements to gain something new. Mana in this world proved to be a building kit for literally everything. Like the cheat element and everybody possessed it.

Ilea still didn't know if she was merely trapped in a simulation or if this was real after all. Her instincts told her it was real but then again, she had read some theories on the internet about Earth being in a simulation, the chances of it being rather high actually. Neither back then nor now did she give much credibility to it in her mind. It didn't matter. To her it was reality, both if her mind consisted only of a block of memory in an enormous and incomprehensible computer or if it was an independent biological entity.

She had used mana time and time again and she trusted her abilities to the fullest. Still, the question remained if it was based on a scientific element that could be used, changed and exploited or if it was something spiritual, something in its nature pure and unchangeable, impossible for the mind to understand. The impacts would differ greatly but only time would tell, time and people more capable and intelligent than her. Ilea would explore magic's limits in her own ways. Perhaps she would acquire the heart of some magical beast nobody else could slay and sell it to the scientists that would build this world's first nuclear weaponry.

If she knew humans at all they would likely use it to bomb some other kingdom's capital. She couldn't help but snort at that, the thought funny to her in a morbid way. Ilea sighed and looked up again, thanking whoever brought her to this world that she now had the freedom to chose, to do and say whatever the fuck she wanted without any social constraints or the thought of money. If she had no food, she could just hunt for it, if she lacked the strength to fight someone she could simply acquire it. If she chose to live underwater, she could probably just grow gills. *Damn I wish I had gills.* She thought, remembering the training she had vowed herself to continue. Her drowning escapades with William.

She had tried to use her ashen arms to move herself around the snowy ground while considering her questions, finding it easier and easier with every minute. She had formed entire models of cities with her ash before, moving them in a spider like manner wasn't exactly the hardest task to do. At least if she concentrated on it. Contemplating the reason for this ability, she couldn't find another answer but her State of Azarinth and Form of Ash and Ember. Both skills were body enhancement spells that increased several of her attributes like strength and resilience.

She didn't know if her ash benefited from her stats or if the described strength in her skills was less directly influencing her stat. Either way the ash connected to her definitely felt more powerful, easier to move and as proven by the fight earlier, more resilient by a metaphysical fuck ton. It was a welcome change of course. Considering her Veil benefited from her Ash and Ember manipulation directly, the effect to her defenses was doubled. She would have to consider the placement of her ash more. Perhaps the eight arms out of her back would be sufficient and could be expanded whenever necessary but shields formed around her real arms could be better in the end.

# Chapter 217 Preparation

## Chapter 217 Preparation

*Or just a ton of ash floating around me at all times.* She chuckled, thinking about the reaction from the people in towns, thinking her to be some kind of ash elemental. *Am I not that already? In some fucked up way...* Time would tell how her ash would most efficiently be deployed but for now the eight arms on her back felt the most natural to her. A number she could still manage. Perhaps she would increase it with time and her increasing skill in the element. *Third tier Ash Creation here I come.* The thought made her smile and with the changes this had already brought it would definitely be the first one she'd advance next time she got a skill point.

Azarith Fighting and Ashen Warrior increased the damage dealt with her body. One of her ashen arms lashed out at a nearby tree trunk, smashing into the wood with ease before it retracted back to her. She hadn't tried a similar move before but her projectiles definitely had a little more difficulty destroying a tree. *Is the increased damage dealt only towards other living being's health? Or to objects not categorized with a health bar as well?* Ilea wasn't sure but the effect against the spirits had been clear, her ash hit hard. *Do trees have health bars?*

She identified the trunk but found nothing else than a simple *[Tree]*. No level or health bar. *I bet there's some kind of sorcery to animate them. There has to be.* She smiled at the thought. *Like a tree necromancer or something.* She had tried but couldn't use Destruction on the spirits through her ash as the skill defined a punch or kick to be used. Perhaps if she formed her ash

into a fist it might work. Instead of pondering, she did exactly that and formed a small fist at the end of one of her ashen limb and again assaulted the tree. The skill didn't activate sadly. *Leaves me with a reason to still engage with my own two hands though.* Ilea thought. It would've been annoying to change her whole approach because she had gotten a new skill. Then again, the range of her ashen limbs was somewhat limited anyway.

Using Wave of Ember with the same limb she had just tried her Destruction spell with, the mana left her and a fiery spark entered the tree trunk, igniting it before the snow and cool air around it slowly smothered the flame. The application of the skill was good but what really made a difference against the spirits was the speed at which she could apply it through different ashen limbs. Before, she was limited to how quickly she could punch and while she was still much faster with her own body, she now had eight more arms to send out Wave of Ember, at least doubling if not tripling her damage output with the skill.

Plus, human opponents usually couldn't exactly block ten arms at the same time. One or two, maybe but the reach she now had allowed her to get behind an opponent's shield or get then in a blind spot. Combined with her ability to just explode the ash into their face or spread it around them she'd be even nastier to fight against. She grinned at that but then thought about how she'd measure up to someone like Green, the demon that had nearly killed her. Perhaps she'd be able to take two or three of his punches now before her bones were shattered but it wasn't enough. Not even close. She sighed but was still content with the changes. *Fucking glad I chose this one and didn't have any of the more obvious choices available.*

The third tier of Veil of Ash was a joke compared to Ash and Ember Manipulation but she couldn't have known. Thinking about it, perhaps the same was true about her Azarinth First Hunter skills. The third tier of Blink had already saved her life once and would doubtlessly do so again in the future. It had little impact on her fighting capabilities but the skill alone was criminally good for how early she had gotten it in her leveling. If every level twenty or thirty person had teleportation at their disposal, the world would be a different place. More runes and enchantments to stop them to be sure.



State of Azarinth was good, a staple to her fighting and her survival so far. The third tier had made it permanent and even gave her a little boost should she need it but even that had a much smaller impact compared to her manipulation. Ilea wondered what her Sphere or even her Azarinth Reversal had in store at the third stage. She took in the snow around her and took a deep breath, reminding herself that in time she'd have all her skills in the third tier. Perhaps a class evolution would change them so much that they'd be unrecognizable compared to now. Only time and excessive training and fighting would tell.

*Fighting far off from human wars.* She thought, watching the distant dots closing in on the city. Survivors, refugees, spies and saboteurs mixed in for sure. All looking to join the repopulating mountain refuge and fortress of Ravenhall. Ilea thought about leaving then and there, the winds asking her to join them, to go east or north, south or west, far away from any human populated town to explore the mysteries of the undiscovered and the forgotten. Her wings were already spreading, the ashen arms tucked behind her back before she stopped herself.

Fists at her side, she gnashed her teeth before she relaxed again. She wouldn't die without preparation, that much she owed to Eve, to Kyrian and to Trian. She would gain as many resistances and knowledge in Ravenhall as she could before she would venture out into the unknown. As much as it annoyed her to be stuck inside of a city for even another day. She just hoped no elves, demons or another human kingdom would attack as long as she was there. Ilea didn't feel like getting involved in another conflict completely out of her control.

The ash behind her dissolved as she made her way back to the city. She had a purpose here and she would fulfill that as well as she could before she moved on. Ilea couldn't ignore the vast resources she had here, the network of people willing to help and prepare her for things others doubtlessly had tried before. She would be the one to succeed where others had failed before her.

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“Four more adventurers attacked city guards. One even another Shadow.” A man in black armor said quietly, arms folded behind his back.

Viper sighed and shook his head. “If this continues people will be scared to leave their homes. Any of them still on the loose?” He looked over at Philipp who was scratching something into one of the massive arrows the woman had given him. She seemed to have made an impression judging by the pile of already enchanted arrows on the table.

“None but we believe an associate is still on the run. The city guard didn’t recognize any of the attackers, meaning they got past the security at the gates.” The guard replied.

“That’s not exactly difficult.” Viper said and took one of the enchanted arrows, looking over the beautifully etched runes.

“For a Shadow like yourself perhaps. I would have difficulties staying undiscovered. The Head Administrator and her runes make sure of that.” The shadowguard replied.

*Ah the head administrator. Sounds more like someone took charge of the Shadow’s Hand after the demon fiasco. I might have to meet them after all. The new self imposed elders. I’m not sure if Verena would’ve approved of this.* His opinion on the matter wasn’t important of course. Viper and Philipp had returned with the others when Dagon had called for aid. To destroy the demons that had taken the lives of Katelyn and Robert.

He wasn’t sure how far the conspiracy reached, perhaps all of them were involved. He had known about some disagreements among the elders but to bring them so far to get the whole city wiped out? *Unthinkable*. He sighed, for the tenth time today already. They had come home, destroyed the demons and he had watched as people he barely knew took over the order that had taken him in, had given him a purpose.

“You’re thinking too much.” Philipp said, Viper looking down at him before he put the arrow back.

“It’s gonna be alright.” The man said to him and Viper nodded.

*Is it though? You were the one to cry and scream in your sleep Philipp. You were the reason I didn’t invest any of my time in investigating this whole ordeal. You were...* He stopped himself. Maybe he was thinking too much after all. Blaming anybody wasn’t going to help, neither him nor his last remaining friend. *You are being dramatic.* He told himself and dismissed the shadowguard, a man he had gotten into the newly found order with a good word, an additional informant he had added to his network. One that shrunk by the day it seemed.

“Maybe you can ask Ilea. She might know something.” Philipp suggested.

“Ask who?” Viper replied, closing the window behind the shadowguard that just left. *Not even a teleportation ability. Perhaps I hired the wrong person.*

“The woman who trained with me yesterday. She said she’d be at the arena again later.” His friend said, finishing another arrow before he took a sip of his drink.

“Ah, that’s her name then. She doesn’t seem to care much for politics.” Viper said and sat down opposite the hunter.

“You judge people too quickly. And what would it hurt? You think she’s somehow involved in it too?” Philipp asked.

“No but she might talk to the wrong people. And we wouldn’t want members of the Hand hunting us down, not with just the two of us.” Viper said but Philipp just laughed.

“I think you’re too paranoid. Still, you’ve never led us astray. It’s your decision. I’m just suggesting it. If she turns out to be against us we’ll notice soon enough.” The hunter said. It was certainly tempting, to ask an isolated member like her before going to this administrator or Dagon, to try and gamble out some information. The librarian already knew most everything

useful Viper had to share. Back then information on classes and monsters seemed so worthwhile.

“I’ll think about it. Thanks Philipp.” He answered after a while, getting up to take a walk. At least he owed the woman that Philipp finally used his bow again. They’ve been through much together but losing the two changed him. *He won’t be the same anymore.* The thought reminded him of himself but he made himself stop. *I need a woman.*

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“You are drowning quite well today Ilea.” William said after two hours of continuous training. Ilea coughed up water and blood as healing mana flowed through her body, her near blue face turning more lively by the second.

“Is this sexual to you?” She asked after having recovered enough to talk. He looked at her and then shook his head before he continued working. *That’s not an answer.* She thought. “Again.”

Water formed around her while she took a deep breath before she was submerged. Spikes of ice soon smashed into her skin while she healed herself. Ilea let all the air in her lungs out and simply accepted the suffering that would lead to improvement. Right now, she was sure that drowning was worse than being burnt alive. Although some part of her mind told her that it’s more about perspective. With every minute of choking and coughing, her whole body retracting and fighting the creeping death coming closer and closer, she focused, focused on all the ways she had to improve.

If a fire mage was her enemy, she would be resistant to his magic. If a water mage trapped her in a flooded cave, she would be resistant to drowning. If an assassin poisoned her, she would prevail. And she would move on, punching them down one piece of their life at a time until they were

defeated. The thought kept her sane as she continuously drowned, her hardened and enhanced body living through the suffering like no normal human could, the call of unconsciousness ignored with an iron will. The training would last another three hours.

“Ilea! What a nice face to see. How did your mission go with the Redleaf boy?” Elise asked and put down the ten books she was carrying. She looked younger than Ilea remembered her, rejuvenated even.

“You look great. Finally out of your prison really is becoming on you.” Ilea said and smiled, sitting down on a nearby arm chair. She had found the woman in a section of the library usually reserved for Dagon and his crew. Most of them had died in the demon attack and the runes keeping people like her out of it had been tampered with as well. By her in part. Five minutes ago. *What a shame.*

“Oh dear you have no idea how amazing I feel. For as much as he knows, he’s surprisingly good with his body too.” Elise said and took off her glasses.

“Now that’s a piece of information I’ll be able to trade with him for quite a fortune isn’t it. I’m glad you’re doing well.” Ilea said and smiled. She was happy for both of them, to find someone they clicked with, in this case rediscovering a long lost love.

“Ah he’s not young enough to be embarrassed like that.” Elise said as she cleaned her glasses.

“New hairstyle?” Ilea asked, seeing that the glasses too weren’t the same white horned ones she had worn before.

“Yes, never liked bangs but I suppose it serves the required purpose.” The librarian replied. “Let me know which enchantments you broke to get in here by the way. And how, they seem terribly ineffective.”

“Just a bunch of minor ones. The big one leading down I didn’t touch.” Ilea said and shrugged.

“Good. I’ll have to talk to Claire again if she finds the time.” Elise said. “Now, as much as I appreciate the visit, I don’t take you to be one to socialize for fun.” She looked at Ilea.

“Right on all accounts Elise. You’re good at reading people even while being stuck in a library for most of your life.” Ilea said. Perhaps she was just easy to read but she didn’t mind too much about being open with her motives, moods and intentions. Too many people were secretive and scheming in this world. Just because she couldn’t trust any random deceitful stranger anymore didn’t mean she had to become one herself.

“I don’t really know where to start Elise.” Ilea said and sighed, summoning a mug of ale and taking a sip.

“Is it about your revenge perhaps? About a man? Trust me, finding out about their every move and ability won’t win you their heart.” The librarian said.

“If you want their literal heart, then it might actually.” Ilea retorted and took another sip. “I’m working on training resistances and need a list of possible dangers I’ll encounter in undiscovered ruins, dungeons and dangerous environments.”

“I can get you some books on that. Also about love, I think you direly need it dear. If you want to explore dungeons then I can give you a list of known locations in the plains and even some around here. The mana density has them recover somewhat quickly after they’ve been cleared and with the absence of any humans around here, some of them are sure to be filled with dangerous monsters.” Elise said.

“I’ll go north probably. North beyond the mountain chain.” She said and took another sip. *Perhaps visiting Walter to get some more ale as well.*

“To be young and adventurous again...,” Elise said and smiled. “You will die. Like most everybody else has before you. One way or the other,

something will get you. The geographical location of the plains is the only reason humanity is still around.”

“Well you’re a bummer. What’s so different about the north then or any of the other frontiers? What makes you think you won’t find humans after traveling for a couple months or years?” Ilea asked. “And what makes you think the monsters in the north wouldn’t come ever come here?”

“Some have and they decimated whole cities. The elves are the frontier to the west and I think the cities destroyed in the last year were in big part just a warning for us not to expand further. Ilea. I don’t want to make you stop whatever you’re doing but there have been countless expeditions. Few ever returned and fewer have brought news of habitable land, valuable resources or amiable races.” Elise explained.

“Why are you doing this Elise? I will go there one way or the other.” Ilea asked, knowing that while the information certainly seemed plausible, the woman likely had a reason to talk her down from her idea.

Elise looked at her for a while without saying anything and then just shook her head. “Ilea, you’re a promising young woman. Stronger than I am even after all those years of study and training. I’ve seen many like you, all of them are dead now. I just... I don’t want to see you die. You could live happily here in Ravenhall, do jobs around here, work for the city or the Hand but you will bring nothing to humanity if you die somewhere in the north, eaten by a beast not even categorized in any encyclopedia.”

Ilea thought about it for a while but she couldn’t disagree more. “I appreciate the sentiment Elise, I really do. Ever since I’ve come... ever since I was born here in Elos... I’ve felt free. Free to explore, to fight and to discover the unknown. It’s not a romantic whim either. I’ve been to the demon realm, the place they call the Great Salt. I’ve befriended one of them. I’ve fought and killed elves, have seen Taleen machines dangerous enough to wipe out cities. And yet here I am. I’ve survived them and I’ll survive much worse. And should one of those monsters come south, I might be one of the humans that destroys it. Just like I have been one of the people destroying the demons that were summoned here.” Ilea finished.

# Chapter 218 A new addition to the schedule

## Chapter 218 A new addition to the schedule

Elise was quiet for quite a while before she nodded. “Alright.” She said. “You’ve convinced me that you’re not just a young brat gaining a lot of levels from some kind of quirky skill. Then I’m looking forward to the entries you’ll add to known dungeons, monsters and ancient items and technology. I still believe you’re unnecessarily risking your life but it is not my decision.” Elise said.

“You’re right. It’s not. I live to fight the very fear that keeps you here.” Ilea said and finished her mug of ale.

“You damn idiot.” Elise said and smiled before she started laughing. “Well if it weren’t for your recklessness I’d be rotting in the capital’s dungeons.” She said. “I’ll look for what you need. Lists of skills, monsters and anything else that might be out there to kill you. Are you joining an expedition?”

“I will be going alone.” Ilea said. “And if you doubt my capabilities then I invite you to come to arena 8B in a couple hours.”

“I might. And I’ll let you know that being a good fighter won’t save you against a poisonous cloud suddenly rising in the cave around you.” Elise retorted.



“No, that’s what I have a level twenty poison resistance for.” Ilea said and smiled while getting up. She wasn’t about to argue with the overprotective librarian anymore, not when the woman had stayed behind safe walls only to be endangered by other humans in the end. “Maybe you should try flying again sometime.” She said her goodbyes and left the woman with her work. Dagon didn’t seem to be around but Ilea could get information from Elise for free while the man likely still held true to his principles, wanting to sell information for other information.

Ilea blinked out of the library, her wings spreading right before she would’ve hit the pavement. She quickly went over to the board showing different classes but found the information outdated. *Looks like they’re still not back to the daily operations.* It was a shame, she could’ve likely added some of the classes to her list of daily tasks but William’s underwater training was at least covering her personally most important skill set.

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Viper and Philipp paid the entry fee and walked into the arena. Ilea the Shadow had apparently rented out the whole thing for a week. Not a cheap investment but with the silver he had seen in the bucket, she was already making a profit. Not a small one at that. The notice was still hanging on the Guild’s board and word of mouth would spread while she continued to do this.

The skill growth of attacking a tank’s shield or actually burning off their face wasn’t that different but paying a defender of sufficient level and power to take the abuse was impossible for most people below a certain level of pay grade. One silver coin for an hour was as cheap as it got but Viper surmised the woman was doing this for her own skills and not for the money. With what she could take, she could easily join any Shadow’s team

if they needed a tank, let alone most adventurer teams. They'd kill each other to have her and the pay of doing jobs or joining an expedition or even a war was certainly better than the silver she amassed through this endeavor.

*Maybe the lack of availability will actually make it somewhat profitable?*

The thought was somewhat verified when they walked into the arena, finding as many people as the day before. This time though, they all paid for watching, all of them waiting in the arena itself while around ten people flung their magic at the woman.

Fire singed her skin before it rapidly recovered, lances projectiles of various elements and magics glanced off her skin or managed to penetrate before they were slowly pushed out by what he assumed was her healing skill, the wounds closing in a frightening speed. *You'd have to finish her in a single blow, taking her head would be the best bet.* He thought and remembered that she had survived and easily recovered from one of his strongest spells. Viper had some cards up his sleeve that he hadn't shown her yet and while the White Flame took a chunk of his mana to use, he could cast it a couple times in a row.

"Are you thinking about how to take her out?" Philipp asked next to him while they joined the waiting group of mages, warriors and rangers down in the pit. Many of them were openly debating the same so either Ilea's hearing wasn't exactly excellent or she simply didn't care. *Probably welcomes it. We all had our ways to get to level 200. She's too young to reach it with experience and safe mercenary work.*

"I am. Thought about the head." Viper said, scratching his chin as he looked at her brushing off the magic from the group of mages, their highest leveled member an arcane mage at level one thirty.

"The head? Yea, seems like a good bet but you'd have to ground her first. She's an ashen mage, creator even I think. From the little I've seen yesterday." Philipp said.

"Creator? Interesting. Never seen an ash creator. Maybe we can ask her to spar for real? See what she can do?" Viper asked, hoping that Philipp would

at least be somewhat interested. Shooting his bow was the first step but getting him to actually fight against someone would be the way to recovery, even without the intent to kill.

“Can’t say I don’t want to see what she can do...,” Philipp said and bit his lip under his hood. They stood a little off from the waiting groups and watched when they switched, the initial mages having completely spent their mana. Their reactions differed greatly, some lost in thought, likely looking at the gains in their skill levels while others seemed to be contemplating their life choices with how little they could do against the woman.

Viper didn’t say anything on the matter. He and Philipp could slaughter all of them in the span of a couple minutes, as could most Shadows. The change level two hundred classes brought to one’s power were significant, let alone the third tier skills that would come into play. It really was no wonder a couple of elves could destroy whole cities in the west, most of them having less than a handful of people at their level.

“You still need to pay, even if you’re waiting.” The woman said and Viper raised his eyebrows when he noticed her looking at the two of them. Philipp chuckled and went to the bucket, flinging two silver coins into it. The time between him throwing them and the impact suggested a significant amount of silver already present in the bucket.

Their turn came twenty minutes later, two groups having spent their mana before the Shadows stepped up. “You should train together while recovering your magic, spar and learn from each other.” Viper said to the meditating mages when he walked by.

“Fancy yourself a teacher?” The woman asked when they reached the spot of the attackers, sweat and even blood in the sand around them. Not to be confused with the woman’s little pond of blood and guts. He was still fascinated with a healer’s ability to recover lost blood and tissue. Creating

fire and light was one thing but creating living matter was something on a completely different scale, at least in his mind.

“I think I can spare to share a little of my experience.” Viper replied.

“A commendable sentiment. Care to share some with me?” The woman asked. He didn’t know what to answer to that for a second, his mouth opening and closing before he caught himself and smiled a thin smile.

“How old are you exactly?” He asked. With her reckless behavior he of course assumed she had found a way to get to two hundred quickly, perhaps just risking her life all the time and fighting higher leveled monsters, alone even. Most people he met that were like that either stopped doing that or were dead. The quick rise to power usually came with a quick rise in arrogance.

“You don’t ask a woman’s age. Perhaps you lack the experience you pretend to have.” She replied.

“I have experience in fighting monsters, not in courting women.” Viper said honestly. He wanted information from her and being upfront seemed like the way to go with this particular Shadow. Uncommon but not unheard of.

“That’s a good answer. Philipp you can start. So, Viper was it? Why did you come today?” She asked as his friend summoned his bow and an arrow.

“I wanted to talk to you. And maybe spar a little. Been a while since I’ve gone all out.” Viper said and watched her look at him with interest, her stomach exploding in a mess of blood and guts a moment later. Viper looked away from the gore as he held up his hand against the blood splashing their way.

“Sounds... like an interesting... proposal.” The woman said as her body regrew the missing parts, spitting out a glob of blood between each word. “I’m not joining any teams.” She added, most of her lower body restored.

“Are you wearing Hand leather armor?” He asked, noticing the similarities between her damn near destroyed set from last time and this half destroyed

one. She looked away not saying anything but he knew the face of a thief when he saw one.

“What did you want to talk about?” She asked as soon as her body had recovered. “No more explosions Philipp. First group can attack again!” Ilea added and waved for the waiting mages.

“I’d prefer to talk somewhere more private.” Viper said. “And I would be willing to pay you of course.”

“I’m not doing any jobs at the moment.” Ilea answered as the first spells started to hit. The noise made it hard for their conversation to continue.

“I’m here until twelve, come back if you still want to talk.” She said. Viper nodded and took a couple steps back to give more space to the adventurers.

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*Sparring with them...* It was something to think about. Both had interesting skill sets and it would certainly be a challenge. Less effective than leveling her resistances of course considering most of her class skills were close to the max already. With only sparring, leveling them even once would take weeks if not months. And only if she focused on it completely. The man so easily sharing some advice with the mages around him made her interested though. He seemed experienced and not in the way most Shadows she had met so far were. Eve and Kyrian got to their level because of their unique classes, Trian because he was trained and taught from early on and because of his class as well. Claire didn’t strike her as the person to take any risks and while she was knowledgeable about tactics, she hadn’t traveled the world and fought things that nearly killed her time and time again.

Of course she didn’t know about the specific history of all her teammates but talking to them and training with them for months had given her

somewhat reliable impressions. Many members of the Hand she had met probably had similar backgrounds or were too proud and secretive to share any of their expertise. *Or they're simply away on another hunt.* Viper seemed different. He wanted something from her but maybe they could trade and maybe sparring with them would benefit her beyond just stats and skills.

The session continued, her skills rising slowly but surely as a group of mages paid her to do so. She couldn't stop smiling at the whole situation. It was of course a win-win situation for all parties involved but Ilea still felt like she was benefiting the most. Some of the mages had left early, gagging at the carnage they took part in but with her Pain Tolerance and healing it was just another vacation day in Ravenhall. A big chunk of her levels were brought by Philipp and Viper's attacks, the latter joining in as well after a while. Perhaps he thought to win her goodwill through the action. Ilea couldn't deny that if that was his intention, it certainly worked.

People came and went, attacking her and recovering their mana before at last, the session ended. Ilea shouted for them to stop and said her farewells, reminding them that she'd be here again the next day. The bucket of silver was already half full, enough to buy food for several years or perhaps one piece of good armor. The discrepancies between cost of living and something like Balduur's gear really bothered her. She reminded herself that a hand-crafted chair or table back on Earth was ridiculously expensive too compared to daily necessities. *I wonder what some really high quality armor would cost. From one of those gluetube blacksmiths. Could it take a single punch from me?*

Her thoughts were interrupted when the two Shadows walked up to her. "I don't think I introduced myself to you yet. Ilea, nice to meet you again Viper." She said, shaking his hand.

"The same to you. You went from below one hundred to this in what? A year? Two?" Viper asked.

"I had some help. Fought Taleen machines for a long time." Ilea replied.

“Good teachers those. Especially for close combat classes.” Viper said and nodded. “And here I thought you had found some kind of trick. You just risked your life one too many times it seems.”

“I have classes that allow for such luxuries.” She said.

The man looked on the bloodied ground and nodded. “So it seems.”

“Is this private enough now?” Ilea asked, seeing how everybody else was gone already.

“I suppose it is.” Viper replied as he too looked around quickly. Philipp collected the arrows lying near her in the meantime. “I’m looking for information, mostly on the demon incident that happened here. Were you present when it happened?”

“I was, even went after the one responsible.” Ilea replied and smiled. “Thought I wasn’t in Ravenhall for quite a while after that.”

Viper blinked a couple times when he heard that but continued talking. “You went after the one responsible? So who did it? Why? Where did you go if not Ravenhall? What happened to them?”

“That’s an awful lot of questions. I don’t see why I wouldn’t share any of it with you but you have to agree to training sessions every day for two weeks. Through the night for eight hours in Viscera, Philipp too. Plus I want to know about monsters and magic you’ve encountered.” Ilea said.

“And how do I know you’re not lying?” Viper asked, Ilea now the one blinking.

“Do I strike you as a liar?” She asked. The man looked at her and then Philipp who looked up a little embarrassed as he got the last arrow.

“What?” The hunter asked and Viper started laughing.

“Ah why not. Some sparring will be good either way. I’ll gladly prepare you for your expedition. Where to? The north? Hunting elves in the forest?”

I'd dissuade you from that one. Don't know a single one that returned from that. Or are you going east to find new lands?" Viper asked with a smile.

"Why not south?" Ilea asked, interested in the fact that he hadn't mentioned that direction.

"People return from there. With tales of sand but they do return." The man replied. "Now to my questions."

"Alright. So the tournament starts and runes start to glow around a big area in Eregar's Haven. Adam Strand, one of the previous elders summoned all those demons and opened a gateway or something to the demon realm. Big fucking creature comes out of that gateway and he goes in, me and a fellow Shadow follow through and find ourselves in a big ass ocean. Got out of that and flew for days until we found land. Well... salt really. We fight through hordes of demons, the creatures attacking each other as much as us until we encounter a talkative mind weaver, the more intelligent kind." Ilea started retelling her adventures in the great salt, going through their encounter with Weavy, the discovery of the teleportation runes and their findings in the facilities they had been transported to.

She explained most of the adventure but left out that they got Weavy back with them. Many of the Shadows knew about him but Viper would have to find out about that himself.

"Adam Strand." He spoke the name with a broken up voice.

"He is in that place, the great salt? Do you have any idea why?" Viper asked but Ilea just shrugged.

"He was there for a purpose, that I'm rather sure about. He didn't seem to have done it just to cripple or destroy Ravenhall or humanity. At least that was my impression. Doesn't make it any better of course." She said.

"No... no it doesn't." Viper said and shook his head. "That's a lot to take in. I had considered him one of the best in the order. To think he would betray us like that. Can anybody confirm your story?"



“I think plenty of members saw him go through the portal in the Haven. If Verena were here, she tried to get him too I think. Still missing though. Dagon might know some more.” Ilea suggested.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I’ll talk to him. Do you know anything about the new Head Administrator?” He asked.

“Head what?” Ilea replied a little confused.

“She’s a member that rose to a lot of power in the order, virtually unknown and now she controls big parts of the city according to my sources.” He explained.

Ilea thought about it for a while but didn’t come up with anything. “Any idea what classes she has?”

“She’s a rune mage, parts of the new walls bear her craft.” Viper explained and her eyebrows rose immediately.

“You mean Claire?” Ilea asked.

# Chapter 219 A City on the Rise

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Ilea led the men to the central circle of the city, where Claire likely resided at the moment. *Either that or she's with Christopher.* She thought but didn't exactly want to share that knowledge with Viper. The man had a stake in the Shadow's Hand and certainly in what had happened to Ravenhall during the demon summoning. She checked the gains from her training earlier as they passed the guards at the gate to the central circle.

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1  
Ignoring the warnings of your parents and friends, you refuse to not stand in fire. This skill will help lessen the damage and pain a little.  
2nd stage: You've been burnt and melted again and again. Through extreme exposure, your skin, muscles and bones become much harder to burn and melt.'*

*'ding' 'Water Resistance reaches lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8'*

The variety in the adventurer's magic was a little disappointing still. Perhaps Elise's and Viper's promised information would bring some light into what kind of magic was out there. Then it was just about finding someone willing to use it on her to gain another resistance. Worst case she'd just have to endure it from a wild monster. The second stage of Heat Resistance was welcome, just a straight up upgrade but seeing how easily Viper had burnt through her skin, Ilea was glad to have it.

The shadowguard at the entrance didn't even check them and just nodded them inside. Ilea motioned for the two to wait outside while she went to talk to Claire. The door wasn't shut and she glanced inside after knocking.

"Come in." The woman sounded stressed, not that that was anything out of the ordinary.

"Hey, it's me. Your favorite person." Ilea said as she closed the thick wooden door behind her, feeling the magical enchantments click into place again when they connected with the frame. Her Sphere was cut off again and she smiled.

"Ilea, nice to meet you. Heard you're the one training all the new adventurers coming to the city?" Claire asked, not looking up from the letter she was reading. Ilea didn't answer and looked through the books on the walls.

"Got anything on existing classes and magic?" She asked, each book title she glanced over more boring than the one before.

"Not really. I'm more busy negotiating with a war torn empire while managing all your assets and the ones from the Hand." Claire said and finally looked up.

"Got your attention. That's nice." Ilea smiled at her and closed in on the desk. "How are you doing?"

Claire rubbed her eyes and then stretched, making a noise Ilea had never heard out of her. Refocusing, the woman smiled back and answered “Constantly tired, stressed and overworked. I love it Ilea.”

“I’m not sure if you’re sarcastic. You need to convey that in a way.” Ilea said but Claire just waved her off.

“I don’t know myself, that’s the problem. You’ll be better off asking Dagon or Elise about the books you’re looking for. Who are the two waiting outside?” Claire asked.

“I already asked Elise. Just thought while I’m here... how’s Christopher doing?” Ilea asked, ignoring the question for now.

“He’s unconventional... smart. Progress is well... I’m gonna continue helping him but I doubt we’ll have a functioning link to the teleportation network of the Taleen anytime soon. Sorry.” Claire said.

Ilea sat on the big table and sighed. “Don’t worry. If we don’t find him, he’ll find his way back alone.” She said. “The two are Shadows looking for the Head Administrator. Couldn’t think of anybody else that fit that description.”

“Sounds like a horrible job.” Claire said. “What do they want?”

“Answers. Regarding the demon incident. I told them what I knew but I don’t know if you guys are looking into it. A way to find the elder and bring him to justice. I think that might be their intention.” Ilea explained.

“Sure. There’s plenty who want revenge. Are they any good other than being able to blow stuff up and kill high level things?”

“One of them maybe. You’ll see. Thanks for seeing them.” Ilea said and jumped up from the table.

“Sure, just bring them in.” Claire said when Ilea waved towards her and blinked out to the others, her teleportation not stopped by the runes to her surprise.

“She’s in there and you can go talk to her. We’ll start the training tomorrow night in Eregar’s Haven. Philipp, make sure to join me again in the pit.” Ilea said and winked to the man before she blinked out of the building not waiting for their replies. They’d be there or they won’t be. For now she stayed close to the building, just in case they were trouble for Claire. While the chance was low she’d have some backup.

*‘Gold magic is one of the rarest forms of metal magic, specializing in body enhancements the users show similar feats to other enhancers. Specifics about high level usage are unknown but theories suggest that gold creators, for evident reasons, hold high positions in kingdoms and empires.’*

“Add another one to the list...,” Ilea murmured and scribbled into her notebook before taking a sip of her tea. The suns were rising behind the distant mountains overlooking Ravenhall, Ilea squinting her eyes at the bright light. The city itself at least wasn’t covered in snow anymore. Spring had come to Ravenhall at last.

“A lovely view isn’t it?” A familiar voice asked, the librarian coming from the staircase leading to the terrace of a lovely restaurant that was mostly owned by Ilea. Not that anybody except for her and Claire were aware of that.

“It is.” Ilea replied, closing the book on known magics she had gotten from Elise.

“You will bring those back to the library I hope?” Dagon asked as he gestured to the chair opposite her. She made a welcoming motion and took

another sip of her tea.

“Of course. I wouldn’t want the whole Shadow’s Hand hunting me down.” She said.

He touched his spectacles and smiled a thin smile. “I don’t hold that kind of authority. Nobody does.”

“And yet everyone came here to destroy the demons.” Ilea suggested, taking a bite of her croissant, something she had seen in Salia before but not Ravenhall.

“That is an exceptional situation. We are simply a mercenary order.” Dagon said and motioned to the waiter who checked on the only customers on the terrace.

“Of course we are. Why are you here? As highly as I think of myself I doubt you’d be delighted by this conversation. Or were you just here to tell me about my late fees?” She asked while he ordered a glass of whiskey.

“I hear you can heal the negative effects of alcohol?” He asked when she raised her eyebrows at his order.

“I’m not going to use my skills to support your alcoholism. You’re old enough to hire a healer.” Ilea replied. He was joking of course, their daily routine not in the slightest comparable to a citizen at a lower level. High Vitality and different skills allowed them to stay up for days without the need for sleep or food, although Ilea didn’t know much about his capabilities in the area.

“Elise asked me to dissuade you from going north. Before you retort or vanish, I know you for a little longer than her. I’m aware that you will go either way. My real reason is something a little more personal.” The man explained and looked around to make sure nobody was listening in.

“I was looking for some... advice.”

“Advice on what? The great librarian of the Shadow’s Hand, the mystical order of powerful mercenaries coming to me for advice?” Ilea joked. *It’s about love isn’t it.*

The man looked down at the table but finally spoke. “Are you pure?”

*Close enough.* “You mean did I ever have sex? Or are you talking about some kind of religious term, in which case I’m not sure in what world I’d be the person to talk to.”

“Sexually... I mean. Yes.” He said.

“I’ve had sex before, yes. Been a while though but I guess killing monsters and getting to the brink of death is a suitable outlet for my frustrations.” Ilea explained before she finished the croissant. *They really need to add twice the amount of butter.*

“I’m unsure. Well I’m not sure how to put it... I don’t know why I thought to ask you...,” The man started and shook his head. “She seems to like it but sometimes...,”

“You feel unsure about your performance?” Ilea asked bluntly and he nodded after a while.

“If you put it that way...,”

“Don’t worry about it. I think it’s normal. For men and women. Now I’m not selling any pills but have you talked to her about this at all?” Ilea asked the man and he looked at her as if she was a mystical being of lore.

“You haven’t.” She stated.

“I haven’t. I don’t want her to think I’m incapable.” He explained.

“I think Elise loves you. The you that can be insecure. To be able to share an insecurity I believe is a show of your character’s strength. Plus communication is the most important thing in a relationship. If you can’t talk about something this small, real issues will be even worse. Trust me. Just bring it up and talk about it. You’ll be fine.” Ilea said, finishing her tea.

“Thank you. I guess I’ll talk to her later.” He said and sighed. “To have learned, worked and fought for decades and this woman is what makes me seek help.”

“Relationships take time. Treat it as a learning experience together with her. I have a feeling her damn near imprisonment brought her to a similar level of knowledge in the matter.” Ilea said. His Whiskey arrived and he downed it in a single gulp.

“Got anything to share regarding possible resistances I could acquire?” Ilea asked. “While you’re here.”

The man nearly sunk into his chair as he looked up at the sky. “You’ve been keeping up the arena training for weeks already. I doubt anything I tell you will make a difference.”

“I’ve not learned a single new skill in two weeks. Everybody is using fire, ice, earth and wind. Some have variations and rarer things but nothing I haven’t seen yet.” Ilea complained. At least the training with Philipp and Viper had gone well, though Philipp wasn’t much help, his skills more suited to hunting and less to an upfront confrontation.

“You could join the war for a while.” Dagon suggested.

“That’s terrible advice. It’s the whole reason I’m going out of this shithole of an empire.” Ilea retorted.

“To fight monsters? Is fighting humans so different?” He asked.

“It is to me.” Ilea didn’t want to go into explaining why. Her morals seen as foreign to most of the people growing up in this war torn and conflict ridden land. Humans at least were a monster they understood.

“You could just travel through a part of the country on the way north. Maybe you find some people with interesting or rare abilities capable of helping your insatiable need to have your body broken down.” Dagon said, putting a couple copper coins on the table.



“It’s on the house.” Ilea said, suppressing the grin that nearly broke through to her face. *I always wanted to say that.*

“You own this establishment?” Dagon asked. “Wait you’re one of the investors for Claire’s manic takeover of half the city? No, don’t answer that. I don’t want to get into arguments with her again.” Dagon said and got up. “Thank you for the advice. I have matters to attend to.”

“Enjoy fucking.” Ilea said and raised her empty cup to the waiter that tried very hard not to listen to the Shadows discussing private matters. People got killed for less on a daily basis. Dagon grumbled something as he walked down the stairs. Ilea had chosen not to share the praise Elise had given him behind his back. Perhaps he wasn’t ready to know that women talked about their men’s sexual habits more so than the other way around.

“I’m Lilith by the way. You know what that means?” Ilea asked the waiter when he came to take the empty cup and Dagon’s glass.

He looked her over for a second and then nodded. “The description fits Lady Lilith. Of course there will be no charge.” He said and bowed deeply.

“Where are you from?” She asked the man. “Don’t keep bowing, I’m the owner not your queen.”

He looked up but didn’t meet her eyes. “From a small village near the southern mountains.”

“How did you survive?” Ilea asked.

“We hid in the forests and traveled from town to town until we were found months later by imperial scouts. They told us they were on the way to Ravenhall, that the Shadow’s Hand had returned to fight the demons. Me and my sister thought that’d be the best bet for us and followed.” The man explained briefly.

“And you’re paid fairly? Treated well?” Ilea asked. The man nodded quickly.

“Of course. Someone collects complaints every other week. At first people were afraid it was something to weed out people who didn’t want to work but when the head cook complained about the kitchen situation, it was taken care of the next week.” He explained. Ilea was impressed by Claire’s management. Good word would spread but the interaction was still kept professional and somewhat impersonal. She left the details to Claire though, the woman was much more knowledgeable about that stuff.

“Good to hear. Thanks.” Ilea said and got up, stretching her arms before she jumped off to the adjacent building. It was nice that her money could get parts of the city running again. Better than just letting it rot in a dwarven dungeon or inside of her necklace.

She made her way towards Viscera, her training with William would soon start. It was still one of the most horrific things she’d ever done. Still, she hadn’t gotten a skill in their nearly three weeks of training, his estimate already passed. The suns were still rising but the city streets were bustling with life. She had seen the influx of people with her own eyes, her hopes that among them some rare magical talents would join her training sessions had been dashed but at least there were new street food stands.

Rice balls, fried fish and hearty soup. People from all over the empire and beyond now contributed to the diversity in Ravenhall. She knew that many other cities, at least in the western and southern part of the empire would experience a similar situation. Hopefully they handled thieves as efficiently as they did here. Guards clad in black, others in the imperial colors patrolled the alleys. While the guards had a lot of power at their disposal, the fact that there were two factions of them brought another level of scrutiny between them.

She was more worried about the guards fighting each other than someone abusing their powers. Of course she had seen both in those three weeks. A newly rebuilt city filled with refugees of war wasn’t safe and perfectly civilized, it wouldn’t be for a long time. Her black armor at least made people part and make way for her even on the busy streets. In Ravenhall seeing a shadow didn’t incite the fear and respect it did in farther away places but they knew what a Shadow could do. Most had seen one or a few in action.

Ilea liked the personal space she got through that, making her just a little less inclined to immediately flee the city whenever her training sessions ended. The colors and new additions to the otherwise somewhat bland and medieval buildings brought by the refugees of various cities were a treat nearly as joyous as the various new foods she got to try. Soon it might look like Salia but with proper walls. Ilea couldn't help but shake her head at the thought. A whole city of sentient humans wiped out by a bunch of angry Elves.

*Better than demons looking to eat something tasty in a hundred years for a change I suppose.* Ilea thought, looking at all the merry people going about their daily business. Feeling safe behind the walls of a city that had literally gotten wiped out by the actions of a single determined old man. *I don't actually know how old he is.* Ilea thought. She reached Viscera soon enough and the line of people waiting to be interviewed to join the Shadowguard.

Of course not everybody felt safe and those that had seen what happened to their villages and cities due to the war or the demonic invasion at least understood the need for capable fighters. Joining the empire during the war was understandably less popular than joining the city guard or the shadowguard that brought additional benefits with it. A possible membership in the Hand being on of them.

She bypassed the group of waiting people, some of their conversations dying out when they looked at her, tugging each other when she walked by. *Living that rock star life.* Ilea thought. She was surprised how few of the people seemed to be angry at the Shadow's Hand for basically causing the demon invasion. Either they didn't know it was them or were too afraid to speak up. Or they acknowledged that the Hand had cleaned up after themselves. She knew that some squads were still out there, cleaning out demons from forests far away from Ravenhall, crushing every last one of the monsters roaming the empire and the lands beyond.

A couple minutes later she found herself in the usual training hall, William waiting for her with a stack of his workload he had brought with him. Ilea still didn't exactly know what he was doing other than evaluation. Perhaps the line above was there because she in fact occupied his time. *Oh well. They can wait. I'm here to drown after all.*

# Chapter 220 Cooking Dragons

## Chapter 220 Cooking Dragons

Pushing out all the air from her lungs, Ilea stopped healing the wounds piercing her chest, instead ripping out the ice spears to allow the flow of water to occur more quickly. It did put a smile on her face that William had to use stronger attacks to even pierce her skin at this point, making him at least put in some effort. She told him to stop and recover when he ran out of mana but he was at least somewhat proud of his abilities it seemed, the man sweating when the nearly unconscious Ilea dropped to the ground, heaving before she started coughing, water and blood running out of the wounds on her body.

She was wearing shorts and a now ruined bra that reminded her more of a sports bra. Sadly they didn't have any similar fabric here but simple cloth did the trick. She wasn't exactly the bustiest woman around after all. A good thing as it wasn't conducive to close combat fighting at all.

*'ding' 'You have learned the General skill: Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*

*You have been submerged in liquid for longer than you should've survived. You crave to become a creature of the deep and have proven that you will go any lengths to achieve that. While your biology doesn't strictly allow for gills, magic has its ways. You can stay submerged in liquid for much longer.'*

“Fucking...,” Ilea said and continued coughing, healing the pierced flesh before she tried to get up, slipping on water and her own blood. “... finally.” She finished, lying on her back as her lungs reformed, the muscles around them closing up to allow for breathing again.

“You got something? About damn time woman.” William said and got up, gathering his documents. “Which skill did you acquire?”

“Harmony of the Drowned.” Ilea said as he raised his eyebrows.

“Interesting. So you really do have no talent for the element of water.” He said. “Luckily it’s still one of the better skills to help you survive. There was no chance of you switching to another element anyway.”

“What do you mean switching?” Ilea asked as she got up, drying herself with one of the prepared towels that was still clean and dry.

“Changing your class from the dreadful ashen magic to something more civilized.” William said and looked at her with a haughty expression.

“Are you trying to start a fight with me William dear?” Ilea asked and saw the minuscule grin that came to his face before it was smashed away by his insurmountable professionalism.

“I have faced enough beasts for a while Miss Spears.” He said and made his way to the exit.

“Nothing else related to underwater survival you can teach me?” She asked, drying her face.

“You are a practical learner. I believe you now have the tools. Already you would challenge the toughest creatures I’ve ever hunted underwater. I daresay I can’t teach you more, not without a related class.” He explained. “Your tenacity at least, is commendable.” The man added and left.

“That’s the praise I get after what I went through for three weeks? Man I pity whatever poor soul would be his apprentice.” Ilea said to herself and finished up, stealing a couple more leather armors from the storage room

each training hall had. She was glad they restocked them time and time again.

*I did pay a hundred gold coins to join after all.* And it wasn't exactly expected that someone would go through several dozen of them per week. Knowing the cost of a good set of leather armor Ilea definitely preferred to get the free ones as long as she still could.

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“You're aware that it costs a silver per hour, even if you're just watching?” The man asked his teammate who had read the same notice Keyla had just went through. One of the two eyed her but didn't say anything, he only stared at her scaly feet. She tried to retract her claws as far as possible.

“Excuse me.” She spoke up and turned to the man, her reptile like eyes blinking. The man looked at her but didn't seem repulsed. *He's waiting for a question you idiot.* She thought.

“Have you been there before? Is it worth it? To level skills I mean.” The cook asked.

“Of course it is. It's a Shadow and she can heal herself almost immediately. I even thought about dropping my second class and restarting as a healer myself.” The man explained, getting a smack on the head by his friend.

“You won't do that idiot, we need you at your highest level otherwise we won't be able to explore near the cliffs anymore. You have no knack for magic anyway.”

“You don’t know that.” The first one retorted before they started going into arguments about their team’s healer. Keyla ignored them and looked through the notice again. There was nothing mentioned regarding requirements, only the cost of a single silver per hour. She still had some money left, nearly sixty silver but while the investment was steep, maybe it would allow her to get a little more preparation before she went hunting again.

Leaving the adventurer’s guild, she made her way to the designated location. The new walls were a little irritating as she got side glances from nearly all the guards. They would know her in time but it had taken quite a while to get the trust of the previous guard. Going through the gate, one of them stopped her. *Here we go.*

“Show me your face please. Are you a lizardman?” The man asked, one of his hands on the handle of his sword. The other guard previously uninterested in the conversation, leaning on his spear butted in.

“Leave it alone man. We’re not in the western shit lands where you’re a dick to non humans.” He said.

“I’m just doing my job. Can I see your face?” The man asked again, Keyla pulling back her hood to reveal the scales and two small horns growing from the sides of her head.

“What in the fuck are you?” The guard asked, unsheathing a part of his sword when the spear man intervened.

“She’s a Breed. I’ve seen some of them before, don’t wet your pants. Where are you from?” He asked.

“I’m from Ravenhall.” Keyla replied, not trying to sound confrontational.

“You’re a fucking liar is what you are. We’ll have to ask you some more questions.” The man said but the spear man looked nearly as irritated now as Keyla was. Of course she had handled countless situations like this before but she had thought she was beyond that now.

*Apparently not.* She thought. With the imperial law she'd be questioned and let go after a couple hours, maybe two days at most. Not the worst but it was time she couldn't use to work or hunt. With how filled the streets were with streetfood vendors already she'd be hard pressed to find a spot. People didn't want to buy from a Breed, not if they knew one of them was cooking their food.

“Why would you want an explosive rune that can't be thrown or set off from a distance?” A voice behind her asked, the two guards moving their attention to whoever was talking.

“Experience.” The reply came and Keyla's world seemed to freeze.

*Is that?*

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“Trust me, sometimes you just have to explode to get out of a situation.” Ilea said to the hunter and enchanter next to her, the man frowning at the thought.

“I'd just use something like corrosion instead but if you can't control it I guess an explosion is better. Very unsafe of course.” Philipp said and shook his head. “I guess I can make you something like that if you really want to. An explosion or fire mage would be better though if you know one that can enchant as well.”

“You think so? I actually know one.” Ilea said when they came up on the gate, some lizardman blocking the way as the two guards looked at them in awe. *Hey wait a second.* Ilea thought, looking at the lizardman through her Sphere.



“Are those horns? Hey do I know you?” Ilea asked, walking around the lizardman who seemed frozen in place.

“We wanted to take it in for questioning.” One of the guards said as Ilea crouched to look up the lizard’s hood.

“Ok help me out here, I’m bad at lizard faces.” She said and got a smack from the lizardman.

“We’re called Breed you damn idiot.” The Breed said. “And yes, I know you.”

“It’s you! Oh my god I’m glad you survived!” Ilea said and hugged Keyla, the woman’s claws digging into her leather armor. “Or is it? You don’t have to slice me.”

“Personal space...,” Keyla said as Ilea let go of her. “It’s me yes, Keyla, the cook. Can you help me find work please? Nobody wants to hire me.”

“What? Why? You’re level one sixty two and a bloody cook.” Ilea said, confusion evident on her face.

“She’s a Breed, people are racist.” Philipp said. “Nice to meet you.” He added.

“Same. And he’s right you know. The guard wanted to question me.” Keyla said, looking at the two of them.

“Really?” Ilea asked. “Why though? You’re like half dragon, that’s pretty cool isn’t it?” She asked which made Philipp laugh out loud.

“Wow. Damned woman.” He said and kept smiling.

“Ilea, it’s not good to look like to the cursed beings you just mentioned.” The woman said and sighed.

“She’s alright, move along.” Ilea said to the guards and focused on her again. “You said you needed work? Maybe I can help you.” She said and

smiled. The guards looked a little lost but ultimately resumed their posts near the gate, not about to stop two shadows because of a Breed.

“That would be fabulous. Maybe I can start in Viscera again but few Shadows know me, only you actually and Eve. Is she around?” Keyla asked, Ilea’s smile quickly vanishing.

“She’s... no. Eve died. I’m sorry.” Ilea said in a subdued way.

“What? How... she...,” Keyla stammered out and looked at her as if it was a joke but Ilea shook her head slowly.

“Did she die in the demon summoning as well?” Keyla asked.

“No. She was murdered in Virilya.” Ilea replied.

“What?” Keyla asked loudly, fire erupting around her as she looked at Ilea with anger. “What are we doing here then?!” Ilea stood in the flames, ignoring the heat before she simply grabbed Keyla in a hug, waiting until the flames subsided.

“I’m sorry. It’s a bit more complicated than that sadly.” Ilea explained. “We can talk about it later. In a more private location.” She added, looking around to see if anybody was focused on them but the guards were the only ones close by, actively ignoring the conversation. Philipp was listening of course but as far as Ilea knew Eve wasn’t exactly well known. As long as she didn’t mention the Golden Lily it would likely not become a problem.

“What do you mean more complicated?” Keyla asked, not shouting anymore.

“More complicated as in we’d likely be minced meat by the end of the week. Come, maybe it’ll help you to blow off some steam.” Ilea said and grabbed the woman’s arm, dragging her through the gate and towards the arenas.

“I was going to train with someone anyway, you don’t have to babysit me Ilea.” Keyla said and pulled away her hand.

“Got a team? I didn’t think you’d be the fighting kind?” Ilea asked with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s a notice in the Guild... to train magic against a tank.” Keyla explained.

“Ah, I understand. I was going there myself. They’re capable enough.” She said with a serious expression. “We can talk after we’re done ok? Don’t shout it out, I don’t want you to get killed for no reason.”

“No reason?!” Keyla started, pointing a claw at her. “You call avenging her meaningless?” She added, her voice lowered again as she looked around at the people walking by, most of them certainly interested but more afraid to offend the Shadows walking next to the Breed.

“I will find them Keyla. And I will find out what happened before I think about what to do with them. Killing them however, won’t bring her back. She’s dead.” She said and continued walking, watching the woman’s mouth open and close behind her, her expression everything but understanding. Ilea had time to grieve and to process what had happened. She didn’t know how close they were but it seemed Eve was one of the few other people having known the cook.

They walked in silence, Philipp occasionally trying to start a conversation but failing with both Ilea and Keyla. They made their way down to the arena Ilea had rented, the people waiting already waved towards them. Ilea greeted them quickly and went inside.

“Where do we pay?” Keyla asked Philipp but he shrugged.

“I don’t think you’ll have to pay.” He said and walked in behind Ilea. She quickly jumped down into the sandy pit and clapped, getting the empty bucked from the side of the arena and placing it a little more to the center.

“Welcome back. For everybody new to this, it’s a silver per hour. I decide on teams to attack and might add or remove certain people as we go. You attack in waves and train with each other in between, or you simply recover your mana if you lack the Wisdom.” Ilea said and looked into their faces.

*Some new ones today. Perhaps there are one or two interesting classes among them.*

Keyla looked at her and then towards Philipp, the man smiling at her. “She’s the tank?” She asked but shook her head. “Well that’s convenient then. Can I start?” The cook asked, fire forming above her hands as she approached.

“You may. Aim for my stomach.” Ilea said, the first fireball hitting her a couple seconds later, the cook smoothly throwing them her way before she summoned new ones immediately. The explosion surrounded Ilea with fire, singeing her leather armor, the ninth one already if her count was still right. Looking at the angry woman’s reptile eyes she knew the armor at least wouldn’t survive this session.

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Keyla packed as much mana as she could into her fireballs, the basic skill something she had continued to level during her teens when she was still adventuring. While working in Ravenhall she had little opportunity to get the skill higher but it was close to the level twenty in the second stage anyway. Perhaps now she had found that opportunity finally.

Her magic hit the coward of a woman before her, flames engulfing her in a maelstrom of heat and destruction, the fire gleaming in her reptile eyes as all her hate consumed the pretentious Shadow standing in front of her. The old witch was right, keeping a couple basic skills like fireball and flame and leveling them up to the highest degrees was more than just worth it. Their mana cost was laughable compared to more complicated magics and the

effect was the same. She twirled and sent another fireball towards Ilea, her now free hand summoning the next one as she came around.

The flames cleared as she stood there, poised to continue her assault. *I'm not going to kill her. But maybe burning her a little will teach her a lesson.* The thought hadn't processed completely when the flames cleared, the woman standing there as if nothing had happened at all. Her leather armor was burnt in places but she seemed completely unharmed. "What?"

"You may continue. Eight people below level one hundred may join. Jacque was it? You can join in as well. Philly, you too." Ilea said, waving some of the bystanders in as her fire magic blazed in her hands, illuminating her face below the big hood.

*She's treating this as a joke?* Keyla asked herself when a hand landed on her shoulder, making her turn to find the hooded shadow from before. *Philipp?*

"You can go all out. It helps for a while." The man said with a smirk on his lips.

*You understand nothing...*, She thought but didn't believe her own lie. At least she hadn't spoken it and embarrassed herself any further. *Maybe he's right.* Magic surged around her as spells of different schools and elements were sent towards the Shadow that suddenly didn't seem just as cowardly as Keyla had painted her inside her head. Lances of ice shattered against her skin as if it was iron, fire and acid licked on her skin, its effects vanishing without a trace before the next attack came. Rocks the size of her own head struck Ilea on her legs, stomach and shoulders but she stood, barely buckling under the focused destruction.

The two people Ilea had called out by name joined in, their levels closer to Keyla's. An ice lance formed next to her, making her look over just like many of the other mages, all distracted by the cold gathering before the massive lance cracked and groaned, shrinking to the size of a short sword before the woman whispered to herself. "...and pierce even the giants... spear of valir." The chant ended and the weapon vanished before Keyla's eyes, a dull impact making her head turn to see the thing stuck inside of

Ilea's belly before a deafening crack resounded, splinters of ice exploding in all directions, ripping through the Shadow.

Most of the ice going towards the group of mages was stopped by the woman but one of them buckled, clutching his leg as he breathed heavily, moaning in pain. Keyla kept her eyes on Ilea, her stomach bleeding from the attack but the wounds were closing before her eyes.

"Didn't even take her down..." The ice mage murmured with a smile on her face.

"Well done. That was the highest damage you've dealt so far." Ilea said and vanished, appearing next to the injured man before she unceremoniously ripped out the splinter of ice, touching his leg right as he started hyperventilating. The small wound closed in the span of thirty seconds before Ilea walked back to her previous position. "Try not to injure your teammates." She added. "There isn't a healer around at all times." She said seriously.

# Chapter 221 Wood and Drakes

## Chapter 221 Wood and Drakes

Ilea watched the mages when she prepared herself for more attacks. Keyla hadn't thrown a single attack after her initial two. Quite destructive fire magic and apparently highly leveled skills compared to the ice shard that had just hit her. It was of course an advanced spell the woman hadn't used before in their sessions, one that might actually injure her as it grew in level.

Her Ice Resistance however was reaching the end of the first tier, currently sitting at eighteen. It would become more and more difficult to injure her with those skills. Keyla had an even worse prospect against her second tier Heat Resistance. Her skin could take the abuse easily combined with quick healing.

The woman's anger seemed to have calmed down a little as well, her attitude changing to a more baffled one when the other mages had started their attacks. "You can continue." She said, smiling a little towards the ice mage who had gotten such a wonderful skill. She hadn't used chanting before which meant the skill required quite a bit of concentration to use, in turn meaning it was at a rather low level still. This training would be highly beneficial for the ice mage. *And for me.* Ilea thought.

Her resistances had grown rapidly in the past weeks but she found that in the second stage, she needed harder hitting foes than level one hundred to one fifty humans. Even her Lightning Resistance was only at level five in

the second stage and she had trained with Trian for quite a long time and rather intensively. *I used my defensive skills then too though.* She thought but back then his lightning still did a lot of damage even with her Veil and other buffs.

The attacks started again but Ilea was lost in thought, only occasionally healing the minor injuries from the attacks, all of the first group lacking anything new that she didn't have a resistance against. *Maybe I should check on him again... this might help the man too.* She thought. Dagon had been against letting the Alymies out of their hideout but perhaps a little training didn't hurt. She doubted any remaining Birminghames or sympathetic factions would be influential enough to pay Shadows to do their dirty work.

*I've been wrong before.* Ilea thought, another spike of ice exploding in her stomach, damaging some of her organs before she quickly healed the damage. The attack still didn't come close to what William had thrown at her in their casual drowning sessions but she wouldn't tell that to the aspiring ice mage. Her future was hopefully less sadistic and cynical as William's. *Perhaps it should be.* Ilea thought, smirking as she locked eyes with the mage, Philly's expression turning a little uncertain, fearful even. *As it should.*

Checking through her skills, Ilea considered how long she would have to remain in Ravenhall.

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0***

***Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 230***

***- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***

***- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20***

***- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 3***



- **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 9**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 18**

### ***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 224***

- **Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 1**
- **Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20**
- **Active: Embered Body Heat – 2<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4**
- **Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 19**
- **Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20**

### ***General Skills:***

- ***Elos Standard language - lvl 6***
- ***Identify - lvl 7***
- ***Meditation – lvl 2nd 17***
- ***Poison Resistance – lvl 20***
- ***Heat Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3***
- ***Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4***
- ***Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 10***
- ***Fear Resistance – lvl 5***
- ***Water Resistance – lvl 16***
- ***Wind Resistance – lvl 17***
- ***Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5***
- ***Ice Resistance – lvl 18***
- ***Crystal Resistance – lvl 15***
- ***Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 19***

- *Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 15*
- *Corrosion Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Veteran – lvl 3*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 600***

***Endurance: 350***

***Strength 266***

***Dexterity 350***

***Intelligence 550***

***Wisdom 425***

***Health: 5810/6000***

***Stamina: 3480/3500***

***Mana: 3620/4250***

Considering how many resistances were about to hit the second tear it might be worth staying another week or two to get those done but the training was getting seriously boring. Plus except for Philipp and Viper, the attacks lacked in impact. Her training was slow if she wasn't brought to near death or at least lost a couple of limbs with each attack. *Meat sales suffer as well like this.* She thought when the groups switched, some new faces in the next one.

“The new people please attack first and in turn.” She said, the change bringing her back to the present. *Six of them.* The first one was a fire mage, by far the most popular choice with adventurers it seemed. Ice was a close second even though it was rather difficult to learn she had read. Elise's information was sobering when it came to the lacking magic diversity of her training partners. Recorded classes were insane in sheer numbers. There was magic for nearly everything one could think of but as it turned out many of those classes were deemed useless or not powerful enough to even be considered.

Ilea was pretty sure that they simply lacked initial impact compared to more conventional choices. Weather mages for example could only summon weak wind tornadoes at first but having watched some movies back on Earth, she knew the possibilities would be quite extensive. Having seen her own ashen magic develop and grow, Ilea was certain her assumptions were correct. At least the attacks would still be wind magic, which she had a resistance to.

Her thoughts stopped when the girl before her, barely older than fifteen lifted her hands, a small splinter of wood growing in the very air before her. Ilea's smile widened as the splinter grew into a small spike before it was loosed towards her. It harmlessly bounced off of her skin, making her mood dampen a little but maybe she could still get a new skill out of this. People around the girl murmured about wood creation but most didn't seem very impressed with her magic. In time, that would change, Ilea knew. She remembered the Birmingham noble and the power he wielded. Against Kyrian and Trian it wasn't enough in the end but most people she had met would struggle against both of them together.

The girl looked a little distraught, her face getting red after someone had chuckled behind her. “You laugh one more time and I’ll kick your face in understand?” Ilea said and smiled at the girl. “You have a rare class it seems, you should be proud of yourself. Train as much as you want here, you don’t have to pay. Next.” Ilea said and was happy to see some confidence return to the girl. She was thinking about answering but ended up just nodding and taking a step back.

The next mage had a lightning class, a big bolt of it impacting Ilea without even the slightest result. His cocky smile was wiped away just as quickly. His class was definitely nice and his skill in magic rather high but it would take decades to reach Trian’s levels. Or a couple months alone against much higher leveled monsters. The fact that the man was here and not fighting something out in the wild made her think about decades more so than mere months.

The last newcomer was a young man in his early twenties. He looked at Ilea before something gray formed before him, a gray whirl materializing and quickly moving towards her. The whirl surrounded her, Ilea trying to figure out what exactly the magic was with her Sphere as she activated her body enhancement skills to see enhance her senses. Minuscule cuts formed on her skin, quickly healing as the whirl intensified. A minute later it subsided, the man breathing heavily with an extended arm towards her, looking at her with a blank stare.

“Was that ash?” Someone asked.

“Dark magic maybe?” Another mage commented.

“He wouldn’t show that off here would he?” Someone said, engaging in the conversation but Ilea knew it was neither of the two suggested.

“What was that?” She asked the man.

“You’ll see when you gain a resistance to it.” He replied. “Isn’t that why we’re all here?”

“Fair enough. You also don’t have to pay.” Ilea said. He didn’t react but stepped back to the group again as they continued speculating on his magic.

“You may attack freely, I’ll let you know when to stop.” Ilea said but knew already that none of them would get her that far. Philipp was in the next group and might be the first one to actually rip out a good chunk of her health. Although her resistances to his magic had grown immensely, making it a little more difficult for his skills to damage her. It was a good indicator to her, how far resistances alone could take her. His magic would rip through her in a similar fashion but the lessened damage meant her healing had an easier time to deal with it, the initial impact was reduced in the first place and with her Veil that increased the potency of her Resistances, it would pay out exponentially.

The session continued without any major surprises, Ilea growing more bored by the minute. Only Philipp’s destructive arrows bringing some joy and challenge into the whole ordeal from time to time but she didn’t know if she could endure another two or three weeks of this. *You have to.*

The sentiment was strengthened when she locked eyes with Keyla, the woman giving her best to burn her skin but in the end it only added to the destruction of her leather armor. Someone at the order had to wonder about the missing armors. The normal instructions and training sessions at the Hand would start up again soon, the city rebuilt mostly and the surrounding dungeons and wildlife culled down to their previous state again by the many Shadows that had remained in and around the city. Some of the refugees and traveling adventurers were close enough to two hundred, meaning some might join the ranks of the esteemed mercenary guild.

“That’s it for today.” Ilea said, motioning for the mages to stop as a last rock hit her head, the mage looking around in fear before his eyes met hers. “Careful there tough guy.” She said, the man looking down immediately. “Come again tomorrow if you want to continue the training. Have a good night.” She added and walked towards the group, some of them splitting off into groups while others left alone.

“Wood mage and you with the gray magic.” Ilea spoke out, the two young mages in the process of leaving turned towards her, some of the others

looking at them with interest. “Stay for a couple minutes if you will. I have an offer that might interest you.” Ilea said, turning to Keyla whose arms hung a little defeated.

“Did that help any?” Ilea asked when she looked at her.

“I don’t know. You... you’re so strong. Why don’t you...,” Keyla started but stopped and looked at the leaving group of mages and the two remaining ones.

“You’ve seen what Philipp did to me.” Ilea said, the man smirking at that.

“Compared to the first time it’s gotten quite a lot less gruesome.” He said and smiled, biting into an apple he had procured out of nowhere. The man was sitting on the railing that separated the theoretical audience from the pit. Few had watched today’s session as Ilea asked them to pay the same price as joining in.

“I’ve fought a wind mage that broke my bones with his attacks. Inheritor of Storm I believe was his class. Someone I know can curse people and drain out their health while another can rip out your heart without you even seeing her. You knew her Keyla. Did you know what she could do?” Ilea asked, watching the woman consider.

“She was nigh invisible, her mind magic capable of freezing people in their tracks. And yet...,” Ilea said and didn’t continue.

Keyla nodded once after a while, looking to the ground, her claws digging into her own flesh until blood dripped to the sand below.

“We’ll talk about her. But first let me help you out.” Ilea suggested and put a hand on the cook’s shoulder. “If anybody gets your services it’s me after all.” She smiled before hugging her.

“We’ll visit a friend and get you a restaurant.” Ilea said, patting her back.

“A restaurant?” Keyla asked in disbelief.

“Exactly that. Maybe start selling things and get people hooked, build a name and then reveal that you’re a Breed. That would be funny, wouldn’t it.” Ilea said and grinned before letting go of her and turning to the two mages who were still waiting. The man looked like he was considering to leave. *Still got him hooked though.*

“You two, I’m gonna train with this guy here and I want you to join. Get your skills higher and maybe try to get you to actually damage me. Resistances against your magic would come in quite handy.” Ilea said. “Do you want to join?”

“Y... yes!” The wood mage said and smiled before looking down.

The man looked at her for a while. “I want to get paid.” He said which made her laugh out loud.

“You’re a god damned comedian aren’t you? How much do you think your services should cost?” Ilea asked, quite interested now.

“Ten silver per training session.” He stated immediately.

“And how do you come to that number?” Ilea asked. He had answered immediately so he must’ve thought about it for a while. He didn’t seem like someone to randomly blurt out a number. Not like her.

“That’s a secret.” The man said which made Philipp laugh from the side.

“Are you sure? He seems rather calculative? Knowing all your abilities might be bad for the future you.” Philipp said with a smile and looked at her sideways. “He probably realized you haven’t even checked the bucket over there, full of silver.”

“I mean yea, the price is only there to show it’s a real offer and not some desperate fuck looking for training partners.” Ilea said. The additional funds were of course nice but she could just ask Claire for money if she really needed it. The new mage raised his eyebrows and shook his head ever so slightly.

“You’ll get fifteen silver for each session but they’re six hours at least. Both of you of course.” Ilea said and smiled to the girl. The man looked even more irritated but still didn’t say anything.

“They won’t be allowed into Eregar’s Haven.” Philipp said.

“With us it’s fine. Plenty of workers down there as well.” Ilea said to which he nodded. “Can you take them already? I need to talk to a friend about Keyla here.”

“Of course. Come on then lads.” Philipp said, the two mages following him apprehensively, the girl looking back to Ilea with a smile.

“There’s plenty of restaurants yes.” Claire said after Ilea had asked about possible employment for Keyla.

“What about the one you worked at before?” Ilea asked.

“The Golden Drake. I doubt the elder who owns it would sell it.” Keyla shook her head. “I checked it out before and it looked abandoned anyway.”

“Wait, that name rings a bell.” Claire said and summoned a book, looking through it for a while. “Ah yes. It was owned by elder Wallace Urn. The man died in the demon summoning. There were some... peculiarities but...,” She went on before checking another book. “It went to the empire but I’ll see what I can do. Considering it’s still abandoned I should get a fair price for it. Would that be alright Ilea?” She asked.

“Depends on you Keyla? Any restaurant you’d get would be a success. Want the Golden Drake?”

“Are you insane? Just the property cost alone.” Keyla said but Claire waved her off.



“Even with a higher price than expected it wouldn’t be a problem. You were the cook before? It’s supposed to be one of the most highly esteemed places in Ravenhall. The South of the empire even if this book is to be believed.” Claire explained.

“Yea she’s a fucking amazing cook. Get it and make her the boss. Or do you want a manager and stuff? I’d be fine with you getting the staff you need and managing the place.” Ilea said, Keyla’s mouth opening and closing as her brain overheated.

“I’ll get it done. Give me a couple days. I’ll give you a list of different restaurants for potential staff or you may go out there and find them yourself. Plenty of street food vendors around but I think there’s already enough wealthy folk around to support a couple higher class establishments. To have a name already and the same cook would be beneficial. Can you stay here, we’ll draft up the details.” Claire said and Ilea got up.

“Great that’s settled then. Make sure she’s paid well.” Ilea said and turned to Keyla, “Let her know if you don’t want the Golden Drake. I’ll visit as soon as it’s running. You’ll cook only for me the first two weeks. I need to stock up on your food.” Ilea said and checked her necklace, finding only three meals remaining that were originally prepared by the cook.

# Chapter 222 Wrong Time, Wrong City

## Chapter 222 Wrong Time, Wrong City

Ilea nodded to Claire and left before the cook could change her mind. She would work at one of her restaurants, the Golden Drake or something else. The shock on her face told Ilea enough, the only interpretation not in her favor was that she somehow had a traumatic connection to that place but the way she had met her when she was working there gave that theory very little credibility.

*Now to get some wood and gray whatever resistance.* Ilea thought. She had some theories to the man's magic but wasn't sure yet. Making her way towards Viscera, she suddenly smelled a faint but familiar scent. *A small detour perhaps.*

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Freddie kept his magic active, delivering pain directly into the brains of the guards still standing. He looked around the barracks and frowned. The walls, beds and even ceilings were covered in blood. Bodies littered the ground, some of the imperials still breathing but he had them frozen in place. He heard the berserker rip through limbs, laughing to himself as he gave his mind to the class. Tugging on him with his mind magic, Freddie led the man back to the main sleeping hall.

“Come on berserker, take these one out and cut off their heads.” He said, knowing that the man didn’t hear anything he said. It helped him manifest the intent in his mind when he spoke it out loud. *Disgusting*. He thought, looking at the bald and shirtless man clutching his butcher knives in both hands. Drool and blood dripped from his mouth as the wounds he had sustained in the fight healed before Freddie’s eyes.

*Fifteen imperial guards*. The thought made him excited. It was mostly the money Baralia would pay but the levels he had just gotten through this were the cherry on top. Ravenhall had stacked up security but to think they’d let him join the guard so easily. Putting a little bit of herbal help into the food without actually poisoning them got them all to bed at a reasonable time. A little bit of mind magic and a wild beast were all that was needed to get the biggest haul to date.

*They expect to be safe here just because it’s far from the capital*. The thought made him smile a little. Most of the people had been below level one hundred, refugees or soldiers that decided to become guards.

He looked away when Takino raised his butcher knife to the terrified guard who could see but was unable to move.

“I’d think about that move again lad.” A voice made him turn and open his eyes wide. A woman had appeared in the room, standing a couple meters away from the berserker. His mind magic extended immediately. *Freeze...* He thought as he looked into the woman’s blue eyes. The room was dark and so was her leather armor. It looked rugged, burnt and barely holding together but something about her made the hair on his back stand up.

She cocked her head and smiled at him, her blue eyes looking into his when the headache started, the sudden pain making him stagger backwards and stumbling into the wall. Something clattered behind him but he tried to keep his eyes focused on the intruder.

*[Warrior – lvl ??]*

*Shadow...* He thought and sent a pulse towards Takino, his heart pounding in his chest as he again focused on his mind magic, condensing mana when the berserker took quick steps towards her and slashed at her head with his right knife. Freddie stabilized himself and got up, smiling when he saw Takino's arm stuck near her head. His smile faded when the woman moved her arm a little to the side, her hand firmly gripping the berserker's wrist and pushing it aside while the cracking of his bones resounded in the dark room.

The man didn't make a noise and used his other knife to attack. Freddie released his magic in that moment, sending an uncoordinated pulse to the woman's head before he reeled back in pain, a blinding shock made his vision blur. He heard a cut and looked up again to find his mate had managed to cut into her unprotected side, blood dripping down from the wound. She let go of his hand and watched with fascination as his wrist recovered, gripping the blade again and slashing at her right after.

Freddie winced at the pain in his head, unsheathing the daggers from his belt as he watched his partner rip through the woman's stomach and entrails, digging deeper with every wild slash. *Not a shadow then.* He thought with relief. Or a very incompetent one at that. Focusing on his own mind, he concentrated on the pain, grabbing a small health potion from one of the pouches on his belt with a shaking hand before removing the cork with his mouth. He downed the potion and breathed out with blades in hand and eyes focused on the room and anybody that moved.

"I see." He heard and looked at the berserker, something gray slowly enveloping the wild man who continued to cleave his blades into the newcomer. He ordered the man to return to his side but Takino's movements suddenly stopped. A sudden dull noise suddenly came from the man before a second and then a third noise could be heard. With the third

hit, Freddie could see the heavy man lift off from the ground but the gray mist around him kept him close to the woman. A sickening noise he had heard many a time before made him take a step back, the butcher knives ripping out of her flesh before they were punched through the berserker's neck, Freddie only seeing this through through the nearly black mist that got more and more dense.

Blood spurted out and painted the ground red behind the berserker before he was enveloped completely. *Run.* The thought was more an instinct as he turned around and nearly stumbled, his teleportation magic taking him out of the building and out onto the streets of Ravenhall. It was night but the many new streetlights and lanterns kept the city in a perpetual state of warm illumination. Stepping on the cobble stone, he ran as fast as he could, any buff to mask his presence activating as he teleported again and again, as quickly as the skill allowed it.

Hearing noises around the corner, he stopped and melded with the wall and the shadows as well as he could. "Quiet night." He heard a man say before the patrolling guards rounded the corner, not taking notice of him it seemed, the second guard grunting in affirmation to the first one's statement. Again he teleported, this time down into the sewers before he started running again, looking behind himself whenever he could.

Around ten minutes later, he slowed down and focused on being silent, making his way through the sewers as he slowed his heart beat until he came up on an entrance to the underground of the city. It would be busy with trade, refugees and whores to be sure but here he could slip into the crowd. Something about that woman had made his instincts go haywire but he had calmed down a little during his flight.

*Fuck... fucking fuck.* He scolded himself for losing all those corpses. Maybe she was looking to get guards as well. The money and status Baralia offered was nothing he had ever heard of before. One could become a bloody noble in a conquered city if enough people had been killed. A woman lightly dressed nodded towards him and revealed her chest to entice him. Freddie looked her way but continued walking, as naturally as possible through the barely lit tunnels of the underground.

He had been here before and even with what the hell he heard happened with this city, it was still the same. New faces but that only meant he'd be even less likely to be recognized. Going down some stairs after checking behind him, he reached a long corridor that led to the central trading hub of the underground. At least it had been exactly that when he had been in Ravenhall last.

Something in his mind cried out when he was close to the door and made him turn around. Blue eyes stared back at him. Blood dripped down from the woman's hands and her uncovered stomach. The gray mist around her separated into eight distinct limbs before she appeared right in front of him. *Ash* He thought as he was enveloped, feeling the familiar texture as he tried and failed to activate his teleportation skill. A hand gripped his throat and pressed it together as he struggled against the monster standing before him, his daggers stabbing at her face and chest with all the strength he could muster. His mind magic lashed out but the blue eyes stayed unwavering, focused and determined while his vision blurred more and more before it went dark.

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Ilea strengthened her grip, pressing down on his wind pipe before she felt his body going limp. Holding him for another minute, she heard the ding in her mind, letting the man drop to the ground. Crouching down, she checked his pouches and any pockets he had but didn't find anything useful. The wounds on her face and chest were healing rapidly, his last struggles uncoordinated and fruitless.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Mindcracker – lvl 158 / Stalker of Iri – lvl 149]'*

None of her skills or classes leveled, as expected from an enemy that weak. *What a bloody massacre.* She thought and took the body into her necklace, blinking upwards twice, her wings spreading when she stood back on the streets of Ravenhall, a street lamp bathing her ash in a dull but warm light. Blood still dripped from her hands and belly.

Seeing how the berseker had only been at level one thirty, she wanted to check if he had any magic that could benefit her as a resistance. It turned out that he was a blood mage, something she had faced a couple times before already. Flying back to the place she had smelled the blood from, she entered the building, summoning the corpse in the process before she unceremoniously dropped him next to the bald berseker. The man had seemed completely lost in his blood lust. It had reminded her of Roland but luckily this was a different man.

“That’s the mind mage.” She said to the guards that were sitting or standing around the dead. One of them was crying, held by another guard that patted their back.

“They cut off the heads of the dead.” A man with a gruff looking beard and a scar on his cheek said before standing up and kicking the new body she had brought. “Cowards.” He spat.

“Probably trying to get in on the Baralia war bounty. I doubt they’d slaughter a whole group of guards otherwise.” Ilea said. “I didn’t find anything on him though.”

“We found the notice on the beefy one. That’s evidence enough. Fuck.” The man said again. “Did you see anybody else?”

“He was killing people and the mind mage froze them in place. I don’t smell anybody else, other than the dead and those that are still here.” Ilea said, checking the room again with her Hunter’s Sight, the skill that had allowed her to follow and find the mind mage. His smell of ale and more importantly blood was unmistakable.

“Thank you Shadow. Can you stay until an officer arrives?” The man asked. She locked eyes with him and blinked her eyes.

“No. You’re lucky I was around. Everyone’s healed. Ask for Lilith if you need anything. And get them the hell out of this room.” She said, motioning to the two young guys sitting on the bloodied bed. The man nodded when she blinked out, continuing on her way to Viscera, this time through the air and with a higher speed. *Unpleasant delay.* She thought, again annoyed that she was still in a shit city. *Fucking humans.*

Entering the Haven, she looked out at the sun shining in the distance. A deep breath filled her lungs before she sighed at the lands before her. It was all artificial though, or at least that was the story behind it. Even if it was, it certainly was enough to tug on her. *Why would they do something that stupid in the city of the Hand?* She questioned the planning of the two murderers, their abilities and power enough to wipe out whole city guards in smaller towns but they had chosen Ravenhall.

Seeing how this happened even here, it must’ve been worse in smaller cities with fewer guards, fewer high level people that aren’t out for money and power. *It’s gonna be a bloody massacre.* She thought, shaking her head. The empire wouldn’t come out of this war the same as when it had entered it. The ground came closer and she quickly spotted both Viper and Philipp waiting with the two young mages near the elevator platform.

“Took your sweet time lassie.” Philipp said when he saw her, a smile on his face. He had certainly become more of a joker in the past weeks.

“Why the newcomers? You’re aware that they’d die with a single hit in our training?” Viper asked, looking at her with a serious expression. The boy stared at him while the girl looked to the ground.

“They have rare magic. Perhaps the Hand will profit from it if we take them in early, show them the ropes before they go out and level quickly through



their special powers. Might save their lives and we have another two capable fighters.” Ilea explained.

“You mean more competition for the others.” Viper said and sighed.

“With the war, the elves, demons and whatever the fuck this continent will spew up next I think we can use a little more competition. Don’t you think Viper?” Ilea suggested to which he didn’t reply.

“Philipp feels ready to do jobs again.” Viper said, looking at the man. The hunter smiled a little awkwardly and looked at her, shrugging a little.

“So you’re leaving. Well I’ve learned a lot, you’ve certainly done your job. Tonight the last one?”

Viper nodded.

*Wish I could leave too. Ilea thought. At least some more second tier resistances. Then I’m out.*

“Got new members for your team already?” She asked.

“Yes. Team of three, we know each other from back in the day. They... lost people too.” Viper explained and she nodded.

“You can join too if you want to. I’d be good to have your power.” Philipp said, the other mage staring at him and shaking his head. “Hey, you’re not the one to decide alone anymore.”

Ilea smiled at Philipp and shook her head. “Don’t worry Viper, I don’t intent to join. Thanks for the offer of course, it... means a lot to me.” She said, not going into further reasons.

“Then I guess we only have a couple hours to teach them. What do you suggest light mage?” Ilea asked.

They moved out a little further, Ilea carrying the two mages with protests from the man. They landed near an open field, Ilea remembering coming here to train with her team from time to time. Viper landed a little further off, motioning Philipp towards him. “We start with a bout. It’ll be good for them to see what can be possible. Philipp, go and protect them.” Viper said, the hunter nodding and walking over to a small hill a little off the field.

A stray magic blast could end their lives in an instant but Ilea trusted both of them to be coordinated enough not to let something like that happen. Still, even an experienced chemist wore safety goggles. She looked at the girl first and smiled. “I’m Ilea. What’s your name?”

“Raphia... Miss Ilea.” She replied and bowed deeply, her brown braided hair nearly falling over her head at the gesture. Ilea saw her burned back from the angle, the girl being a little smaller than herself.

“Nice to meet you Raphia.” Ilea said and watched the girl straighten herself, looking into her eyes and then to the ground again. She had dark skin and blue eyes, a beautiful combination Ilea thought. She would look striking with a couple more years and something more flattering than the cheap brown shirt and pants.

“Are you willing to share your name at least?” She asked the thin man dressed in clothes just as cheap as the girl’s.

“Cornelius.” He replied and bowed slightly as well, surprising her. His previous attitude had reminded her more of a rebellious teenager. Now that she looked a little more closely, she guessed his age a little lower than previously.

*Might not be in his twenties yet.*

“Good. Now I just brought you here to gain the resistances to your respective magic. You know that Cornelius and you know that now too Raphia. Still, you’re working with a Shadow now and as far as I know there’s plenty of opportunities the Hand can provide to train you. If you’re helpful to me, I might do the same for you. At the very least you’ll get your fifteen silvers.”

“Now I want you to watch and realize that there are people out there who can do this and more.” She said and motioned to Philipp. The two nodded and walked over to the hunter with a brisk pace.

“Stand a little behind me. I’ll shield you should anything come this way.” The man said with a serious expression, both Raphia and Cornelius taking a couple steps back.

“So this is the last one?” Ilea asked as she focused on Viper.

“Perhaps but as fate has it we’ll probably meet again sooner or later. Hopefully not as enemies.” The man replied, magic surging around him, the wild plants growing on the field catching on fire and withering away.

“I hope so too.” Ilea said *For your sake*.

“Good, then let’s see if what I tried to teach you has born any fruit.” He said, an arrow entering her Sphere, cutting through the air with a hiss.

# Chapter 223 Pointers

## Chapter 223 Pointers

Cornelius held his breath, prepared to use his magic whenever necessary. Had he made it? To think an actual Shadow would take interest in him. *Keep your guard up.* The thought never left his mind. Not when the woman had first talked to him during the supposed magic training session and not for a moment after. He had checked out the arena after people in the adventurer guild had talked about it, a real Shadow, not some kind of misleading job offer as so many others seemed to be.

It turned out there were two more and they would actually train together in Eregar's Haven, the legendary underground base of the Shadow's Hand. He was still suspicious of course, ready to flee at any moment. The woman had offered to train with them, something one at his level could only dream of. *If it's too good to be true...* The words echoed in his mind but he had learned that sometimes taking stupid risks would pay off. The wood mage girl next to him didn't seem to be concerned by any of his worries, a stupid smile on her face as she watched the two Shadows prepare on the field.

*She was there to train resistances and that was true. Why wouldn't she want us here? Why would she kill us?* Questions flowed through his mind as he considered possibilities. None of her reactions had been predictable. He had tried to gauge her with asking for money, something no Shadow would agree to but Ilea had, if that was really her name. A powerful surge of magic made him focus, head radiating from the robed mage even as far as

they were standing. The plants around him were set aflame but Cornelius couldn't make out a skill being used. *Is it burning from his mana alone?*

“Now don't make a noise.” The Shadow standing before them said, a bow suddenly appearing in his hand, an arrow in the other. Both looked more expensive than all the wealth Cornelius or his parents had ever possessed. The man drew his bow and aimed at the Shadow who was supposed to face the mage before her. He looked over to Raphia who looked to be in conflict with herself, switching her gaze from the hunter to the warrior.

“You saw her before, she will survive.” Cornelius said, mostly to stop her from doing anything stupid. She could ruin their chances, whatever that meant. Perhaps the Shadows wanted to kill Ilea, perhaps it was a test of some sort. He didn't know. Her behavior compared to the two made him think she was an apprentice, someone inexperienced compared to the mage or the hunter but these were Shadows he was talking about. Anything was possible. At least he knew she could take quite a bit of magical damage before being damaged but in an actual fight, how much would that mean?

The arrow was loosed, the projectile flying with a speed he could hardly process, enhanced by either the bow or its user no doubt. *It should be louder.* He thought and watched as the arrow hit. Ilea hadn't moved, at least that was what he thought at first. The woman's hand was lifted, holding the arrow in it as gray mist formed around her. *Is that?* Cornelius thought but the consistency looked different. *Ash? So she's a creator as well.* He smiled, perhaps she could teach him something after all. If she survived.

Ilea didn't look their way and he watched as the arrow exploded, the force of the blast pushing them back a little but the hunter didn't seem to be bothered by it at all. He caught himself and walked up the incline again to see the fighters, Ilea's ash lowering to reveal a completely uninjured face. Her arm didn't look any worse either from the distance. And then she vanished. Cornelius looked around to find the mage also missing, a sudden beam of light appearing in the air above before Ilea and her ash was flung to the ground, crashing into it with a loud boom. He watched as she skidded to a halt and vanished again. *I can barely see them.* He thought, his nails digging into his palms as he activated his magic. The hunter looked his way and nodded.

It was a little easier to follow them now but mostly because the light mage didn't move at all, instead remaining in the air, occasionally shooting blasts of fire and light at the appearing warrior. Half of the field was on fire already, his eyes growing teary and his throat itching from the smoke. A blast fired into the air but Ilea didn't follow, the mage vanishing and ash following behind as the blasts became more frantic, quicker between pauses until he somehow couldn't vanish anymore. Tendrils of ash was all that Cornelius could make out in the tumble that hit the ground with immense speed.

“And it's over. He did better this time.” The hunter before them said, Cornelius raising his eyebrows.

“What do you mean? She was blasted ten times.” He said and squinted his eyes, trying to make out the area where the two had impacted. The man could've easily been the one coming out on top from that encounter.

“I'm afraid it needs a little more to take her down. Hard enough to hit her at all.” The hunter said and made his way to the fighters, unconcerned about the possible danger. “Is he conscious?!”

Cornelius looked at the fire but couldn't stop himself, following the hunter. Raphia looked at him and walked down as well, sweat on her face when he quickly glanced her way.

“Give it another minute.” He heard Ilea's voice come out of the fires.

“Damn flames. You guys can't control fire?” The hunter asked, Cornelius trusting his intuition as he concentrated on his magic. Dust began to form in his hands before it spread out, more and more added to it as his mana dwindled. He made it lay on top of the flames, smothering them out to form a path towards the voice they had heard before.

“Nice one.” The hunter commented but he barely heard it, sweat on his brow as he painfully stopped his spell before his last ounce of mana would be used up. Falling unconscious in front of the Shadows would be the opposite of what he intended.

“Are you ok?” Raphia asked from his side, touching his arm. He slapped her hand aside and continued walking, the girl staring at him with fear in her eyes.

“There you go. Could you put out the flames?” Ilea said, straightening herself over the mage who coughed up what looked like ash.

“You... why... always in my mouth?” He asked, spitting on the ground before he lifted his hand, the fires subsiding immediately, their life taken as if he was the god of flame. Cornelius looked at him with big eyes and then realized that the woman had taken him down. He saw the grin on her face when the mage stood up, ash dancing around her body before it slowly dissolved. He could feel goose bumps on his body as he gulped hard.

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“A dust mage?” Viper asked as he continued coughing. Ilea loved pushing some ash into his throat, just as he loved burning through her skin and organs with his magic. Even with her second stage in heat resistance, he could damage her. With her Veil and ash around her it would take a couple direct and prolonged hits though, nothing he could consistently manage during a bout.

She had underestimated him at first, thinking that he'd be just another mage with a strong attack but his movements and speed were on par with Trian if not better. He would use his magic to burn through any connections she established to his body with her ash or hands, staying focused even after several hard hits. He definitely had more Vitality than most mages she had fought before plus some impressive defensive skills. *A reasonable approach.* She thought but most people didn't seem to agree with her, instead rather investing everything into destructive power to quickly whittle down anybody's defenses and health.

The problem occurred only when the enemy stood up again. “I liked you more when you weren’t that ruthless.” Viper said as he stood up.

“Yea I mean it was fun to have my head turned to ash before our bouts even started.” Ilea commented with a smile.

“That was one time, don’t hold that against me. You said I should go all out.” Viper hissed.

“It’s so easy to irritate you. Maybe I should join that team.” Ilea joked, sent tumbling by the sudden white flame that impacted her head. Her Veil hadn’t been up, both eyes and most of her skin melted in an instant before she caught herself, her hand digging into the ground and bringing her to a stop as her healing started, ash forming around her and her defenses activating.

“Outstanding move.” Philipp said and held up two thumbs when a flying ball of ash and fury impacted the injured mage, the two of them rushing over the field before she pushed him down into the dirt, her fist landing on his head, a shield of light flaring up before her ashen limbs dug into it, sending Wave of Ember into it, her left hand adding reversed healing while her right one kept punching. Three hits and it was broken, his white flame just now passing through her Veil before she grabbed his hand, crushed it to break several bones and pushing it away, the spell burning into the ground.

Another punch to his head and his nose was broken, another one and his right eye was squashed. He held up his broken hand as fire enveloped her, burning into her ash and health. Again, she took his arm and this time bent it to the side, breaking it as he winced and screamed, his other arm held by her left one. Ilea held up her fist, the man just looking at her with broken teeth and a crooked smile before she kned him right in the junk. Again he howled in pain. She wanted to say something but remembered her face hadn’t been healed, her throat burnt and her mouth partially missing.

Breathing heavily, she rolled to the side, her face rebuilding slowly while the man cried in pain, holding his crotch with his one good arm. Ilea’s eyes opened, good as new before she touched him, checking on his health to find him not closer to death than she had gotten him before. *Tough fucker.*



“Was that really worth it?” She asked, spitting out some blood that had remained in her mouth.

“Always...,” The man groaned before she started healing him.

“Do you have a healer in the new team?”

“We do, second class but he’s good enough. About your quality I suppose.” He replied, wincing as he moved his destroyed arm. She took care of his internal bleedings and his broken face first before she healed his arm.

“Your defenses are pretty good though, for a mage.”

“The only reason you win is because you’re the only one I’ve met able to take my attacks for longer than a couple seconds.” Viper replied, his face back to his usual grumpy look.

“Don’t flatter yourself, I’m obviously just better.” Ilea joked, standing up and helping him in turn.

“You are.” He said in a serious tone, making her look at him but the man didn’t say anything else, Philipp and the others joining them while the hunter clapped.

“Nearly died because he just couldn’t accept defeat.” The man said and stopped clapping. “At least you managed to traumatize these two, good job.”

Ilea watched the young mages but if anything she found admiration in their eyes. Envy perhaps but if anything she felt like this was a good thing for them to see. “He said dust mage before, is that true Cornelius?”

The man nodded with a smile, at least he didn’t look as cocky as he had before. “Alright then, both of you attack me with everything you have.” Ilea said and appeared a little closer to the center of the field. Big parts of it were still charred, smoke in the air and the smell of burnt flesh and hair interwoven. Raphia gagged a little but was the first to face her, wood

forming before her. Cornelius looked at her and then stepped to her side, his hands held together, dust appearing between them.

“You are both element creators.” Viper said, having put up his nigh indestructible hood again. “That means you have an advantage against other mages. You can fuel your spells from your mana alone, no need for the air and nature around you.” He winked at Ilea and continued the lesson.

“While many classes evolve to allow creation, wood and dust are not normally found, meaning you have the privilege to grow through your powers quickly. Now attack her.”

Wood and dust shot her way but Ilea simply moved to the side quickly, her boots digging deep into the earth as she dashed to the side, coming to a stop as their magic hit nothing.

“You know her defensive capabilities. Neither of your attacks would’ve done any damage and yet she moved away. Why?” Viper asked.

“Because she does whatever she feels like?” Philipp interrupted and smiled.

“She is standing closer to us now. And if we didn’t know her, we might think her defenses are low, allowing her to surprise us with a frontal attack later in the fight.” Cornelius said, Viper looking at him with raised eyebrows.

“Good. Yes. Although in her case I agree more with Philipp. Still, Ilea knows to trust her skills and instincts, her movements quicker than her brain could likely process... although I have a feeling she has skills that increase that.” He said and looked at her. “You both are mages, your attacks currently focused in the ranged variety. Just like mine.”

“You’ll have to learn to fight in close quarters, to keep your concentration and spells up even when an enemy is slashing their sword through your flesh. Keep a healer nearby or even better, learn skills that heal yourself if your class allows it. Even little recovery can decide between living and dying so chose wisely between offensive and defensive power.” Viper explained.

Ilea appeared behind the two mages standing entirely too close together and grabbed their arms before she flung them forward, the kids hitting the ground and tumbling. “Keep vigilant, don’t get distracted when you are in a fight.” Viper said while the two got up slowly, defiance in their eyes. “Found some promising ones didn’t you?” He whispered towards her.

*That’s what war does to children.* Ilea thought.

“Good. Keep a lookout at your health and signal your healer if you’re injured or crippled. Raphia, you have a sprained ankle. Try to endure the pain and don’t shot it to the enemy, especially not smart enemies. They will favor your weak side and use it against you.” Ilea jogged towards the girl’s left, moving in when she tried to face her but moaned out in pain when she put weight on her foot.

Standing before her, the girl looked up at her with tears in her eyes but Ilea just grabbed her and healed the foot. “You’re a healer...,” Raphia exclaimed, Cornelius snorting behind her.

“What do you think she did to the mage, kiss him?” He said and the girl looked away.

“Don’t let him frighten you.” Ilea whispered to her when she got close and jumped away again.

“You have rare classes, the both of you. Still, either at level one hundred, one fifty or two hundred you will likely get the chance to evolve them. Until then you should level your skills as high as possible. Train and fight, try to find a healer to incorporate into your team or get the necessary skills yourself. I didn’t have the foresight when I rushed through the levels and still I regret not having gotten everything to the second stage at least before getting my current classes.” Viper explained. Ilea doubted his apparent lack of foresight but didn’t comment on it.

“That’s what I’ll offer you. Perhaps Ilea will teach you some more.” Viper said and nodded to Ilea.

“Thanks.” Ilea simply said and looked to the two.

“Thank you!” Raphia shouted and Cornelius bowed to him.

“I’ll be in the arena again tomorrow. Make sure to say bye.” Ilea said and waved to the two Shadows who were about to leave.

“Of course.” Philipp said and smiled at her, bowing lightly as he said it. Viper nodded before they made their way out of the Haven.

The three looked after the mages before Ilea clapped. “Alright. Now you’ll have a little more time to try out your skills and to level them on me. Just go nuts. Both of you have meditation already?” She asked, Raphia nodding but Cornelius looking around a little confused.

“Really?” Ilea asked. *That was unexpected.* “Raphia can show you how to do it, I’m sure you’ll figure it out in no time.”

Now it was his turn to look a little flustered. They soon started to attack her, Ilea deactivating her spells and looking towards the elevator in the distance. A smile came to her lips before she focused on the two mages again, their attacks already impacting her uncovered belly. “Move while you attack, at your level you might be able to get some stat points for free.”

# Chapter 224 The Daily Grind

## Chapter 224 The Daily Grind

Ilea started her daily resistance training class in the arena a couple hours earlier that day. William taught her what was necessary to survive underwater meaning she had around half a day to herself now. She would still occasionally test possible new members but those were few and far in between. Only four had joined the Hand after she had tested Gan and Bataar. *Wonder if they are dead already.*

The arena was closed off, the clerk sleeping on his desk when she arrived. She quickly checked the wooden table and the boxes below, finding the key inside one of them. The lock on the chain clicked and was removed, opening the double door to the underground arena she had rented for the third consecutive week.

*Maybe I'll get stuck here and become a training instructor.* She mused, not hating the idea as much as she would've thought. New people seeking adventure would come in and from time to time they might return, showing off their new gear or skills to the instructor that initially believed in them. *Dale is more shocked whenever he sees me.* Ilea snorted, summoning the battered metal bucked from her necklace.

She had earned around 1830 silver coins in the past weeks, 18 gold and 30 silvers. Exchanging them in the adventurer guild had cost three silvers which brought her new total to 50 gold, 71 silver and 62 copper coins. *And half the bloody city if I know Claire at all.*

“How the fuck can’t shadows pay off their debt of a hundred gold in a couple months?” She asked herself and shook her head. The empty bucket fell onto the sandy ground next to her. She had informed the guild to change the time on her notice. Seeing how popular the job was, they offered to keep it on the notice board for free.

The first people started coming already and it was barely one in the afternoon. She had decided to sleep a couple hours longer in the morning, enjoying her bed at home. *Might want to bring that one.* She thought as she waved to the group of adventurers. A new team formed in Ravenhall, levels around a hundred but they wanted to work on their skills and teamwork before going out.

“Welcome back. Did you decide on a name yet?” Ilea asked and walked away from the bucket. Sadly it didn’t have a recovery skill like herself.

“Not yet. Is that really necessary Shadow?” One of them asked.

“No idea. I think when you’re out there you’ll have more pressing matters than your group’s name.” She replied with a smile.

“Miss Ilea. We erm... we thought as long as it’s just us, maybe we could do a real bout against you. We’d be willing to pay more of course.” The apparent leader of the team asked. Their group had come nearly every day in the past week, paying huge amounts of silver just to train with her. Their gear was already good and their knowledge and experience even better.

“Sure, but only for a short while. I’m here to train resistances and if you can’t hit me it kind of defeats the purpose.” Ilea said as ash started forming around her. “You don’t have to pay more either.”

“Move out!” The warrior said and Ilea smiled as his team immediately moved into a crude formation, mages in the back, healer in the middle and the warriors up front, standing in a way that allowed the mages to send their projectiles her way.

“Good formation.” Ilea said and blinked to the healer, grabbing the woman by the neck and lifting her up. “If you move I’ll kill her.”

The team froze up and spun around to face her, unsure how to proceed. The mages had their spells at the ready but hadn't fired them immediately. "Too bad. She's already dead." Ilea said, letting go of the woman who started coughing immediately. Blinking to one of the mages, she kicked at their leg, dodging the fire that she blasted towards her face.

The bone cracked and pierced the mage's skin, the woman screaming before she fell down. "Aim at the center of mass, it's your best bet to deal some damage at least." Ilea said and rushed at the other mage, dashing left and right to avoid the lightning bolts rushing past her before a warrior intercepted her, his offhand shield smashing into her.

"Good job." She said, holding onto the shield while they skidded to a halt. Turning the shield, she twisted until he was on the ground. Putting a foot behind his back, she was about to break the arm when a lightning bolt made her dodge again. "You should be able to let go of your weapons should the need arise. Find a good balance, you don't want to lose them without good reason."

Rushing at the mage again, she found he had relocated and stood near the remaining warrior now, the two protecting the healer who was taking care of the crying and injured mage. Ilea nodded at that and stopped. "What went wrong?"

She didn't intervene in the healing, instead letting them do their own thing. "We didn't immediately flee." The warrior behind her said, his arm injured by her twist as he unslung his shield, the heavy iron piece falling to the ground with a clatter.

"Perhaps. You've seen how quick I am, that I can teleport around. I would've picked you off one by one." Ilea said. "Grouping up again might be the best option, like you did in the end. The formation was good against anybody with less mobility and I assume you'll be fighting monsters?" The warrior before her nodded, his sword still held high with the one good arm.

"They're easier predictable but not always. Inform yourself well as soon as you've made contact with whatever beast occupies the dungeon or land you work in. If it's an unknown, learn as you go." Ilea explained, the mage's

bone cracking back into place as she winced. “Use whatever time the enemy gives you to the fullest... but you’re already doing that.” The warrior had circled her to join the group while the lightning mage was preparing a more complicated spell she had seen him use in their training before.

“Props to the healer for not panicking. You’ve all at least seen some action.” Ilea said. “Would you like me to continue?”

Viper and Philipp later showed up as promised, clad in their usual black gear but wearing packs on their backs additionally. “No storage rings for you?” Ilea joked, spells raining down on her as she gestured the mage group to stop.

“Perhaps we’ll find some on the journey.” Philipp replied and hugged her.

“Where to?” She hugged the man back.

“West. The destroyed independent cities have become breeding grounds for beasts, cull the herd a little and investigate.” Viper supplied.

“And loot whatever isn’t looted yet?” Ilea asked, the man snorting at that.

“It’s no man’s land now.” He simply stated.

“Well then I wish you good fortune. Hopefully no elves.”

“I hope for the opposite.” Viper said and grinned.

“You’re still bound to go north?” Philipp asked as he let go of her, a nod his reply. “Well then it’s not us who need the wishes.” He smiled. “Let’s meet up again here and have dinner, all of us.”

Ilea was surprised no dragon suddenly razed the city to the ground at that statement. “Don’t deathflag me Philipp, it’s not a nice thing to do.”



“What does deathflaggin mean?” The man asked to which Ilea quickly explained.

“Ah, I understand. Then let’s not meet up. I hope we both die.” He said, smiling.

*You don’t understand Philipp.* Ilea thought and shook her head laughing.

“Seriously though, good luck.” The man said and punched her chest.

“Good luck Ilea. Let us know if you need support at some point.” Viper added.

“To you as well.” She said, thinking about the lack of any cool one liners related to the Shadow’s Hand. *Maybe we don’t need that.*

She watched them leave with a smile before turning to her trainees again and gestured for them to continue.

“Philly, come quickly.” Ilea said after the training ended, her two trainees waiting a little to the side.

“You two can continue your training together, I’ll be right there.” Ilea said when the ice mage came up to her.

“What can I do for you Shadow?” Philly asked.

***[Mage – lvl 140]***

“I might be able to get you an ice mage instructor of the hand. Interested?” Ilea asked, watching her face light up at the question.

“Definitely, what would I have to do for that? My goal is to eventually join the Hand anyway.” She replied immediately.

“I haven’t asked the guy yet but I feel like he likes torturing an apprentice. It’s gonna fuck you up but he’s good.” Ilea said, the smile on Philly leaving slowly.

“I’d still do it.” She said, determined.

“Good, I’ll ask him then. Maybe those two will join as well. The old fucker might not accept his luck at first.” Ilea said more to herself as she waved the others over. “I’ll talk to you again tomorrow if you’re here.”

“Of course lady Shadow.” She said and bowed.

“Ilea is fine you know. Come on, ready to get thrown around again?” She asked the two, Cornelius snorting and Raphia giggling nervously.

“And why did you want me to watch you train those two?” William asked, standing next to her while they watched Raphia and Cornelius meditate, creating as much of their element as possible.

“To get to know them. Both creators and as you can see with rare classes. I want them to be nurtured and I wanted you to be their trainer.” Ilea explained, the man frowning next to her.

“Did the drowning get to your mind?”

“No. But I’ve seen how much you enjoyed it. You’re aware I can see with my sphere. I traced your movements and know you wrote down the times I could stay underwater. Your statistics were a little extensive I think. I don’t think your other work suffered much. Ever considered becoming a team manager?” Ilea asked, thinking back on Joseph who had been theirs for a little while. She wondered if he had survived. Not enough to actually check with Claire.

“That’s just for full members.” William said.

“Eh, one of the elders is a traitor, one is dead and the others are fuck know’s where. The Shadowguard is a thing now and you evaluate some of them as well don’t you? Why not train them too, in addition to some young and talented fighters like these?”

The man was quiet for a while. “Why?”

“Why not, the job seems to fit you. I also have two more people that would fit well into the team. An ice mage at level one forty and a healer working for the imperial guard at the moment. I think they’d make a wonderful mercenary team together.” Ilea suggested.

“I mean why think about me even? All I did was riddle you with ice and drown you.”

Ilea thought about it for a while and then smiled. “I have this unhealthy notion that makes me care about people who hurt me.” She said. “Maybe it’s stockholm syndrome.”

“I read about something like that, the name was different I think.”

“It’s a fine line between caring and wanting to rip off their heads.” Ilea said seriously, the man turning towards her before he started laughing.

“You truly are one of a kind. Warn me before you go for my head but you certainly deserve it more than others. I’ll take the team and I’ll... think about training some guards. I heard a group of imperials were wiped out by a mind mage just yesterday. Embarrassing I tell you.”

Ilea grunted in response. “So you’re leaving then? Done with your resistances and drowning?”

“Not quite. Hopefully soon. Maybe you can help with ice and water. They’re both sitting close to the second stage. Maybe while these two try to give me their respective resistances too.” Ilea suggested.

“We might as well start then. You two.” He said and walked over. “Ilea asked me to train you. Objections?”

“Anybody’s better than her.” Cornelius said with a grin while Raphia looked at the ice mage and then Ilea.

“What about you girl?” William asked in a harsh tone.

“I... if she thinks it’s a good id... idea.” Raphia said and looked at Ilea, the woman nodding once.

*Better than me? You will learn pain my boy.* Ilea thought and grinned.

“That’s settled then. We will start now, get up and run laps. Dodge my attacks in the process.” He said, Ilea watching the two confusedly stare at him.

*Bad move.* She thought when the first spikes of ice hit them, digging into their flesh just enough to hurt. Raphia was the first to react, getting up quickly and starting to run in a random direction. Cornelius opened his mouth but was hit with a chunk of ice in his teeth. *Gotta hurt.* And then he ran as well.

“Slow learners those. No wonder after you trained them.” William said and turned to her.

“I’m immune to your banter William, come on. Let’s get me those resistances.” Ilea said and pointed at her belly while the air around them cooled, a lance of ice forming before the mage. She could tell he was happy.

***‘ding’ ‘Water Resistance reaches lvl 19’***

***‘ding’ ‘Ice Resistance reaches lvl 20’***

The two final notifications of the night made Ilea smile. Getting her body destroyed by attacks was much simpler than drowning. His sadism or in his words *rigorous methods* had been directed at the two new students after he realized Ilea wasn’t much bothered by whatever attack he produced.

Cornelius lay knocked out on the ground, bleeding from his head and dozens of small cuts on his body that William assured her were nothing to be taken seriously. She had checked of course but found his words to be right. Raphia was crying quietly as she hugged her knees.

“Are you up for this girl?” Ilea asked when she sat down next to her.

“Up for this... yes. Yes. I gained a point in Dexterity and two in Endurance. Ice Resistance as well. It’s... good.” Raphia said. “I’ll miss you.”

“You can stop at any moment but I think he’s good at what he does, albeit a little extreme. You’ll look back on it with hate and despair, those emotions fueling whatever destructive spells you will bring down on your enemies.” Ilea said and patted her head, a sob leaving the girl. “If that is what you want.”

“I want to... bring destruction down on my enemies.” The girl said, sobbing between words with snot coming out of her nose and tears in her eyes.

“That’s my girl.” Ilea said.

“Don’t worry. I won’t torture them like this everyday. Just wanted to see what they’re made of.” William said as they walked out of Viscera, the two trainees sleeping in the apartment Ilea still had in the town of the Hand.

“What do you think?”

“I’ll work with them.”

“That’s the highest praise anybody will ever get from you, damn perfectionist.” Ilea said and chuckled. “Hungry?”

“The world is filled with untapped potential. If you didn’t sit around in restaurants all the time maybe you’d actually get somewhere.”

“Careful old man, we don’t want to produce property damage with your limp body. You’d have to pay me more than you own.” Ilea replied. “I wanted to check out a new place.”

“If it’s an invitation.” The man said.

“Not making enough at the Hand? Could talk to Claire about that.” She suggested as they walked through the city, the suns rising but still hidden behind the mountain chain separating the city from the plains.

“Don’t talk to her about me. I make enough.” The man said abruptly, even lifting his hand to metaphorically stop her.

“You like her? Or are you scared of her?” Ilea asked with a smile when they passed some nature mages growing trees on a patch of earth between the cobble stone. One could see the sapling grow. *Magic being awesome.*

“I don’t know Ilea.” William answered when they rounded a corner to the next street.

“Bit of both maybe.” She suggested and saw the building she was looking for in the distance.

“Maybe.” He said as they came up on the Golden Drake, the sign broken in places and many of the windows destroyed, one wall outright missing.

“Golden Drake is it?” He asked. “Looks like it’s owned by the empire.”

“It was.” Ilea said and entered, the door wide open but her nose didn’t lie. She led him into the kitchen where she saw a group of people watching a lone Breed work.

“We’re closed.” Keyla shouted when Ilea opened the door.

“I knew you couldn’t resist.” Ilea said and smiled as she walked towards the pot. “What’s that.”

“Ah it’s... that’s Lilith. She’s the owner and he is?” Keyla asked, the cooks standing around the room nodding or bowing respectfully.

“William. We’d like breakfast. How about that?”

“It’s a northern seafood dish, very savory and not my suggestion for breakfast.” Keyla explained while Ilea took a spoon to taste.

“We’ll have it. How’s the top floor?”

“Most of the tables and chairs smashed to pieces and parts of the walls are missing.”

“Towards the suns?” Ilea asked, getting two plates and handing one to William.

“Where are the suns?” Keyla asked, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Northwest.” One of the cooks supplied.

“Yes, probably.”

“Good.” Ilea said and smiled, filling her plate before William did the same, bowing to the cook after he was done. The stairs were broken but Ilea simply blinked up, her plate still in hand. The man behind her concentrated before ice started forming before him, effectively rebuilding the stairwell.

“That’s gonna be water damage William.” Ilea sighed and grabbed one of the tables, dragging it towards the opening in the wall. The man got two chairs and handed one to her. “What a gentleman.” She said and smiled.

“You’re the owner, what other choice do I have.”

# Chapter 225 The Shadow's Hand

## Chapter 225 The Shadow's Hand

“It’s the most powerful one I could make in that size.” Claire said, handing the metal piece to Ilea.

“Don’t activate it now please, trust me it works. I suggest only using it in emergencies, although I know how much you can take.”

“Thank you. I’ll need three at least.” Ilea said, Claire rolling her eyes.

“I’ll get it done until next week. You’re here for that long?”

“Probably. Hey do you have any time free in your schedule for some blast resistance training?” The woman didn’t seem too pleased to hear the request.

“I will make time for you but I don’t really have any.” Claire replied, getting out a bottle from a drawer and pouring herself a drink.

“You’re drinking now?” Ilea asked.

“It’s a potion, energizes me.”

“Maybe you need some explosion training. You’re overworking, it’s not healthy, even for a monster like yourself.” Ilea said, sitting on the desk and taking away the drink. “I’m sure you have a network of great people working for you already. Delegate more.”



“And eat this.” She added, summoning a plate of the meal Keyla had served to her and William earlier. They’re the same when it comes to work at least.

Claire rubbed her eyes but started eating nonetheless, quickly getting lost in it before the plate was empty. “This is excellent, did you find a new street cook?”

“That’s from Keyla, I don’t think the Golden Drake will be a wasted investment.” Ilea said and took the plate, storing it inside her necklace.

“Alright. I’ll do it. Train a little with you, it’s been entirely too long since I’ve used my skills and been in real danger. If this continues I’ll be assassinated by some shit Barilia hunter.” She said and got up. “Do you have time now?”

“I do but weren’t you working on something?”

“It can wait a couple hours... days even if I’m honest. The workload has actually slowed down now that more and more staff has been hired. You’re right. I should definitely delegate more and maybe spend some time with my mother.”

“While we’re talking about enchantments and explosions, Philipp told me to inform you about your arrows. He asked me to have a look and I’ve made some improvements.”

Ilea looked at her with a raised eyebrow and smiled. “Isn’t he the arrow guy?”

“He is, but I’m the authority when it comes to explosions.” Claire replied and summoned a box, opening the expensive looking wooden contraption. Inside was an assortment of heavy arrows. “Twenty of the best heavy explosion arrows you’ll find in the market.” She said and closed the box again, showing it towards Ilea.

“Thanks Claire.” She smiled and opened the box, putting the arrows into her necklace to be able to use them immediately.

“Of course. Where do you want to train? Should be Eregar’s or outside the city.”

“The Haven is fine.” Ilea said before they left together, Claire breathing in deeply when they walked out of the building. “Been a while since you were out?”

“Sadly, yes.” The woman replied, already looking a little less grumpy than before.

“Let’s blow off some steam then.” Ilea smirked and started running, activating her buffs in the process as she turned around, looking at a confused Claire before she jumped up the nearest wall, rebounding and landing on the nearby roof. “Come on, you’re falling behind!”

“Was that really necessary?” Claire asked when she met up with the waiting Ilea near the entrance of Viscera, two guards who had informed her about roof running walking away and nodding towards Claire.

“You’re slow woman.”

“Didn’t want to set the city on fire, I’ll show you how fast I can be down in the Haven.”

“You better, I hope you didn’t just sit back and work on papers until now. You’re still a Shadow Claire.” Ilea said, smirking at her.

They quickly rushed through Viscera, Ilea checking on the two youngsters with her sphere, only vaguely noting that the guy was only a year or two younger than her.

“How’s the farming going?” She asked Claire when they descended with the elevator, Ilea sitting down on the side, her legs dangling off the platform.

“The nature mages you’ve brought are a big help. Apparently pointed out some things that could’ve hampered the fields in the long term. It’s going well. We certainly needed it too. The city is nearly filled halfway already.”

“What about all the refugees? I’m pretty sure they can’t pay for food and apartments?” Ilea asked, ashen wings spreading before she jumped off the platform, descending next to it.

“Most of them can’t but we’re talking about people who previously lived in other cities. They had jobs and skills that we can use here just as much as in Virilya. I think in the long term it’s even going to benefit the city to have a fresh start.”

Ilea snorted. “Don’t say that to the people who lost everyone.”

“I’m speaking pragmatically Ilea, you know that. The Hand has lost enough.”

“Seems like you care a lot about the order. Remember when we joined it together?”

The elevator came to a halt, sounds of people talking with some interspersed shouts in between could be heard. “It’s my chance Ilea. To do something that matters.”

“I guess the demons weren’t entirely unwelcome to you either.” She smirked as Claire looked at her with an irritated gaze.

“I profited, certainly. It was neither of our faults that it happened and what else can we do but move on?” She asked, walking with Ilea for a while before metal gauntlets, a battle skirt interwoven with metal plates and armored boots replaced her professional clothing from before.

“Why are you asking those questions? Do you think nobody cares about the thousands that died?”

“Nice getup, runes on everything I suppose? It’s not about the ones that died Claire. I knew few of them and had my closure with wiping out the

demon hordes.” Ilea explained as fire started exiting from Claire’s hands and feet, elevating her slowly as she struggled to control her ascent.

Ilea watched her adjust and stabilize. “I just don’t want you to get too involved with an order we don’t know the goals of.”

“What do you mean? The Shadow’s Hand is a mercenary guild first and foremost. I’ve looked into it myself Ilea, deeply. Into Adam Strand’s work and the other elders. Two of them that are still out there somewhere or dead became more influential as time went on simply because they were the strongest. They love battling and I could imagine they’ve actually been here since the demons and decided to just let us manage the order from now on.”

“Wallace had some shady business going on but he’s dead now. Adam is gone as well, an enemy to both humanity and the Hand. The only thing I could find were records from previous elders talking about us being specifically one of humanity’s greatest weapons. Since their records enough events have proven that the Shadow’s Hand is willing to even work for free when elves are involved or some otherworldly monster or demon destroys whole cities.”

“Humanity’s weapon of mass destruction.” Ilea mused while accelerating into the Haven, Claire following close behind, occasional explosions sending her through the air as her runed armor pushed her onward.

“Without a head it would be hard to mobilize. The retaking of Ravenhall is a rare exception, a personal matter, as would be the massacre of thousands of people by another race or monster.”

Claire’s reasoning wasn’t new to Ilea. Dagon had talked about it enough as had Sulivhaan. “What’s the Haven then?”

“A personal project of the one called Eregar?” Claire asked. “Something commissioned by the empire or kingdom that ruled over this land thousands of years ago?”

“We don’t know.” Ilea said as she landed near some rocky hills.

“We don’t.” Claire said, nearly stumbling when she landed.

“You should train with that. Good speed but your balance could kill you.”

“I know. Don’t worry too much Ilea. Trust me, the Hand has considerably less annoying politics and powerhungry idiots in its ranks than pretty much anything else I’ve seen or heard about. Most of us just want jobs to go out and hunt while being paid according to the danger. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“I think the lack of complicated backstabbing, questionable information and outright lies has brought many to us. We have a reputation and our network of mercenaries is good for humanity as a whole.”

“I agree. Guess I just feel like there’s more to it. Or maybe there was more to it back in the day. Can’t imagine something this big not having a political agenda.” Ilea commented.

“What about the adventurer’s guild? Or the smith’s guild? You’re overthinking it, come now, let’s train.” Claire said and jumped a dozen meters with the help of a small explosion below her feet. “And Ilea. Don’t worry about me. You know Dagon and Sulivhaan. If anything we’re the ones in control now.” She smirked and pointed her hand towards Ilea.

Mana built around her before an explosion sent her tumbling, much of her armor ripped apart, blood flowing down from her chest and belly. That hurts... She thought, enduring the pain as she got up and started healing herself.

“I trust in your ability to survive Ilea. But please, give me some credit as well.”

The next explosion followed quickly, ripping through her leg as if it was paper. Her bone was uninjured, the same as with Viper. Sadly her Light Magic Resistance hadn’t leveled to the second tier but there were some practitioners in her training group from time to time. Ilea felt a little better about Claire being so involved. Maybe it was a good thing after all. She just hoped the order didn’t somehow get involved in a large scale war.

Ilea continued her training for days before the next skill finally leveled to the second stage. It was thanks to William, his magic finally tipping her ice resistance towards the higher level.

***'ding' 'Ice Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1***

***You have endured the biting cold of ice and lived to tell the tale. One of the deadliest climates and magics will now be less dangerous to you with this skill.'2nd stage: Freezing temperatures no longer affect your body. It is not advised to jump in front of flying ice lances or to anger the spirits.***

The newfound stage two in no way negated the magic but the wounds were now similar to what a metal weapon would create. Her flesh wasn't freezing anymore, the cold not spreading and even magical buildup of ice had a much harder time clinging to her. Even absolute zero wouldn't affect her body, at least she thought that to be the case.

The next skill to level was Earth Magic Resistance, an overzealous mage having thrown a literal truck load of rock at her, burying the damn near unkillable warriorhealer.

***'ding' 'Earth Magic Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1***

***The earth trembles as arcane beings bend its nature to their will. You have found stone and earth to be a worthwhile opponent yet stood unmoving in its destructive path. This skill will help you negate more of its damage.***

***2nd stage: Your skin and bones harden, adapting more and more to the element that threatened your life again and again.'***

This skill simply made her tougher, one of the better second stages so far because it didn't just have an impact on her defense against Earth magic alone.

Lacking Philipp in her training, Ilea thought about possibilities and came to the corrosive arrows she had gotten shot with by the elves near Riverwatch so long ago. Carefully pushing them into her skin, she found them still working and with the help from the occasional acid mage, she brought her corrosion resistance to the second tier. She did however had a queasy feeling in her stomach for a whole day, not even her healing skill could take it away. *Feels like I've eaten five whole cheesecakes.*

***'ding' 'Your Corrosion Resistance reaches 2nd lvl 1***

***Many substances can be corrosive. Even the strongest stone will be cut through by the right combination of chemicals. You have been exposed to more corrosion than many others and with this skill your resistance to many substances will be heightened.***

***2nd stage: Your insatiable need to melt and dissolve your body has changed its structure significantly. Your very cells have become more resistant to change and imbalance.'***

Ilea didn't quite know yet how this affected her but at least the arrows didn't damage her nearly as much as before. She kept them in her necklace, just in case. It could've also been the case that the arrows simply didn't work as well anymore, no further acid mages joined her training in the days after to shed any light on the question. William continued to train both Raphia and Cornelius while he focused on his water magic against Ilea. The skill finally leveled a day after corrosion resistance got to the second stage.

*‘ding’ Your Water Resistance reaches – 2nd lvl 1*

*In your days you have learned many things. One of them is that water pressure is not a joke. This Resistance helps a little with reducing the damage.*

*2nd stage: You’ve taken so much damage from water based attacks it might be good to check if you’re not actually on fire. Getting more used to it your body and armor magically redirects the pressure to lessen the burden on you.’*

Ilea felt like an infomercial when the next water attack from William hit her, the flow shooting off to the side as if she was the polar opposite of a magnet. She had questions like what would happen if someone like Aliana used their strongest spell against her but at least against William’s more small scale focused attacks it worked wonders. Swimming in a bubble of his magically collected water and later the demon lake in Eregar’s Haven showed her how it affected swimming too.

Her speed underwater had increased considerably, the somewhat sluggish feeling the resistance of water would normally give a person was near completely absent, allowing her to glide through it as if she was a bird in the sky. Or well, a fish in water. It was not wonder that her Wind Resistance has similar effects.

*‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches – 2nd lvl 1*

*The ever elusive magic of Wind can cut from any side. You have learned that it might’ve been a good idea to become a Void mage. This skill helps you resist the power of wind a little more.*

*2nd stage: The mana flow inside of you has acclimated itself to the air around you, making you more aerodynamic.’*

Her flight speed but also her running speed increased through this change and while her water resistance actively pushed the magical attacks out of



the way, she couldn't exactly ignore a wind blade to her face. Instead dodging became easier, a glancing blow allowing her to gain momentum and use it to attack. It was a little bizarre. Ilea had gotten so used to her skills, to creating such magical surprises like her body changing its reaction to an air attack through some numbers going up came as a difficult thing to accept. She would get used to it.

Ilea's resistance to crystal magic sadly didn't manage to get to the second stage in the time she had planned for it. The two mages with related classes had left the city on hunts or expeditions, leaving her skill at level fifteen. On the other hand Ilea managed to convince Elise to use her Arcane magic on her again. It wasn't a difficult task to get her on Ilea's side considering the skill would be an asset in her adventuring. Adventuring Elise tried to talk her out of whenever Ilea healed herself from the librarian's attacks.

***'ding' 'Arcane Magic Resistance reaches – 2nd lvl 1***

***Wielding the true arcane is a rare and powerful talent only accessible to few. The raw energies tear at not just flesh and bone but at the magical structure and minds of whomever faces them. Its red glow turns purple the more refined it is. This skill shall help you counter masters of the arcane.***

***2nd stage: Your flow of mana has been ruptured many times by the raw form of magic, making it substantially more resistant to both adept mages and natural occurrences of the true arcane.'***

A simple upgrade to what the skill already was. The only difference seemed to be the addition of resistance to natural arcane magic. Claire's training on the other hand looked much more promising with what the second stage to her explosion magic brought.

***Blast Resistance – 2nd 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. 2nd stage: Despite common sense, you just keep on doing it. Either you should start reading safety manuals or embrace that you are a true explosion elemental. Your organs, bones, muscles and your skin become partially shock absorbent. Please stop.*

More important to Ilea was of course the shift in Claire's priorities, wanting to add bouts to their training and investing more and more time as she got used to the modifications she had added to her armor, trying out new things by the day. Her level of stress was reduced greatly, at least considering her facial expressions.

In the end Ilea had only two resistances remaining that were close to the second tier, both of which achievable in less than a week. Getting the respective person to help would prove to be the most difficult task.

"He's not been eating for a week." The young woman said, scratching her neck. "I'm gonna force feed him if he keeps it up for another."

Ilea frowned and leaned on the close by gray wall "Does he talk to you at least?"

Aurelia nodded weakly. "Though... what he says. It's not entirely pleasant."

# Chapter 226 Meditation

## Chapter 226 Meditation

Ilea straightened and smiled weakly, "I'll see him then."

The girl shook her head, her eyes closed during the motion while she clenched her fists. "He's refused to see anyone."

Ilea just grinned, running a hand through her black hair before she vanished. "He knows me better than that." She said into the dark room, quite aware of the pungent smell. He was lying in a tumble of blankets in the corner of the room.

"Trian. How are you doing pal?" She walked over and stood above the man, his uneven breathing enough indication to his very aware state. "Grief and depression. Looks like you need to see some sunlight and let magic flow through you."

Not even a grunt. Ilea knew the man and if anything managed to get through to him then it was her annoying little self. "I'll bring him back in an hour!" The shout was directed both at the lightning vampyr and his sister, watching with sharp eyes from behind the door frame.

"Ilea fuck off..." The man murmured but he didn't exactly have a choice, Ilea simply grabbing him and slinging the full sized human across her shoulders like a kid unwilling to go out and play.

She looked at the head bobbing next to her shoulder before looking ahead. “I won’t. You’ve been vegetating long enough.” He didn’t react to the flow of her healing magic going through his mana stream.

The two of them went straight down into the Haven. Not real sunlight but it was close enough.

“I won’t fight you Ilea.” He stared at the ground between them, his eyes bloodshot, his beard scruffy and unkempt. Ilea sat down opposite him and summoned ash, moving it around in the air with her mind before she formed his likeness in it. Not exactly an easy task but trusting her skills, she’d get close enough with a little more time.

“I’m not asking you to fight me.” The offhanded comment was added with a smile when a little more ash was created to add the beard to the Trian that stared back at him. “I said you need some sun. Feel like sitting down? Meditating for a while maybe?” The questions remained in the air as he looked at her and then turned to the glowing orb in the fake sky.

No further word left her as she simply observed, moving his ashen head further up as she straightened his beard, added a body and straightened his posture from the limp and sloping one he showed to the Trian that had been annoyed with the incapable team he had been assigned to. She added armor and even some gray lightning flowing around his statue when he turned and looked at himself.

“You think highly of me.” The man said and sat down, his eyes closing as he relaxed. Ilea smiled and looked at him.

Closing her eyes to match him, Ilea started meditating, feeling the mana flow through her body as she thought about her team, “I know who you are.” She said and smiled softly, time accelerating as she vaguely noted the changes of the earth, air and sun around them, her sphere watching the

movements of the insects below and around her as she relaxed and focused on her breathing, the ashen Trian long gone with the wind.

“An hour has passed.” The noise made her blink her eyes, the man standing with his back towards her.

She stretched and jumped up, feeling relaxed and prepared for whatever was to come, “So it has.”

“Do you need me to carry you back?” Ilea joked as she walked to his side, the man glancing at her.

He started walking towards the nearby elevator as she fell in next to him, bringing the man back to the hiding place of the remaining Alymies near Dagon’s library. The two stepped into his dark room, the man sniffing the air before he went back to bed.

Ilea watched his back and turned to the sister who was waiting outside. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

When she came back the next day, the man was sitting on his bed in the dark, half the blankets missing and the smell considerably less poignant than before. He silently got up and followed her out and into the Haven where they went to the same spot again and meditated. Ilea didn’t speak a word and neither did Trian, both of them falling into a trance before an hour again had passed.

“Don’t shave it all off, it looks good on you.” Ilea said before she left again.

Ilea stayed at her home that night, relaxing in her bed as she looked at the stars before she grabbed one of the many books she had from back in Salia

and started reading. It was relaxing, coming back to it and enjoying the sound of the ocean below. Hardly an hour had passed in the last weeks where she wasn't training, where magic wasn't cutting into her time and time again.

Putting her book down after a while, she breathed in deeply and let the air out through her mouth. Her clothes stored in her necklace, she appeared on the balcony outside and looked over the endless ocean. She shivered as she thought about what might be hiding in the deep but it was not a shiver of fear. Sitting down, Ilea activated her meditation as she took in the light from the stars, the crashing of the waves and the wind gently brushing over her skin.

She woke from her state when the suns broke through the skies to pierce the water, rays of light shining on the lone figure sitting in her solitude. Blinking into the living room, she summoned some pants and a shirt onto the table, deciding to dress manually for once. Getting a piece of meat from her magical freezer downstairs, she frowned. Checking the enchantments, she pushed mana into them and relaxed when the sides of the box cooled down again.

*I shouldn't leave it here.* She thought and put all the remaining food into her necklace where it would stay in the same state far longer than the enchantments would hold without a charge or a magical crystal that was entirely too expensive to add. At least if she had her necklace anyway.

There was enough meat, various vegetables, spices noodles and rice to make a couple hundred meals at least. Perhaps not for someone like Ilea whose hunger had evolved into a past time compared to the need it was previously. If there's a third class at some point maybe I should become a cook. She mused, summoning a piece of meat and heating up the blood in her hand to boiling temperatures. Adding some ash to it, she completely entwined the piece and watched through her Sphere how the inside of it changed. It was not living anymore but had some mana remaining, making

it harder to pierce with her Sphere. It was enough to see the progression of its cooking.

Or maybe a baker. She thought and cooled down the ash and her blood, looking at the steaming piece of medium rare feathered drake. Ilea had no idea if medium rare was unhealthy with this kind of meat but she had worse poison flowing through her body. Adding some salt alone, she ate the piece while the juices flowed down her hand. Blinking up and outside her house, she decided the taste wasn't exactly up to par with Keyla's cooking.

She whistled an ominous tune while walking into the nearby cave, growling soon heard from the dark space before her. They grow up so fast. She thought and threw the meat while her ash enveloped her arm, cleaning it off any remains. The cat hissed as Ilea turned to leave. "Don't trash my house while I'm gone."

Wings of ash materialized behind her, each feather like protrusion forming out of thin air before she flapped them once, the magic lifting her from the cool rock while she looked over her otherworldly house. Maybe I should've gone a little less swanky.

Flying up, Ilea breathed in the fresh snowy air, the old trees clinging to the stone and rocky earth with deep running roots as the human flew above them, twirling in the air. Ilea smiled as the wind brushed against her skin, a fresh set of Shadow leather armor replacing her clothes that flattered in the wind, already close to tearing at the speed.

Activating all her buffs, the wind pressure of her passing freed the close by trees off the snow adorning the tops of their branches. Ilea left behind a trail before she ascended steeply, following the side of a mountain that stretched into the clouds above. The air cooled as she was swallowed by white, her sphere continuing to report on the close surface that rushed past her before she came up to meet the two faraway suns shining down on her and the high mountain reaching for their light.

Continuing her ascent as if an arrow shot towards the sky, Ilea soon landed on the peak. The natural barrier separating the Isanna desert from the empire of Lys and the human plains spread before her, mountains reaching

higher still than the peak she was standing on. She could see a shadow quickly moving over the white snow but was unable to spot its origins, instead the woman jumped down and spread her wings, laughing as she sped up and rushed through the valleys, stray wolves, trolls and unknown species howled or fled at her approach.

An hour of detours and petting unwilling animals later, Ilea flew into the valley where the city of Ravenhall resided, the mountain lake spreading before her as she approached, its brilliance reflecting the suns before she promptly pierced the icy surface, breaking through the meter thick ice without much resistance before she swam through the water, barely slowed down by the element, her skin ignoring the freezing cold around her as her sphere warned her of any possible approaching threat in the dark.

Breaking out of the ice a couple minutes later, Ilea twirled and shook off the snow and frozen pieces still sticking to her armor before she blinked to the shore, rinsing her wet hair as she formed ash around it, heating the element enough to quickly dry it.

She could see people walking on the distant road to the city gates, some wagons pulled by oxen or horses in between. It's not slowing down. Ilea thought, walking towards the city gates, the guards loudly organizing all the refugees. She nodded towards one of the guards and was waved inside before the waiting people.

He nodded to her and spoke, "Welcome back Shadow." Ilea blinked inside instead of waiting for the people to part, waving at the guard who tried to find her again. The square behind the gate was even fuller than the last time she had been there, young children and babies crying while merchants shouted about their goods, adventurers, guards and soldiers waiting like hawks to find strong or useful individuals to hire as well as a bunch of unsavory individuals hiding in the shadows or among the bigger groups of people.

She sighed and walked towards Viscera, "It's getting full." Many of the stores on the way that had remained closed, abandoned and half destroyed for weeks after the demons had been vanquished were now open and bustling with life. Bakeries, clothes shops, armor and weapon vendors as



well as a bunch of pawn shops had opened up. Serious looking mages and warriors stood in front of the doors, checking the interested for required funds, levels and a willingness to actually purchase something.

As Ilea passed the streets, she found beggars and thieves among the people, looking for the next meal while street cooks made their bellies growl from a couple meters away. People around her seemed interested but whispers of Shadow and respectful guards and adventurers had them stay at a distance, not sure if she really was part of the order but too afraid to risk anything. They had a reputation, here even more so than in other cities.

“Thank you.” Ilea said, handing over four copper coins to the old man who handed her some fried balls of dough filled with fish and drenched in a brown and aromatic smelling sauce. Eating her meal, she quickly approached the second ring of walls, the guards leaning on the walls as people went in and out. A beggar was stopped and shooed away, not welcome in the second ring it seemed. Ilea was nodded through and calmed down at the considerably less dense mass of people here.

Shops had opened too, as well as inns and restaurants, the beautiful weather bringing life to the differing colors and architectural styles that had sprung up in the previously drab and gray medieval city. Looks like a bloody amusement park. She thought and smiled, stuffing the last of the fried balls into her mouth before she closed her eyes and savored the taste.

Music played from a nearby cafe, reminding her a little of rock n’ roll. It really was a bizarre place. The shops here looked higher class, no doormen standing outside, nice looking attire, weapons and even books displayed in the various store windows. People were smoking and talking on the balconies, some of them motioning to her as she walked past below, quite aware of the stares thanks to her Sphere. A passing shadowguard nodded to her, Ilea mirroring the gesture as she followed along the third wall’s side to get back out of the second ring.

The entrance to Viscera was in the third and outermost ring but close to the mountain, meaning it was quicker to walk through the second ring to get there. She could see the line of potential shadowguards waiting, as well as already appointed guards standing watch around the square before the

entrance. She quickly blinked twice, appearing before the door before she was waved in by the guard whose only reaction was a tighter grip around the handle of his sheathed sword.

Ilea quickly made her way through Viscera before she flew up towards the library and blinked into the hallway in front of it. Checking around her, she teleported a couple more times before she came into the hidden space where the Alymies resided.

Trian was not in his room but Aurelia was training with Samuel and Orthan in a hall further back. The girl noticed her quickly and shook her head. “He’s not here.” The girl didn’t know where the man had went upon further questioning but Ilea had a good idea where she could check.

She found him near their previous meditation spot in Eregar’s Haven but the man had apparently decided to sit next to a tree overlooking a field of grass and flowers. Ilea stepped up to him and sat down, enjoying the warm breeze that flowed through her hair.

“Why do you think we’re here?” The man spoke after a while, Ilea glancing over to the man before she smiled.

Thinking on his question, she fell backwards into the grass. “I don’t know. Maybe there’s a reason for everybody, maybe there’s a mastermind pulling all the strings and we’re just playthings to quench its boredom.” Plucking a flower from the ground, she continued talking as she twirled it in her fingers, “An answer might not present itself, in which case I chose to make my own reason.”

The man chuckled, ever so slightly. “Let me guess? Fighting and eating?”

“Sounds good, doesn’t it?” Ilea opened one eye and found him looking back at her.

“What did you want when you came to me?”

“Your health and mana drain abilities.” Ilea replied honestly. “And to help a friend.”

The man looked out over the field and smiled lightly. “You have.” Magic surged in him before she felt her mana and life slowly tick down.

“What is your reason then?” Ilea asked, relaxing again as her healing and meditation activated to more than outweigh his magic.

“For now?” He asked and closed his eyes again, “I like to sit here and think about that very question.”

Ilea smirked, reminded of some philosophers of old, sitting below trees and thinking about life. With his reduced hunger and need for sleep as well as improved body, the mage could literally sit there and think for days, perhaps even weeks. At least he’s out of his bed.

He used his drain spells whenever she was nearby, slowly but surely leveling them between her training sessions with William and the now four apprentices he had. Philly was stoked at first but had a similar reaction when their training actually began. At least she’d have pain resistance soon enough.

Later that day, Ilea went to the adventurer’s guild and took down the notice regarding her spell training, informing the clerk that she’d be discontinuing the sessions and to thank anybody who would ask about it.

Five days of extensive lying next to a tree brought her the two missing second stage advancements.

*‘ding’ ‘Mana Drain Resistance reaches – 2nd 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.*

*2nd stage: Your mana is bound to you, making it harder for anybody to drain it from you. In addition the mana removed from you damages the enemy, should they desire to use it for themselves. This effect increases with every point of mana lost.’*

*‘ding’ ‘Health Drain Resistance reaches – 2nd 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.*

*2nd stage: Your health is yours, with each point lost it will become more difficult to steal from you what is yours alone.’*

Both skills would be useful against someone with either ability but Ilea simply mentioned to Trian that he could stop using his skills, continuing to lie there and enjoy the serene atmosphere.

The man stopped and sapped her with some lightning instead, the woman just grunting at him in response. “It was nice having you here.” He said and continued his meditation, occasionally writing something into a small notebook he had brought the day before.

Ilea didn’t intrude on his notes and yawned. “Wake me in four hours.” She still had two skills missing and hoped William’s training had born enough fruit for her to have some breakfast.

# Chapter 227 Hope

## Chapter 227 Hope

Ilea landed near the field William usually used for his training, already seeing from far away that a fifth person had joined the team. A smile blossomed on her face when she saw the new member to be Dany, the healer she had worked with during the winter spirit incident. “Nice getup.” She motioned to the nicely crafted leather armor, bow and short sword the healer was wearing. “Changing classes?”

“I was always a hunter Shadow. Healing was simply more required in the past months.” The woman replied with a smile, the artificial sunlight reflecting off her red hair.

*I'd like to hunt You.* Ilea thought and smirked at her, the woman staring back at her. A spear of ice smashed into the healer's shoulder, sending her tumbling through the dirt before she looked up, groaning at the broken bone.

William stepped towards the woman as the mages around her prepared their spells. “Your attention is with the enemy.” Raphia jumped to the healer while Philly created a barrier of ice in front of the two, all three retreating while a mist of cool air slowly threatened to envelop them.

Ilea slowly stepped to his side and watched Cornelius send a mist of dust to intercept his growing blizzard, the gray magic quickly quenched by the ice William commanded. “At least their teamwork has improved. Impressive in just a couple days.”

“It is to be expected. Don’t praise them without reason, it will go to their heads. Until they beat me individually I won’t think of them as more than wild rabble.” The man certainly set his bar of approval high.

Ilea smirked and watched Dany’s shoulder crack back into place before she shot an arrow at William, the projectile harmlessly caught in a slim arm of water before it dropped to the ground, “What am I to you then oh great teacher?”

He grunted in response and send a shower of ice spikes towards his pupils, their efforts joined together to stop his low effort attack that nonetheless proved to be highly dangerous to them. “Why are you here Ilea?”

“To get the last remaining resistances I’ve been looking for. You don’t know a poison master by chance?”

“I do not. I will finish this section of the training, they may attack you afterwards. Perhaps their skills have grown enough to at least shave of a couple points of health from your unnaturally tough skin.” The man suggested. He didn’t know her skin had become even tougher in the meantime.

“It will be good training for them.”

“Hitting an unmoving target with their barely passable aim?”

Ilea smiled and watched his magic obliterate the group as their shields cracked, their magic freezing in the air before they could even launch a counter measure against the Shadow standing against them while he had a casual conversation with a friend. Raphia was holding her leg, blood flowing down from the wound while Philly shielded her, one of her arms broken from a chunk of ice that had impacted her earlier.

Cornelius still tried to stop the oncoming mist of frost but was soon caught as his foot froze to the ground, more and more of his leg cooling down and freezing as he screamed, ordering it to move. Dany crawled towards Raphia, dodging the ice and water attacks as best as she could, their foe

separating them with his ranged attacks to stop the healer from reaching the others.

“No, seeing that their attacks are futile even if they aren’t blocked.” Ilea replied, watching him stop his assault.

William nodded. “Good addition. I could do the same except for the ice mage, she is quite capable already and arrows can at least make me bleed without my shielding. May the other two attack you as well?”

Ilea nodded and waited for Dany to heal the others, Philly unfreezing the dust mage’s leg before she and the healer took care of it, not a second wasted. Right as they were done William clapped, all of them running towards him as they built a formation, coming to a stop a couple meters away, sweat and blood on their faces.

“For the next couple of hours you will be attacking her, I think all of you know her. Your goal will be to injure her, make her bleed or even incapacitate her. I will review your efforts. This is not target practice for your magic, I want you to treat her as wild monster that your team was tasked to take out. Work together and stay on the move. I will personally take you out if you stand still.” His explanation ended and a mist of icy air formed around him and Ilea, the team jumping backwards and forming up before the split into teams of two, Raphia with Dany and Philly with Cornelius.

*They really treat it seriously...* Ilea thought, smiling at the first attacks hitting her. Philly definitely had the ability to make her bleed, even with her second stage of ice resistance. What she didn’t expect was William interfering and blocking her attacks with ice magic of his own. “You have that one in the second stage already?” He asked, the mist around her growing colder, her body thoroughly ignoring it.

“I do.” A wooden spike impacted her belly, nearly leaving a scratch on her skin. Close. Ilea thought but the impact would likely not be enough to grant her the resistance, not if the girl could at least draw blood. A whirl of dust formed around her, slowing down with each second as its particles were frozen but the impact on her body was already visible, small scratches on

her skin forming. Deciding not to use her healing was a necessity if this training should do anything for her, even her natural regeneration, enhanced of course, took care of the little damage they dealt to her.

An arrow cut into her flesh but was stopped before drawing blood, the frustration clear on Dany's face when she surveyed the results but kept moving around her nonetheless.

It took the group three hours of continued fighting to finally injure her. They had to take turns to meditate, Philly usually protecting the meditating party against William's attacks before they could continue. A combined effort of her ice magic, removing the thin mist around Ilea before the other three sent out their magic did the trick. Cornelius dust formed a drill like mist and cut into her unprotected stomach, followed by roots that slammed into her and ultimately an enhanced arrow carrying a frozen tip that would explode on impact.

They drew blood but it took their whole coordination as a team to achieve it and William quickly increased his involvement, his attacks growing more numerous to make it more and more difficult for the attacking group. *They're going to be quite something if they can keep this kind of training up for a couple months or even years.* She smiled as they switched up their tactics, ice arrows exploding around her before wooden spears pushed by swirling dust cut into her, much deeper than the ice arrow had managed before. *Perfect.*

All of them but Dany had seen her training in the arena before, unmoved by the lack of pain or injury she showed even when their attack proved more and more dangerous. They knew it was nothing to her, Dany looking around a little concerned from time to time, reassured by her teammates that it would take more than this to take her out.

“You are a long way from dealing any real damage to the monster.” William stated from his hovering position above her, standing on floating ice. “It's



been five hours and you've kept your assault going." Clapping again, he pointed towards the distance. "The monster has noticed you and will hunt you up to the two trees on top of the hill. Touch one of them and you're safe. You have a ten second head start."

Ilea watched the confusion in their eyes before Philly started into a sprint, the others quickly following. "I'm the monster?" Ilea asked. "Maybe you should run as well?"

The man lifted an eyebrow but remained calm as he looked at the running team before him. "I have faced enough of them. For a while at least." He whispered, knowing she would hear the man.

Ilea spread her wings and appeared next to the man. "But you must be prepared to face them." She looked him in the eyes and he stared back. His magic pulsed around him and she knew that he was prepared, should she make a move. "Ten seconds have passed."

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Dany was running as fast as she could, two of her hunter skills luckily increasing her speed, allowing her to stay close behind Philly who somehow managed to be quicker still. A gray mist suddenly flashed by and impacted the ice mage, the woman screaming before she went silent, the mist stopping as Dany veered to avoid it. A tendril of it shot out, making her jump over it before she dodged right upon landing, the ashen limb following her as she continued to avoid it.

She saw a figure in the mist, smashing her fist at a small barrier of ice before she heard it cracking and then the ash vanished. Blue eyes appeared in a mist of gray a couple meters in front of her, stopping her sprint towards the tree as limbs of ash cut off an escape route around her. She didn't stop, feeling her heart rate accelerate, she turned and rushed back to the two mages following her.

Suddenly she felt someone grab her shoulder, gently but unmoving as her body came to an abrupt stop, her limbs moving forward as her shoulder nearly broke again. A wooden spear surrounded by dust rushed past her and impacted something behind her, the tug on her shoulder lessening enough for her to wiggle free and jump to the side, the two trees becoming the only thing she saw and focused on with all her mind.

Looking back, she saw ash enveloping Cornelius as he tried fighting back against the element with his dust, black wings smashing into his chest before he was flung to the side, unconscious and bleeding. Nearly stumbling at the sight, Dany focused against, her legs impacting the ground as she trusted her skills to take her to the destination.

A scream coming from Raphia resounded behind her before she too went quiet, the now fifty meters distance to the trees feeling like an insurmountable obstacle as her breathing became the only noise she could hear, frantically looking sideways to see the unavoidable gray mist. But instead, there was a blue one, forming before her when William landed, dozens of ice lances forming behind a complicated array of shields, water forced out of the ground.

“Go on Healer, you have almost made it.” His words lifted her up, power surging inside of her as her skills again pushed to the very highest they could manage. She ran past the floating ice, glancing at their teacher for a split second and seeing him grin, the lances starting to move around her as she passed the man, the trees now only forty meters away. Another ten steps later when she heard the lances impacting something before ice broke, again and again she heard the noise, like a hammer shattering against a storefront window.

*Twenty meters.* Dany thought before a loud noise resounded behind her, followed ten steps later by a single cough. Then silence. She counted down the steps and took a plunge towards the tree in front of her, feeling something brush at the back of her hair right before her chest impacted the wood, all the air in her lungs pushed out as she winced. Her chest was injured, she knew and quickly started her healing spell, her legs touching the tree as she lay on her back, looking up and breathing hard. Quiet steps came from behind her before a woman clad in ash stood above her, grinning down at her. I'm dead. The thought was of course irrational but she felt goose bumps on her whole body before Ilea reached down to her. "Congratulations."

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"You might want to heal the others now." Ilea said and looked into the shaken woman's eyes. She nodded and ran off with a big smile. William was already standing again, wiping the blood from his cheek and waving off the girl that tried to heal his injury. She had used just enough force to take him out of the equation for a split second.

The man made his way towards her as he glanced after the running healer, taking care of her teammates. "You let her win."

Ilea didn't reply, looking at him and then up into the trees.

"Giving them hope isn't wise. They should know what's out there." The man said, leaning on the other tree.

She looked at him and smiled, “Knowing what’s out there, hope is all we have William.” The wind rustled the leaves above them, sending a couple of them twirling down towards the earth. The two Shadows watched the young mages shout and congratulate the healer for her win before she took care of their light injuries, running towards their coach right after.

“Perhaps I should find someone to spar as well.” The man said as he pushed off the tree, having accepted her healing touch that took care of the broken jaw.

“I’ll go ask Claire, she’ll miss our bouts when I’m gone. Plus you have a healer now.” Ilea smirked at his flustered reaction, clapping as she approached the group. He caught himself quickly and ordered them to continue the previous training with trying to injure Ilea.

***‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1  
A connection made from a mage to nature allowed for this talent to take root. Facing the force of nature you grow more accustomed to its effects, your body more resilient to the magic of the forest.***

Ilea smiled but continued the training after the message had popped up in her mind. It took hours of them injuring her but William increased the training time for as long as the group could stand, excusing himself to take care of his other duties. Ilea heard the stomach of Raphia rumble before another root smacked against her leg. They were certainly moving less than before, tired and hungry looks on their faces as they struggled on. It wouldn’t take long for one of them to collapse and Ilea knew that would probably be the end of today’s session.

Thinking for a minute and taking a surprisingly weak ice lance to her chest, Ilea clapped once, “Stop it. That’s it for today. I’ll invite you to dinner.” She

said, knowing that Keyla was probably still working. It was deep in the night after all. “Good job everyone.”

Cornelius smirked. “Got your resistances?”

“Not yours.” Ilea replied and started walking towards the elevator.

“Not bad Keyla.” Ilea said as she looked at the building, no more shattered windows or missing walls visible on the facade. It still looked closed but that was to be expected. She found the woman alone in the kitchen, looking through notes on what looked like people, “Struggling with the cooks?”

“Oh, Ilea. Nice to see you. Yes. We’re pretty much ready to open but some of the chefs... I’m not sure if they have what it takes. Came to eat?”

“I did, with four starving little beasts.” She added with a smile, relaxing on one of the counters. Keyla threw a pot at her which she caught with one hand.

“You’re beast enough. No lounging in my kitchen, come on. Go sit upstairs, I’ll serve the food in ten minutes.” Keyla said, Ilea putting down the pan on her way out.

“Food will be served in ten, come on everyone.” She said into the stairwell and went up into the newly furnished hall. “Fancy.” She said and sat down on a table big enough to seat them all.

“Are we supposed to be here? I don’t think it’s open yet?” Raphia said and looked around, trying to dust off her cloak before she carefully sat down on the expensive looking chair.

Ilea just waved her off and sat down. “I know the owner.” She said as the group looked at each other a little awkwardly.

“Thanks for training with us today miss Ilea.” Philly said with a smile.

“She was there because of mine and Raphia’s magic, you know that.”  
Cornelius commented but didn’t look at Ilea.

Raphia slapped his shoulder and shook her head. “There was no reason for her to stay that long, even if she wanted the skills. Don’t complain all the time, people can be nice as well.”

The man didn’t seem convinced but neither commented further on the topic. “Are you going to stay in Ravenhall?” Philly asked and looked at Ilea. “It would be great to have you around for some pointers and bouts if you ever felt like it.”

“No. I will be leaving as soon as I have finished my preparations, one part of that being a Dust magic resistance.” Ilea said, looking at Cornelius. “I’m happy to bout with you guys as soon as I’m back again. Hopefully you’ll prove to be better by then. I at least expect you to beat William as a team.”

“You can’t even beat him.” Cornelius blurted out and laughed. “How are we supposed to.”

Dany smiled and looked at Ilea but didn’t say anything. “The menu isn’t quite ready yet and this shit town’s market isn’t selling the fish that swims in the ocean just hours from here so you’ll have to be happy with this one.” Keyla came into the room, carrying five plates that she smoothly placed before all the guests. “Beef in a spicy sauce with mint and a side of egg noodles. Enjoy.”

# Chapter 228 Farewells

## Chapter 228 Farewells

*'ding' 'You have learned the General skill: Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1 Dangerous and elusive magic answering to few who seek its complexity, understand its beauty. You have faced a mage of dust and lived, preparing you for the next confrontation, should it come to pass.'*

*There you go.* She thought and floated up to William. “I have my skills.”

“Good. Then we will resume the training. Form up apprentices!” He shouted and watched them scramble together.

Ilea watched from the sidelines for a while until William let them pause and relax after a couple more hours, most of them injured. “You know what I expect of you.” They turned towards her when she spoke and stood up. “I wish you good luck.”

Cornelius rolled his eyes and murmured to himself but Ilea didn't care to listen. He still nodded to her a moment later, as if acknowledging that she had gotten him this gig in the first place. Maybe he just didn't accept that someone would help him out with such a minor motive as gaining a resistance. Ilea wasn't sure but she didn't care much.

Raphia ran up and embraced her, thanking her and promising to reach the goal she had set for them. “I don't doubt you. Remember that there are monsters out there stronger than me, be prepared and be quick.” Ilea said to

them when she let go of the girl. Philly bowed and smiled while William nodded to her with a business like look on his face.

*That man is not one for emotional goodbyes.* She mused and waved at them one last time before she flew towards Trian's meditation tree. The man was there as if she had left him just a minute ago, looking into the distance as he tapped the pen on his notebook. "Stuck?"

He looked up at her and smiled weakly. "No, I'm just looking for the right words."

Ilea sat down next to him and leaned her back on the tree. "You're leaving." He spoke as he opened his notebook, writing a line into it.

"I am."

"Will you return?"

"I hope I will."

"I can't believe you're leaving me alone with Claire."

Ilea laughed, the man joining her a moment later. "I think you'll be just fine. Try moving around a little before you grow into the tree. William is training a girl that could help you gain a wood magic resistance, might help in the long term."

"Very funny Ilea. I think I'll be fine. I have all this time... to figure out how."

Ilea patted him on his shoulder and stood up, meanwhile summoning the golden lighter she had gotten in Salia. Trian looked up to her, the woman waving the magic lighter in her hand, the small flame moving in the wind. "Something to remind you. I found this right before I joined the Hand. Maybe it'll help in some way." She said and let it fall, the mage catching it casually before he flicked it on, staring into the flame.

"Thanks. I expect you back with stories to tell." He said and looked into her eyes.



Ilea switched into her ashen hunter armor, breathing out as she looked at the sun. "Leave some empty pages for me will you?"

He nodded slightly and smiled at her as she turned, ashen wings sprouting from her back before she took off.

"It's time then? Took you longer than expected. I thought you'd be gone after a couple days." Claire mused. "I'll miss the training."

Ilea grunted as she looked at the metal spheres Claire had placed on the table. Taking one, she felt that the devices were receptive to her mana. It would be unwise to activate one here. "Can I throw them?"

"No. I could but not you. Except if you can throw them as quickly as the explosion expands. I don't doubt you'll reach that kind of power at some point though you'll likely not need them again by then." Claire joked, a relaxed smile on her face as she got up and walked to the big double window overlooking the central square of the city.

"Train with William, a healer is in their team as well. Trian might join in from time to time as well if you ask nicely, he's sitting near a tree. Make sure he doesn't start to grow into it."

Claire turned and nodded. "I'll think about it. Thanks."

The three explosive devices vanished into her necklace. "I've prepared some reading for you." Claire said as she walked back, the empty space on the wooden table filled with a notebook, two hardcover books and a stack of loose papers. "These two are monster encyclopedias, they're rather questionable, unconfirmed and while Dagon disregards them as fiction I doubt it's all made up. If you're going north you might as well check them out just in case."

She motioned to the notebook and the stack, “I’ve collected all the information on expeditions north in the last ten years, missing people notices, planned routes and team compositions. This is confidential information from both the Hand and the adventurer guild so treat them as such.”

Ilea looked it over before all of it too vanished into her necklace. “Thank you, I’ll look it over. And don’t worry too much.”

Claire laughed and shook her head. “I worry about whatever stands in your way.”

“I wish I could be as confident as you think I am.” Ilea joked.

“You are when life is at stake, I’ve seen it plenty. Now go, I’ll make sure your investment won’t be wasted. And that you won’t be thoroughly disappointed in me when we have a bout again.” Claire said and smirked. She looked better, less overworked, Ilea thought.

“Keep it up then and don’t worry about the old man’s attitude, I’m pretty sure he likes you at least somewhat.” Ilea said and walked to the door, Claire coming in for a hug.

“Don’t you dare dying on us.” She whispered before letting go. Ilea smiled and left, making her way down the stairs and out towards the Golden Drake.

*I wouldn’t want to invoke your fury Claire. Not even as a ghost or undead.*

“So it’s time. Good, come up. We’ve cooked everything at least fifty times. Good training for the cooks.” Keyla said and led Ilea to the kitchen, the room now occupying a whole floor compared to the single room it had before. A terrace had been added to the front of the building, allowing for more seating and the prices seemed quite a bit more reasonable.

“You’re ready to open then?” Ilea asked. The cook scoffed at her. A knife twirled in her clawed hand.

“We’ve been ready to open for a whole week but you ordered. I kept the less than perfect meals as well, do let me know if I should give them out to the refugees.”

“I ordered... I mean where did you keep it all?”

Keyla didn’t answer but instead opened a compartment in the wall, steam rising as the glowing of blue runes subsided slowly. Dozens of steaming meals in what looked like cardboard boxes. “It’s something I’ve wanted to try for a long time but the previous owners thought it cheap and lacking... class.” The last word added with a hiss and a showing of sharp teeth.

“It’s a cool idea for adventurers I think.” Ilea said and grabbed one of the boxes, starting to eat with a fork she took from a nearby table.

“The non perfect meals?”

“I’ll take it all, will be a while until I come back to restock I think.” Ilea said. “How much do I owe you?”

“I owe you my life, a restaurant and more than I will ever be able to repay you, you mind fucked idiot.” Keyla said and pointed the knife at her.

Ilea smiled and brushed her hand through the rows of prepared meals. “I like the idea of giving out meals to the poor, maybe stuff you weren’t able to sell.”

“With these enchantments we’ll be able to keep them for weeks before they go bad. I had some other ideas towards that direction. Cheaper meals and maybe trade or jobs getting ingredients instead of money to pay for food.”

Ilea nodded and opened another compartment, looking at Keyla who just gestured to towards the whole kitchen. “It’s all for you, we’ll open tomorrow. Not that anybody knows about that yet.”

“Well I hope you’ll have fun. Talk to the Hand should anybody bother you because of your race.” Ilea said.

“Will do. Thanks again, I won’t disappoint you Ilea.” Keyla said and showed her teeth again.

“I know you wont.” Ilea replied with a smile. “It would be a damn shame for you not to own your own restaurant. Don’t overwork yourself.”

Keyla snorted and then laughed. “While you’re out there killing yourself? I will do what I love my dear. I will cook and people will eat.”

It took Ilea the good part of fifteen minutes to put all the meals into her necklace, Keyla quickly explaining what they contained, how she got the ideas and how it was prepared. There was some cursing involved and partially offensive stories but if anything it made her want to try the meals even more. There were four hundred and sixty eight prepared boxes, enough to last her maybe a couple months if they were all she would eat. Maybe a couple weeks if all she did was eat.

“Thanks, here I don’t want you to go bankrupt before you’ve even opened.” Ilea said and stacked ten gold coins on one of the counters.

“I’ll put that down on the list of what I owe you.” Keyla said. “Enjoy yourself Ilea.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Leaving the place with Keyla, Ilea hugged her before going back to Viscera, quickly saying her goodbyes to Elise and Dagon. The librarians had been pretty helpful in her resistance training endeavors. At least she knew about all the skills she still lacked thanks to them. Dagon grunted while Elise teared up and hugged her. Ilea had to pry open her arms to be able to go.

She was thoroughly spent on her social energy when she finally left the city, her wings carrying her out and over the walls before she made her way towards the ocean and her house. Thinking of Claire, Trian and everybody else she had met in this world and what they’d been through together made

it a little difficult to journey out alone again. The further away from civilization she got the more that feeling lessened, Ilea instead thinking about Kyrian who was either dead or fighting somewhere out there and of Eve.

The armored flying warrior cut through the air as she passed over snow covered trees and mountains, glimpses of the ocean visible in the distance as she closed in on the cliffs occupied by wild animals and a lonely house hanging on a plateau, digging deep into the mountain side.

Blinking into her bedroom from above, Ilea stored a chunk of her books in her necklace before looking at the very thing that had made her come here. I hope you'll survive at least a part of my journey. She thought and put the beautiful big and comfortable bed into the dwarven necklace that had made her life a whole lot easier. "Now you're ready." The woman said, stepping out onto her balcony, black armor clinging to her body, blue eyes looking over the endless ocean while ash danced around her.

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A woman clad in black appeared close to the running mage, daggers flashing in the dim hallway illuminated by a single torch. The man cried out in pain as he sunk to his knees, his arms lifting to send a spell at the attacker before he was crushed by an invisible force, his nose breaking on the stone floor, blood pooling more quickly than it should.

"Don't move if you want to live." Senia said quietly, twirling the daggers in her hands before she appeared next to his face, letting go of one weapon,

the blade flashing down and digging into the ground still influenced by Sulivhaan's gravity magic.

Rock frowned under his helmet, ripping his hammer out of the wall and with it pieces of bloody bone and skin. "This one's dead, sorry boss."

Sulivhaan surveyed the hallway, four corpses lying behind them but at least they had a single survivor. The evidence was clear, Navalis didn't make mistakes. "Here you go." Senia said, taking out the paper notice addressed to all citizens of the empire of Lys and beyond, a request to hunt and kill guards, soldiers and even members of the Hand.

A mistake that would cost Baralia dearly. Or a calculated move knowing the results. Sulivhaan thought. He didn't quite know how it benefited the kingdom to help them uncover traitors and easily bought mercenaries and adventurers. The rumors that the Hand had orchestrated the demon summoning and even planned to use the war against the empire had been dashed by the written proof coming from Baralia. Not a single member of the Hand had died so far and Sulivhaan planned to keep it that way.

"Ravenhall should soon be clean. I've heard even fresh arrivals talking about the bounty and how everyone who tried something had vanished or been ripped apart by a Shadow or guard." The officer said, four Shadow squad leaders and ten imperial officers and guard captains of both Ravenhall and the Shadowguards were present at the meeting. Sulivhaan had started organizing the cooperation as soon as the first Baralia hunters had come as far as the mountain city. The notice had showed up quickly after, making it even easier to convince the empire.

"The empire will pay improved rates for any Shadow that finds and destroys paid hunters and notices informing citizens of the enemy's... intent. In and outside of Ravenhall."

The squad leaders looked at Sulivhaan who thought about it for a moment. So far they had worked together to find and kill anyone in the city who worked for the enemy to keep Ravenhall stable and its citizens safe but this was an offer to get the Hand involved throughout the empire. Many people would die but knowing that the Shadow's Hand was hunting for them would dissuade a lot of those thinking about the offer.

“We are not an official party in this war and that will stay this way due to the nature of this very organization. However the fact that the offer proven to be from the Kingdom of Baralia calls for the death of our organization's members calls for action. I will review this with the deciding parties and come back to you with an answer. Today.” Sulivhaan said, the officer nodding before they left.

One of the squad leaders sat down on the table as soon as the empire representatives had left. “Are we sure this isn't coming from the empire?”

“As I said, it's proven. By parties I personally trust.” Sulivhaan replied. “I'm sure you've come to similar findings?” He looked at the others, both confirming.

“It's simply baffling. They knew we would get involved, why not focus on the empire?”

“Perhaps the retaking of Ravenhall and subsequent rebuilding was a thorn in their eyes. Maybe their information is outdated and they think we're severely weakened.” One of the Shadows offered.

Sulivhaan shook his head. “We are weakened. More members will die. Perhaps they thought the empire would distrust us more, would declare our involvement a machination against them.”

“Maybe they will.”

“Maybe. Fact is that there is an offer out there asking for Shadows to be murdered. No matter who or why it came to be we cannot sit idle. Payment was offered for a mission without complete involvement of our order in a human war.” One of the leaders said and looked at Sulivhaan.

He had his doubts about the involvement but knew that only few Shadows would heed the call, still it would bring substantial resources towards the empire's war efforts as well as more resources to members of the Hand. As long as the whole order wasn't involved he had to agree. "I'll discuss it with other heads and we'll post the mission later today if all are in agreement?"

They confirmed, each leaving the room quickly thereafter, the mage remaining for a little while longer. First the demons and now this. He sighed when Senia appeared next to him.

"How'd it go boss?" She asked with a grin on her face. She and many others would love the opportunity to hunt easy prey for very good money. As well as whatever else they could acquire in the chaos of war.

This is just as much part of the Hand Sulivhaan. He told himself and slowly floated up from his chair, his magic surging around him. "A mission request from the empire of Iys, to hunt and kill those that seek to destroy us." He could only look at her with disdain as her smile grew. "Our team will remain here in Ravenhall, you are of course free to join the hunt should you wish."

The woman stopped smiling, instead shaking her head. "I promised you Sulivhaan. Forgive my lack of discipline." She bowed deeply before vanishing.

*How long until you leave?* The man asked himself as he stood there, shaking his head and leading his thoughts towards a more optimistic direction. The girl had many opportunities but had remained at his side as she had promised so long ago. Turbulent times would come but which wars had been any different? This time he was in a position of power and he would not let the Hand fall into depravity.



# Chapter 229 Journey through the Night

## Chapter 229 Journey through the Night

The suns were going down as Ilea sped through the mountain chain in the southern part of the empire, soon passing the last peaks before the terrain would grow more even. What was supposed to be human controlled country didn't show any sign of their presence or control. Ilea couldn't spot a single town as far as she could see nor any light or travelers. The wild lands although mapped were avoided at night except by adventurers and the truly desperate.

Her wings moved in the winds, her destination northwest. Passing through the plains, she could make out dark patches of forest in the distance, stormy clouds passing above. Lowering her altitude, she flew below and close above the forest when she heard a roar that made her veer a little, interested in what kind of beast it was. Another cry resounded as she zeroed in on the direction, hovering over a clearing where the massive form of what looked like a grizzly bear tried to fight off the creatures clawing into its back and side.

Ilea blinked downwards and rushed next to the creature, three of her ashen limbs punching into the demons that threatened to kill the beast. She grabbed the fourth one by its throat, the claws of the rabid monster fruitlessly digging into the ash around her as she stared into its soulless eyes. Her fist smashed into its face, a second and third time before the

demon's skull cracked, a ding resounding in her mind as she threw away the lifeless body, twirling in the air above the injured bear, the monsters recovered from her Wave of Ember, all rushing at the newfound prey.

***[Grenoth – lvl 122]***

“Not a bear then?” Ilea asked as the several meters long and high beast roared at her and the demons, her blue eyes staring at it before her ash lashed out again, wave of ember sent into the beasts. Appearing above one of them, she grappled it and landed in the earth and mud, the two skidding to a halt as she sent her destructive mana into its body, claws lashing out at her before she silenced it with four ashen limbs and a fist to its chest. *Two down.* She thought and blinked again, three quick steps later she tackled the disoriented demon into and through a tree behind it, feeling several bones break. Her hand lashed out and ripped out its throat, blood spurting out and onto her ash.

A hard kick to its center of mass sent the half dead monster flying into another tree, its body bending unnaturally before a noise resounded in her head. *One to go.*

The Grenoth was slashing at the remaining demon with its paw, only able to keep it at a distance as it tried to move with its injured legs, bleeding from several spots on its back, only visible to Ilea thanks to her sphere, the wounds lost in the brown fur of the massive beast. *To think something like that can be taken down by a mere four demons.*

The demon was just about to slash into the Grenoth's snout when it was ripped backwards, Ilea grabbing it by the neck and throwing it ten meters into the dirt. The bear like creature moved its clawed paw towards her but Ilea simply took a step towards the demon, avoiding the strike of the injured and scared animal behind her.

“Spawn.” She said and identified the demon to be at level eighty four. Not from the Great Salt then it seemed. Ilea felt personally responsible to shred through any demonic remains she came across prowling the lands of Elos. The monster was screeching towards her and started running again, unrelenting in its wish for blood and death. The monster lacking any

coordination, pure instinct and blood lust whipping it towards her was met by a fully powered and perfectly aimed punch that splattered its brain out into the clearing so fast that its legs continued moving for another three steps before its already dead body fell down onto the grass.

The Grenoth roared behind her, Ilea appearing next to it before she carefully touched it. A clawed paw smashed into her defenses with enough force to cut through a tree trunk, her feet digging into the ground as the kinetic force went through her body. Healing mana started circling through the animal as she focused on the worst injuries first. The demons were vicious creatures but she doubted the bear would have difficulties against a couple of them. *There were likely more.*

Ilea looked into the distance, the bear roaring into her ear. “Calm down teddy.” Ilea said, her ash blocking another wild attack that nearly teared out one of the animal’s claws. It healed quickly as her mana flowed through it, the Grenoth calming down a little as its pains lessened. “See, all better.”

She took care of the worst and then patted the monster on its head, dodging two wild hits as she danced backwards and laughed. “You’re welcome.” She sped off running into the direction where the demons had likely come from, her Hunter’s Sight helping her focus on the trail the fighting monsters had left in their wake. *Could’ve found this without any skills even.* Ilea thought but doubted she’d try to follow the destructive path and massive paw prints on the wet ground if she didn’t have her classes.

She had been right. Three demon corpses were found, one still breathing but so deformed it could hardly move. A stomp took it out of its misery as she looked around for a while to see if she could find any more of them. There were none.

*Might as well move through the terrain and see if more of them are around.* The thought resulted in her quickly running through the forest, vaguely west and northwards as she carefully looked at any trails she could find. It had rained earlier, making it rather easy to spot all the indicators of animals and monsters living, hunting or fleeing in the forest.

Ten minutes later, she came out onto a patch of open space, wild flowers and grass growing on the field. Her ashen wings formed behind her before she rushed over it, noting the hares that ran for safety at her approach. Another patch of forest followed, the huntress back on her feet and on the lookout for demons and other dangers that might lurk in the shadows.

Hours passed as she hunted, finding a pack of wolves that had killed a deer like creature. The animals ran for their lives when she came rushing in, the smell of blood in her nose before she took in the scene. Her search continued fruitlessly when she decided to continue through the air, unable to spot any demons in the vicinity. The familiar smell of burnt wood stopped her, Ilea following the trail until she saw the light in the distance.

A small camp fire it seemed. Cooked meat and the scent of blood mixed in as she got closer. She noticed the woman in her sphere long before she spoke but still advanced on the fire.

“Who goes in the dark?!” A male voice shouted out, his face visible from the near burnt out fire, sweat gleaming on his brow as magic formed in his hand.

*Looks like arcane magic.* Ilea thought as she tried to identify the man. The woman was now behind her, a bow in hand and ready to strike. She'd be the first one Ilea would target should the situation demand it, their eyes and ears it seemed.

However she wasn't in the business of killing random travelers. “A lone Shadow.” Her voice echoed through the trees, the man's eyes focusing on her as his magic swirled in his hand.

“You are welcome at our fire Shadow.” He spoke, looking towards her as she slowly made her way towards the fire, hands at her side. Ilea was armored and without a pack, definitely suspicious but identifying herself as a Shadow would eliminate a lot of questions.

***[Mage – lvl 75]***

She saw another two people, one a young woman staring at her with wide open eyes as she clutched a staff with shaking hands and a man clad in several blankets, sweating and shivering with closed eyes. “Is he alright?” She asked, nodding towards the man.

“He is... injured. A monster attacked us on the road, about half an hour north.” The man stopped channeling mana into his spell and answered her. The rogue behind her didn’t reveal herself yet, a smart move Ilea thought.

She walked over to the injured man and touched his brow, checking his body with her recovery magic. “What kind of monster?” The man was about to stop her from touching his friend but the question made him pause.

*Claws.* Ilea thought, the deep wounds on his chest and belly would bring the man’s death if he was moved. Her mana flowed through him, his breathing calming down immediately.

“Demons.” The man spoke. “I heard what had happened in the empire but to think they’ve come as far as Kroll...”

*So I’m already in the kingdom of Kroll.* “Where were they?”

“Half an hour north Shadow. We took down the two that attacked us but...” He glanced at the forest behind her for a split second, “... I think there are more.”

Ilea stood up and looked at the man. “He is going to survive. You should travel with a healer if you can. Now tell me what you know.” She turned and looked directly at the woman hiding in the darkness. “You too if you have anything to add.”

The rogue tensed up immediately before the man next to her sighed. “Come out. We didn’t mean no offense Shadow. You are alone and we don’t know your intentions.” He said and she could see his muscles tense up.

“Just tell me where they are and I’ll leave you alone.” Ilea suggested, the woman stepping out of the dark, half her face hidden in cloth, a cloak hiding the rest.

“I will lead you.” The woman said, a sharp glance of the man making her shoulders droop. “It’s ok.”

Ilea looked at her and nodded. “I’ll get her out if it gets messy.”

Coughing came from the previously injured man who croaked out a plea for water, the rogue nodding to Ilea before she started moving into the forest, jumping on a tree and Ilea following on the ground below.

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*Hog you damn idiot.* Ilyna thought as she led the Shadow towards the demons they had encountered on the road westwards. Travis was as good as dead and he nearly fucked it up with that monster. All the hairs on her back were standing, her instincts tugging on her mind as the woman silently followed on the ground behind her. *Making a lot of damn noise woman.*

They had no other choice but to rest and start a fire, hoping that none of the demons or anything else would show up to slaughter them in the dark. To think that smuggling out escaped slaves from Baralia would be interrupted by demons out of all possibilities. And now they had the luck to have a lone Shadow walk in on them. She didn’t know what the woman had done to Travis but his skin had already looked better when they had left.

*Maybe he could move now. Maybe she could be a distraction while they fled.* Ilyna thought as she led the woman to her doom. *Or mine.*

“What did you do to the injured man?” She couldn’t help but ask in a whisper.

Expecting no answer or a lie, she continued silently through the night. “I healed his wounds. I told the mage you should get a healer.”

*But she’s a warrior?* Ilyna was starting to doubt her decisions. Maybe it was a battle healer that lost her team somewhere in the wild or she wasn’t a Shadow at all. Thinking of blowing it off and hope that Travis could walk or even run again, she turned to the woman and stopped. “I th...,”

The Shadow held up a hand and sniffed the air. “Found you...,” A whisper into the dark night before she started walking.

*What is she...*, She followed and soon heard the noises of ripping flesh coming from the road ahead. Ilyna’s eyes widened when she saw the horrific creatures in the distance, a wagon had rolled to the side of the road.

“I think it’s time for you to leave huntress.” The woman spoke from below, a gray mist forming around her.

And then she vanished, Ilyna’s eyes frantically darting in the dark before she found her again, much closer to the road and the monsters. Again she vanished, Ilyna instinctively following from her elevated position in the trees until she could see the road illuminated by the moonlight.

The Shadow was among them, grabbing them with her bare hands before she smashed her fists into them, appearing around the circle of confused and raging monsters, the gray mist cutting into the creatures. She couldn’t move, couldn’t rip her eyes from the horrific slaughter, limbs ripped and thrown away, the sound of breaking bones and crushed flesh interspersed with screeches before everything was silent.

The woman was standing among a pile of corpses. *Get a fucking grip.* Ilyna quickly approached the shadow, the smell and sight nauseating but not the worst she had seen. “How often are they still sighted? I thought the empire took care of most of them.”

Ilyna froze again, nearly falling from the tree she was on when the woman spoke to her. “I... I don’t. Sometimes, the empire doesn’t care as soon as they cross the borders.”

“Any cities destroyed?”

“Not that I know of. This is one of the biggest groups I’ve heard about.”  
She replied as quickly as she could.

“Good. Well be careful out there. They turn people they kill into demons.”

*I know.* The thought went through her head as she jumped down from the tree, checking the wagon for any survivors.

“They’re dead. There’s some food in there. Good luck.” The Shadow said and vanished. Ilyna looked around but couldn’t find her again, dead eyes staring through her from the ground, a rustling behind her nearly making her jump. It was just an owl.

*Get the fuck out of here, move.* She told herself and jumped up again, her hiding skills activating as she sped back to her group.

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Ilea followed the long trail of the demons, most of them leading along the country road she had come across. The clouds above her hid the moonlight, turning the road pitch black. *Why were they traveling at this bloody time?* She questioned but decided that it wasn’t her problem. The girl had looked scared but not of the others around the campfire and the man had definitely been injured by a demon. Ilea decided on the benefit of the doubt for that group, mostly because she didn’t have a bad feeling when she had talked to them.



None of the demons had been above level one hundred. Stragglers escaping from the empire. If any originally summoned beasts had made it this far the situation would certainly be different. Even some random adventurers could deal with one or two of them at this level. *With great difficulty.*

A glint of light was reflected in the distance as she was running. Deciding to see what it was, Ilea quickly reached a group of soldiers in armor and colors she hadn't seen before. They veered out at her approach and shouted for her to stop. Ilea followed their orders and lifted her hands as she identified them. *Barely one above a hundred.*

“What is your business in the kingdom of Kroll? I assume you are a Shadow?” One of them asked, his armor looking a little higher in quality compared to the others.

Ilea looked them over and answered, “Passing through officer. If you're looking for the demons they're ten minutes down the road.” Some of the soldiers looked at each other at that, Ilea noticing two of them grip their weapons more tightly. “They're already dead.”

The officer locked eyes with her, “And why would a Shadow care to kill demons on the road?”

“That, officer. Is my own business. Let me know if you have the location of any other groups of them. I'll be happy to clean up the mess.” She suggested with a smile, the man gulping as he heard it.

He waved for the group to continue, “That won't be necessary Shadow, good luck on your hunt.”

“And on yours.” Ilea replied and watched them leave, following the thinning trail for another twenty minutes, finding the burnt remains of at least three demons in the forest a couple minutes off the road. She definitely liked the lack of scrutiny even soldiers showed her now that she was wearing black and simply stated she was a Shadow. *Who would travel in the wild alone at night, claiming to have killed demons and in complete confidence standing against a group of ten soldiers aiming their magic at them. Who but a Shadow. Or someone just as dangerous.*

Giving up on her search, she decided to follow the road until she knew again where she was. The visibility was too bad for her to see anything further than a couple dozen meters. Several hours passed without her encountering anybody as she sped over the road leading westwards through the night, only a single pause necessary to gain back her stamina and mana that started to reach less than a fifth of her total.

Ilea stopped another hour later near a worn down stone bridge with questionable maintenance. Wooden signs with fading writing confirmed she was going towards the west. Most of the listed towns were indecipherable but she could make out the word Karth in the midst of them, the mountain apparently dominant enough to deserve a mention on the fuck off nowhere signs.

# Chapter 230 Back to the Roots

## Chapter 230 Back to the Roots

Ilea quickly checked through the remaining notifications in her mind but found none of her skills or classes had leveled from her encounters with the demons. The lone traveler soon came upon a city, its gates closed, guards patrolling on the walls. The sounds and smells that she perceived even from the hundred meter distance made her slow down and walk off the road onto the field of grass. She could see a single mage flying above the wall, following her along the defenses as she ran and circled the city.

*Lucky for you I'm no elf.* Passing the town walls, she continued on the same road, jumping over a river and ignoring a road leading north. Having looked over her map she had decided to go north from Riverwatch to avoid getting caught up in the war raging through the empire or the constant conflicts in the northern plains she had heard about. Ilea was pretty sure Kroll was smaller than the empire but she had no idea where it started or ended. The suns would rise soon and she hoped to see Karth at that point. *Maybe I should learn where some of the stars are to orient myself.*

It was an idea she previously had but never actually cared to learn about. A class in the Shadow's Hand might've been the right decision but Ilea didn't want to end up hidden away in a library like Dagon. The man had of course fought on the fields of Ravenhall to retake the city so she had to give credit where it was due.

The road soon diverged again, several paths leading in different directions. Ilea chose to follow the road to Karth. Running along the neglected road, she soon saw light on the horizon. Her buffs raised to the max when she realized it wasn't sunlight but fire instead. The scent of smoke soon filled the air, Ilea ignoring the dangerous environment and rushing towards the origin of the fires.

*A town?* She thought when she passed destroyed walls, looking at the husks of destroyed houses built with wood and stone. All of it looked simple. Her lungs were filled with smoke but she resisted the slight urge to cough, finding it an easy thing. Perhaps her training with William hadn't just been beneficial for underwater scenarios, although her skill only mentioned liquids.

A big square opened up, Ilea walking out into the open as a massive beam of wood came loose from a nearby building, shattering on the ground as it sent fiery sparks onto the dirt. *Corpses.* She thought and walked towards the wooden platform, finding several people dead, wounds from both weapons and claws it seemed but the headless corpse bound to a stake confused her a little, an ax biting into the wood above where the neck ended.

*An execution?* Some of the corpses looked like guards, at least very badly equipped ones. She found the head of the judged lying a couple meters away, eyes open and a look of anguish staring back at her. She chucked it away and continued looking around the burning village. Flying up, she found that the place was much smaller than she first thought, the raging fires hid the village's ordinary nature, clothing it in a last spectacle.

Sounds of battle made her focus and glance at a patch of forest to the west. Quickly rushing over, she followed a trail of blood, corpses of soldiers, guards and what looked like civilians left behind before she came out into a small clearing, four armored warriors staring down a young woman, black lightning zapping the leaves and trees around her as she clutched the bleeding wound on her belly.

“Let her bleed out...,” One of the soldiers said, his spear pointed at her before he went to one knee, wincing in pain. Lightning cracked and sent the man backwards, smoke coming from his head as he landed close to Ilea.

She was about to intervene and at least find out who they were when the woman cried out in pain.

Lightning crackled, scorching the ground around her before she coughed up blood. “You fucking dogs... I will kill all of you.”

The men tensed up. “Careful, don’t let your guard down.”

Ilea checked the soldier lying in front of her but found him dead and gone, instead walking towards the thoroughly distracted group before she spoke, “Who are you?”

Two of them turned right away, the woman coughing again and stumbling against the tree behind her as she smiled towards Ilea. A resigned look, her eyes closing with a pain stricken face. “A Shadow! Good, this one practices dark magics, you’ve seen it yourself. We were sent to take care of them.”

“Them? The dead man on the square?” Ilea asked and listened to the whispers coming from the woman.

“Charles, I will soon join you.”

“Yes, the whole village was corrupted, death magic.” The soldier who had spoken before answered her.

“So you came and killed them all, burnt down the village to cleanse it?” Ilea asked, trying to get a reaction out of him that might explain some of it.

“Exactly. She’s the last one of the wretches.” He said and twirled his blade.

Ilea really didn’t want to be in this situation but she wasn’t as cold as to just vanish without at least seeing it through. “What kind of rituals did they do?”

The soldier looked confused, the other two approaching the woman who seemed to have given up completely. “Didn’t you listen, she practices dark magic.”

*Know a guy or two who do that too.* Ilea thought and watched them start beating her. “Just kill her and be done with it.”

The man shook his head. “No. She must suffer. An example to those who would chose to serve these kinds of gods.” Quiet moans of pain filled her ears as she watched them throw the woman in the mud, kicking at her side with heavy boots, bones breaking with each hit.

“I said kill her and be done with it.” Ilea said but the man just smiled at her, turning his attention to the others. “Alright, your stupid decision not to listen to me.” Ilea added and appeared between the two men, her fists hitting each of their faces, breaking a jaw and a nose. “Now fuck off.”

The man behind her raised his sword and pointed it at her. “Why would you interfere, are you on a mission Shadow? These are the king’s laws and you stand between them. Would you really go against a whole kingdom?”

Ash surged out, gripping around the struggling soldiers next to her as her mana pushed into them, their feeble resistance cracking before another two tendrils sent wave of ember into them, both of them dying while she walked up to the man, his sword lashing out as he screamed. The blade stopped at her armored shoulder before she gripped his hand. “Why would they care about some shit soldiers like you?”

A kick sent the man stumbling, his hip bone broken. He crawled on the ground in pain before she appeared above him, her armored boot crushing his skull with a clean blow. The woman on the ground was barely conscious when healing mana started flowing through her and took care of her heavy injuries.

“I can take you out of the kingdom, to the west.” Ilea said, the healed woman remaining on the ground as she cried.

Ilea looked away and added, “I’m not going to wait here with you.”

A hoarse voice answered her, “The corpse... on the square. The one they executed first. He had a necklace.Can I ask you to burn them and bring that to me...,”

Ilea leaned on the tree next to her. “Do I look like a charity? I offered to help you come west. It’s that or I leave. Your problems aren’t mine dark mage.”

“I don’t need your help Shadow.”

Ilea nodded once and walked off. Another three men added to her list of humans she had planned not to encounter for a while. Her arm lashed out and punched through a thick tree, the wood groaning as its weight shifted and ripped the whole structure down towards the ground. Flying up above the treeline, Ilea quickly sped up as finally the light of day greeted her, the form of the massive mountain of Karth barely visible in the far distance.

Several hours of flying at her top speed finally brought her close enough to see the town of Riverwatch, her wings disintegrating after she landed on the road leading towards the city. “A shit night finally ends.”

Ilea started walking, greeting a group of adventurers that were gleefully talking in the back of a horse pulled wagon, a massive dead beast Ilea couldn’t quite place lying between them. *Frog mutant or something?* She thought, their enthusiastic mood taking a big downfall upon seeing the Shadow. Apprehension clearly visible on their faces Ilea decided against trying to join them for the ride and instead kept walking until they were barely visible to her on the dusty road. She came up on the bridge she had crossed many a time before when coming to Riverwatch and stopped, looking towards the faraway walls of the city before she smiled, instead crossing the river and starting to run into the familiar part of the Navali forest.

*Seems like the Drakes have repopulated.* The thought went through her head when one of them stopped and quickly rushed away when it spotted her. “That’s right bitch!” She laughed and continued her run, her armored boots hitting the creeks and leaving deep marks in the soft earth wherever she passed.

The temple looked the exact same as it had before, rundown and fucking old. *My first home in this shit hole. Nah, actually this forest isn't as shit as the empire.* Ilea thought and walked through the stone halls, quickly opening a door and looking at the skeleton still inside. “Hey buddy, been a while.” She waved and closed the door again, not to further disturb the permanent resident.

“Lucky I found this instead of the city first. I might’ve become another ice or fire mage thinking it to be bloody cool.” Her hands brushed against the stone as she saw through the ground with her sphere, blinking into the small hall she had found after her arrival. Touching the wall, there was still no Bluemoon grass but she felt the power within. It would grow again, in time. She felt a little bad about eating probably dozens if not hundreds of years worth of the elixir in just a couple months and alone at that. Nobody else used it anymore and the rate of death was too high for her to spread it with good faith. The guild didn’t linger for long.

“Oh hey, look it’s drake scales.” She smiled and took one of the remaining pieces. *What a shit material. Looked badass at least.* To think she had lugged tons of the stuff around after painfully cutting it off from the monsters she had killed. *Maybe I’ll do that with dragon scales soon enough.*

Walking into the library, she smelled the old books and dried shit and piss. *Courtesy of your one and only.* Her hands grazed the cracks and missing stone on the wall where she had trained Destruction. Walking back, she checked the fountain.

### ***[Fountain of Clarity]***

She smirked, “Still as stupid as it was back then.” Drinking a little of the water, she felt its power flow through her. Summoning a cup, she found the effects vanished as soon as it left the beautifully crafted spring. Ilea checked the stone and found several enchantments on its side and within. Runes



carved into the well and still active. She couldn't tell on what exactly it ran but there must've been some connection to a man crystal somewhere. Putting her hand into the fountain and directly storing the water in her necklace proved unsuccessful as well.

Again, as soon as she drank it from her necklace the power had disappeared. "What is this? Some kind of system abuse patch they implemented?"

It felt natural for Ilea to talk to herself now that she was alone again, back in these familiar halls that were now clad in complete darkness, her sphere now as natural for her to see as her eyes were. Considering the enchantments and runes she had seen before, the Azarinth Order or whoever had built this place certainly weren't novices. A healing fountain could be a great asset to a city, an army or really any adventurer. Ilea didn't know anything about the limitations of building one, of having it powered. Perhaps it required a spell or sacrifice to initially activate. Maybe it was linked to the bluemoon grass or the source of the plant.

She wasn't about to jot down every single rune on the well but maybe a journey to the temple with Clarie, Christopher and perhaps even Weavy would shed some light on the magical fountain of health. *Alchemists would probably kill to see this thing.* She smiled, not intending to share it with the world as of yet. Her blink at a much higher level allowed her to blink down into the big hall where she had fought against some kind of guardian golem before. Parts of the thing still remained on the dusty floor, magical lights still illuminating the eerie room.

Ilea walked towards the treasure room where she had found the black cloak she had loved so much. *A shame it burnt to crisps in the Taleen dungeon.* The thought was interrupted when she felt something weird in her Sphere. *Really. Another hidden passage?* Ilea smiled and followed the wall, the perfectly ordinary looking stone bricks damn near screamed at her in her Sphere. Blinking brought her nowhere new. Either an enchantment had been placed to prevent overeager initiates to find it or there really was nothing.

Her fists and ash started digging into the stone, Ilea's weapons damaging the hard surface as if it was drywall, ripping out big chunks with each hit. She waved at the dust, her ash moving away the shattered stone. Right before she started feeling silly for going berserk against a cellar wall, her fist broke through. Ripping at it, a huge crack formed letting her see through. Her Sphere was still unable to see but her eyes told her there was something.

It lacked any light and Ilea continued clearing out stone until she could fit through the opening. Her sphere immediately expanded when she passed the invisible threshold. No dungeon notification popped up as she had hoped but she found a rune on a nearby wall connected to a magical light. That much she understood, her mana pushing into the rune before a dim blue light illuminated the perfectly intact stairwell.

She could make out a single room below, steadily going down as she checked for traps. More lights were activated when she touched the rune at the bottom of the stairs, the big room coming to life before her eyes. A round table with a big map in the middle as well as several chairs, dust and cobwebs clinging to everything they could. The dust made the air heavy, a smell of leather permeating her nose and sphere. *Hidden meeting room?*

Nobody had used it in their last days it seemed, neither skeleton nor undead prowling the room as she stepped around the table. The map looked much like her own with a lot more cities, empires and kingdoms. Getting out her notebook, she compared the names and found most of them differing from what she had in her hand. Riverwatch and all the cities west of it were not even on the map. The empire of Lys was there but much smaller and further to the east. Ravenhall was on it too, the lone city in the mountain retaining its name through the centuries.

Ilea felt a little pride rushing through her at that but shook her head at the absurdity of the fact. They were no glorious order making the world a better place. They were mercenaries. *Oldest bloody mercenaries though and the baddest of ass.*

“Wish I had my cellphone to take a picture.” She complained and sat down on one of the chairs, finding it somewhat comfortable despite the cobwebs

and the cloud of dust that clung to her armor immediately. Taking one of the chess pieces from the map, she twirled it in her fingers before her eyes fell on the symbol painted on the pawn's chest. One of her gauntlets vanished before she sacrificed a couple hundred health to activate her third tier State of Azarinth.

One of the runes, the one on the back of her hand looked eerily similar to the one painted in blue on the little figure. Standing up again, she studied the placement of the figures but couldn't figure out what it meant. Some were grouped up near Karth, some built formations in the forest. Single pieces stood alone near the northern mountain chain or placed in the forest, their dark color quite a contrast to the brown ones all the other figures sported.

Ilea didn't recognize any of the other symbols, even her State of Azarinth rune wasn't exactly the same but she couldn't help but be convinced. Checking them for similarities, she put nine figures into her necklace. Perhaps one of the librarians she had met would know about their significance. The dark figures neither had any discernible shape nor symbols but she couldn't help but take one and look at it deeply. "Can thou see me dark lord?" A shiver went down her spine, hoping she hadn't just summoned Morgoth himself to the world of Elos.

"I swear one of these days it's gonna happen. I'm just gonna doom all of life because of some stupid joke." Ilea mused to herself, placing the black figure back exactly where she had taken it from. Summoning her notebook, she quickly sketched down another map and took her time to write each name she could actually read into it. Nothing west or north of the now human plains had any writing on it, telling her that even back whenever this was, the forest and northern mountains weren't charted. At least not by the owners of this hall.

# Chapter 231 Compass Rose

## Chapter 231 Compass Rose

The room had little else that held her interest. She added the position of all the figures in her notebook as well just in case it would be relevant. If this had been some kind of strategy meeting then it was possible someone had rearranged them to make sure it wouldn't give away anything should a spy or someone like her enter the room at one point or the other.

*As cocky as the Azarinth Order seemed to have been according to all the books I doubt they'd bother.* Ilea looked through the room once more but there weren't even any books. She was happy the map had survived considering the state the library in her training hall had been in. Going back up the stairs, she was back in the hall with the guardian and blinked back up. Another blink and she was on top of the temple.

The trees around the temple had grown close, taking back what was theirs in the past. Leaves rustled when the wind blew through them. Ilea looked around, a Drake's call audible in the distance before she looked down on the stone roof. "Still here hmm?" The question answered itself when she crouched down a little and cleaned away the leaves and dirt that had covered her compass rose and the small mountain to the southwest. She smiled and straightened herself again, not adding anything to the map today. Ilea closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, enjoying the quiet, the nature. She had been mere prey when she arrived in Elos but as some comical god, fate or RNG had it, she was still alive and had turned into a huntress herself.

Her eyes opened and her body turned, northwards. To the mountain chain she could barely make out in the cloudy distance. Quickly glancing towards the lone mountain in the south, she winked at it and let her wings spread. The ashen protrusions moved in the wind before her legs left the roof, ascending towards the sky. Ilea sped towards the north, her mind focused and brimming with excitement.

She kept flying low, only a couple meters above the treeline, avoiding some of the higher ones sticking out of the forest like overgrown buildings. Regularly checking the western sky for any signs of movement other than the leaves and small birds, she advanced on her destination. Ilea had her sphere and some other skills active at all times now, making her prepared for an ambush. Combined with her healing and high speed, she hoped it was enough to at least survive alone in the north.

If not she'd find a dungeon somewhere and train until she was strong enough to do so. The mountains grew closer but visibility was good today, meaning she was likely still a while away from her destination. It took her an hour to get close to the mountain chain, close enough to see them reach up into the clouds and beyond. Accelerating, she flew in an upwards curve to pass the mountain tops, ignoring any of the routes the expeditions had planned to use. Perhaps that was why they had failed in the first place.

*Maybe they didn't fail and simply found a nice place to stay and decided to become independent.* The thought vanished from her mind when she crossed over the lowest mountain before her. The country stretching behind it was littered with massive cracks and crevices running deep into the stone, mountains and valleys forming and breaking off in at points extreme angles. The terrain continued as far as she could see, dark storms visible far away and snow covering the higher parts of some mountains.

She slowed down and hovered in the air, gulping while trying to think about where to go. Looking east, she couldn't see the ocean, the mountainous environment continuing further than she thought possible. Except for the south, she could not find an end to it, purple lightning flashing in one of the dark storms making her head turn. *It's harder to breathe.* Ilea found but it wasn't an issue. She knew about higher altitudes having lower levels of oxygen but to her it felt like the air was thicker, heavier in a sense.

Shaking her head, she woke herself out of her reverie and flew downwards to a relatively nearby valley, deep cracks showing at the bottom of it. Her eyes opened wide when one of the high mountains overlooking her destination seemed to turn black, enveloped by dark clouds that moved towards her. She slowed down and watched as the mountain got enveloped, her instincts telling her to run but her mind unable to pry herself off the view, the massive clouds moving through the air like a beast prowling the skies. *Move.*

Ilea heard herself think and started rushing downwards. Her whole body screamed at her that something about that storm was dangerous. Trusting her instincts, she quickly reached the ground, looking for somewhere to take shelter. There were small cracks in the rock but other than protrusions sticking out and providing shade against the sun, there was nothing she felt safe enough to actually hide behind. *The crevice.* Enhancing her speed with the third tier of her aura, adding blinks in to cover even more distance, she rushed towards her new target.

Ilea blinked past big rocks and rushed by near mountains, seeing not a single living being on the surface as the sky darkened and a purple flash cut through stone a couple hundred meters to her left. The shock wave pushed her to the east, all her power and body fighting against the natural force. Her healing spell told her something was wrong with her left side but she couldn't figure out what, simply pushing mana towards it and feeling the damage subside, albeit slowly. *Let's not get hit.*

The storm was now right above her, the light of the suns a forgotten memory, unable to pierce whatever it was that formed the massive storm front. No rain fell from the dark giants looming over her, Ilea's breathing and heart beat accelerating as she enhanced her body to the fullest. The only sound she could hear were her own wings, her frantic breathing and her heartbeat, even the strong winds that had accompanied her previously scared or pushed away by whatever was happening. A distant purple impact sent a wave of air to her back, the woman happy to find her speed picking up with the help.

The valley wasn't visible anymore, hidden behind high hills and sharp stones sticking out of the ground all around her. Another bolt of lightning

hit the stone, this time only a hundred meters to her right, the explosion of rock sending shrapnel as big as some of the massive protrusions around her flying, her body tumbling in the wave of pure power as she tried to stabilize herself, pieces of rock impacting against her Veil and the ashen mist she started forming around herself. She blinked out of the way of another flying rock as big as a car, finding herself stable enough to fly again.

*What the hell is this bullshit...* She continued forward, using the terrain around her to ignore the flying truck sized chunks still impacting slowly around her, one of them forcing another blink as it rushed down at her from a steep angle. The sound of impacting mass, sending debris and air to the side made her reduce her hearing capabilities not to take damage there as well. Crossing over another large hill, the crevice at the bottom of the valley was visible again, still several kilometers away. Her eyes focused on what she assumed to be shelter, her awareness suddenly peaked, the terrain that had rushed by her a moment earlier slowed down to a crawl, the flying debris pushing through the air like stone through water.

And then she saw it, above her the sky turned purple, tendrils of energy zapping at the clouds before they moved down towards the ground, trying to find a way to go as it snaked through the air with moderate speed. Ilea blinked backwards, knowing she had two seconds to prepare herself as the ash around her moved forward, forming several walls as her arms shielded her body, her legs moving up to her stomach and her wings cutting forward through the air to cocoon her small form. Five hundred points of health were sacrificed to increase her State of Azarinth for a moment, her healing already kicking in to recover the health while she formed more ash to protect her.

Ilea felt herself fall towards the ground, the purple lightning moved through the air like cracks in the sky, invisible to her a moment later as it passed the ashen defenses before her. Ilea prepared to blink again when the lightning impacted around forty meters in front of her. The shock wave came a moment later, her ash vanishing like sand washed away by the tides, her Veil resisting for a moment before the force pushed through. Ilea's muscles and bones pushed backwards, her vision nearly going dark when her skull cracked behind her armor, the force nearly shattering her bones, some of

them snapping and cutting out of her skin as they slashed through her organs and tissue from within, only stopped by the armor on her back as she was flung through the air like a rag doll.

Fighting with all her will to stay conscious, her healing skill took over. Trying to stop the internal bleedings, Ilea focused on her heart and brain secondarily. Her body flying at high speed impacted a rock, the bones still sticking out of her skin cutting through even more of her body as she was flung sideways, finally landing on the ground where her body tumbled for twenty more meters before coming to a stop. Blood seeped out of the thin openings in her armor, her head looking towards the sky. One of her eyes had miraculously survived, the bloodied thing barely registering the dark clouds above while she tried with all her power to stabilize her dying body.

A purple tendril of energy slashed through the sky above when she saw a winged shadow amidst the clouds, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared, the lightning impacting somewhere far off, the wind nearly moving her body, Ilea willing her hands to dig into the stone with whatever strength they had left. One of them still responded, a swift jab brought her some stability at the cost of even more of her body rupturing. Her vision went dark for a moment before she came back, breathing hard. Flying debris rained down on the ground next to her, small pebbles impacting her surprisingly intact armor. The bleeding was under control now but half of her organs were still mush, her heart and brain damaged and at the brink of failure as well.

Ilea's instincts took over as her hand held on to the ground, a massive rock impacting a couple dozen meters next to her, her body lifting up from the force. She landed again with a groan, blinking her prone body away when a stone the size and weight of a tank crashed into the ground, the impact making her stumble again. Some of her organs had recovered but got injured again, not as badly as with the initial impact at least. Her brain and heart recovered and bones snapped back into place, Ilea using the existing bone instead of building new one to save time but also because nothing had been completely pulverized. Nothing she needed to move.

As soon as the bleedings were taken care of and most of her organs were functioning at least somewhat, she spread her wings, one good eye focused



on the crevice that looked to be so close. Lightning hit making her turn her head, wincing at the damage the movement did to a part of her spine. Luckily unable to feel the pain, she found the lightning had impacted several hundred meters away and behind a big hill. Focusing forward again, Ilea continued to heal her body, the recovery getting quicker now that she wasn't leaking blood anymore and no more of her bones were trying to damage her. She was back.

Energy hit behind her, increasing her speed as she rushed past the desolate landscape, veering left before she entered the crevice. Ilea's speed was too high, her body too injured for her to navigate properly through the quickly thinning tear in the land. She impacted the wall before stabilizing, grazing the other side of the crevice before landing hard on the ground a hundred meters further down. Her body came to a halt. A line of stone had been scratched and cracked from her landing.

Breathing out, the woman started laughing, wincing at the pain when she reactivated its perception. Half her body was still mush but it was quickly recovering now, stable and soon back at peak condition. It was good to feel it. To know she had survived. She couldn't feel her legs but that was a minor concern.

A hiss made her tense up, her one eye frantically looking for the source of the noise as her second one started rebuilding. A moment later she stared back at the huge eagle that clung to the side of the crevice, a snake as broad as herself and longer than she thought possible struggled against the eagle's claw that dug deeply into its body as it hissed and tried biting at the unmoving bird.

*It's looking at me.* She focused on healing up, not moving a single muscle as the light of her second eye returned. The eagle was several meters in height, its talons longer than most swords a human would wield. *Is it hiding or hunting?* The storm was still above them, the valley a dark and quiet place, noise coming from the lightning impacts from above and the occasional stone that fell. Ilea blinked closer to the stone wall, building ash again just in case lightning managed to somehow find its way down the narrow crack.

The eagle still watched her but it already had a meal in its talons. If it was a wild animal she'd likely be safe. *Maybe its apprehensive of me as well?* The idea didn't fit with the majestic monster that casually held onto the side of the crevice, its wings retracted and sometimes moving to stabilize its massive body. They waited together for another fifteen minutes until light fell in from above, Ilea noticing the grass and plants growing at the bottom of the crack for the first time now that the danger of the storm had moved past.

She watched the eagle lift its head and look back down at her before it jumped off, the wingspan too broad to fly straight in the crack as it ascended quickly, both using its wings but also digging into the stone with its one free clawed foot. And it was gone, alongside the snake that had been less lucky than Ilea had been.

Ilea breathed a sigh of relief, finding the air easier to breathe again down here and outside of the silent storm. *What was the thing I saw?* She thought and tried to remember, the memory like a haze of her barely conscious self. There were wings, she was sure of it. Big wings and a tail. Moving out of the hiding spot under some protruding stone above, she grinned to herself. *Was that the first dragon I've seen? And I didn't even fight it.* Excitement flowed through her, the adrenaline from her tense arrival in the north slowly faded as she activated her meditation skill and focused to control her quickening heartbeat.

She hadn't seen the levels of the beasts but her instincts at least had sounded an alarm. Both the snake and the eagle would likely be formidable opponents should she stand in their way. Hunters of prey themselves and they survived here where lightning was strong enough to kill her. *Maybe I'll follow the crevice.* Ilea thought, reminded that the expeditions planned to use tunnels and similar cracks in the land to go into the northern territory. With the lack of animals she had seen above, it seemed like the more sensible bet. Especially with how quickly that storm had moved around her.

Deciding to simply move further north and see what she'd find, Ilea carefully walked alongside the crack, the occasional flower growing out of the dry stone greeting the new visitor. *Life finds a way hmm?*

The crevice opened up when she came out of the previous section. Not by much but enough to have allowed stones to fall into it more easily, some stacking several dozen meters high, their structural integrity questionable at best. A small clear stream of water flowed lazily through the crack, ending in a small cave near where Ilea stood. More plants were growing here, their green splendor reflecting the sunlight from above alongside the sparkling creek. Movement caught her eye, a fox like creature with scales instead of fur peeked out of a hole before it moved to the creek, its red brown form hidden among the stone before it started sipping the water.

Ilea moved through with as little noise as she could produce but the fox rushed away when she came closer. *Not as stealthy as the little guy.* Looking around, she blinked to a group of massive stones, the suns residing nearly right above her not reaching this part of the creek because of the steep angle. She jumped up, her wings spreading before she rushed to the top of the crevice, looking out over the terrain. Hills and big chunks of rock inhibited her view but she could see the dark clouds in the distance, purple flashes continuously impacting the ground. Even from so far away she could feel the tiny tremors. Seeing a group of birds flying by, she jumped down again, grabbing the edge of the cliff to hide her body from the predators. The hairs on her back were standing when she watched the leathery wings of the vicious looking birds flap in the winds. *Welcome to the fabled north. It's been 0 days since the last near death experience.*

# Chapter 232 The Northern Night

## Chapter 232 The Northern Night

Traveling through the cracks in the land proved rather simple for Ilea, gifted with flight, high durability and endurance. The creek she had found previously was the only source of water she had seen so far and the shadows were already stretching far to the west, almost no light finding the bottom of the crevice she was currently moving through. The howling wind could be heard rushing by above, the cover of the glen protecting the creatures seeking shelter within. She could hear them before passing over the small hill, her Sphere informing her about the size and form of what creatures lay beyond. One of them looked up, its scaled head turning her way before it hissed, the other two bipedal bird like animals turned her way as well.

### *[Burrow Dragoon – lvl 205]*

The closest one read as the three fanned out to surround their prey. “So you want to play?” Two of them quickly advanced, their height a little lower than Ilea’s but the claws on their feet nearly as long as her hand. Yellow eyes focused on her as the last one of them jumped up and twirled before it crashed and dug into the earth, Ilea’s brows rising as she jumped backwards, seeing the Dragoon advance through the ground with her Sphere. It reached her before the running ones did, its jaw snapping at the air before it landed again, digging into the ground.

They had neither arms nor wings, most of their weight probably distributed between claws and teeth. At least that's what Ilea thought when she blinked next to one of the murder chickens, the monster just jumping up to burrow like its pal had done before it. Ilea's fist alongside five limbs of ash crashed into its side, six loads of wave of ember with a side of Destruction rushed into the beast, the impact sending it skidding for several meters before it cried out in pain, hissing at her. *Heavier than I thought.*

Stepping to her left, Ilea avoided the emerging Dragoon, its leg rushing out to dig into her ash. Crouching downwards to avoid its attack, Ilea grabbed on to one of its legs and twirled around, throwing it at the hissing monster. The third beast emerged, its maw closing around her foot before she had let go of the second one, preventing her blink from activating. Its teeth ground through her Veil and fought hard against her armor before eight tendrils of ash smashed into the beast, Ilea pulling it up and out of the ground with her legs before she smashed her fist into its hard skull. Again and again until one of its eyes closed, a crack reverberating.

Ilea saw the other two approaching below and spread her wings, ascending with all the power she had, dragging the one Dragoon out of the stone while she continued her assault. Her armor groaned under the stress but the beast didn't manage to get through. Its limbs stopped moving another three punches later, Ilea putting her hands inside its maw and pulling it apart. Sweat dropped from her brow as she groaned, finally breaking open the beast's jaws and dropping its lifeless body towards the hissing monsters below.

Blinking behind one of them, she grabbed its tail and whirled it around, impacting the second one while her ash and touch delivered Wave of Ember as well as reversed Hunter Recovery. Breathing out hard, she watched the monster get up and burrow, Ilea still holding on to the other beast that desperately tried to get away. Jumping up, her wings helping in the process, she twirled and smashed the emerging beast with its specimen, smiling when it bit down into the other monster's back. Jaw locked in place, Ilea let go of them before landing on top of the now intertwined beasts, one groaning in pain as teeth, fists and destructive mana rained into its scaled head.

It died a moment later, Ilea quickly taking care of the last one that remained locked in place, the only danger remaining its frantically moving legs that tried to claw at her. The bloodied yellow golden scales glittered a little in the sunshine that would soon leave the crevice behind until the night came and went.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Burrow Dragoon – lvl 205]*

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Burrow Dragoon – lvl 217]*

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Burrow Dragoon – lvl 222]*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*And here I thought the north was going to be good to raise my classes again.* Ilea smashed her fists together and breathed out. There were scratches on her armor but no further damage. Compared to the lightning bolt from before, where the force was distributed amongst her whole armor, the Dragoon had attacked a specific part, its teeth and jaw strength apparently enough to damage it. *Let's not end up with our head inside of that jaw.*

Leaving the corpses behind, she moved on as the land became more and more dark. The glen became thinner and thinner until she could barely move through it at its lowest point, instead jumping up to fit through. Moving from an jutting stone to another, she found her visibility lowering. Coming out on the other side, she found herself looking into a deep crevice, mist looked to be falling into it from the top. She could hardly make out the ground and jumped down. A small creek flowed slowly towards her direction, growing vegetation pushed out of the slits and cracks on the ground.

As the night progressed, Ilea could see sparkling stars shining down from above, their light reflected in the water of the creek as a thin mist rolled into the glen. Like a cascade of water, the mist flowed down from the dangerous terrain above. *Where is it coming from?*

The question remained unanswered when the area around her turned eerily calm. She couldn't make out the sound of the flowing water just a couple meters over, her breathing quickening as she prepared, for something. She knew not what. Seeing the mist pour in from all directions around her Ilea thought it best to fly up and observe the area but her body froze when she heard a noise.

A humming switching between high and low notes in an eerily unnatural rhythm. Her body screamed at her to get the hell out of there but she couldn't move an inch.

*'ding' 'You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for three seconds.'*

The time passed slowly as she watched something twist in the mist, four limbs moving towards her with frightening speed, a ghostly floating form dancing as if pushed by an unearthly wind before six white eyes opened and stared at her, black feline pupils staring into her two. Unblinking and unwavering the barely visible creature moved towards her in twirling motions, its eyes focused on her at all times before she could finally move again.

*[Miststalker – lvl ??]*

Ilea's wings spread while she felt her mana and health drain, the familiar sensation not surprising her. The four limbs ending in what looked like blades reached out to her while she ascended, the soundless weapons slashing through the mist. The humming continued but left her unaffected, Ilea debating if she should engage the creepy monster when her body locked up again, her form falling down towards the mists.

*'ding' 'You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for three seconds.'*

*'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 4'*

The seconds passed before she blinked up, her wings forming just before she dropped again.

***‘ding’ ‘You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for two seconds.’***

As she fell, her heart sunk. Dozens of the creatures moved through the mists, their songs intertwining into a terrifying concert of death. All of them moved towards her. Her health and mana started draining faster as more of the creatures advanced on her. Her body moved again for a second before another one of them froze her in place. She had blinked up and away but not far enough to get out of the deathly crevice.

***‘ding’ ‘You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for two seconds.’***

One of the monsters slashed its bladed scythe like arm at her, Ilea’s mind flashing back to her first encounter with a Taleen Guardian. It dissipated at her armor but she felt the magic flow into her, a cold feeling spreading where it had hit her. *Curse.*

Another drain to her health and mana and if she didn’t get out of there soon, she’d be left dry and dead before the night had ended. Blinking up, she rammed her hands and ashen limbs into the stone before the next message resounded in her mind.

***‘ding’ ‘You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for two seconds.’***

***‘ding’ ‘Veteran reaches lvl 5’***

Her plan had worked and she hung limply at the side of the cliff, the ghostly monsters unable to fly up to her as they grouped up, sucking out her health and mana even from the distance of nearly thirty meters.



*Let's see if this works.* She thought and used the split second of available movement to dig herself even deeper into the wall. Carefully looking over her health and mana, she frowned and decided it was a shit idea to try and level here, already reaching below half of her mana.

***'ding' 'You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for one second.'***

*Already down to a single second?* Ilea blinked up again, digging into stone before another message came up.

***'ding' 'You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for one second.'***

This time her skill didn't level but with a single second in between, she could blink up again. The mana and health drain started to wane by then, the distance too high for the monsters' magic to affect her. Mist continued to pour down when she reached the top of the crevice.

***'ding' 'You have heard the song of a mighty creature – Your body is paralyzed for one second.'***

***'ding' 'Veteran reaches lvl 6'***

Looking down she found dozens of white eyes staring at her, unblinking before soon they started moving away, twirling in the mist as the visibility down in the crack became less and less. All her hair was standing up as she fell down backwards, sitting there as the mist continued pouring into the hole. It came from the air it seemed, like the wind carrying a white sheet before it poured down over the country. Ilea found some distant moving sets of six eyes even up here but none of them had noticed her so far and it looked like the mists congregated in deeper areas like the crevices. The humming continued from below, the fact that it didn't sound like there were dozens of them there made it even creepier to her. She moved a couple steps back, still sitting and breathed out.

*A couple fewer levels in Veteran at the start and that could've been it. Days since the last near death experience... still zero.* She shivered and stood up,

letting healing mana flow through her, meditation quickly returning her lost mana. “Terrifying little buggers.” Ilea looked out towards a pair of them twirling in their own sea of mist but decided to observe more before she landed in another fight. Who knew if they could multiply or something.

Looking over the cliff side, she found it had turned completely white. She couldn't make out a single one of the creatures. The flow of the mist had nearly stopped as well. *I should find another place to hide. The storms are too dangerous to...* Ilea's thought process was interrupted when she looked out over the lands. Dark mountains loomed all around her, cracks and crevices visible even far away, some reflecting the starlight on a white sheet of mist. Not a single purple light was visible. Not a single black cloud either.

Ilea spread her wings and flew up a couple dozen meters to get a better view. Other than seeing a little further, it was the exact same result. She saw a couple clouds but they looked either gray or white, not that that was an indicator of their safety. Still, there was no purple lightning. It was quiet. Seas of mist had congregated in various areas where the land seemed to form into valleys. Ilea assumed most if not all crevices were filled with the stuff and likely the creatures that followed.

*Miststalkers was it?* She couldn't identify a single one of them. Flying closer to a small mountain, she landed on its peak, standing on black stone. A thin sheet of ice glimmered in the moonlight, crunching and splintering when she stepped over to the other side. Lakes of mist and cloudy mountain tops showed wherever she turned.

***‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’***

“Erm, what?” She blinked her eyes, watching black furry creatures run in the dark before they vanished again. “Hello. Yes what please?” Looking up towards the sky there was neither a god nor demon replying to her questioning.

*...and natural occurrences of the true arcane. Does that mean there's magic in the air here?*

Figuring she'd learn about what the hell just happened in time, she tried spotting the running creatures again. Four legs and a tail. They were only visible because of the absence of light where they ran, at least it felt that way to Ilea. Spreading her wings, she jumped off the mountain and glided over the lake of mist where she could see at least a dozen of the mist creatures, too far below her to affect her with their magic. Landing on a hill overlooking the lake, some of the creatures nearby quickly advanced on her, their eerie melody sung but not affecting her anymore.

“What are you going to do now mist bitches?” The answer was of course to drain her health and mana. They stood far inside the mist, too far for her to try and engage, just in case they were just luring her in there. Training her resistances against the spells was certainly a possibility but she didn't feel safe enough to run around with half of her mana and health missing.

Turning away instead, she continued her observation rounds from the sky. Not too high up as she saw things moving through the clouds. More of the leathery birds that moved in big murders. *That doesn't look safe.* She wanted to fight one of them alone before rushing into a whole group of the creatures. At least it seemed they either didn't see her or didn't care about her presence. Landing on an elevated position devoid of mist, she spotted a big skeleton. A lizard like head and four limbs. The tail was missing but checking a couple dozen meters behind the creature, she found its skeleton lying on the stone. The bone wasn't completely dry, a little blood and tissue still sticking to it indicating a more recent death than she had assumed at first.

Identifying the bone gave her the name of the creature.

### ***[Kalamon Bone – High Quality]***

Ilea grabbed one of the ribs and pulled hard. It cracked after a while, the woman stumbling back a little. Putting it below her foot, she stomped down and found it cracking with the first hit, breaking on the second. *Not better than my stuff.*

Moving on through the dark, Ilea glimpsed more of the mist creatures and deadly looking birds but other than that there was nothing moving in the

night. Nothing visible to her at least. She spent the night rushing from mountain top to mountain top, hiding from swarms of birds from time to time. A loud hissing sound made her jump into a crack, tremors of something moving by could be felt but looking over the edge, she couldn't see anything. Neither had there been a paralyzing effect but Ilea didn't really know what that meant. It was possible her Veteran level was high enough to counter the effects or certain strong monsters simply had the ability, like a skill of her own and could use it at will.

Ilea couldn't tell the mountains from each other, constantly moving between their high peaks and the valleys beyond, the cracks in the earth leading down even deeper. With the mists it seemed unwise to travel them by night but there were certainly enough hunters around above ground as well. Birds and flying drake like creatures occasionally dived down but she could never see what exactly they hunted or killed. It made her more wary of the skies, making sure to stay as invisible as possible to them. Her black armor barely reflecting light and mostly her small form compared to the beasts she had encountered so far helped her in that regard. Or it was pure luck that none of the animals had dived to kill her. Ilea didn't know. What she knew was that by the time the suns were rising on the horizon, the cracked and mountainous terrain now expanded further than her eyes let her see in all directions. A smile formed on her face as she stretched and summoned a meal, sitting down on a stone atop a mountain peak. Her legs dangled, bumping the stone from time to time as she enjoyed Keyla's cooking in silence. *I'm lost as fuck.*

# Chapter 233 Chicken Nuggets

## Chapter 233 Chicken Nuggets

With the emergence of the suns, Ilea watched closely what happened to the lakes of mist when the light reached their borders. Eating the last of her meal, she quickly scanned the surroundings to find the closest crack in the land. Putting away the box, she jumped off the mountain and glided down the steep side of it with her wings out. The sunlight was hidden behind the mountain but coming up on the crevice, Ilea saw how the mist was already dissipating. Miststalkers danced around before they too vanished, particles of mist floating up in the air, the last of their existence shimmering in the light that finally rose over the mountain.

And as quickly as the mist had vanished, black clouds formed and purple lightning started impacting faraway hills and mountains. Ilea watched a cloud form only a couple hundred meters away, deciding it was safe to traverse the chasms again. Jumping down, she felt the air rush by from the first lightning impact of the newly formed death cloud. *Are the mist creatures in there? Just turning into lightning stalkers by day?*

A little apprehensive, Ilea scanned her surroundings as she stepped down into the thin crevice. No mist could be seen, not even in its nooks and crannies. Which meant traveling was somewhat safe outside during the night and in the cracks by day. If one considered the dangerous beasts manageable.

Ilea saw the first animals and small insects move out of their hiding spaces among the rocks and cracks, eager to find food and water now that the mists were gone. *Not exactly an abundance of resources around here.* She watched the animals and started walking northwards. So far she had found the Dragoons that she could definitely kill but they were below her level, meaning it wasn't exactly profitable leveling wise. They were interesting opponents but without an ability to seriously hurt her combined with the low level, she wasn't particularly interested in hunting them.

Neither did they seem to be around in high numbers. A rustling resounded behind her but she couldn't see anything when she turned, neither did her Sphere. Checking for anything in hiding as if she was looking for a rogue, she found nothing. Smiling a little, she imagined Eve trying to sneak up on her here in the north. Shaking her head, she walked on and continued her considerations. The Miststalkers were interesting but as long as they came in such high numbers she wasn't sure if she should approach them. Her resistances were high of course and she could gain levels in her mist magic resistance at least but it wasn't like they'd go anywhere.

That was if they appeared again the next night. Ilea had only seen one day and night in the north so far and while the purple lightning had returned she didn't know if the mist did. The gray birds freaked her out but without having fought against them she might just find them the way to level up here. Coming into another section of the crevice, Ilea sniffed the air and activated all her buffs, blinking behind a rock she could see through her Sphere. Looking around, listening and waiting for a minute, she couldn't make out anything but the smell of a recent fire was unmistakable.

Rushing through the glen, she found it. A crudely prepped fireplace, cold ash remaining. Bones of an animal lay to its side, free of any meat. Checking her surroundings again, Ilea instead activated her Hunter's Sight, looking for any clues regarding the maker of this fire. There was of course the question if she really wanted to look for whomever had prepared it but the potential benefits of getting to know someone who knew their way around the north were obvious. *Might even be worth the risk.* She found half faded tracks in the sand.

*Boots...* She surmised, meaning that it wasn't just some half intelligent ape creature able to make a fire. Well it could still be but the ape wore boots at least. Following the trail proved difficult, either because it was older or because the mists and stalkers had danced over it for a whole night or three. The trail continued into a small cave opening, darkness staring back at her when she entered. The Sphere taking over, Ilea walked through the narrow corridor before she heard a stream flowing, seeing it a couple meters later.

The water flowed down into the unknown, further than her sphere could see. The space wasn't big enough for her to glide down with her wings, Ilea instead climbing down through the small gap between the water and rock. After a couple meters she could already see the bottom further down. Coming out as quietly as she could, she found the following cave to be a little brighter. She couldn't make out the light source as of yet. Trying to stay quiet, she walked through the opening cave, finding a large fissure in the stone at the other end of it. The water flowed down a small creek that had formed over the years. *Just another crevice?*

There was grass growing outside the fissure, soft light breaking in from cracks above. It definitely looked like something Ilea wouldn't have found if she had simply continued down the previous glen. The way led further down, actually opening up below while the top looked more narrow and even closed off, only opening in certain parts to allow sunlight inside. *Wonder if the mists come down here too...*

The answer would have to wait, Ilea walking deeper into the unknown, the small stream of water flowing down next to her, occasionally reflecting the sun when she passed a crack above her. The terrain led further down before opening up into a big cave, vegetation abundant, the water ending in a small pond hidden behind ferns. The trail was still there, actually growing more pronounced and easy to follow.

Ilea heard chirping sound before a blinding headache nearly brought her to her knees, the pain spreading through her before she shut it off, healing against the damage done to her mind and body. She had never experienced such a pure force of mind magic before, the attack feeling like a combination of Weavy's and Eve's abilities. Fine control shattering her mind with the force of a sledgehammer. Carefully surveying the damage

done, Ilea simply healed against it, focusing on her mind as she started meditating.

Her second stage deflected a part of the attack back at whoever was doing this and she hoped it would provoke some sort of response. Her healing was stable and she combined with her recovery of both mana and health, she could simply sit there and take it for several hours. And so she did. The attack didn't subside, first ten minutes, then twenty.

***'ding' 'Mental Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'***

*Might as well stay until it's at level twenty. With such a ridiculously powerful attack that's gonna take less than a day.* The plan didn't work out though, the mind magic subsiding another five minutes later. She could still hear the chirping and decided to find out what it was. In the grass nearby right outside her Sphere's previous radius, she found a small yellow chick, chirping happily as it wiggled a worm out of the ground.

Slurping it down, the cute animal looked at her and chirped again, flapping its small arms. "You're fucking cute."

Carefully moving her hand forward, she pet the tiny chicken and identified it.

***[Mind Flayer – lvl ??]***

Ilea continued smiling and lifted the animal up on her hand. "Sorry little guy, I don't have any bread with me." Looking into the bird's eyes, it chirped again before lying down in her hand. The thing was asleep in a couple seconds. "Aren't you the cutest murder mage. Mind Flayer... are you kidding me."

She considered an illusion spell like the electric mind magic cat had used to change its appearance but she didn't feel any magic coming from the chick anymore. Maybe her identify skill was wrong or influenced by something that had actually attacked her but then again why wouldn't a tiny chicken have an affinity for mind magic?



If there were hundreds of them maybe she'd at least consider making chicken nuggets, simply for the levels but just one of them was just too cute to harm. *I'd get fried if there were even five of them attacking me at the same time.* Reminded of the miststalkers, she wondered if there were more of these here. She couldn't find any with her sphere at least. There were some more worms and insects, all of them dead in the area she could see. *Using nukes to kill worms.*

A mystery, how an animal so small and cute only in need of some worms and water to live had acquired such an insane ability with mind magic. She placed it down on the grass again and let it sleep, the bird likely exhausted from the magic it had exerted before. *Next thing is a worm using earth magic to encase and eat me.*

The thought wasn't too far off but with all the beasts she had seen so far the bird was the most surprising, simply because of its small size. With the lacking Mental Resistance most people had, it wasn't too far off to think a single one of those chicks could've wiped out an entire expedition. *Or a single blast of that lightning. Not sure if it's lightning or arcane but my resistances are in the second tier for both.*

The open area continued for a while, the vegetation slowly waning as the water source was left behind. With a final twist, the cave led into a wide open space. Ilea's eyes opened wide when she looked out over the cave walls, light breaking in from a big opening at the top, flowing down like a golden cascade that illuminated parts of the massive structures. Temples, high towers and aqueducts visible before they vanished into the darkness below where no light reached. Cracks, broken off pieces and rubble told her a little about this place's history.

There was no notification so it wasn't a dungeon. *A city? Under the mountain? Have I finally found some dwarves?* Something felt off about the place though. A dark and sinister feeling that made her apprehensive. This place was dead, long gone and rotting. Ashen wings spread before she floated down about a hundred meters to reach the highest tower. Looking down made her shiver, an unending void staring back at her. She had no idea what lurked beyond that abyss. Green eyes suddenly flashed in her

mind, making her reel back and calm down using meditation and her healing.

*Come on recovery, I thought you could heal mental damage too.* Opening her eyes again, calm and collected she walked on the rooftops, their red color fading. Moving past one of the merlons she saw a square below her, not quite angled right but solid enough to still stand. A big gate lay at the end of it, leading into the massive cathedral she had found herself on. The intricate design of the architecture reminded her a little of Salia, towers with pointed tops and several distinct sections reaching up towards the sunlight above. Railings, some damaged and bent held onto the edges of the square, metal weaving in shapes of roses to create a mesh preventing a fall.

Walking to the edge of the square, she found thorns had been placed on the outside of the railings. *Flaunting their wealth. Didn't work out in the end, now did it?* She was quite aware of her own pompous house but at least she hadn't added roses to her balcony railings. *Maybe I should.*

The door leading inside was hanging off a single hinge, its heavy wooden frame a shade of its assumed former self. The color it once had was long gone and the wood was rotting from within. The interwoven metal lines the only indication of its ancient splendor. Ilea moved past and found herself on the balcony overlooking the massive cathedral hall. Windows now missing all glass, only the metal framing going through their midst let the weak sunlight fall into the building, its brilliance reflecting on the silver being part of the construction.

Ilea walked along the wooden railing, taking in the incredible architectural wonder now forgotten and rotting away. Tables as well as chairs and benches lined the floor of the hall, metal cutlery and plates remaining on it still. *What happened to this place?*

There were no skeletons, no signs of a fight nor zombies or demons walking around. *Did they just abandon it?* Her reverie turned into apprehension when she reached the end of the balcony, now seeing the massive double doors leading out of the cathedral. The doors were cast in metal, silver lined within showing a beautiful rose. Not the door had peaked the feeling but what sat before it. A tall person in a wooden chair, one of

their legs propped on the other and a book in hand. Their back was towards her and a hood prevented her from seeing any of their features.

Ilea had tried to be quiet but she didn't have any stealth skills, surprising her that the man or woman hadn't seen her yet. *Or chose not to react. Wait, is this guy still alive?* Her options were sneaking up and attacking, identifying them from closer up and going from there or speaking up from a higher distance. The last option seemed the sanest one and would allow for the highest chance to get away should it become necessary. Identifying them would serve nothing as her approach likely wouldn't change. She wouldn't attack them without knowing more.

Her wings spread and took her over the wooden railing, down towards the stone floor where she landed with almost no noise. Checking for openings in the walls and orienting herself to know where the cave led outwards, she stepped forward, "Greetings traveler."

Head moving back a little, she at least knew they weren't dead, "How unexpected. A tracker of some sort I surmise?" A deep voice spoke, Ilea stopping in her tracks. The man touched the book and turned the page.

Ilea wanted to get closer but something told her the man was dangerous, instead keeping her distance, "Found a fire, followed the trail. Beautiful place, is it yours?"

A hearty chuckle reverberated through the hall, "No. I do not claim possession of this ruin."

"What are you here for then?" Ilea asked, seeing a strand of red hair when he turned a little towards her.

The man got up and dusted his insanely intricate robe off and patted the book, "Just the attendance list..." He murmured and shook his head. "I'm a historian." He said and turned, dark gray eyes looking at her as she took an instinctive step back. A tongue brushed over his pointed sharp teeth, the book held by hands ending in delicate clawed fingers, carefully resting on the side of the leather. A pale and fair face with red hair falling to its side.

*Not a man at all.* She thought about how to proceed but as long as he didn't attack she would see to what it lead.

“You are afraid? Naturally. I am as surprised to find a human here as you are finding an elf.” He said, the book vanishing in his hand. “Perhaps... perhaps we may find an arrangement that would benefit the both of us, before you run off or uselessly die in your misguided attempt at vengeance.”

Ilea relaxed a little. The elf was odd, that at least she was sure of. He looked older than the ones she had fought which either meant they were aggressive and arrogant because of puberty or this one was simply different. Either way she lacked information but she did want to explore this city, at best without an elf lurking inside of it. “Been a while since I met one of your kind. None of them were particularly pleasant.”

The elf smiled, his mouth opening partially to show his teeth. Ilea wasn't sure if he was trying to intimidate her with the creepy look or if his jaw simply didn't allow otherwise. Ash formed behind her back, condensing into small pearls to allow for a quick fight should it come to pass. “Your race tends to spread. Too much. too quickly. It is good for the young to experience warfare in a safe environment.”

Ilea just looked at him, “Not so safe when we killed them.” A challenge perhaps but his insult wasn't lost on her. The elf's expression didn't change however, simply waving off her comment.

“Then you are a warrior. One capable of slaying elves. Where is your group? Don't humans normally move in bigger numbers?” The elf asked as he turned and looked at the massive gate.

She didn't reply for a while, thinking about the situation, “It's a dungeon isn't it? An elf claiming to be a historian, standing before the closed gates that would lead to an ancient city, full of libraries. Knowledge long lost in time.” Ilea smiled and stepped closer, interested in his class and level, “I am a warrior and as fate has it I've come to explore dungeons.”

He turned to her again and smiled, his tongue licking over his teeth, “Indeed. I thought you foolish for a human but there seems to be something up in that skull at least. Bring me what is hidden in this dungeon and I will reward you. A task as your guilds and kingdoms assign.”

“What kind of reward can you offer long ears?” Ilea asked, her head turning to the side.

He summoned a piece of gold. Not a coin but a literal unrefined piece of gold. “This is what you use as currency, is it not? To trade amongst each other.” Moving it from side to side, Ilea’s eyes stayed focused on his.

*Am I supposed to dance, monkey master?*

# Chapter 234 Roses

## Chapter 234 Roses

“What do you use for trading? Amongst each other I mean.” Ilea asked, folding her hands before her.

The elf raised an eyebrow, “Do you suggest elves trade shiny metals as a base of our economy?” Ilea shrugged, making him continue, “We trade knowledge, favors and...,” He stopped, his smile waning.

Ilea smiled and clapped her hands together, “Good, let’s do that then. Plus I get all the shiny rocks and gear in there. Not really interesting for a historian.”

The elf contemplated and answered, “As long as you show it to me. Enchantments and metals can say a lot about a culture. You seek knowledge then? Or favors.”

Ilea was seeking strength, monsters to slay and preferably dungeons. Getting anything in addition from an actual real life elf would only add to her gains. Plus Dagon, Elise and pretty much anyone seeking knowledge would rip her a new one if they knew she had botched this opportunity. She was curious herself if she was honest. The elves had been an enigma. An angry enigma killing thousands. She was however not about to judge a whole race by the actions of a few warriors.

“Sure, I’ll show you the stuff. Does the dungeon start right beyond that door?” She asked, pointing at the rose.

He nodded. “Indeed. However I would prefer not to waste my time on this. Even if you claim to have slain an elf I won’t be waiting here for a long dead human looking to fight through a dungeon above her capabilities.”

*Thought you’d never ask.* Ashen limbs expanding from the pellets she had created, her buffs coming to the max as she breathed out, a grin plastered on her face as she moved into an aggressive stance.

“The other humans in hiding may join as well. I’m well aware of the strategic benefits.” The elf said, moving back his hood to reveal lightly curled red hair falling to his shoulders. Magic thrummed around him as he prepared.

“It’s all me.” Ilea said and rushed at him in the span of two seconds. Her fist reached toward him before it impacted an invisible barrier. The force was distributed among it, a part of it shocking through her arm before she moved back, her ashen limbs smashing into the barrier and pushing a total of eight spells of Wave of Ember into it.

The elf rose his eyebrows but didn’t react in any other way, the barrier standing strong.

***[Elf – Mage – lvl ??]***

*Could be anything between me and a literal god.* Continuing the assault, she grew more bold and simply stacked her attacks again and again, her destructive mana slowly eating into the barrier before cracks formed and it shattered in glittering shards, the elf vanishing and appearing in the middle of the hall. Ilea blinked after him in an instant, her fist rushing at his face with all her speed. The Elf’s eyes opened wide before an unseen force stopped her arm. Another moment passed and a thin barrier formed near her elbow and sliced into her flesh between the connecting pieces of armor.

He held her and formed a second cutting edge when she formed ash within his barrier, her arm stuck and her ash now reaching out to him. Vanishing again, she watched him appear while healing her wound. The cuts were deep, ripping through tissue easily but not quite getting through her enhanced bones.

The elf watched her, gray mist seemingly swirling in his eyes before she closed her fist again. A dome suddenly cut off all the sound, runes starting to glow in a dark light below her. A cold feeling immediately spread and nearly made her vomit before she realized what it was. *Curses?* Her healing magic spread through her. She had to give it to the elf, his magic was quite a bit more impressive than Kyrian's. Her health started draining but not at an alarming rate. If her health drain resistance worked it would become even more manageable as time went on.

Trying to blink out of the dome didn't work and she could tell through her Sphere that digging under it wouldn't be an option either. Instead her ash spread out, heating up as much as she could. Adding more and more to it, she covered the whole dome. Concentrating on her manipulation skill, she focused all eight of her ashen arms on a specific point. With an explosion of mana, she hit the barrier with all of them, Wave of Ember ripping out a chunk of her resources. The barrier cracked and allowed her to teleport out, Ilea appearing before the elf in the blink of an eye as her fist again hit a barrier.

He smiled, showing his teeth and lifted one of his hands, "That is enough human. I will await your return. Books and relics as well as biological remains, should there be any."

Ilea activated her meditation, the damage from his curse was fading quickly with her high level healing and resistance to his spell. "I want answers first."

He snarled and hissed at her, making her blink her eyes in a confused manner. "That is not part of our trade agreement!"

Ilea chuckled and sat down on a nearby wooden chair, "Calm down man. No reason to get all pissy. I won't go in there with you behind me. I know you lot don't like dungeons but I need to know why."

The elf looked at her and sat down slowly, claws digging into his chair before he replied in a calm voice, "It is forbidden."



Ilea sat forward, her elbows resting on her knees. “Really? Look if that’s the kind of information you’ll give me then I won’t bother getting a single bloody book out of there.”

He hissed and opened his mouth wide before he calmed down again, looking up at the ceiling and sighing, “Why would I bother. To play this game with a creature like you...,”

“Traps in there, maybe your abilities are badly suited for the monsters inside. Maybe it’s a sacrifice thing and the first one in dies. Or you’re just bored, this is actually your dungeon and you’re a dragon trying to have fun with my little old human self.” Ilea suggested and sat back, the elf staring at her in silence.

A bit of air was pushed out of his nose, “Amusing.” He spoke and tapped one of his claws on the armrest of his chair. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt. It is forbidden. To enter dungeons. By those we serve. To add to that our biology is... sensitive to the mana density found within most dungeons. Just sniffing that door makes me want to puke.”

Ilea nodded, “Interesting story. So if I were to pull you inside you’d puke? Why not do that then.”

He stood up and threw his chair, “I cannot! Under no circumstances am I to enter a dungeon. Human it took me decades wandering these desolated lands to find...,” He sighed and calmed down again. “... I am tired. Of this, of your presence. You have my offer and I will remain in this hall for seven cycles of the light. Do as you will.” He stood up and walked to the other end of the cathedral, taking a chair and summoning his book again.

The air around the elf had calmed down again. Ilea stood before the door and turned her attention to the silver rose, the metal showing spots of rust. *If the lightning didn’t kill me, this won’t either.* Her hand reached the handle and she pulled. Only a little, checking if the elf moved but he had remained in his chair. The metal made a creaking sound, her strength enough to pull open the huge double doors with relative ease. She only opened one of them, peering through. Stairs led downwards but what greeted her was a small field of green grass, silver roses reflecting the light of the sun.

The door opened even wider. Ilea checked on the elf again but he had not moved. There was still the possibility of him suddenly appearing behind her but the fact that she had seen another elf refuse to enter a dungeon made her somewhat confident. It was a common thing after all and the only reason he hadn't fought her to the death she supposed. *I wonder who would win?*

Stepping through the doors, she took a deep breath but couldn't feel anything different than right outside. He had talked about mana density but why did it affect elves and not humans? Ilea closed the door behind herself and walked on, a sound reverberating through her mind.

*'ding' 'You have entered the Tremor dungeon'*

The space was open and could've been reached with flying as well but it felt right to her to use the big doors. As if entering the next area of a game. She smiled when she spotted the armored knight standing with his back turned to her a couple dozen meters further down the meadow.

*Another talkative fellow perhaps?* The question would be answered soon, Ilea plucking one of the silver roses and smelling it. Metal was the only thing she could make out.

*[Silver Rose]*

*Yea no shit.* Storing it in her necklace she wondered how much something like that was worth down in the human kingdoms. Somehow she felt like her lacking affinity for plants would kill them quite quickly if she tried to grow them. Again checking if anything near the elf had changed, she stepped forward.

“Greetings.” She spoke but the knight did not respond. His armor looked similar to the roses in color but covered in even more rust than the decoration on the heavy doors. The sword in his right hand looked most intact, its handle beautifully crafted with a guard that looked like pellets. Its blade was long, more suited as a two handed weapon but the weight didn't seem to matter. A shield hung from his right arm, much more withered from age than the sword. Full plate armor finished the picture of a deadly knight.

He looked more impressive to Ilea than most of the adventurers she'd seen trying to emulate such a look. The knight turned when she took another step, metal lightly creaking as it moved. A closed off helmet with two thorn like protrusions reaching towards the sky hid any facial features the man, elf or dwarf would've had. The only visible thing were white eyes staring back at her from the thin slits within.

“Hello, nice to meet you Mr. Knight. Can you speak?” Her head cocked to the side when she asked the question, ashen limbs floating behind her. “I suppose not.” The knight didn't say a word. Taking another step seemed to be just too offensive for the being as he started walking towards her, shield rising and sword pointed towards her. “I guess your intentions are clear then.”

Waiting for the knight to reach her, Ilea identified it.

***[Knight of the Rose – lvl ??]***

The sword lashed out towards her with a quick move. Not enough to surprise her, Ilea dodging backwards to make space. Her ash moved out, three of the limbs impacting the shield the knight rose in response. He stepped sideways quickly and jumped to avoid the rest of her ashen attack.

Ilea's eyebrow rose before moving in, getting closer while her ash lashed out. The knight stepped backwards while swinging, avoiding the ash with quick movements before he dashed first sideways and then towards her, sword upfront with a piercing motion. Ilea had to blink to avoid the strike, finding the knight had already turned towards her. *Maybe don't blink into him...*

Roses were crushed in his following run, his speed increasing with each step before his swing rushed at her, Ilea dodging down under the sword as her ash hit into his side, destructive mana rushing into him. She felt some of her magic dissipate. *Intrusion enchantment?* She didn't have time to contemplate it, his shield rushing down at her. Ilea was forced to blink again.

Looking at the knight, she patted the side of her helmet. “You’re a quick one aren’t you.” Her words had barely left her mouth before the thing was upon her again, a flurry of four fluidly executed strikes that she dodged with back steps, most of her tendrils cut apart or blocked by his shield. Dodging his last blow, the sword swinging high above her, Ilea stepped forward, her fist impacting the shield he held out towards her as the force of her whole might crashed into it. Both held true, a small wave of air pushed outwards, moving the grass and roses next to the two warriors.

The brief moment passed before he stepped backwards, sword coming down to again get back the distance. His weapon was held close to his shield, the knight silent and careful, as if contemplating her every move. Ilea held out her hand before she formed ash, a big cloud of it. The knight didn’t move as she draped it all over him. Rushing into the cloud from the side, she could see him respond the exact same way, as if the ash didn’t exist at all. His sword lashed out, Ilea dodging before she punched in his side, his elbow jerking back to hit her.

The impact sent her stumbling back, followed by a sword strike that cut through the stunned hunter’s defenses, slowed down by her ash before it stopped dead on her armor. Blinking back, Ilea felt her shoulder had been injured by the strike. A small dent showed on her armor that had survived what she thought was worse. Maybe she had been wrong. White eyes looked at her before the knight rushed out again, his blade moving quickly and surely, leaving her few openings even with all her experience and high fighting skills. Her ash hanging on to him, she used reversed healing but again found a lot of the mana simply dissipating.

A slash of his sword cut through the ash before he resumed his unrelenting attacks. Letting the sword glide through her Veil, she felt as it scratched past her helmet before her fist again met his shield. This time he pushed back, Ilea’s arm glanced off before she blinked behind him. Using the rotation, she kicked into his knee with little effect, the knight turning as he swung his sword. A step into the dirt sent her tumbling and avoiding the blade, gaining enough time to blink away from him as the sword rushed at her again.

Ilea’s wings spread before she flew up, watching the knight below that just stared at her. Creating a small projectile of ash, she was about to fire when

she saw him draw a bow, the arrow rushing at her before she dodged sideways. *Of course.*

Back on the ground, she decided that the only way she could beat this damn thing was a frontal clash. It was a masterful swordsman, better than anything Ilea had ever fought. It didn't mean much but coupled with the insane power every strike held the knight definitely lived up to his name at least.

Trusting in her skills, Ilea faced the knight. Ashen limbs moved in from the side to hit it wherever possible while she simply stayed in his reach, dodging and weaving through the strikes. Some she could only let glance and scrape against her defenses while others had to be dodged using blink. He wasn't the quickest she'd ever fought, nor the flashiest. Still, she had a hard time getting damage in. Whenever she moved into one of his openings, the shield would bash towards her, even with heavy gauntlets equipped the knight took her beating easily.

Moving under the shield or to the side of it was followed by a hit with the sword's pommel or the knight's armored knee. Ilea was used to sword wielders to struggle as soon as she had moved past their preferred reach. Not this one. Strike followed strike, the once beautiful garden turning to trampled roses and uneven ground as the two powerful warriors traded blows of ash and steel.

Sweat rolled down her brow, sticking to the inside of her helmet. Several dents in her armor marked every mistake, every step she had miscalculated and every time she had misjudged his range. The knight stood, like a devil with two horns, shield raised and sword pointing towards her. A formidable opponent to be sure. His slow reaction whenever she blinked further away allowed her to use meditation frequently between exchanging blows.

Sword slashing towards her, she knew exactly how far it would come. Stepping backwards, she felt the air rush by before her helmet, the sword passing when she stepped forwards and to the left. Her right arm moved upwards, punching the arm that held his sword, mana dissipating from her skills. Some into his body and some into the air. He stepped to her right and

used his shield to slash at her. Ilea ducked and twirled to her left, her leg impacting his before the knight jumped back.

Jumping up, she watched the sword dig into the ground where she had just been, her right leg kicking out before she impacted the shield that rushed towards her. Landing several meters further back, Ilea crouched and panted, meditation flowing through her for two seconds while the knight rushed towards her, faster with every step.

The moment passed and his sword rushed towards her with a piercing motion, Ilea's body turning sideways as the blade rushed by. Grabbing onto his arm, she pushed mana into him while her limbs of ash hit towards his shoulder, three managing to swing around his shield before impacting his back. Hearing the sizzle of her embers made her smile but she wouldn't lose her concentration. The increasing effect of Form of Ash and Ember helped her get in more hits by the minute but the effect had been maxed out for a while now. *I'll take you down and if it takes a week to do so.*

# Chapter 235 Tunnel Vision

Patch notes 1.0.4: General skills now ordered alphabetically.

## Chapter 235 Tunnel Vision

Ilea had lost track of time and space, all her focus on the knight before her. The knight that had ignored her ash, flying into his eyes and helmet, had taken hits with her heavy gauntlets to his knees, whose shield blocked all of her attacks with ease. His sword cut through her ashen limbs and left deep cuts and dents in her armor. A set she was proud of and hated to see this damaged but at some point there had to come an enemy where it wouldn't hold.

The dull light of the suns had long passed, the two warriors facing each other in complete darkness, neither inhibited by the circumstances nor the passing of time. Their only purpose the destruction of the other as they danced through the once glorious field of roses, now turned to muddled earth. Glints of silver shined briefly when Ilea's enhanced fist smashed into the knight's side, the impact of ash and metal against his heavy armor creating sparks that withered quickly in the air.

A spectacle of balance and endurance, the two skilled warriors battering each other continuously without either knowing the limits of the other. Ilea refused to believe the enemy was a sentient being at this point. Either cursed, controlled, undead or just a monster. No grunts nor signs of exhaustion showed after all this time. Ilea was nearly spent, her brief respite

in meditation not quite enough to keep her completely stacked. Again, she moved through one of his openings, sacrificing a hundred points of health to enhance her strike that she moved past his shield and into his shoulder. A blink followed to avoid his retaliation.

She was one with the knight, his movements, his sword and shield mere extensions of his limbs were now familiar to her. Like long lost friends she had found them again as they slashed and danced around her in their endless desire to take her life. Her mistakes had lessened and her footwork got better with every hour they fought. Every mistake punished with a strike that bruised her body and armor or a shield bash blinding her from the sheer force of it.

Ilea wondered how a warrior with all his stats in Vitality, Endurance and Strength would hold up and she more and more believed he at least somewhat represented an answer. No magical power, no sudden teleportation, trick weapons or anything else. Just a man with a sword and shield. Ilea doubted she'd be able to have a chance without her ashen limbs, his reach and control of the space around him coupled with near perfect and consistent footwork made the difference between a sword and fist clear.

Still. With time, she was learning how to exploit every weakness, how to move her body to bring his slightly taller frame into awkward positions. Long enough to get a hit in, never more than one. Most of the time she was forced to blink away right after to avoid his swift response but if she had learned anything in this world then that she should use every trick and ability she could to exploit an enemy's weakness.

This knight had few but Ilea wasn't one who needed to fall back on tricks to win her fights. Ashen limbs allowed her to get consistent damage into the knight while all the rest of her skills kept her alive, close and ready to exploit every opening. She had tried enveloping him with ash and simply using her reversed healing but she needed to be able to blink quickly which made that tactic more bothersome than anything else, her connection to him making her unable to use the teleportation skill.

A heavy step dug into the dirt, the knight closing the distance between them. His sword moved, its point aimed at her chest. A small step forward



made his attack even quicker, just a bit more deadly while his shield was already poised to take any ability she would use against him. She side stepped the blade as she had many times before, waiting for the very last moment to avoid a faint that had nearly cost her an arm earlier. Neither his leg nor shield moved which still left four possible movement open as far as she remembered but she kept focusing, her sphere informing her about every little movement her foe made.

His elbow moved, a split second after his sword had come to a stop. Ilea had found that dodging to the left of his right handed sword strikes would leave her at an advantage compared to his shield side which both made it hard to get around it but also left her open for an attack. Pushing her right foot into the ground, she moved her body to the left, feeling his arm pass over her. A fist rushing up moved his arm a little, destructive mana forcefully pushed into it before she blinked away, waiting for his knee to strike her back.

Appearing thirty meters down the meadow, her meditation kicked in, Ilea's breathing heavy and coarse. Waiting for the next attack, she instinctively tensed up, her skills deactivating as all her buffs pushed to the max. Weirdly, no attack came. Breathing out, she needed a moment to adjust. Listening while poised for another strike, all she could hear was the winds moving through the last remaining blades of grass. She stood and waited for a whole minute, refusing to check the notifications in her mind. One blink of an eye could be enough for him to get a deadly strike in. *My armor has suffered enough.*

The thought was clear enough but if he was recovering somehow she had to get in and stop it too. Taking a step forward and then another, she carefully closed in on the previous position before finally seeing the knight in her sphere. He was not standing anymore. The man had fallen, his sword and shield lying to his side, unmoving. Ilea checked her latest messages and smiled before she too found herself falling. *That was fun.*

Her consciousness fading, meditation and her healing activated, the pleasant feeling rushing through her as her mind focused. Buffs rushed through her blood again as she opened her eyes, only darkness staring back at her. *I can't.* She thought and forced her body to move. The rush from the fight

was fading but her rational mind told her to check for dangers, not to sleep so close to enemy territory. *What about the elf?*

Spreading her wings, she willed them to move her closer to the cathedral entrance, right on top of the steps. Neither there nor behind the doors could she see the elf. He had either left or was still sitting in his chair. She felt a weight fall from her back. Maybe this time she hadn't been betrayed. *And of course it was an elf...*

Ilea woke up when the first sunlight reached down into the deep caverns, bringing with it the comprehension of her battle. Shooting up, she checked behind her again, healing and meditation flowing through her body as well as all her enhancing abilities. She had fallen asleep, her stamina and mana dangerously close to zero when she had finally beaten her opponent. *The knight...*, He was still there, lifeless and eerie. His rusty armor, now even more damaged than before fit well into the scene Ilea surveyed before her.

A city spread, well at least it started spreading. Downwards into the dark on the steep side of a mountain. Splendid architecture flowing into the abyss before it vanished, the sunlight reaching no further than a couple hundred meters past the field of silver roses. *Field of silver shreds*. Some were still standing near the edges of the meadow, unbent and uncaring of the events that had transpired. The elf had not entered the dungeon or at least hadn't murdered her in her sleep. Ilea couldn't help but start laughing. The clear sound rushed down the mountain and into the city below but she didn't care if anybody listened. This one was for her alone.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 289] – For defeating an enemy fifty levels or more above your own, additional experience is granted.***

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 231 – 5 Stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 225 – 5 Stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Reversal reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5’*

Calming down a little as she read through the messages, a smile blossomed on her face. *The first step.* She thought back on the first drake she had killed, the first levels she had gained from killing alone. The rush of adrenaline and her joy for battle. It had been so easy, blinking around the Drake as she delivered strike upon strike, unaware of its movement before her bones were shattered. *Good times.*

And now she had taken her first step towards what she would become. Her body tingled with excitement. Not primarily for more levels, eventual class evolutions, third tier skills or better gear but for the next knight she would face. For the next battle that would take everything from her, from her skills, mind and body. The next time she would dance on the tip of an unseen blade with an opponent worth fighting. She had missed the feeling. Missed the rush, the danger of being alone in the unknown. To be truly and utterly free.

Savoring the excitement, she let the moment pass, remembering all the people she had met and the places she had learned to love. A small grin remained, her mind imagining an invisible Eve looking on with an annoyed frown. Kyrian giving her a thumbs up and smiling, likely stuck in a similar situation as she was in currently. Trian who would shake his head at the recklessness and of course Claire who would lecture her on either the tactics employed or the lack of teamwork. Not that there was a team to work with.

They were the ones that understood, at least somewhat. What it meant to be an adventurer. *To go beyond and fight things as unimaginable as a dude in armor. Can't wait to freak out Dale and Walter when I eventually return.* She hoped the human kingdoms would still be standing when the time came, if only for the few individuals she cared about. Experience showed that the worst enemy to humanity, in Elos as on Earth were they themselves. Nothing much she could do when all her friends chose to surround themselves with their mortal foe.

*Who's the reckless fool now?* Standing up, she walked to the downed knight and checked on him. He was indeed dead. The helmet came off with a little more force than she expected, the thing flying off into the distant void after she had finally pulled it free. *There goes a cool looking helmet.* It was rusty anyway but would've perhaps fetched a good price still. Now that she had her necklace there was no reason not to store everything she could sell within. *Claire will get herself some more work buying up the whole empire when I'm back. Just need a couple more lost civilizations adding to the Ilea townbuilding fund.*

The face below the helmet looked dead. Deader than it should've looked. She had seen her fair share of corpses and this one was old. Some of his skin was coming off in places, yellow and cracked teeth showing through one of his cheeks. "Undead fellow hmm?" There was no response. *I know terribly little about the undead despite having necromancer friends. Maybe I should lend myself to some more exposition.*

She sighed and put her ten stat points into Intelligence as she checked her sheet.

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0***

***Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 231***

- **Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 3**
- **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 9**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 19**

***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 225***

- **Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 1**
- **Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20**
- **Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 5**
- **Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 17**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 19**
- **Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20**

***General Skills:***

- **Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 2**
- **Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8**
- **Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Crystal Resistance – lvl 15**
- **Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2**
- **Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Elos Standard language - lvl 6**

- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Meditation – lvl 2nd 17*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 11*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 20*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 600***

***Endurance: 350***

***Strength 266***

***Dexterity 350***

***Intelligence 560***

***Wisdom 425***

***Health: 6000/6000***

***Stamina: 3498/3500***

**Mana: 4243/4250**

*Maybe six hundred Int first?* More of a punch would certainly help but Ilea doubted the impact forty more points in intelligence would have. Vitality, Endurance or Wisdom seemed better alternatives but in the end all four helped her win that fight. Strength and Dexterity had fallen a little off her priority list but again, she doubted winning against that knight would've been possible with lacking flexibility or the strength to move efficiently with her heavy armor.

Sighing, she could only imagine the battle if her Strength and Vitality had matched the knight's. *Someday perhaps.* At least he didn't seem to have any regeneration capabilities. Grabbing him by the rim of his chest plate, she dragged the heavy corpse towards the double doors and pushed them open. She grinned when she saw the elf sitting on his chair. "Hey elfling, not a book but maybe interesting still."

He didn't react. *Is he asleep. Do elves sleep?* Dragging the corpse towards the other side of the cathedral, she chucked him right next to the sitting elf, metal clanking as it hit the stone floor. His eyes opened before he looked towards the corpse and then her.

The elf sighed theatrically, "Do I need to explain to you what a book looks like?"

"This isn't one?" Ilea asked, trying to look as confused as she could. He just shook his head and summoned the one he had been reading when she had found him the day before.

"Leather usually but it can be other materials. Inside are pages made of paper, usually letters or sketches, even paintings stored within." He explained seriously, opening the book to show her. "Do you know those words. This is a letter here."

Ilea stared at the book and blinked, "Aaaah, a book. But you can't eat that. You can eat that thing." She pointed to the corpse.

One of the elf's eyebrows rose before he hissed, his tongue visible for a split second, "Sarcasm. Of course it is. You are most bothersome. Right you are with this corpse at least but the meat of an undead... a thousand years... maybe even older. It won't be very tasty. Human warriors usually aren't." He looked at the corpse and then at her. "That was sarcasm as well. I forget that you don't eat your kind. A peculiar thing but not the weirdest I've seen."

"Took me a while to kill that one, you know its age? The gear is enchanted I'm pretty sure." Ilea commented, sliding a nearby chair behind herself and sitting down.

He stared at her and put away his book again, crouching down near the corpse before he touched it, "Your armor is damaged. I surmise this exploration will take some time." He murmured the second part. "It is old but the rust makes that much obvious. Similar to modern enchantments I've seen. It does however look suspiciously dwarven. Mana intrusion defense as most warriors would use. It is finely connected but the helmet is missing."

"It just flew off, no idea how that happened." Ilea commented while shaking her head. He looked at her and went back to touch the knight's armor.

"This is something at least. As per our agreement I will answer a single question of yours." He said. Ilea had kinda forgotten about that part, simply proud to have slain this foe.

The closest question she had ready left her mouth, "Do you eat each other as well? Like other elves I mean."

*That's a stupid question Ilea.* She thought but her mood hadn't diminished in the slightest.

He walked towards the altar near the end of the cathedral, the undead knight lifted and moved through the air by a shimmering barrier below, "Of course we do. Hunting and not eating the kill is a waste." His mouth remained



open for a split second but he didn't continue. "Does that answer your question human?"

Ilea nodded, "I guess." Her arms were pushed into her sides. *Gonna have to think of some more interesting things for later, I could've guessed that one myself.*

"Oh well." She murmured and left him to his devices. Back through the double doors, she closed them behind herself. As much as he hadn't betrayed her yet, the thing was an elf still. Their reputation towards humans was questionable at best. *Now where is my next fight...*

# Chapter 236 A City of Dust

Some minor plot changes in earlier chapters I did:

- Chapter 6: Removed mentions of a third class. Its existence is unknown.
- Chapter 8/9: Changed dialogue and added some lines to the thugs that had kidnapped Alice. Mostly because they were cringe as fuck and just the worst kind of characters. I didn't know better back when I wrote it but it's bad enough for me to go and fix it. They lacked any motive and were only there for Ilea to kill. Now at least there's something more to it, a hint at a job, a reason to kidnap the noble girl or even kill her and a little foreshadowing line in regards to a nation's preparation for war. Alice has all reason not to talk to Ilea about her nobility as she's a wild healer she met in the forest and Ilea tries to be considerate, not asking too many questions. I think it's somewhat acceptable like this. Let me know if you disagree.
- Chapter 10: Removed Alice's mention of mages that can teleport others. That is neither a common ability nor known by the general populace. Even if the possibility of such an ability exists, we haven't seen it so far.

## Chapter 236 A City of Dust

Passing the meadow, she soon stepped on the stone road that lead downwards into the darkness. Nothing moved in the distance and no immediate knight could be spotted, Ilea carefully surveying the area. The first line of massive houses or rather mansions towered before her after a couple dozen meters already, the city and abyss beyond hidden by the

warmly colored stone. If any paint had ever graced the structures, it wasn't visible anymore.

Everything looked abandoned, forsaken and old. It was obvious that the buildings were crumbling but there was no indication that a fight had happened here. *Like the people were wiped off.* The knight was indication enough that at least unlife was still around. Ilea couldn't help but compare this place to the Taleen dungeon or rather city she had been in before. The green lights, machines hiding behind every corner and the utilitarian architecture had made it feel eerie, like an outpost of some alien race abandoned to the machines when the air ran out.

This here felt more serene. Like a place where once an important mine provided jobs and a flourishing market and now it was abandoned, the mine dry. Blinking into the mansion before her, she found herself in a dust covered room. Metal frames remained on the wall, anything that had ever been inside a mystery. The wood groaned when she took a step, nearly breaking under her heavy weight. Furniture remained, all of it barely holding together, Ilea scared it would fall apart upon her touch. It didn't, not quite yet.

It didn't look like the room was fully furnished. Here and there it looked like the symmetry was amiss. Perhaps a different style these people had chosen to adapt or what fit more into her theories was that the people who left took what was important with them. Checking through drawers, cabinets, under beds and in every chest, there was nothing of note remaining. Rusty knives, a sword whose handle broke when she lifted it, the once likely beautiful blade clattering back into the chest she had found it in. Staying quiet for a while, Ilea listened for any noise. Any movement that would indicate she had attracted not quite unwanted attention.

It was quiet. Wind came in between the metal frames where once windows adorned the big apartment. The second and ground floor brought similar results, old and broken down items most places Ilea had visited in Elos stocked their houses with. The height of the doorways, size of objects and the similar culture made her think of humans. The undead she had killed was of course human as well but there was no reason to doubt he had been an original inhabitant. It was possible he was a guard placed by someone

powerful exploring the dungeon as well, in which case she had all reason to be apprehensive.

The chance was low. Nobody had yet shown up and the knight hadn't adapted his approach during their fight, neither had he fled when his death was near. Walking down into the cellar, she found a closed off section, metal grids loosely holding onto the ground and ceiling, rust coloring the dark steel in a coarse orange brown. Stepping up to the lock, Ilea grabbed it and closed her palm. A crunch resounded as the lock was reduced to metal dust. She lifted it towards her face, her helmet vanishing as she blew the particles away.

Helmet on again, she opened the door with a creaky sound. One of the rods came loose, Ilea's second hand catching the thing before more started sliding out of the frame. Her ashen limbs rushed out and secured all of it, slowly sliding the pieces down to the stone floor. *A prison?* The house hadn't looked like a dedicated facility for that. Neither did the structure induce a very secure feeling considering criminals would have classes and insane abilities as well.

Four skeletons were resting in the room, huddled together in one of the corners. The wall behind them showed more defined cracks than the rest of the cell. The size and proportions definitely looked human to her. Quietly touching the skeletons, they vanished into her necklace.

The other two houses closest to the rose garden showed similar interiors, just as broken down and useless as the first one but at least there were no dungeons in the cellars. "Dungeon in a dungeon." Ilea pushed air out of her nose as she sketched down a small cathedral in her notebook, the garden and three big squares. A small skull was added to the square on the left.

Each of the houses had big empty space around them, indicating gardens or training grounds. Metal poles reaching a couple meters off the ground left her thinking on the possible uses they might've served at some point. The three mansions were simply the first one immediately after the garden but the city spread out to either side, more and more until the suns didn't reach it anymore.

*Enough to explore still. Guess I'll be focusing on the lit part for now.*

Another mansion was searched before she blinked to the roof, looking over the area. Wings spreading, she jumped from house to house before she found a rather large square, several hundred meters long. What looked like a fountain was placed in its midst, the water that had once added to its splendor was long gone. Ilea squinted her eyes and saw a lone figure enter the space from one of the side streets. His armor didn't glint, not anymore. Still it was unmistakably a knight. The man looked like a mirror image of the one she had fought the day before.

Jumping down from the house, she checked if any more of them were around but found it as deserted as the part of the city she had explored so far. *Guess we'll be fighting for a couple hours again.* A smile formed on her face as she casually strolled towards the knight in the distance. *Glad for my helmet, I must seem fucking nuts to anybody that sees me smile at doom all the time.*

Walking into and through the fountain pond, the knight finally spotted her. His shield and sword rose the same exact way the previous foe had used his before he started jogging, then full out running. Heavy steps stomped on the old cobbled stone, holding on to the warm color from long untreated exposure to sunlight. Ilea's consciousness focused, her skills circulating power through every muscle of the warrior healer.

The sword rushed at her. Chipped and bruised, rust eating into the treated steel as it rushed past the dodging form of Ilea. The weapon a ghost of its former self but in the hands of its wielder remaining just as deadly. Her dance began once more. This time she knew the steps.

Punching into the knight's side, she blinked away as she had many times before. Though it was a similar knight, his slight difference in height changed it enough for her to adjust. Just like before, every step was important, every movement calculated. They danced around, the knight slashing into the stone with ease, his blade whooshing as the heavy piece of steel pushed more than cut through the air. Ilea appeared and disappeared, every opening used to deliver just a little more damage into the undead warrior, its final rest simply a matter of time. Such was her confidence.

Hours passed, Ilea trying different things, overextending from time to time and paying the price with more cuts to her armor, bruised tissue that healed and cost her time and mana. She was used to the weight of his weapon, the speed of his movements and the perfect near machine like accuracy of his counters, thrusts and slashes. Still, she was in control. A single misstep could cost her life, she was aware of it but the fact made her calm. This was something she knew, every muscle burning, ash covering the ground, her arms and armor.

A series of quick attacks from the knight made her dodge backwards and closer to the temple like building that overlooked the big square, the enemy sword smashing into the stairs and getting stuck. Ilea jumped and kicked at his head, his shield taking most of the force while her ashen limbs rushed around his defense to deliver their spells. His sword swished by right in front of her when an arrow entering her sphere made her blink up. Wings spread, she looked towards the source and found two more knights rushing towards her.

“Fuck. You damn fucking asshats. I nearly had him down!” Her shout provoked another arrow, all three now aiming at her flying form. Deciding on the ground instead, she spread her ash and sent it out in a loose cloud before she blinked into the temple. Landing on her feet, she crouched down and listened. It was quiet but she saw one of the knights approaching the temple, turning his head before it came to a stop near her position behind the wall. *You have to be shitting me.*

The knight was not shitting her, his sword thrusting into the stone as she jumped forward, rushing off into the dark unknown, her sphere showing her the way. *Can they see through walls as well?* An unfortunate ability if proven to be true, at least to her hiding capabilities. She was definitely much faster than the knights when it came to running or flying so in the end it would simply require more time to get away. That too of course depended on how far and how persistently they would follow. If she had fifty knights running after her at the end of the day it might not be worth the trouble to stay here.

Running through the open space in the center of the temple, she spotted targets that had survived the test of time. Looking back, she only found the

high reaching temple walls. A single tree with no leaves, arid and scrawny still stood near the closed double doors that led into the inner courtyard.

Even the mist stalkers sounded like an easier time than two or three of these knights. Blinking through and out of the temple on the other side, her wings carrying her over yet another square, she vanished into the next house. Three more blinks later she was in a spacious attic, appearing in between dusty furniture. Taking a couple steps, she sat down and breathed out, counting the seconds and calculating how long the knights would need to get to her if they were moving at maximum speed and knew exactly where she was.

The math wasn't accurate but at least she knew they wouldn't need longer than a minute or two. That time passed as she waited, ready to blink again. Then five minutes passed and then another five. *So I can lose them. Good news.* She was annoyed that the two new ones had interfered with her fight. Not even a single level up. Valuable information was gained nonetheless. Summoning her notebook, she opened it to the page that read '*Tremor Dungeon*'. She added the fact that there were more Knights of the Rose than the single one.

That they could tell where she was at short distances, a small question mark added to that. They reacted to noise as well as sight it seemed. It was possible that they were patrolling and she had simply spent too long fighting the night at the same location. The first one had walked onto the square on its own as far as she could tell. *Should've figured that one out and led him back to the rose field.*

The two knights varied in size but minimally so. The most interesting as well as dangerous thing she had learned had come from a short glimpse at the second of the three knights that was rushing towards her. Right before she had vanished into the temple. Ilea was sure that one wasn't carrying a shield. The angle hadn't allowed for a better look but his sword had looked smaller too. *'Different weapons?'* She added but was glad that at least no magic had flown her way. The sound of an explosive fireball would be a massive disadvantage for the lone hunter.

Ilea moved the page but had nothing to add to the crude starts of a map. She had moved too far too quickly to even sketch the individual houses and streets. She was back in the unknown. *I like it.* Ilea stood up and looked out the small window. *I like it quite a bit.*

A courtyard spread before her, starting after the neighboring row of houses and spreading for several hundred meters. Old dry trees lined a road leading towards a massive building, enough towers and detail to be a city of its own. She counted eight massive towers sprouting from different sections, each not as high as the center most part of the massive structure. Her view broadened when she appeared on the neighboring house's roof. "Of course." She murmured and stared at the four cathedrals in the distance that towered out of the city like beacons of interest.

The eight towered building was still the highest and most prominent of the lot. *What should I say?* Ilea asked herself, blinking down to the dry earth, she rushed towards the line of trees. *You've caught my eye.* The elf could have his lousy fifty meter high masterwork of ancient architecture, she however would have the biggest fucking monument to magical construction she had ever seen. Remembering Iz, she retracted that statement. She did however like the Gothic architecture quite a bit more than the metal tubes and spheres of the Taleen.

*Let's be honest here... that thing will be teeming with knights.* Slowing down, she quickly considered if perhaps a boss was inside. Gulping at the thought of the Taleen Praetorians, she nonetheless pressed on. A glimpse would be reasonable considering the chances of treasure. This time she didn't have an expedition to worry about at least. *Nobody to distract whatever's in there either.*

Ilea peeked out from behind a tree, the towers looking down at her, spaced around the complicated central construction, each towering over their own addition to the core, as if fungus growing outwards. It still managed to look linear, symmetric and certainly impressive. A shame that it lay lost and forgotten somewhere underground in the north. The structure was simply too vast to be a single big boss room, at least she was somewhat sure about that. The sections with the towers likely each had their own significance.



Ilea watched over the courtyard and started walking along the trees. The lack of life gave the imposing structure a near divine feel. If anything had survived in this ancient graveyard, it was in there. Nothing intercepted her as she sneaked up on the building. The side entrance was closed, the big metal double doors worn, the silver symbols hanging loosely out of the dark steel. Her sphere could see the hallway behind the door and a blink confirmed there were no enchantments preventing her from entering. Just to be sure, Ilea blinked out again and nodded. If runes didn't suddenly come to life again, she should be fine.

The halls were dark, only glimmers of sunlight making it through the windows. The floor looked like marble to her but its shine long gone. Checking the doors leading towards the closest part of the facility with a big tower, Ilea found them closed. Again her blink brought her inside. A big dome like room in complete darkness, its shape only apparent thanks to her perception sphere. Standing quietly in the dark for half a minute, she made sure nothing else was in her with her.

Sending a projectile of ash into one of the walls without a reaction confirmed it for her, the woman walking around the room and inspecting everything. No skeletons, no weapons, no paintings it turned out to be mostly just an empty room. There was a counter near the end of it but other than dust there was nothing behind it. Blinking back into the hall, she held her breath when she appeared. Two knights had just walked by, their heads focused forward. Their armor looked less worn than the ones she had seen outside.

One of them was carrying two short swords in his hands, each straight with a broad and sharp blade. A guard protected his hands, the steel nearly untouched by time. Sunlight gleamed off weapon and handle when they moved past a window. The second knight carried a halberd cast entirely in steel. His weapon didn't look as clean and unused as the other knight's but still not as worn as the ones she had met so far. Ilea had goose bumps as she stood there, frozen and watching.

*[Kingsguard - ???]*

*Well that explains it.* Not just the level but the way they walked and moved their weapons as well. Not something she would want to fight the way she was right now and most certainly not two at the same time. *Would love to see a Pratotian vs Kingsguard melee.* The knights passed and she blinked to the next spot, deciding to only teleport for now as it was the most silent movement she could muster. Especially with her battered steel armor that was creaking with every step.

# Chapter 237 Palace Guards

## Chapter 237 Palace Guards

*Kingsguard. Meaning I'm in the palace?* Ilea blinked again, not moving too far to see any potential enemies before they noticed her. She'd explore a little more until one of them actually saw her. *I've gotten away from Praetorians, I'll get away from these guys.* They were much smaller to boot, only reaching close to two meters in height. Shorter and fewer legs meant a likely slower running speed. The three question marks worried her a little of course. It was the next barrier and could mean anything between level five or six hundred and a thousand, if not more.

A couple minutes later, she came up on a big opening towards the center. White stairs showing cracks led upwards and she blinked through, avoiding another set of knights coming closer around the corner. Waiting between two pillars, she watched them move past before they continued on in the circle like hallway around the center. Blinking closer to the entrance around thirty meters further in, there were two knights standing guard. Both equipped with sword and shield.

There were no further pillars between her and the knights, the distance enough to blink into the room behind them but not enough for her to see what was there. The doors looked massive, dwarfing the two undead in front of it, dark steel with silver engravings just like the side entrance she had used to get in. The ceiling above her was solid and she couldn't see anything below her either. *Probably the throne room.* Ilea smiled and

blinked inside, appearing in a crouch as she saw the two knights behind her still guarding the gate she had just passed. They didn't move.

It was the throne room. Empty and glorious. Two big chairs stood on a platform in the distance, withered flags hanging from either side of the room, some having fallen after all those years. Other than the few shimmering lines of silver, they had lost their color. One of the thrones looked a little more pompous, both of course made or at least coated in silver. A big flag of a rose was hanging on the wall behind them. Massive pillars stood in rows on either side of the hall, Ilea immediately blinking behind one of them.

*If this doesn't scream boss room.* She was in a dungeon and this was the palace of the city. Still, so far she had the option to flee from any encounter with what she considered bosses. The Praetorians, the Basilisk as well as the Alpha Stalkerhound. Of the few games she had seen with bosses, it was usually a closed off encounter but even with dungeons and levels this world departed greatly from those games. Real pain was one of those things.

Blinking closer and closer to the thrones, there was nothing suddenly screaming or rushing at her. Right until she stood before the bigger one of the two, sitting down as gracefully as she could. "Welcome citizens. Your queen will now declare the newest laws." She whispered with a smirk on her face, resting her head on one of her arms as she lazily lounged on the throne. Sadly the thing was fixed to the ground, otherwise she would've considered taking it with her. The noise of removing it would likely alarm the knights outside.

*Or the one walking in from behind.* She thought and blinked behind the throne, crouching just out of sight from the knight walking into the hall, thanking her armor for not making a noise. *Close one.* Blinking again, she appeared a couple meters behind the knight. A doorway led further back, the man not turning after she had appeared. It was another Kingsguard, carrying a single long sword. Identify showed three question marks. Ilea fought down the need to engage him, knowing that the noise of their fight would at the very least alert the knights standing guard just a hundred meters further down the hall and outside the doors.

Instead blinking back through the doorway leading behind the throne room, she quickly scanned it but other than stairs leading down there was nothing. *I'm probably gonna trap myself down there.* Of course she still went, blinking down the spiral staircase that led deep under the city. Finally coming out after three blinks, she wondered if the kingsguard patrolled all the way down here or if he had just been inside the small room for such a long time. She'd notice when he came back down at least. The walls, floor and ceiling were still marble down here. Definitely too spacious to just be a storage room or the royal cleaning chamber.

*What kind of fucked up experiments will I find here I wonder.* Following the hallway, she came into another spacious hall. There was furniture here, benches, many doors leading somewhere to the side as well as two knights in the distance, guarding a single corridor going further in. Ilea quickly blinked and crouched behind a marble pot that had some kind of red plant growing out of it. Checking the knights, they hadn't reacted. Either she was too far away or they wouldn't move too far from their position.

The hall was about fifty meters wide and three times as long. With her current level Blink she'd need around four casts to reach the other side. The first sets of doors to the side were reachable but only the one to the right would give her cover from the guards. Ilea quickly checked the immediate area around her for anything valuable but other than another two pots, a bunch of marble benches fixed to the ground and a fountain, there was nothing. *Hold up a minute.*

Looking up, she studied the red plant, perfectly fine and growing even though not a single bit of sunlight reached down here. Magic lamps on the ceiling shined down and illuminated nearly the whole hall, some of them broken. Listening carefully, she could hear the water fall inside the fountain further down the hall. *There's still power here.* Of course the Taleen dungeon had working lights too, as well as traps and robot like enemies. It was more of a contrast here. The rest of the city looked dead, at least the little bits and pieces she had seen so far.

The rest of the palace too but this hall was powered, lit up and had plants growing. Either it was part of the dungeon and the higher mana density somehow powered it all or they had a massive power source hidden away

somewhere. *A mana crystal that worked for a couple thousand years or something.* Ilea checked the two closest doors and blinked to the one on the right, a counter close by giving her a bit of cover.

Sitting somewhat close to the door, she let a tendril of ash flow out towards it. The ash reached the beautifully crafted handle and pushed down. It was locked. Feeling her way towards the keyhole, she formed her ash to unlock it. Whenever she met the least resistance, she just let her ash lose form and flow further in until it was filled. Solidifying her ash, she turned it. The door remained locked. *An enchantment maybe?* Her sphere didn't see into the room and when she tried to blink inside, she just ended up closer to the wall.

Getting her ash back out, she reformed it into a serrated blade and solidified it. The door was a dark piece of steel set into the wall, leaving little to no space between stone and metal. Ilea started sawing into the marble before a small pulse of mana sent her ash away from the wall. Checking the knights again, she saw them still standing there. Her ash had done no damage at all. Ilea blinked back into the middle of the hall, hiding behind a bench as she made her body as small as possible. The closest door on the left didn't have any cover and while it wasn't much closer to the knights as the entrance, she didn't want to risk it. At least not yet.

Two doors on the left side were tried unsuccessfully before she finally found an open one on the right. Opening it carefully and very slowly with her ash, she just moved it enough to allow her sphere to see inside. The enchantments had to be connected to work, as much she had learned from Claire's room in Ravenhall. A good thing that she checked as a knight stood motionless a couple meters behind the door, shield and sword in hand. Ilea summoned some of the Dracgal meat she still had from a mission and ripped off a little piece. Moving it with her ash, she put it between the door and its frame. Testing the stability, she pushed at the door with her ash but found it unable to close. None of the guards had been alarmed.

A long hallway followed behind the knight, Ilea appearing without moving before she blinked again.

***[Kingsguard – lvl ???]***

*How many of those are down here?* The hallway had several doors but only two were open, both having a bed and some furniture inside. Checking through all of it as quietly as she could, Ilea found a book bound in leather and a small notebook. Both were in the same table drawer. The wardrobes in both rooms were empty. The few items either saying something about the culture or they were soldier's quarters. Perhaps occupied by the very kingsguard standing only twenty meters away, now part of the dungeon.

Checking the rest of the doors, she blinked back out into the hall with the treasure she had found. The books were in perfect condition, as was the furniture and the beds. Something was definitely keeping this place of the dungeon fresh. The knight she had checked out from behind wore an althrough dusty still perfectly fine set of armor. *And a sword as deadly as when it was made.*

Blinking behind the counter, she found some bottles of alcohol as well as a bunch of kitchen utensils, ice in a metal crate and a runed metal plate next to a sink likely there for water. She took the bottles with her and blinked into the middle again. There were five more doors she hadn't checked but they were too close to the knights and offered nothing to hide her. They looked like kingsguard too. *Could almost be statues as still as they're standing.*

Blinking as close as she could without being seen, she was finally able to make out the knights through her Sphere. *Which means...*, Ilea thought and appeared in the corridor behind them with a grin below her helmet. Checking out the corridor, her perception ended in a small room where she blinked into as soon as she could. The knights hadn't heard her.

Again, a closed door albeit a bigger one at that. It too was closed and runed off to prevent her from damaging it or entering. Ilea doubted it would hold up to her full on assault but that would most definitely alert the two guys protecting this place. Ilea considered if she could use their power to break down the door but where would she go afterwards? She had no idea how one of them might be in combat. For now it was more reasonable to look for another way in. A key maybe or someone that could crack the enchantment inside the lock.

*This sucks.* Her exploration of the palace so far had wielded exactly two books. Not a single level gained nor buckets of gold found. *At least I'll get to fight these guys eventually.* The thought made her smile as she blinked towards them again and out into the hall, hiding behind cover. Fighting two of them at the same time was unreasonable and with active enchantments she didn't know if there could be something to trap her down here. *Guess I'll go see what they can do and then talk to Elfie.*

Blinking back through the hallway, she came to a stop near the last bench, sitting on the ground to hide from the guards. Her sphere barely reached the stairwell but she nonetheless blinked inside. Her question if the knight would patrol all the way down here was answered when she saw him a couple meters further up through her sphere. Blinking past and up again, she was back in the throne room, humming the theme to a famous spy movie franchise.

Ilea realized that she found the thrill of hiding less exciting than that of death during battle. "The day is still young." She said to herself and watched the gates to the throne room open, blinking behind a pillar. The two knights rushed in and scanned the room, Ilea blinking past and out of the doors. *They hear better than me, damn.* Moving around the extensions of the palace, she found the enchantments from underground didn't affect anything here. All of it was rotten, unusable or just empty.

Moving around the palace, she found a single guard at the main frontal entry that was situated towards the darkness. The light was already fading when Ilea looked down from one of the towers closest to the main gate. The guard had a single long sword, bigger and heavier looking than the one wielded by the shield bearers she had fought. Jumping down, she landed on the courtyard before the palace, waving at the knight that slowly pointed his sword at her, lifting the thing as if it was a mere toothpick.

"Come on, let's see what you can do." Ilea said as her ash spread out, the Kingsguard knight slowly stepping towards her. He stopped ten meters shy of her and lifted his blade, slashing sideways. Ilea noticed a thin line moving through the air thanks to her Sphere and crouched under it. Neither her ears nor eyes would've known anything had happened but she trusted her Sphere, probably more than her other senses. Another hit, this time a



slash from above confirmed it, a thin cut forming on the stone when his weapon came down.

Ilea blinked closer and was met with a thrust towards her heart, dodging sideways she was hit by the knight's fist crashing into her chest. Her armor held but she was bruised, her rib cage damaged but holding. *At least he didn't break every single one of my bones with that attack.* With all her bonuses to defense it was impressive to actually damage her in the first place but such was the power of the knights of Tremor apparently.

"I'm gonna kill every single last one of you." Ilea said when the knight slashed twice, making her blink right into a third attack he had started when she activated her spell. The invisible blade cut into her armor at the thigh, going through her ash, her Veil and the metal. Ilea jumped backwards but found herself losing balance. Probably because of the leg that was falling downwards as the knight swung his sword again. Blinking back, she spread her wings and flew upwards. Seeing the air move through her sphere, she twirled as one of her wings was cut through.

Falling towards the ground, she focused on stopping the bleeding. Her perception of pain was off as another blade cut through the air. Ilea blinked again, trying to get around the palace to hide behind the building. She was still falling as her second wing reformed, stabilizing before she sped up, blood dripping down on the massive structure from the wound on her leg. *Guess that proves their ability.* She smirked at the idea of a long range blade knight. *Can they all do that?* She thought about the different weapons. A dual wielding knight would demolish her with these kind of attacks.

Flying over the palace, she continued on before blinking into one of the nearby buildings. Teleporting four more times, she rested in an abandoned apartment. Her leg had stopped bleeding. *God damn fucker took my leg.* It was likely still on the ground but Ilea was more annoyed about her armor. The very armor that had protected her against most things she had encountered so far. It was cut through cleanly as if an industrial laser was taken to it. "Was that wind magic or what?"

Neither her armor, leg nor bone had offered much resistance it seemed. Still, her other leg had a cut going about halfway into her armor. *So I did stop it.* The situation might have ended differently had she lost both of her legs. Not that this was very favorable. Ilea hit the ground with her fist, her bone and tissue slowly rebuilding. She had been outclassed by the normal knights already but to be so utterly demolished by a single bloody kingsguard variant was frustrating. *You'll get there. It's just the next Drake you have to face.* She told herself and smiled, summoning a set of leather armor and taking the left boot. It would take another couple minutes for her leg to regrow and a ton of mana but at least she didn't have to run away barefoot.

The sunlight had vanished when she could move her toes again. Putting on the boot, she stood up and checked her surroundings. Being in the dark already made her curious. Ilea blinked out and soon found a wall separating this part of the city from another one. Parts of it were broken down and she was now definitely in the area where no sunlight reached during the day. Her sphere was the only sight she had, piercing through the wall.

She tensed up when she heard scraping. Metal against stone, uneven and close by. It got louder and louder until she saw a hunched over knight missing an arm and half his head stumble into her sphere. His breathing was heavy, the chipped and dented big sword scratching into the stone before he looked up as if sniffing the air. He turned away and growled right before rushing off with uneven movements, sword smashing into walls and other obstacles along the way. Ilea turned and made her way up again. *Lost enough legs for a day.*

# Chapter 238 Questions

## Chapter 238 Questions

The way back was quiet, Ilea avoiding any knights she saw moving through her sphere, few even noticing her blink by. At least they didn't pursue far, otherwise she would've probably been losing more limbs from the kingsguard she had engaged. Soon she found herself on the rose field again, exiting the dungeon into the cathedral at the very top of it.

The elf was cutting into the corpse, all the armor was lying carefully distributed on the ground. *To think this is the safe haven instead of the boss encounter.* Ilea thought as she watched the cloaked elven curse mage experiment with a human corpse in a desolated and massive Gothic cathedral. "Hey, I'm back. Found some things that might interest you." She said, sitting down on one of the benches near him.

The elf held up a finger, continuing to cut before he stuffed his hand into the corpse. Three seconds later he ripped something out and showed her a shriveled heart, smiling with blood on his face.

Ilea smiled back from under her helmet, "Congratulations on dinner."

The elf threw the heart her way and sneered, "Dinner. Look at it, corrupted. It's not human anymore."

"What does that mean?" Ilea asked, looking the heart over in her hand. It looked just like what she imagined a several hundred or thousand year old heart from a resurrected corpse would look like.

He shook his head, “It means that they are corrupted and no longer human. What is there not to understand human?”

Ilea gave up and summoned the two books. “Found these although I can’t read them.” His eyes opened wide, the blade he had used dropped onto the ground without care as he held out his hands, moving closer to her. “Mate, you’ve got blood on your fingers.”

He blinked, as if woken from a trance, “Oh yes. I was just...,” He said, summoning a piece of cloth that he used to clean himself. “How is it in there?”

“Old, most of it is dust, rotting or just missing. I’ve found some skeletons but not the amount a destroyed city should contain. There’s knights in there called Knights of the Rose and the dungeon itself is called Tremor.” Ilea started but he interrupted her, summoning a small book and starting to write into it.

“Slow down.”

Ilea told him about all she had found so far, which wasn’t a lot but he seemed more than happy about it. His tongue constantly licked over his teeth as he wrote everything down with a creepy smile. “Why are you constantly licking your lips? Your smile looks creepy too, can you not relax a little?”

The elf just looked at her and closed his book, “Human, you are asking a wolf to stop hunting. Was that all you have found so far?”

Ilea nodded, “Pretty much.”

“For the price of a leg I suppose?” He asked, accepting the two books and starting to look them over.

Ilea eyed him but didn’t comment on the leg, “Can you read the language?”

He opened the books and nodded, “This city was a part of the Rhyvor kingdom. There’s plenty of relics and dungeons in the area but I believe this was the capital. I’ve spent years in the past learning this language.”

“Why?”

“Why? I believe it is the capital because well, it’s the most vast of those I’ve found so far. And you speak of a palace like cathedral. As to why I’ve spent years learning this language, well it’s rare to have books survive this long. A good thing humans tend to store things with runes against decay in place. A peculiar notion.” He answered, murmuring the last sentence.

Ilea raised an eyebrows, “How so? Is it not understandable that one stores things in a safe place?”

The elf closed the book before he carefully put both of them on the table, “Peculiar because your very race expires so easily and quickly.” He said with a smile.

“You motherfucker.” She said but couldn’t help appreciate his bluntness.

He didn’t seem to care about the insult, instead sitting down with one of the books. “You have honored the trade.”

“Good, then why do you attack and kill humans. I heard there was a war a decade or two ago and half a year ago you slaughtered thousands by invading cities in the west.” Ilea asked, taking out her notebook and pen, opening it at the page with a big ‘*Elves*’ written at the top.

He thought about it for a moment before he answered, “I do not know of a war. We tend to send out our young to train, into different terrains and areas but fighting humans is rarely profitable for their strength. Perhaps they had encroached into the forest but I cannot say for sure.”

“What do you mean encroached into the forest? These cities have been standing there for years if not decades or longer. Why now?” Ilea asked, writing down what he said.

“I do not know. It is not for me to decide on matters such as these. As much as I understand you have lost many, why are you concerned about elves? Are you not constantly at war with your own, where many more die and suffer?” The elf asked, moving a little forward on his chair.

Ilea thought about it and couldn't deny that of course humans were the main danger to themselves, “It's not about numbers. We know humans, know why and how they fight. Elves? No idea, other than that each of you is as capable as some of the most powerful humans.”

*Maybe I shouldn't have said that.* Ilea thought but shrugged it off.

“The unknown. I understand.” He wrote something down and looked at her, “I cannot tell you why your cities were eradicated, only that I, perhaps, would have chosen differently. As I said, it is not for me to know nor to decide.”

“For whom is it then? Who do you serve? Another race? Some god or just a more powerful elf? What kind of government do you have?” He looked at her and closed his notebook.

“I might answer more of your questions depending on the contents of those books. For now I consider my duty, fulfilled.” The elf said.

“Are you not afraid this knowledge might help humanity fight you?” Ilea asked as a way of provoking him.

He looked at her and blinked his eyes, “I applaud your power but as you have stated, you are one in many. Should you manage to set your differences aside to face a common enemy, I will be surprised at the very least. Although I reckon the respect I would foster for humanity would quickly shatter upon your slaughter in the forests of old.”

She had gotten more than she expected. *So he would respect us for actually trying? If there's only a couple thousand elves and I think there's more then I doubt we'd have much success so he's got me there.* He went back to reading and Ilea didn't further pry. His answer had been final, his views

clear. Arrogant he may be but so were humans and Ilea had a feeling his sense of superiority wasn't exactly an illusion.

In a world where people had a number over their heads it was simple to quantify military power, "What's the book about?"

"I have merely started with the first paragraph. Would you like a translation to Standard?" The elf asked, not looking up from the book.

Ilea shrugged, "I mean if you're a historian I would assume you want to share the knowledge. As far as I know you're the last person alive to read their language so it might be helpful."

He looked at her then, blinking once before he continued reading. He had some work to do then but Ilea was thinking about how to tackle the dungeon. She could fight a single sword and shield knight but not a kingsguard. Problem was that she couldn't just fight them where they stood because more would patrol or hear the noise.

*Find singles then. Lure them out.* She was already walking back towards the entrance. The night had just started but it wasn't a detriment for her. She knew that the rose field would be safe, at least most of the time and if the knights didn't change up their patrolling patters. *And if whatever that hunched over thing stayed behind the wall.*

Before doing anything else, Ilea found a secluded space at the end of the field and used her ash to shovel away a bunch of dirt. Placing the skeletons she had found within, she closed it off carefully. She had not known these people but they deserved better than to rot in a closed off cellar. Quickly moving through the houses, she appeared on the roof overlooking the first big square.

Ilea's enhanced sight pierced the darkness but found it hard to see the whole square. It was one thing to see when the moons were hidden behind clouds but a completely different one to see in a dark cave. One that seemed to swallow light. Movement caught her eye, a single knight as far as she could tell. Forming an ashen projectile, she aimed and sent it off. Hearing it impact something, she blinked down into the house below. She heard his

footsteps a second later, the knight running over the square towards her before he jumped on top of the house.

*Casually jumps ten meters high.* Checking him, she found it wasn't the same knight she had fought before. This one held two blades. Still, he was alone. Blinking to the opposite house's roof, she took a step. The noise immediately made the knight turn towards her, Ilea jumping backwards to the next house and the knight followed. In hot pursuit, the quick warrior made Ilea blink a couple times to get away, ultimately landing in the rose meadow. Her own little dirt patch she had claimed for her murdering.

*Is it murder?* She asked herself. *I see it more as freeing them.* They were undead after all. Killing humans was sometimes a necessity but it didn't make it easier, knowing one had snuffed out an individual's life. Rarely were they purely evil. She remembered the Birmingales and the family members they had murdered for something they likely didn't even know about nor could have changed if they did.

Now this here, this was much simpler. At least at first glance. Ilea hoped she wasn't somehow cursing these knights' souls to an eternal curse or something. *Patrolling an ancient city for hundreds of years without an enemy to fight seems curse enough.* His swords rushed at her, this one much more aggressive in his movements and attacks than the shield wielding knights. Dodging and weaving through his blades, her ashen limbs hit into his armor, some cut through by his swords, others dodged by quick sidesteps and twirls but two of her attacks hit.

His abilities and weapons weren't meant to defend, they were meant to overwhelm and kill. At the end of the day he wasn't much faster than the other knight had been, the only real difference being the lighter weapons and absence of a shield. A difference Ilea adjusted to in the first couple seconds of the fight. This time she simply was much more defensive, not going for openings and instead letting her ash do the job while she concentrated fully on deflecting and moving away from the dangerous blades.

Two short broad swords. While their speed and maneuverability was higher, they paid in their reach. After a couple minutes of fighting, Ilea even tried



exploiting the rare openings he gave her. Dodging to the left, she avoided a slash of his right hand blade. She twirled, his second blade cutting through her Veil and scratching on the back of her armor before her left fist hit with full force and all her offensive potential into his back. He turned, blade slashing at her before his second blade moved in, making her blink back as far as she could.

Meditation and healing flowing through her, she simply stood there, waiting for him to engage again. A battle of attrition but she could recharge her batteries, he couldn't. *How am I ever going to defeat a kingsguard without Meditation.* The knight was upon her again, all of her concentration focused on his blades and legs which he sometimes used to attack as well. Wielding two blades was incredibly difficult, as much was clear to her but this knight knew what the hell he was doing.

His flurry of attacks would continue for ten to fifteen slashes without giving her even the slightest potential for an opening. Were it not for her ashen limbs that had more reach than her arms, this fight would take days if not longer. The slashes he wasted on destroying her ash instead of attacking her certainly helped with dodging.

Ilea's movements were getting more refined by the hour and while the shield bearer had inflicted several damaging cuts on her, this one was much easier to handle. His blades still cut through her ash and Veil but had a harder time getting into her armor. The main difference was the simple fact that she was fighting defensively, getting more and more damage in with her ashen limbs while he at most managed to dent her armor and bruise her.

The fight ended abruptly after a couple of hours, just as anticlimactically as the first one had. The knight fell, his rusted swords falling to the ground, followed by his body. Ilea fell to her knees, her helmet vanishing before sweat started dripping on the ground. "That wasn't as hard huh?" She asked into the void with heavy breathing.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 294] – For defeating an enemy sixty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

After a couple seconds Ilea frowned. “Where are the levels?” There were none and her questioning didn’t change that. *I’d have gotten two back in the Taleen dungeon for killing something sixty levels above my own.*

Of course she had made a step towards the next level at least but it was a little frustrating not knowing how far along she was to the next one. Her status didn’t offer the exact numbers needed. *He was an even higher level than the last one.* Ilea walked to the knight and started removing his armor, his weapons stored in her necklace. Piece by piece she removed it and stored all of it in her necklace. The man himself remained. Scratching her head, she thought about what to do. If she burned him the smoke and smell might alert more of them but she didn’t feel like burying an undead. What if he rose again? He ash alone while enough to burn flesh wouldn’t be enough and she wasn’t about to form a mini furnace to melt the corpse.

Stepping out of the dungeon, she dropped the corpse on the ground in the cathedral. “Hey can they leave the dungeon?”

The elf stood up and appeared close to the corpse, “You have killed another one. Impressive. Monsters can leave their dungeons but I’ve tried luring some out before. These knights here, they refuse to do so.” He explained as he went to touch the body.

“I think you’ve experimented with that one enough. I’d like to burn them.”

He looked at her with questioning eyes, his tongue licking his lips, “A farewell of sorts? A waste but I understand the sentimentality. Why give the courtesy to your enemy? I am curious.”

Ilea looked at the man, half his face rotten off as he lay there unmoving. “They are long dead. Once they were renowned warriors protecting this place. At least I’d like to think so. Maybe they were fascists torturing and murdering the population but they’ve long since served whatever purpose they had. It’s the least to burn them. Maybe that way they can’t get used again.”

“Interesting. You are compassionate. A rare trait for someone at your level of strength, be it human or other.” The elf said. Ilea didn’t think herself very compassionate, having killed people for being part of the wrong family.

The elf looked at her before speaking once more, “Fascist. I have not heard that word before, what does it mean?”

“A form of an authoritarian nationalist government where anybody opposing it is usually tortured and killed. Often very racist as well.” Ilea tried explaining.

He frowned, “I’ve never heard of such a thing. Which nations use such a form of government?”

Ilea hadn’t really mentioned her origins on Earth anymore, having accepted her life here in Elos. “None that I know of.” She answered honestly.

The elf looked at her for a while, “Elaborate if you please.”

Ilea smiled and sat down on a bench, “You help me burn these corpses and then we trade information. How does that sound?”

“Reasonable to my disdain.” The elf answered with a smile of his own.

“Ah don’t be like that. You already said that humans don’t have a chance against whatever forest coven you’re a part of. Not that I think anybody would be willing to wage such a war anyway.”

He nodded at that, “Your nature is very different, I believe you are right.”

“Can you burn them? I don’t really have wood with me but there’s plenty in the city.” Ilea said, looking over her shoulder towards the double doors.

The elf got up and walked to the elevated platform where the first dead knight lay. “That won’t be necessary.” He summoned wooden sticks before the knights were both levitated with barriers, carefully placed on the wood before he summoned a small metal cube. It started glowing before a small stream of fire formed in front of him. The wood was set alight in moments,

Ilea stepping closer as smoke started rising, the smell of burnt flesh reaching her nose.

He stepped next to her and remained silent as the fire engulfed the two corpses. “How much wood do you have? I think there’s going to be plenty more.”

“You wish to burn every single undead in there? How many are there?”

“No idea. But yes, I do. Guess I’ll be collecting wood from now on.” Ilea said.

He licked his lips and answered, “I believe that will be necessary.”

# Chapter 239 Of the World

AN: Lots of half knowledge on my part. Ilea doesn't know more and knows that but tries explaining nonetheless. Please inform me if anything is so completely and utterly wrong that you can't bear to read it. I'll look it up and change it if it's horrid 🤪.

## Chapter 239 Of the World

“It sounds like a workable form, yet you say it failed?” The elf was intrigued, writing down notes as quickly as she talked.

Ilea looked up at the stars shining in through the small opening in the cave ceiling. “Because while in theory fair there is always a party that takes over, their interests and personal desires leading to corruption and in the end more suffering for the people.”

“Are you perhaps a scholar?” The elf asked, finishing his notes. “Humans must be quite rich in ideas, a wonder none of them have been applied. Or perhaps...”

“I am not from this realm.” Ilea stated bluntly, “Neither am I a scholar. This is common knowledge where I'm from, the history of our world and people.”

He just stared, for a whole thirty seconds, “Not from... what do you mean?” He was as close to the edge of his seat as he could possibly sustain. With

his barrier magic the elf could probably go further though.

“First you. You said your people are split into different domains. Is it a political decision or something else? Is each just a family?”

His claws dug into the chair he was sitting on as he hissed, “It is more complicated. Politics and families matter, yes. In some domains more than in others. Most importantly it comes down to magic.”

She wrote it down and sighed, “Magic, explain.”

“You first.”

Ilea locked eyes with him and tapped her pen on her notebook. She wasn't about to go into specific names or descriptions, lest they find some way to invade Earth. “I'm not from Elos. I woke up one day in this realm suddenly and without warning. I didn't have a class nor any weapons.”

“With all that you have told me I am inclined to believe your words. Yet still, it is... not easy. Realm travel is exceptionally difficult. Many of the oldest of my domain have tried and yet I do not know of one to succeed. Summoning is a different thing but the demon realm is not the same.”

“What do you mean not the same? I've been there before actually.” Ilea said.

He noted some things down, “You've been there? How?”

“A powerful human summoned a bunch of them and managed to open a fissure to their lands. The Great Salt.” She explained.

“A name I have heard spoken by one of the mind weavers... you speak truth. A human. How have you found back? Where you summoned again?”

“There was technology there... far more advanced than anything I've ever seen. It reminded me of fiction created where I was originally from. It... I won't share how exactly I got back. Not with what you have told me so far.”

He frowned and hissed but the smile remained, getting less creepy now that she was engrossed in the conversation, “The demon realm is special. Somehow realms can be breached more easily, at least with summoning magic. The existence of others have been theorized but elves rarely invest time in such research.” He hissed again, “Fight and kill, that’s all they do, all they strive for. And yet...,” He stopped himself and calmed down a little. Splinters of wood had fallen to the ground. Nothing was left of the two corpses that had been placed on the pyre.

Ash formed in her palm before she focused on recreating a city with streets, cars, planes flying by and skyscrapers reaching towards the clouds. She added trees and people walking around, power lines as well as rivers and lakes. Her ash manipulation skill was high enough for the detailed model although she couldn’t add a lot of density. Most of it looked like a murky view of a city, fading with every breath of the wind. “That’s what a city would look like where I’m from.”

He walked around the model floating in the air before her and pointed at some of the details, “Birds of some kind?”

“Planes we called them. I have no knowledge of their construction but the physics of our realm allowed for them to reach the skies, burning fuel to generate energy.”

“Mechanical... the wings would allow them to glide. Wind runes coupled with mana crystals or capable mages could accomplish such a thing perhaps but it is wholly inefficient.” The elf said as he continued looking at the model.

Ilea smiled, “There was no magic. At least to my knowledge. No status, skills, classes. We had fictional worlds and technology that would tell stories similar to what is reality in Elos. I’m still not sure this isn’t just a simulation of sorts, my mind simply trapped in some form of experiment.”

The elf opened his eyes wide and stopped his walking as he considered, his fingers moving through an ashen skyscraper, “That would mean I am an illusion as well, fabricated from your mind or the simulation too. I am here and I think, as much as a theory like that is plausible I have to believe this is

real. Even if it isn't, what difference would it make..." He said before continuing, "No mana... no skills and classes. How did you accomplish all this then?" He gestured widely at the whole model.

"The plane flies with physics and burning fuel. Mostly fuel generates heat in some form like when you burn wood." She gestured towards the ash left from the pyre, "That heat is used to make something move which in turn generates velocity. These things are called cars, they have wheels like wagons here but aren't drawn. Instead small controlled explosions caused by burning fuel make the wheels turn. There are batteries that store electricity, another form of power. Like mana crystals here they can make lights turn on for example." She explained, "Buildings are built with manual labor and the help of machines."

The elf stared at her but didn't write anything down as she continued, "It wasn't always like this of course. This world here, the governments, kingdoms and empires. As well as the walls, architecture, the way people move around with wagons drawn by horses or oxen. It has similarities to my world, just a couple hundred years earlier."

"Ingenious. To think technology alone would create all this. No a single ounce of mana. Are you sure it didn't exist? Perhaps inside this fuel or electricity you had? The elf asked.

Ilea shook her head, "I don't know. As I said I'm not a scholar. I am young, even for a human and haven't learned a whole lot. Because we die early people have to specialize and learn for decades to be able to build planes for example."

The elf sat down, still looking at the model, "The possibilities, endless. And yet we the immortal... protect the natural way of the world..." He said and looked at her, his expression horrified before he looked up as if to check if someone heard him.

*Not supposed to ask questions?* She thought, "It wasn't all good of course. Fuel isn't endless. I'm not sure if mana is. We deforested large areas of the world, dug deep to get more fuel. Humans had no predators in the age where I was born and many other species had to move and die because we



continued to expand. Our world was dying.” She paused and added, “Well to be frank, the world wasn’t dying. We were on the way there, we as a species. Slowly at first but at some point the ecosystem would simply crash and we would be wiped out, maybe some would survive, maybe not.”

“Your race does have the tendency to grow in large numbers and I can see the lack of foresight or care due to your low lifespan.” Then he surprised her and laughed, a weird sound coming from the predator.

“What’s so funny?”

He looked at her but didn’t reply for a while, “Humans are not the strongest species here, not by far. Perhaps we play an important role to keep them from doing what your species did to your world.”

Ilea shrugged, “Perhaps. As do all the monsters in the wild. Magic is still a power source and I think technology will advance nonetheless. The structures and machines I saw both in the Great Salt and Taleen dungeons speak for themselves although I don’t know if they were built by humans.”

“Dwarves. At least the Taleen, may they be cursed evermore. Even those still alive today have marvelous talent in creating machines to amplify their powers.” The elf spoke.

Ilea led the ash fade, “You mean the Taleen are still around? I thought they’re gone.”

He looked up and spoke, his voice soft, “Their machines remain. I do not know if they are dead. Dwarves not counting themselves to the race of old are still here. Have you not met them? Even in the north some venture for their never ending search of metals, ruins and old technology.” He spat the last part as if mocking the very motivation.

*How very stereotypical, maybe our fiction was somehow influenced by this world, connected dreams or something. Or I really am just inside of a simulation. “I’ve not met them.”*

He grunted and then looked at her again, “The domains are separated into magic. Water, Wind, Fire, Ice, Light and Dark. It has been this way for time everlasting.”

“Which are you a part of. Barrier and curses, the latter seems like dark magic.” Ilea guessed.

He smiled, “It is not that simple, you are right in your assumption but it is merely a coincidence. An elf serving the domain of fire may wield water instead.”

“What separates you then? Who controls the domains?”

“I cannot say, thus I would betray all that I serve, all that I come from.” He replied.

Ilea nodded and sat back, writing down what she had learned, “Do you fight amongst each other?”

His smile waned, no teeth showing anymore as he looked away. He was silent for a minute before he spoke, “Elves... we. Yes, we fight not for political gain or power as you do. Merely as a sport, sometimes revenge or because of law. Mostly... because they want to.”

Ilea looked at him, “They... you don't? Want to fight other elves I mean?”

He didn't reply, staring into her eyes. “Why do you think they want to?” Ilea asked after a while.

The elf looked away, “Because, it is our nature.”

Ilea stood up and smiled, his attention shifting back to the book he had been working on, “I'd be hiding behind a wall somewhere far away if human nature was so one dimensional. But here we are, an elf calling himself historian and a human exploring dungeons that could easily take her life.”

He didn't reply and continued reading, Ilea cracking her neck, ready to go back in and fight. Somehow it felt freeing to talk about Earth so openly, to someone that wasn't part of her race altogether. Kyrian would try as well

and she had shared some things with him but he didn't understand, not truly. Perhaps a being as old as this one, having traveled further than most humans would dare had taken her stories as the truth. Had considered them in a way most humans here couldn't.

“What's it about?” She asked, nodding to the book.

He looked at her and smiled again, “The Wines of Ryvor, a guide to the vineyards of the future.”

Ilea shook her head and started laughing, turning around and going towards the double doors. “Speaking of which.” She said and placed the bottles of alcohol she had found on a nearby bench. “Maybe you'll be able to sort them by quality.”

It was still night but the previously clouded moonlight brought enough sight that Ilea could spot the two knights patrolling in the distance. She had no wish to engage two at the same time. Nor would her abilities allow it. *The question is...*,” She thought and blinked down. At least their visibility seemed a little reduced as well, considering they had not engaged her yet.

Blinking again twice, she formed a tendril of ash behind the knights before touching one of them. He turned and looked her way, the knight next to him looking at the noise the first one had made. Using the ash again to touch his armor, he walked her way. The second knight just looked after the first one but didn't follow. Ilea blinked again, getting a little further away but staying hidden. Again and again she moved her ash as far as she could and touched him without making any additional noise.

She let out a breath when the second knight continued patrolling, walking away from the first one who she tried to lure towards her. He had a sword and shield much like the first one she had faced. Judging the first knight far enough away, she stood up and hit her target with a projectile of ash. The enemy immediately charged into a sprint, rushing towards her before she

smiled and giggled a little while she ran towards the meadow that had little grass remaining. *I can separate them.* She smiled brightly, blinking to avoid the blade that would've cut into her back.

Finally having the knight where she wanted him, she grinned and gestured him to come. Excitement clear on her face, her skills rushed to the max as she dodged his blade in a simple motion, chipped metal scratching against ash.

Ilea spent the next few days luring single knights back towards the meadow. Their range and skills were ingrained in her very mind after fighting with them for hours upon hours. Most of the ones close to the entrance were wielding sword and shield, some rare ones were dual wielding. So far she hadn't found one with a halberd or large sword and no shield as she had seen in the palace. It was night and she was rather exhausted. None of the fights had taken as much of a toll on her as the first one, a combination of meditation and healing had kept her going.

Stripping the last knight of his armor and putting it into her necklace, she allowed herself to calm down. *You need some sleep.* The clattering of the armor set, sword and shield included made her focus and look around, her skills burning at the little mana she had left after the fight. "What?"

She looked at the armor on the ground and raised her eyebrows under her dented helmet. Shield bashes weren't good for her armor. She had no idea how the knights gathered that much strength into their hits. Perhaps they had some skill to damage enemy armor itself. A possibility for sure. *There you go...*

Ilea found the problem and scratched her head after taking off her helmet, unable to store it in her necklace.

***[Legate Guardian Necklace – Ancient Quality] - [Storage capacity at 250/250]***

*Well that sucks. I'm full.* At least all the corpses had been stored, otherwise the smell would be annoying in the meadow she had claimed as her own. *Sixty four storage units for eight armor sets? That's insane.* Of course it wasn't necessary to keep them all but even with all her attacks it was hard to even damage them slightly. Very light dents and sometimes a ripped connecting piece but otherwise the knights fell dead because her intrusive mana had killed them.

*Well it is how it is. Maybe the elf has an idea what to do with them.* She thought and lied down near the stairs. Ilea was sweaty and bloody, not a condition in which she would sleep in her bed. Neither did she want to separate from her armor for now, even with the damage it had sustained.

Checking all the messages as she let herself calm down made her smile.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 263] – For defeating an enemy thirty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

...

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 291] – For defeating an enemy sixty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

There were eight of them in total and this time she did level up.

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 232 – 5 Stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 233 – 5 Stat points awarded'***

***‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 225 – 5 Stat points awarded’***

*Twice in Azarinth.* She thought about where to put the stats and decided on five in each Endurance, Intelligence and Wisdom.

***‘ding’ ‘State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4’***

***‘ding’ ‘Hunter’s Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10’***

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

With the level ups only Hunter’s Sight remained below the maximum current level in the second stage. *I’ll have to focus on stalking them for a while.* She doubted it would be quick as the actual fights didn’t incorporate the skill’s usage at all.

***‘ding’ ‘Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’***

***‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6’***

***‘ding’ ‘Body of Ash reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20’***

Considerable level ups, finally after such a long time chasing other goals. Ilea smiled at the results and fell asleep quickly, dreaming of dodging a knight’s attacks as he threatened to reap her life.

# Chapter 240 Mapping out

## Chapter 240 Mapping out

It was still night when she woke up, rested and prepared for fighting. The skills that had flared up were deactivated again, her battles having continued in her dreams. “God, fuck.” She said, rubbing her eyes after taking off her helmet. The rose knight set was still lying on the ground next to her as she scratched her head. Looking at her own helmet she had to give it to the knight. Dents all over and her head piece was the one part in the best condition.

A yawn left her as she stretched. “What shall we do today?” She looked at the rose knight helmet next to her, the thing staring back with about as much life as when the man had still resided inside. Summoning a meal, some sort of chicken soup with vegetables and a fresh lime like taste, she sat back and ate. The suns started shining into the dark cave when she was nearly done, illuminating the houses in the distance.

She could make out the palace if she squinted, at least the towers reaching above the lines of buildings. Ilea stood up when she was done, putting away the box into her necklace. Neither the amount her food nor the boxes occupied changed at all. *How can four and a half hundred meals equal five storage points and a single set of armor is eight?* She knew it had to do with volume and individual pieces. There was some way to stack things but either it didn't apply to armor or the pieces were simply not similar enough.

They did however look the same to her. Then again her ashen hunter armor took up considerable space too whenever she stored it. Connecting the armor pieces together with the related hooks and strings, she dragged it out towards the exit. Elfie was reading still, writing notes or a translation into a second book he had conjured out of nowhere. *Does he have space issues too sometimes? Maybe he doesn't lug around entire sets of armor.*

Ilea left the armor in a corner of the room and went towards the remaining ash on top of the platform at the end of the cathedral. Setting up some of the wood she had gotten from inside the dungeon, she carefully put the corpses from each slain knight onto the pyre. "Fire?"

The elf absentmindedly summoned the cube and threw it towards her, Ilea catching the thing and looking it over. It was smooth all around, just a small cube around eight centimeters on each side. She pushed some mana into it and was met by fire rushing towards her face, into the openings of her helmet. The elf put down his book and looked at her in disbelief but she simply continued and turned it around, the flame not even singeing her skin with her high resistance. It was enough to set flame to wood but compared to a high level fire mage's spells it wasn't worth a mention.

Jumping down, she threw the cube back to the elf. He inspected it before it vanished, "I see your success is accelerating. Eight this time. Congratulations on the two levels." He said and continued working. Ilea walked closer and looked at his second book.

*Wines of Rhyvor, he is translating it.* "What about the second book, is it of more use than a history on wines?"

He grunted and wrote another line, "Perhaps. It is encoded however and I've yet to crack it. Translating this one helps me calm down... it's irritating. Why make it harder for knowledge to be accessed."

"For spies maybe?" Ilea suggested but he just hissed, a gesture she was used to by now. She wasn't sure yet if it was like a sigh or a groan. Then again he used those gestures too.

"I am aware of its uses, simply annoyed at their existence human."



Ilea nodded, walking over to the armor and dragging it towards the elf. The first set he had studied was neatly stacked on a bench. “Can you forge something out of this? Mine is breaking apart.”

He scratched into the page with his pen and looked her, “Do I look like a smith to you?”

Ilea smiled under her helmet, “You elves are just so amazing I thought I’d ask. Any idea where I might find one? Need to sell some of the knight sets too.” She considered if it would bother him. Old armor was history too after all.

“Elves have two classes as well. You should know that if you’ve killed any of us. We’re in the north. There are people weaseling about, however few I’m sure a smith or two is among them.” He explained, the sarcasm lost on him.

Ilea stored the armor in her necklace, bringing it back to capacity. All the corpses she had stored amounted to the same units a single set of armor needed. *Should just leave them on the bodies... or a box maybe?* Remembering how she had stored all the things in Salia and how little space it occupied made this a reasonable idea. There was of course plenty of things still in her necklace that she could sort out but throwing away five perfectly good cakes or two kilos of dragcal meat just wasn’t in the cards for her.

The fire burned through the knights and their old bones, everything quickly turning to ash. It had taken all her strength to bring them down and now a simple fire took care of everything. *Damn necromancers.* Ilea spoke to the elf without looking at him, “No locations of a city where people live?”

“There is no city in the north, not anymore as far as I know. I have locations of other dungeons and am willing to give them to you on the same conditions we have agreed upon here. Some are far away. Do you have ways of traveling quickly?” He asked, carefully turning the page of the old book.

Ilea nodded, “Depends on what you’d consider quickly. I can fly at least.”

“Flying? Foolish human...,” He sighed and stopped working. “The Famine Crows will shred you apart if they catch you flying in their territory. There’s worse up there as well.”

Ilea squinted at him, “Well I’ve flown by night, I know the storms are happening by day. Nearly killed me before. Are those the ones with leathery wings? I never came close enough to identify them.”

He summoned a notebook and flipped through the pages before showing her a sketch of the leathery birds she had seen before, “Famine Crows. I have seen them travel in groups of up to forty. Their levels I would guess at above three hundred fifty but not above five hundred.”

*Meaning he’s able to identify up to three fifty but they don’t have three question marks?* Ilea speculated. “I have also seen them rip apart anything else they touch. The only thing they don’t attack is the mist.”

“You mean the Miststalkers.”

He turned in his notebook again and showed her one of the six eyed monsters, “They are a part of the mist. I have my theories about them but as I have said, not even the crows attack them.”

Ilea smiled, “Well there’s little meat on them isn’t there.”

“I suggest you travel by day and only through the crevices and cracks lining the terrain. Yet. You have faced these knights, in a dungeon and alone, I doubt you will wish to travel safely.”

“Finally you understand something. Got a map I can copy?” Ilea asked. She was debating if she should stay until her armor was completely done for. The thing definitely had a couple more fights in it but maybe it would be better to survey the area and maybe find some better armor. Going back to Ravenhall was an option as well but she doubted she’d find this dungeon again.

He hissed in response, looking at her with an annoyed look, “That is information I have collected over decades. What will you pay in return?”

Ilea rolled her eyes and spread her wings, “Never mind. I guess I’ll just find them myself. Will take me longer to find any more books for you sadly.”

Glancing at him, she smiled, “Tragedy really. All that forgotten knowledge. Old runes, forms of governments....”

“Alright, stop. Yet how do I know you will not simply vanish with this knowledge?” The elf asked.

Ilea shrugged, “You don’t. I don’t mind lugging a bunch of books with me though, especially if you can translate them. I’m mostly looking for dungeons and monsters to fight. Learning a thing or two about them in the process might be beneficial too.”

She rolled her eyes, “Look I’m working together with an elf, you’re supposed to be the enemy of my race. Isn’t that sign enough that I will honor the deal?”

He considered her words and ultimately nodded, putting away his notebook and summoning a big tube. Inside of it was the map, rolled out and flattened by his magic as she stepped next to him. It nearly covered the whole table he was working on. Ilea’s eyes opened wide when she took it all in. This wasn’t a simple map with some dungeon locations. Every crack and narrow corridor he had found was carefully painted onto it. Considerations, mentions of monsters and their locations as well as where the mist pooled was noted.

Hiding spots for the night and deeper layers, caves as well as water sources were listed. High peaks and dangerous zones as well as what she was looking for mostly, dungeons. There was a whole bunch of them. Each named. *Had he really not stepped inside?*

“Where are we now?”

He pointed at one of the northernmost dungeons named ‘*Rhyvor Capital – Tremor*’ The name she had given him.

Ilea nodded, “I think the ones closest are enough for now. Not that I don’t have enough with this one already. Did you find any adventurers near one of them? Maybe some have lower leveled monsters, are half empty or close to the surface?”

He looked over the map before putting his finger on one specific one. ‘*Root Vault*’

“Anything you can tell me about it?” The dungeon was located west from their current location but Ilea had no idea how far exactly. There was no reference point she had on the map, however there were many landmarks described both outside and in the crevices that would lead her to the right destination. As well as it would let her find back. She was already sketching into her own notebook, only focusing on the part around Tremor and up to the Root Vault.

“I could not enter but there were signs of intelligent life, fireplaces and hidden sleeping pockets in the stone walls leading up to the dungeon. It is possible the very denizens of the dungeon itself are responsible but it is rare for monsters to show this kind of intellect. Especially in dungeons.” He explained and continued, “The entrance does not lie deep underground but there are strong roots growing even beyond the point where I felt the mana grow more dense. Perhaps you will find a trail there.”

She nodded and wrote some of the notes next to the dungeon mark. Two other places were mentioned, even closer than the Root Vault. ‘*City – Rhyvor?*’ and a place he had simply named ‘*Cliffs*’, “Anything you can tell me about those two?” She asked, finishing her crude copy as she added the crevices, water sources, big mountains and other notable additions he had chosen to include.

“Other than that they are dungeons, no. I would suggest you don’t go to the one I named Cliffs yet. There were winged creatures that paralyzed me even before I could walk out of the entrance.” He said.

Ilea closed her notebook after a while, “What’s your Veteran level at?”

The elf looked at her, “The Veteran skill... mine is above level fifteen. I won't tell you the specific level.” He stated. It surprised Ilea that he even shared anything related to the skill level. She didn't exactly know how the skill worked yet, only that really powerful creatures could produce sounds or according to the skill description spells as well to paralyze her completely.

She considered his answer and asked, “How long were you stunned?”

“Ten seconds. Enough to possibly have died were I closer to the edge.”

*That's why you level bone density and healing my friend.* “Any other tips when I go out? I've not been in the north for very long.”

He looked at her as he rolled up the map again, not touching the thing at all. “Come on, you wouldn't want your only cooperative and capable dungeon diver to die to an invisible volcano or something.” She joked. The elf sighed again and shook his head.

“There are wolf like creatures appearing at night.” He turned to the page where a simple but completely black wolf was drawn, “I haven't managed to identify them but I saw them disappear and appear at random.” The elf paused and closed his book again, “I've seen many species here but a lot of them you'll find similar to the beast found at lower altitudes, simply stronger and faster. Do I have to tell you to avoid the ones as big as mountains?”

Ilea waved her hand in response, “I'll try not to enter their mouths.”

“That might actually be the best option, if you can avoid the teeth. Other than the arcane storms you have mentioned, there are occasionally blizzards appearing near the mountain tops as well as strong winds if you fly too high. Both of them are at least as dangerous as the arcane lightning.” The elf explained, Ilea taking some notes in the process.

*Natural winds as strong as Arthur's magic?* She asked herself, remembering her cracked bones. Her resistance was higher now but if it was anything close to the lightning she'd try to stay low. “Thanks. I'll be

back in a couple days or longer depending on what I find. If I don't, I'll leave a message here in the cathedral should you not be here anymore.”

He nodded at that and put away his map, summoning the book on wines again as he continued his translation. She definitely wanted to learn more about his people. It also felt good to talk to someone other than herself every other day or week. Her wings taking her higher, she decided to fly to the opening where the sun shined inside instead of the small crevice she had entered from. Looking outside, she found herself at the side of a mountain, between rocks covering up most of the area. Climbing out, she squeezed through a small crack, not choosing the exit up top to avoid lightning that might hit her there. She saw a steep decline leading downwards when she finally managed to get through, her armor scratching on the rock. Arcane storms raged in the distance as she searched for the closest crack in the lands below.

Checking her notes, the Tremor dungeon was painted under a mountain, where she was right now. Another long range of mountains was painted to the east, the one she saw from her elevated position. *And another big one there, with a massive and visible valley and a fissure at the bottom.* Ilea found it a minute of searching later. According to the map there were several smaller cracks leading to the valley she saw from here.

Quietly listening for storms, she activated all her buffs in preparation. A destination in sight, she pushed off and accelerated in a steep dive with all power. The clouds moved quickly and unpredictably, sometimes turning as if they were beasts themselves. Ilea made it. Lightning cracked a couple hundred meters behind her when she blinked the last stretch into the thin crack, smashing into the wall before she could stabilize herself.

Pieces of rock fell downwards as she moved off the wall, jumping down and landing on the somewhat flat terrain. A thin line of water flowed through and ended somewhere between a bunch of boulders. Checking her map again, she would have to follow the trail until she entered the valley, then westwards in a curve until she reached the Root Vault. *I wonder what it's actually called.* She asked herself why he had called it a vault of all things.

Maybe he did know something about the place but had chosen not to share it with her. Not that he had any reason to give her any information. For all she knew he was lying about everything. She could at least write it all down, maybe she'd meet another elf to talk to at some point to compare things. Plus if the locations of the other dungeons were true then she had already gotten more than enough out of it.

Ilea flew low and at moderate speed to be able to react to anything that jumped her, thinking about the Tremor dungeon and her talks with the Elf. His reaction wasn't much when she mentioned her being from another realm, seemingly more focused on the lack of research than her experience. For what it was worth, he actually seemed kind of nice, a little weird at times but not unpleasant.

A loud roar resounded but it was too far away to be meant for her. *And the way that sounded too big to be meant for such small prey.* The sound had come from ahead, Ilea picking up some speed more interested in seeing what it was than her self preservation.

Coming around a corner, she saw the end of a massive scaled tail slither through towards the next section of the valley, sunlight glistening on parts of its green skin. The crevice started to open up more and more. At the end of this one she could see two ways, one west and one northwards. With the tail going west and her destination lying in the same direction, her next step was cut out for her. A smile blossomed on her face as she watched the dark clouds move by above, quickly finding cover as the arcane smashed into the overhanging walls of stone.

# Chapter 241 Contact

## Chapter 241 Contact

Coming out into the valley, Ilea ducked back behind a big boulder. An arcane storm was passing by above and the valley was simply too vast to provide ample cover. The tail she saw belonged to a snake, glistening green as the lightning hit it. The hiss that followed was enough to freeze her in place.

***‘ding’ ‘You have heard a mighty beast’s roar. You are paralyzed for 15 seconds.’***

*What the hell is at that Cliffs dungeon when that humongous snake only paralyzes me for fifteen seconds.* She didn’t know if the size and strength of an animal would influence the paralyze duration, maybe it had to do with the sound they could produce alone. Or it was a separate skill they used for hunting. *Maybe I should’ve just stayed and leveled until my armor broke.* She considered if no armor wasn’t just as fine but losing an arm or getting cut deeply would have her spend more mana on healing.

A dangerous hit could end her life so she wasn’t about to continue unprepared. At least not if there were other options she could exploit first. Taking a glance again, the snake had moved on as well as whatever beast she had heard roaring earlier. The valley looked like not a living thing had passed through in a hundred years, the sky above as calm as on a sunny afternoon near a desert. *It just took that lightning...*



Checking for storms, she kept on the side of the valley and rushed through as quickly as possible, right until the crack in the middle could be seen. Ilea quickly blinked towards in and flew down, landing on her feet a moment later. The area around here seemed deserted as well, likely because the huge snake had just passed through. Flying onward, she kept her Hunter's Sight activated to find any trail she might miss otherwise.

The map he had given her helped tremendously with navigating the terrain. Dead ends were visible and knowing where more cover was, she became more bold with traveling the surface. Storms could appear and move quickly but when her next destination lied just fifteen seconds of flying away, she'd risk it. Plus her armor might take another hit without her dying in it. After that she would stop being so reckless. At least against nature. *That would be a lame death. Killed by lightning.*

She had no plans of stopping until she could punch the lightning to death herself. For two hours she traveled through the cracks, only finding small critters that fled immediately when they heard or saw her. The Root Vault couldn't have been far anymore, Ilea coming into the crevice that according to her map led right up to the dungeon. Slowing down and focusing on her Hunter's Sight, she took in every little pebble in her sphere and through the hunting skill.

Jumping over a small hill, she saw the first roots. The area darkened, leading further down as the crack in the land turned into a cave. More and more roots as big as herself showed, breaking through the stone as they grew. *Wood magic, let's see if that girl can show me something like this when I come back...*

The cave where she thought the dungeon started led downwards in a steep angle, thorns big enough to impale a human broke out of the roots, illuminated by glowing plants further down. Ilea wasn't fooled. This wasn't some oasis in the wasteland that was the north, this was a deathtrap. Only powerful magic could create what lay before her. Focusing back around her, she was successful even before finding the hidden pockets the elf had mentioned.

*Fresh blood.* She crouched down and touched the red stain on the rock. Someone or something was injured. And it was recent. Her sense of smell coupled with her Sphere quickly led her towards a small cave entrance to the side of the glen, helped by Hunter's Sight. It was dark when she blinked into the tunnel, water dripping from the ceiling somewhere but she could still smell the blood. After several jumps further down, nearly no light found its way into the dark cave anymore. Her eyes could still make out silhouettes but Ilea was mostly trusting her sphere at that point.

She could hear voices and saw light flicker on the walls five minutes later, her quick pace quickly finding whatever was bleeding. A gruff and deep voice talked quietly, Ilea slowing down as she got closer. "It's gonna be alright warlock."

"Something is coming." A second voice said, ethereal as if wisps had followed the sound to Ilea's ears. She stepped closer and saw the group in her sphere. A lizardman holding a nasty cut in his belly, a hooded and masked figure looking her way. The last one was something that looked like a robot, legs and hands connected to a big torso and core with straight connecting pieces as well as tubes that continued before they plugged into its back. Tubes came out of its shoulders ending in valves. The robot was holding its hand onto the wound when the lizardman coughed.

The hooded figure suddenly appeared before her, a sword clad in black lightning advancing on her. Ilea instinctively moved to the right, hitting his hand with her left wrist before she punched at the figure's side with her fist. A quick move and the man hit the wall of the cave hard, something breaking in the process.

### ***[Rogue – lvl 172]***

Ilea walked on towards the other two after checking his vitals with a tendril of ash, "Stay down." The robot turned to her when she approached, saws extending out of his arms. Yellow eyes stared at her in the dark, "I'm a healer." She said and continued towards the lizardman, the robot not moving as he watched her. She put her back towards him and checked up on the lizard, "What happened to him? His health is draining quickly."

*Poison or a curse*, She thought as her healing mana pushed into the creature. He groaned in pain making the robot tense up a little behind her, two spear like objects slowly extending out of its chest.

“Stop... Stonebreaker...,” The ethereal voice said as the man moved closer, holding his shoulder before he winced. “She is... healing him.” He finished and sacked down, the robot rushing at his side.

“What did you do?” His deep voice asked, still remaining as quiet as it had been before.

Ilea stabilized the lizardman, his eyes closing as the poison or curse racked through his body. “His shoulder is damaged, nothing more. He has several cuts on his legs that worry me more but those didn’t come from me.”

“Damn fool.” The robot said and tried ripping away the mantle covering the man’s legs but was stopped.

“I will be fine. No poison.” The ethereal voice said and Ilea could see wisps of smoke coming out from behind the black mask under the hood, its smooth surface turning her way.

Ilea continued healing, “I’ll take care of him afterwards.”

The robot nodded and answered her initial question, “One of the monsters in the nearby dungeon. He was poisoned.”

She quietly continued. Whatever poison it was, it was strong. “Did you not know the dungeon would have venomous animals in it?” She asked and looked at the robot.

He walked over to her and crouched down next to the lizardman, “Of course we did.” He didn’t elaborate further as he held one of the lizard’s hands.

*His voice isn’t coming from the head*, Ilea noticed. Were her own body poisoned she’d be healed already but the different biology of the lizardman made it even harder than healing another human. She trusted her skill fully,

not helping guide the mana or focusing overly on specific parts of his body. “No antidote? Do you have whatever caused the poison? Maybe it helps.”

The robot nodded, checking one of the packs lying next to the lizard before he took a small box out, “No antidote yet. The alchemist has given up on it, their poison varying in properties and even changing from time to time.” He took out a monster’s claw that looked more like a thorn, gray and ending in a sharp slightly glistening tip, about as big as her hand. “Careful lassie.”

She just looked at him and grabbed the thing. Rolling down the pant leg where her armor had been taken, she turned the thorn and pushed it into her leg. The thing penetrated to her blood with a little bit more force, the robot standing as if frozen before he rushed at her, “Don’t move so rapidly.” Ilea said, her ashen limbs lashing out to make him stop, “You’ll poison yourself too.”

***‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Drop Saurian venom, -25 Health per second for five minutes.***

*Enough to kill me and that’s from a single scratch of this thing.* She looked at the lizardman and frowned. He was over it already luckily. *Good thing I found them, perhaps they wouldn’t be up for trading if their friend just died.* The lizardman was at level one forty and the robot man at one eighty, both identifying as mages.

“Why would you poison yourself?” The robot asked, obviously confused when the lizardman woke and gasped for air. Ilea let go of him and simply let healing mana flow through herself, the pain a dull tugging in her leg as she walked over to the other mage. He tensed up when she touched him but relaxed when she took care of first his shoulder and then the cuts on his leg. Something about his anatomy was fascinating.

Ilea continued looking at him through her healing skill even after his cuts had been healed, “What are you?” She asked in fascination, looking at his mask. He pushed her away a little and got up, Ilea not resisting. “No wonder you can’t get poisoned.” She said, turning to the others. The rogue didn’t reply and neither did she press. It was likely offensive already to

whatever race he was a part of. Not that she cared much, he had attacked her after all.

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1*

*You are a target of assassins or not very good at distinguishing berries. Surviving either of those you have developed a general resistance to poisons.*

*2nd stage: Either you need better guards or you need to stop eating everything you see. Experience has granted you an ability to sense poison. Additionally its spread throughout your body is slower, reducing its effects.'*

*That's why I poison myself.* Ilea thought with a smile.

The rogue walked to the others as Ilea watched them help up the lizardman who was still weakened from the exertion and near death experience, "We have to go, a trail of blood was left behind." The robot said and turned to Ilea. "What do you seek as payment warrior?"

"I need a place to sell my things, more importantly a smith. Know anyone around that fits that description?"

He nodded and started walking into the dark, "Aye, not a pleasant one that one but perhaps you'll survive it. If the poison doesn't drop you after all." He said and chuckled, a click resounding from his right eye, an enchantment flushing the dark cave with light. "We should be quiet, not to attract more attention." He added before they climbed down through a tight opening.

Ten minutes of silent climbing later, they came into a tunnel that seemed unnatural, its walls straight. She noticed for the first time how tall the robot was now that he stood upright. Easily two hand a half meters, even taller than the lizardman. The smoky rogue was the only one similar to her in size. "Where are we going?" She asked after a couple minutes of walking down the corridor.

The light of his headlight waved over to her before it moved forward again, "Hallowfort, our home."

Ilea looked at the others but they ignored her, lost in their own thoughts. “That doesn’t really tell me anything robot man.”

He laughed at that, deep and loud before he checked behind them, “We should be safe now. You’ll see lassie. Seeing your worn out armor and those horns on your head I think you’ll fit right in.”

“I will show you to the smith with a good word as soon as we’re there. I doubt that is fixable sadly.” He added, “A shame, looks like Niameer steel.” A test perhaps but she had no idea what the name meant.

“Found it on a corpse a while ago, had it reforged.” She said, the robot holding up a thumb.

“We’re here.” Pushing aside a big stone plate, he leaned on its side and gestured them all to go in. Following inside, he pushed back the massive stone gate with the handle that was attached on the other side. Moving through the waiting people, he touched a runed plate that was on the other end of the small tunnel, a section on the ground opening immediately. Fresh air immediately flowed in, “Careful, it’s a bit of a drop.”

Ilea waited until they were all through before she looked down, jumping and landing two seconds later, looking at the waiting group of people. They stood at the edge of a massive cliff, crystals growing on the stone behind and around them, stretching for kilometers into the underground cave, illuminating everything in a pale light. Ilea stepped towards the edge and looked down, several hundred meters of air until it ended in what looked like a massive lake. Natural stone pillars grew from the lake up towards the ceiling, everything covered by crystals in patches of white.

A bridge a hundred meters to her right led over a chasm and towards warm torch light interspersed with magical lamps. Houses of all sizes and styles riddled the plateau, built on top of the massive statue depicting a humanoid figure, its head missing. The stone monument reached down and into the natural rock below before it all ended in the distant lake. “I’m impressed.” Ilea said, smiling as she took in the view and looked over at the robot. The metal on him was rusted in parts, dark gray and black as well as patches of red showing.

“No monsters here?” She asked as he joined her side and chuckled.

His eyes twirled before he spoke, “Rarely. They reside down in the lake or the dungeon. We’re safe here from the storms as well as most wild beasts. Come now, a warrior able to heal will be a most welcome addition.”

Ilea nodded and followed him when the lizardman knelt on one knee before her, “I owe you my life warrior.”

Ilea grinned and flicked his lizard like head, “You owe me a drink.” The lizard looked confused when the robot started roaring with laughter.

“You heard the lassie, come before you get yourself into more dept than you can carry.” He said and helped him up.

A three meter tall guard with dark armor and a hammer as big as Ilea grunted when they came over the bridge and entered Hallowfort. It wasn’t big, nothing compared to any of the cities in the human plains. Perhaps a village or even just a bigger camp but what it lacked in numbers and size, it won back in diversity. To Ilea it felt just as alive as any bigger city she’d been to. Half the races running around, trading and shouting she had never seen. *Is that a dwarf?* The man was as tall as a kid but with sturdy arms and legs, no hair on his head as well as a scar on his scalp. He looked about as heavy as she would be were it not for her dense bones and muscles.

The scents of unknown foods mixed with body odor entirely alien to her as they walked through the village before they came up on a small house. “I’ll see you later, let me know how it goes.” The robot said to the rogue. The man didn’t reply, nodding lightly towards Ilea before he vanished. The lizard bowed deeply before he too said his goodbyes, at least for now. It seemed clear that responsibility for her would fall on the robot.

“Come on in.” He said and opened the door, stopping in a contraption near the wall before his chest opened, steam exiting from both the pipes on his back as well as the chamber itself before a man about one meter forty in height jumped out. A black bushy beard, one mechanical eye and black greasy hair looked at her with an outstretched hand, “Terok Stonebreaker, very happy to make your acquaintance.”

Ilea smiled and shook his hand, “Ilea Spears. The same. You were moving that machine?”

“Never seen a dwarf and his rig!” He laughed and walked over to it, “It’s smaller than most but trust me this thing can take a punch. The runes and gears allow for the finest movements coupled with my metal magic. Not the most beautiful thing but it does the job. Don’t ever insult it or I’ll pummel you.” He said, laughing again before punching the exoskeleton.

“Fascinating. You think I could get one of them too?”

He frowned, “Well you might as well try, it’s hard without metal magic. The fine control I mean. You need specific metal too, that elven stuff you have on your armor might be a start but you’ll need much more.”

Ilea nodded and smiled, happy to have found this little place. Still, she didn’t come to the north to join another village and get involved with their problems and wars, “Can you show me to the smith? I don’t plan to stay long.”

The dwarf smiled and nodded, “I understand, not one to dwell. I shall stay true to my word. If you ever need anything just come back.” He said and opened the door, beckoning her to follow. “He was good as dead, glad you appeared. I just hope he will go out again.” Terok said as he led her through the village.

Ilea spotted smoke coming out of a big building, hearing the sounds of a hammer hitting metal, “What about that one?” She asked as he led her further down, away from the forge.

“She’s not bad but won’t be able to handle your level of steel. There’s only one here that could but he’s... well. He doesn’t want to work with everyone. Not me either but perhaps I can convince him to take down the runes, you’ve saved one of us after all.”



# Chapter 242 Floating Wisdom

## Chapter 242 Floating Wisdom

Terok led her down a stairwell into the stone, many side halls leading to living quarters or rooms with other purposes. Some of the beings looked at her when she passed but nobody seemed to care extensively. A refreshing reception compared to most humans that immediately started whispering after her. The dwarf suddenly stopped and motioned down a hallway. The red glow of fire came from within but nothing could be heard.

“Hey, master!” Terok shouted down the hall, “This lassie here has saved a friend, thought you could offer her your services in return.” They waited but no response came, Ilea looking at the dwarf who seemed a little unsure by now.

“Why can’t we just go?”

He gestured at the ground and walls, “There are runes in place to prevent entry, curses and dark magic. He normally only works with those that can cross it unharmed.”

Ilea nodded and started walking, “Why didn’t you say that. Well I’ll see you then Terok, thanks for showing me the way.” He watched in disbelief when she simply started walking. A light feeling of nausea started spreading in her belly but it was nothing major. Neither was the health drain that started a couple meters further in. Her healing easily canceled it out. With time it would grow less effective anyway, thanks to her second stage resistance to health drain magic.

She heard Terok laugh and looked back, the dwarf shaking his head. “Well good luck then. You can use the exit we came from, if you can survive this you can definitely activate the rune.”

Ilea gave him a thumbs up as she moved further into the smithy. A couple more steps and her hearing was cut off, the sound of a hammer hitting metal resounded a couple meters further in. The room opened up, stairs leading down into the big space where a being made of dark mist hovered near an anvil. It had two arms that looked solid, the rest was more ethereal. Like the winter spirits she had faced before.

### *[Smith – lvl 212]*

*Not even Balduur has that kind of level.* She thought and decided to wait until he was done with whatever he was working on. There was a plethora of machines in the room, tools and metal structures she had never seen nor any idea what purpose they served. Sitting down on a workbench a little to the side, she continued healing herself, neither curse nor health drain lessening when she had entered. The thing he, she or it was working on looked awfully small in her sphere, shaped like just the handle of a weapon. *Isn't the blade done and then the handle added?*

Summoning her notebook, she wrote down the name of the poison and the monster that occupied the Root Vault. Another thing she could hunt and kill, likely in similar or higher levels as the rose knights. *Overwhelming choice...*, It wasn't really. Here she would meet other hunters coming from Hallowfort, at least she assumed as much. Saving lives wasn't the worst and she could make friends like that easily. Ilea had no idea how long it would have taken to find this smith here, likely choosing one of the lesser talented had she not met Terok. Still, she was lucky this time. It could've also been her finding three dead or dying adventurers, unable to save them.

And this was her adventure, not another tragedy. Hers alone with nightmares spewed out of hell's mouth, there for her to fight and kill, dancing on the edge of death. Her thinking was interrupted when a whisper resounded in the whole room, “A new traveler, seeking the work of Goliath.” The voice echoed, the smith turning around, two golden eyes looking out of the dark mist as it held up the finished product.

“A door handle? I mean maybe I could replace some of mine... I’m Ilea by the way,” She said as he put it away.

“Work for one of my dear friends. Payment for a joke well told.” He explained and hovered a little closer, “You, no you are here for that armor are you not? Or have you lost your weapons too?” He asked, the whisper coming from several directions at once, confusing Ilea quite a bit.

“Just the armor, I don’t fight with steel.” She said and stood up, walking around the room to discern how he did the thing with his voice.

The smith hovered after her, “Niameer steel. Rare to see it these days. The elven lands of old used to favor it did they not? Before the light was no more.”

Ilea cocked her head to the side and turned around, “Why do I hear you like a surround sound system?”

A weird noise came from the smith, its eyes squinting a little and bobbing up and down, a laugh perhaps, “It is what I am, the magics of dark not one favorable for those of the living flesh. You must have felt it when you entered? The curse, my unending hunger for life and its source.”

“You meant that’s you? You didn’t put up runes to make people not come here?”

“It can get lonely, sadly most cannot stomach being close to me. Your kind... what are you then? An elf? A dwarf? No... you would not like the mana here and you are too tall for a dwarf. A dark one then but one of life?” He asked inquisitively.

“I’m human.”

Its eyes moved up a little before it spoke, “Human, what a rare visitor then. Those of weak blood find it hard to travel here, to even stand where you do is an achievement not gained without strife. I salute you.” He said and bowed a little, “The dark ones often find conversation tiring yet it leaves

my forge silent, abandoned. Were it not for my work one might question why I even rose to consciousness.”

*Lots of interesting things this guy says.* The smith was either old and wise, a being of great power or perhaps a crazy loner spinning lies to confuse her. *The elves don't like the mana here? Dark ones?* “It’s nice to meet you then, I salute your dedication to the forge. You are the first smith of such a level I have met.”

The weird sound again, “Amusing. A human so far north, a long time it has been. Truly. For this alone I shall grant your request.”

*Nice,* She thought and summoned the mold she had taken from Balduur. “That’s the mold, it fits me perfectly. The monsters here are a little much for Niameer steel.”

The smith hovered around the mold, lifting its eyes from time to time, “A suitable mold. It is good to know the art is not lost entirely. Niameer however is not meant to be abused so roughly. It is meant to hide sound and light. A shadow’s metal. Are you a shadow?”

Ilea thought about it and shook her head, “I fight directly, you can see that by how it looks.” Switching to a set of leather armor, she placed the pieces of her ashen hunter set on a free workbench. *Not meant to be abused so roughly? And it was never damaged by any of the attacks coming from other people or their weapons?* She felt a little embarrassed in front of this old being and showed it apparently.

“Do not feel offended human. It is a good metal, even moreso rare. A precious ore and it can certainly hold up to others but with time its shape will dent, its glimmer fade.” The smith explained as he lifted some of the pieces up, looking them over carefully.

Ilea summoned one of the rose knight sets, using her ash to clean off one of the tables before she dumped it there. “What about these then? The ones who fought me used that.” Adding a sword to it, just in case it was a different metal, the smith turned towards her. Grabbing the chest plate, it contemplated, turning it over and over again.

“I am uncertain. What do you intend to do with it?” It asked finally.

“Depends on how good it is. Got plenty more so do with this one what you like.” Ilea said with a grin.

Its eyes lifted and almost looked happy, “Good, I cannot determine its properties without working it. Hold on.” It said and took the breast plate, putting it on the anvil and starting to hammer. Harder with each hit before it chucked it into the biggest forge, some of the runes lighting up before the heat in the room went up by at least fifty degrees.

*No wonder no humans come in here.* Ilea thought, noticing the flare but her heat resistance and general condition completely ignoring the difference. It didn't stop getting hotter, soon the straps of her leather armor started to catch on fire, the room not cooling down for a whole twenty minutes. Ilea covered herself in ash and stored her leather armor, switching back to it when it cooled down. She looked at the goop of golden liquid that remained of the chest plate.

“Stonehammer steel... it was incredibly old, brittle but as expected it held up, for a long time. For rust to form on such a sturdy material. A dungeon perhaps? I would be interested in more of this metal if you would.” The smith said in his ethereal whisper.

“Of course, half for you half for me alright? Make me as many full sets of armor with the mold as you can, how does that sound?” She grinned and watched the eyes light up when she dumped all the armors and weapons she had gotten from her escapades so far. Nine sets and an assortment of weapons equaling probably another set.

“Marvelous. To think such quantities have found themselves into my forge. You see it is a metal found only deep underground. Further than most are willing to dig.

Ilea smiled and clapped her hands, “Cool. Can you make it black?”

The smith immediately started working, talking about coating the set with another lesser metal that wouldn't weaken the structure but change its silver color to a darker and matte black, not quite as dark as the previous steel but Ilea didn't mind. As long as she wasn't a shining beacon of light walking around she'd be fine. A lot of the work involved waiting for the forge to melt the metal, leaving ample time for conversation.

"You think this will be sturdier than the Niameer armor?" Ilea asked, looking over her old battered set.

The smith turned towards her, putting another piece into the forge with his bare stone hand, "Yes. Considerably. It will wear with time, especially if weapons of the same quality will impact it but less quickly than the Niameer. A wise choice to hold on to it." It explained.

She nodded and sat back again, meditating to recover the mana she was constantly using to keep her healing up, "You spoke of being a dark one... what does that mean?"

Goliath looked at her and spoke, "Humans... your world so small yet your pride reaching for the moons." He said but she didn't feel insulted, it was more a statement, one of wonder and not one of dismissing the human race, "The dark ones are those not born from consciousness, not of the womb of a mother but of mana itself. Gifted sight and understanding by time, long past. By the nurturing touch of life and death itself."

*It speaks in riddles*, Ilea smiled. She was taking a liking to this smith. "Were you once monsters? Roaming the wild on instinct alone?"

"Precisely. Though it is a theory I believe it to be true. I have felt it.. have... memories from before." It said, "Powerful one must be to attain choice. We gather in places dense in the energy of the world. Magic itself."

Ilea slid a little further back on the bench and rested her back on the wall, "Does that mean I'll have to check every monster I fight to see if they're

not actually a nice old woman looking for her lost child somewhere... or a professor late for his class....”

“It is not so simple. Only beings attuned with mana may become what generations have decided to call a dark one. You shall learn, with time, the differences between wild beast and scholar. A riddle of morality you shall decipher on your own, young one.”

“How old exactly are you?” She asked, genuinely interested.

It looked at her, its eyes sparkling with golden light, “I do not know the answer you seek.” The whisper replied.

Ilea nodded as he floated over to the forge, taking the container now filled to the brim with fluid metal. Carefully moving it over, she could feel the heat on her again but it quickly vanished when Goliath poured the metal into the mold. Waiting for a couple minute without moving, it placed several big tools looking like metal versions of vacuum cleaners around the mold. “Three minutes.” It spoke and activated the devices, an icy cold enveloping the mold and all within, cooling it down in such a drastic manner that the whole room filled with mist.

Separating the pieces of the mold again, it carefully took out the still steaming pieces before dumping them in a container containing fluid, “Done, let it cool off completely before you touch the metal. With half of what you have given me I will create four more complete sets of armor if that is what you request. The coating I will do as the last step.”

Ilea nodded and smiled, “That’s perfect. How much gold will it cost by the way?”

“Gold? No you misunderstand human. Gold has little use for me. Bring me worthwhile work and materials. That is sufficient as a trade.”

Ilea turned her head sideways but shrugged and stood up, “Well if you say so. You could probably buy interesting metals with gold as well though, just saying.”

“A human desperate to separate with her wealth. Truly, as rare as one so far in the north. Well it is no wonder, us hiding deep underground.” It said and produced another weird guttural sound. “Gold I have found is a fickle mistress, one not as convincing as true skill. I may miss working on the most prized ore simply because the owner was incapable of paying for my services.” It explained. Ilea still thought it would be beneficial but then again who was she to question the business model of a thousand year old floating smith spirit.

“Fair enough. Mind if I stay here while you work?”

It simply continued putting armor pieces into the furnace, the heat rising again, “Not at all. It is rare enough to have a guest. If my cursed presence is not upsetting your stomach.”

Ilea chuckled, “I’ve met some people with better curses than yours.”

“Better... that is an amusing perspective.”

“You mentioned elves not liking this area before, why do you think that?” Ilea asked, remembering their earlier conversation.

The smith turned towards her and grabbed one of the swords she had placed on the workbench, “Few I have met. They are secretive and according to the rare travelers seeking my work, their race resides in a big forest to the south. That way it has been for thousands of years legend has it. It is said that places brimming with energy such as this, such as the north after it has... changed, such are not places the elven race seeks to reside in. Though I did not pry, merely am I retelling rumors of old.”

“What change are you talking about? And why do you believe they came north then, if they disliked it so much?” Ilea asked, sitting up.

Goliath looked at her for a while before answering, “Long ago a change befell this area of the world. This place... it became, so terribly more pleasant. I do not know why, yet the energies of the world, condensing and twisting as if bringing out the color and vibrancy of life and death itself. Fewer travelers have visited since then. You are the first human in a long



time. The town they have built above my forge has been a blessing, truly. As to why an elf would visit this place I lack the answers you seek, why perhaps you might ask, would a human come this far?”

Ilea summoned her notebook and wrote some of the info down. It seemed interesting, maybe whatever had happened was the reason Tremor was now forgotten and taken over by mindless undead. *Opposed to being a city bustling with... wine merchants.*

“Oh... human might I ask of you a favor?”

“What is it?” Ilea asked and jumped up, cracking her neck.

It walked over to the devices that looked like vacuum cleaners to her and checked something on them, “The water is being used up, the air too dry and the force too hot. It is rare I need to cool with ice, yet your metal requires it. Would you be so kind and get me some in the lake below?”

She looked at the massive container, twice as big as herself and easily as broad as she was tall, “You mean the lake below?”

“Might this undertaking be impossible for you? Perhaps I might be able to contact my helper but I believe she is on guard duty for another week.”

*Week long guard duty, sound horrible. The fellow near the bridge?* Ilea asked herself and shook her head, “No need, I will get you some water. Any other way out than the door? That thing won’t fit through that corridor and I doubt my storage item allows such a massive thing inside.” It was close, worth a try now that she had ninety units of storage free again.

# Chapter 243 Metal Gear

## Chapter 243 Metal Gear

“There is.” Goliath said in the usual whisper and moved over to the water tank. Its hand raised up and aimed at the stone wall next to it before energy gathered in a dark orb, shooting out a second later. The blast completely obliterated the wall. A rune glowed near the wall and the fresh air was cut off immediately, likely because the airflow was not to be disturbed.

Ilea nodded and spread her wings, looking down into the abyss. They were situated somewhere near the waist of the massive stone statue on whose shoulders and decapitated neck the town of Hallowfort had been built. It was still a couple hundred meters down to the water. Two of her ashen limbs moved over to the container and unhooked it from the metal piece it hung from. Goliath’s golden eyes were focused on her during the whole process, Ilea just looking back and winking at the smith before she flew out, the container dragged by the ash’s strength alone.

Letting herself fall, she took in the crystal light that illuminated the world below the wasteland. Stone and water mostly, little vegetation likely because the suns didn’t reach down here at all. The water reached further than her eyes could see, more an underground sea than just a lake. The crystals reflected on the water surface when she reached it, glistening in their unending brilliance. Holding onto the massive bucket with all her ashen limbs, she flew it sideways and dunked it into the water, slowly lowering it afterwards.

It filled up quickly, Ilea noticing some dark shapes in the water deep below. *Fishies coming to play?* But the bucket was full and she didn't want to damage Goliath's tools just because of her curiosity. *Later, much later if I'm honest. My water trauma is too recent.* Using all the strength in her ash and wings, she pulled the container up. The statue reached high towards the ceiling of the cave, a person with two arms and legs, hands held together as if praying or meditating.

Heaving the huge bucket back inside, she carefully hung it back where she had taken it from, noticing the change in temperature immediately upon entering. Some of the water already started to steam. "It's already going, shouldn't I hang it outside where it's cooler?" She asked when the smith turned, again focused on her.

It didn't speak for a whole thirty seconds, "I must ask young human. Are you a child of ash?"

She was a little confused, especially because more of the water was already evaporating, "I'm an ash creator if that is what you mean. Your water?"

"Do not mind the water. I thank thee for bringing it. Truly, one touched by ash. I was not sure when I saw but now. It is an honor." It said and bowed a little.

Ilea nodded and looked at the water tank again. "The runes do not use liquid water alone, simply the element around it. Be it in the air or in the tank. Once there are insufficient resources available the ice machines will stop working." The smith explained and she nodded. "You would not be able to summon ash at all without first burning wood or something else. An enigma, to write runes with the capability to create. A mystery for another life perhaps, another time."

"Why do you think it's that special, ash creation I mean. I would assume many elves as well as humans can create elements through magic, ash as well." Ilea suggested.

The smith moved to pour her second set of armor, activating the ice runes exactly three minutes later to rapidly cool it down again. "Ash..." It

started, separating the mold and putting each piece into new containers with the liquid from before. Not water but something that looked more sluggish. "... it is connected with death. Unattainable for those not close to it. Those who have experienced the dreads of magic, suffered and prevailed. It is said that they are the ones chosen by ash. Or the ones understanding the natural element, depending on philosophy and theory applied. You will find that many like myself will come to acknowledge your mana and its ability to create."

Its explanation made sense, Ilea remembering some of the requirements that had let her class evolve into Ash Wielder initially. *Come to think of it there must be religions based around certain elements or schools of magic as well. The healing orders are one thing but maybe the magic domains Elfie mentioned? Maybe there's an ash thing too with dark ones like Goliath.*

Fishing out the pieces that had been finished first, the smith put them on a work bench and dried them off the strange liquid with a towel. Taking a massive two handed hammer, the smith swung down, magic dancing around the hammer head before it impacted hard on the chest plate. A ring resounded and the hammer was rebounded a little, the force traveling through the smith as it held the more weapon than tool steady in its two massive arms. "Test it if you like but purely physically it holds up."

Ilea nodded before she took the breast plate and put it on the ground. "Damaging the floor ok?" She asked, looking up at the smith.

"Please do." It replied, eyes dancing in the darkness.

Ilea smiled and crouched down with a punch, her skills flaring up and five hundred health vanishing to activate her state's third tier. Her fist hit, a small shock wave sending the air around her away as the steel armor cracked into the stone below. Neither her arm nor the armor showed any damage, the stone floor losing out as the weakest link. "Seems usable, wonderful work." Ilea said, grabbing the piece and ripping it out of the ground, cracks visible where it had entered. She quickly identified the pieces.

*[Rose Hunter Armor Helm – Rare Quality]*  
*[Rose Hunter Armor Chest Piece – Rare Quality]*  
*[Rose Hunter Armor Bracers – Rare Quality]*  
*[Rose Hunter Armor Gauntlets – Rare Quality]*  
*[Rose Hunter Armor Legs – Rare Quality]*  
*[Rose Hunter Armor Boots – Rare Quality]*

“Very nice. Any idea about enchantments? My previous stuff had lightening and durability on it.”

Checking one of the pieces the smith made a noise, “Rare, perhaps with better metal and your mold I might be able to forge you a set of ancient quality. There is no enchanter here worthy of mention. That dwarf who brought you here might be able to help but I suggest you look for someone more dedicated to the craft.”

Ilea nodded, “I doubt these sets will hold up very long so maybe quick and dirty is enough right now. Do you know if he is a bad enchanter or why would you not recommend his work?”

The smith put the third set into the forge, “I do not know if he has any talent at all. They like to use their war machines, enchanting is always necessary. Yet those actually using their machines are rarely the ones best at enchanting itself.”

She nodded and thought about it, “I’ll go ask him then. Maybe he can recommend someone as well.”

“Do that young one. I will be done in three hours, the coating will take another two.” It said before continuing its work.

Ilea nodded, “I’ll be back then.” Taking back her Ashen Hunter armor, she switched to it and blinked out of the room, back into the corridor. Walking up, a feline looking humanoid with a tail nearly ran into her, vanishing before her eyes. *Did he steal anything? Wait, that’s racist.* Nothing was amiss and she walked back up to find Terok’s house again.

Finding the dwarf inside, tinkering on his machine Ilea knocked on the door and waited. “Who is it?”

“Your new friend.” Ilea said and smiled behind her helmet when he opened the door.

The dwarf motioned her to sit on a worn chair in what looked like his kitchen. She had to duck a little to have space. Only the entryway was big enough for what was essentially his mech suit. “I’ll be with ya in a minute.” He grumbled, putting on a goggle on his non mechanical eye before sparks shot outwards. “Fucking shit. Dreaded cursed limp son of a bitch.” He grumbled before chucking his tool at the opposite wall.

Ilea folded her legs and took off her battered helmet, smiling at the dwarf, “Anything amiss?”

“Oh not particularly.” He said and walked over to a box, taking out a bottle of something. She could tell there was a cooling rune on the crate. “Want one too? I don’t have anything more fancy than the ale from down the street. Not the worst I’ve had.”

“Gladly.” Ilea replied. He laughed and threw her a bottle.

“Didn’t strike me as no lady. Back so soon, did the old mystery blob work with ye?”

The question made her smile as she looked at the label on her bottle, the thing nearly coming off already. *Bleaker’s ale* She removed the cork and took a sip. “He did, or she? Whatever. My armor’s pretty battered so I was thinking of getting it reforged. Problem is, the old smith isn’t exactly an enchanter. Heard you lot do that with your machines. Any experience in the trade?”

The dwarf nodded and sat down, taking a swig from his bottle of ale too. “Some, I would suggest someone better but there hardly is anybody here. Enchanters aren’t usually the best fighters and you need to be good or sneaky to survive here.” He pointed at her, “The smith is an exception.

Fucker's been here for longer than the very statue you're standing on I wager."

"Can you do lightening and durability enchantments or something similar?" She asked.

Setting down his bottle, he looked at her, "Aye. Neither above level two but it's better than nothing."

Ilea nodded, smiling at his answer, "Do you take gold for your work?"

"I do. Would rather have some good metal if you have any to spare. Maybe you can get some from the smith. My suit is breathing its last breaths." He sighed.

Ilea thought about it for a moment and then tapped on her helmet, "How does Niameer steel sound?" Goliath had suggested it would be better suited for sneaking than taking damage, not something she excelled at anyway.

The dwarf nearly choked and then laughed, "I would enchant whatever you like for a lifetime at a chance of Niameer."

"Is it really that good? God pretty fucked up from the monsters I've fought."

The dwarf nodded with a smile, "It's exceptionally durable for the flexibility it provides. You've seen my rig, it's not a simple breast plate. There's a lot of moving parts, small enchantments and runes placed in small intervals. Niameer is great for that. Elven gold I've heard it called. Don't think they use it much anymore, not flashy enough I suppose."

Ilea thought about it for a while. Terok seemed honest, not downplaying how much the metal was worth but he had offered her a drink and she liked the guy. Her Rose Hunter sets would be even better against direct damage and she had little use for the intricate designs he was in need of. Perhaps at some point in the future but the armor used up a ton of space in her necklace. *Maybe not molten down.*

“How much would you need for your machine?” Ilea asked, looking over at the thing.

The dwarf considered and then held up a finger, going over to his rig. His hands were nearly shaking when he took some measurements with a tool, his mechanical eye sounding like a lens zooming in before he jotted down some numbers on a notepad that was hanging from the wall right next to the rig. “Your whole set isn’t enough to replace everything with it. Two legs worth might cover all the smaller parts, gears and the important enchantments I would have to put on. Even if it would be better than my current rig I won’t waste Niameer on plating... no offense.”

“None taken.” Ilea chuckled and smiled, “I didn’t even know it was such a special metal. Just that it took more abuse than anything else I had before.”

The dwarf visibly winced at that and shook his head, “Humans. You lot.” It sounded like he was trying to bite down some of the curses coming to his lips but she wouldn’t have minded.

“Two legs worth, if you give me the plans I can ask the smith to finish them for you too. Lifelong enchantments from you, any information you can provide, connections here and beyond if necessary and you show me the thing when it’s done. Deal?” He shook her hand faster than she could blink, a big smile on his face.

“You are... a blessing. First you save the rookie and now this.” He laughed loudly before finishing his ale. “I’ll get the plans, wait a moment.” He added and walked to one of the back rooms, murmuring to himself. “... must use all this luck as long as it lasts... Niameer...”

*Smith, check. Enchanter, half check. Dwarf, elf, dark one?, check. Cat person - ???, Ilea mentally noted down before he came back, his beard and hair looking even more disheveled than before, a big grin on his face as he put a stack of papers down.*

“Those I need. Measurements and proportions are noted as well as everything else needed. If the smith doesn’t want to make it I’ll take the steel like that. Maybe someone else will be able to melt it down at least.”



Terok said, “Oh and if you need a machine designed or something I can help with that too of course. I’m more an engineer than an enchanter but I’ve picked some things up in my years.”

Ilea took the papers and made them vanish, surprising him. “I’ll see what I can do.” She said and got up, “Thanks for the ale. It was... alright.”

*Walter would be appalled,* She thought but didn’t mention that. It was impressive that they had a brewery down in this cave at all. With time whoever produced it might get better at it too.

“Thank you Ilea. Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to me.” The dwarf said and grabbed her hand with both of his when she left, a big smile on his face.

She just nodded, a little overwhelmed with the treatment. She was just giving him a little of her old armor. Being able to help people out that she liked was certainly a good feeling but she didn’t like being in the spotlight. Quickly making her way back to the smith, she found that he had finished another set and was working on the fourth one. She switched back to leather armor and placed the old battered set on the work bench.

“Ah, you have returned human. Have you found an enchanter.”

Ilea nodded, checking the pieces of her old armor, “I have. The dwarf, he also confirmed there are few better at it here but I don’t need the best at the moment. Best I can get is enough. He agreed to do as many enchantments as I need forever if I give him some of the Niameer steel.”

“Oho... a deal in his favor to be sure. Yet I suppose he does not know the number of armors you will want to enchant.” Its eyes danced with joy. Ilea replied with a grin.

“I wanted to ask you if you could forge the two leg pieces into the things he needs.” Ilea said and summoned the plans, handing them to the smith. It floated a little away from the forge not to set the paper on fire accidentally.

Looking through them he answered, “The Stonehammer steel deal I consider repaid with the forging and coating of your armors. I am willing to melt down your Niameer to ingots but... this...,” Goliath stopped talking, switching to the next page before he held two of them up against the light of the forge. Ilea saw some bits overlapping but didn’t understand the designs. “He was a dwarf was he not?”

Ilea didn’t understand what he meant, “I mean, short stature, big beard, uses a big machine suit to fight. Looks like the other dwarves I’ve seen around here.”

“This might look like what a dwarf would make but the detail is... astounding. In my age only those calling themselves Taleen have reached such boldness. Such... ingenuity. Marvelous. I will forge his pieces.”

Ilea smiled at that, “Make the rest into ingots, I’ll hold on to them for now. You knew Taleen? They were dwarves too right?”

The smith carefully pinned the papers on a wall and activated a rune, a thin shimmer coming to life before them. Protection of some sort. “Once, they chose to find and destroy me. Perhaps jealous of my work or simply annoyed at the competition. Even though I did not charge gold for my work and chose to serve every and all kinds of creatures.”

“That’s exactly why someone would want you dead.” Ilea said and couldn’t help but chuckle.

The smith looked at her, confusion somehow apparent in those two golden eyes. “Is that so. Even after all those years it is saddening to see the strife between beings born of life and death, of fire and blood. Is it not our mortal duty to create?”

The smith was not looking for an answer, merely stating how he thought. “Not all life is your equal Goliath, smith of the north. I would call myself on the side of destruction. As much as I would like to share your philosophy.”

“It is the nature of the world. These are merely musings of an old spirit. Even in the forge, to create you must strike, bend and destroy. For steel to be reborn. The same is true for all beings, all creation. A fact I cannot change. Now come. Let us finish your armors.”

# Chapter 244 Real Steel

## Chapter 244 Real Steel

Ilea smiled brightly at the finished product. The armor had the exact same form but was a little less dark. Still black but Niameer had a midnight like property to it that the coating to her Rose Hunter sets just couldn't replicate. A good thing she had taken the mold with her, the armor as if she was wearing a body suit. It was heavier, certainly but her power had increased continuously since the group of smiths had made her first set back in Virilya. *Plus I'm getting enchantments done as well.*

Goliath's eyes danced happily as it watched her move around in the armor. "I love it."

"It was a mold, not one made by me but still. I am happy to be of service, Ashen Hunter."

"Why hunter?" Ilea asked, curious at the name. She did identify as a warrior as far as she knew.

The smith started melting down an ingot of Niameer, ten of them put in a crate and stored in her necklace. Four had been reserved for the dwarf. "The armor was made for you. It has chosen the name Rose Hunter. You look more like a hunter to me. I do not know what the word rose means."

Ilea laughed at that and smiled, "You're how many thousand years old and don't know what a rose is?" Instantly regretting it she instead continued, "It's a flower. No offense, I was just caught off guard. Here, they're usually

other colors than silver and not made of metal.” She said and summoned the silver rose she had gotten from the Tremor dungeon.

The smith made joyous eyes and carefully took the rose, “Marvelous. You see, my curse withers most plants, especially delicate things like flowers. They are of life after all.” Handing it back to her, she held up her hand.

“Keep it. I can get more of them.”

“A gift I shall treasure, Ilea, huntress of ash.” It whispered and bowed.

She tested out moving in the armor for a while, her other four sets cooling in their buckets after the coating had been applied. It felt good, she hadn't even noticed how dented and bent her ash hunter set really was. Adjusting wasn't difficult of course but it probably impacted her performance, at least a little. “You said the Taleen came for you, their machines or the dwarves themselves?”

Goliath didn't reply, carefully forming a small piece of glowing Niameer with two pliers before finally putting it into liquid, a sizzling sound coming from the bucket. “They came with their guardian machines. Neither of the two dwarves that died that day were fighters of any capability. Creators they were, their machines putting up a formidable resistance.”

*I mean it is a floating level two hundred creature with a hammer head as big as my chest. I wonder how it'd do against a Praetorian, knowing so much about metal.* “And their machines were so different than other ones you've seen?”

“Oh yes. Quite astounding. An internal mana source, capable of harnessing a part of the ambient mana around them. Truly groundbreaking. I was unable to replicate it.”

“And you think Terok is making something like that?” Ilea asked.

The smith poured another form before he answered, “Not at all. Whoever is responsible for a mana source like the ones found in a Taleen machine is far beyond even my capabilities. A true master. Most exoskeletons I have seen were brutes, massive and specialized in destruction alone. No such machine would require such precise and small pieces of Niameer. The Taleen Guardians I believe they were called, they had no such steel but a more common metal found in the south. To think they formed it into what became such quick and agile opponents... it is, impressive.”

Ilea summoned a Taleen sword and showed it to the smith, “That the metal?”

“Indeed.” It took the blade and inspected it, “It’s perfect. As much as one can make out of that steel.”

Ilea summoned a second one and then decided to just dump all of her remaining Taleen weapons bar one dagger and one sword. The weapons appeared on a workbench, spears, maces, warhammers and swords. She was left with 152/250 storage capacity in her necklace. Hopefully enough to carry all the armors that were cooling down still. “You can have all that, not sure if it will be any use.”

The smith inspected the weapons, dismissing most of them quickly before it held two of the swords and looked at them. Goliath turned the blades and moved them around, “Impressive.”

“What is it?” Ilea asked. They already knew the Taleen crafted their blades perfectly.

The smith turned towards her and showed her the blades, “They are identical to my eye.”

Ilea nodded, “Well the Guardians look the same as well, must be some kind of mechanical production.” She said. *Did the dwarves have their own little industrial revolution?*

“Blades forged by machines... of this quality? I will study them more. If you find a production facility, machine, runes or enchantments please do

show them to me.” Goliath added before motioning to her armor sets.  
“They are done.”

Ilea smiled brightly and stored all of it in her necklace. Four full sets of Rose Hunter armor plus another one she was wearing. Each set weighed ten units in her necklace, bringing her capacity to one ninety two at the moment. “Thanks Goliath, you really saved my ass here.”

“Do not speak of it. You have brought me ample compensation. This is the last piece for you dwarf as well. Let him know I will want to see the finished product.” The smith said with excited eyes. Ilea was getting better at gauging the emotions in them, the intricate small movements and changes in the golden light or their form.

She smiled under her new helmet, the two horns sharp again as they protruded out and forwards. Twirling once, she came to a stop in a stance.  
*Nearly done then.*

“Will you remain here? I might come again in a couple weeks... for reforging and with new metal.” Ilea said and moved back into a casual position.

“Of course. Perhaps I will be able to improve your armor while I learn more about Stonehammer steel.” Goliath said as she stored her armor mold and nodded.

Holding out her hand, she smiled when the smith shook it, “I’m looking forward to that. Have fun.”

“Good luck on your hunt, ashen warrior.”

“Five whole sets? Wow... you know I... ah fuck it. Yea lay them out. Did the smith agree to form ingots at least?” Terok asked, checking the first piece of the empty armor, nodding at its quality.

Ilea just summoned one of the pieces he had ordered and twirled it around her fingers, smiling at the dwarf. His brows lifted while his eyes opened when he finally looked at her, “You damned miracle. Sure I won’t be cursed or murdered for accepting your help?” He laughed.

Ilea stored the piece again and motioned to the armors, “Only if you don’t finish the job. I’d like to leave today if possible.”

The dwarf nodded, a big smile on his face as he started working, “Unreasonable requests are my specialty.” He said and cracked his knuckles.

Ilea decided to stay and play around with her ash a little while he worked. She had felt out the limits of her ash manipulation and had come to the conclusion that eight semi sturdy limbs were the ideal number. Semi sturdy because it allowed for them to still be easily movable. Highly dexterous with steel like tips dense and sharp enough to penetrate weak opponents easily. She was of course preferring their use with Wave of Ember, against enemies like the rose knights who she couldn’t hurt with the ash’s pure physical properties.

More than eight limbs couldn’t use the skill, otherwise she would simply create a fifty of them and spend a big chunk of mana with each blow. Switching between different levels of density in different parts of the limbs let her optimize a little while the dwarf finished her last set, until finally he exclaimed happily. “It’s done!”

Blinking next to him, the dwarf nearly jumped into the wall face first. “Don’t do that again.” He said when he had calmed down, Ilea looking at her armor.

***[Rose Hunter Armor Helm – Rare Quality] Enchantments [Lightening 2 / Durability 2]***  
***[Rose Hunter Armor Chest Piece – Rare Quality] Enchantments***



***[Lightening 2 / Durability 2]***

***[Rose Hunter Armor Bracers – Rare Quality] Enchantments [Lightening 2 / Durability 2]***

***[Rose Hunter Armor Gauntlets – Rare Quality] Enchantments***

***[Lightening 2 / Durability 2]***

***[Rose Hunter Armor Legs – Rare Quality] Enchantments [Lightening 2 / Durability 2]***

***[Rose Hunter Armor Boots – Rare Quality] Enchantments [Lightening 2 / Durability 2]***

Not quite as good as Iana's but that was to be expected. It certainly made a difference however, the lightening enchantments would bring some more speed to her movements. "Perfect, here you go." Ilea said and dumped all the pieces, screws and springs on the work table he had used, the dwarf frantically looking through all of it.

He nodded after a while and smiled brightly, "All there... this is going to be a long week."

"Well have fun. I might return at some point for more enchantments. Don't die on me."

The dwarf chuckled, "Same to you, same to you." He was already lost as he started distributing the pieces into separate piles, taking another set of plans he had and started working. He didn't even ask her where his plans were.

"Smith wants to see the end result it said. I think it can hear you if you go down and shout." Ilea added before she quietly left, leaving the dwarf to his passion. She had remained here long enough, not a single point of experience gained as she waited for her gear to be finished. *Now I have a smith and an adequate enchanter. Maybe I'll find a better one at some point too.*

Spreading her wings outside, she flew directly towards the exit in the stone. Testing it out, she found herself even able to blink through. Whatever enchantment was on the door neither prevented her sphere nor her blink to work. Finding the way back out was simple enough, through dark tunnels and caves until she finally breathed fresh air again.

It was dark outside but the shattering impacts coming from above told her the lightning wasn't over, neither was there a mist laying at the bottom of the valleys. At least not as far as she could see. The roots to the dungeon lay exposed, the entrance like the gaping mouth of a carnivorous plant. *A big fucking plant.* She knew the knights in her dungeon were capable foes, ones she could use to level both her skills and levels but perhaps the beasts in here could somehow be killed easier.

It was worth a shot to her, unlike whatever lay below Hallowfort. There had been mentions of another dungeon but the underground sea didn't particularly entice her. Not until all other close by resources had been used up. Stepping into the big opening, she jumped down onto one of the roots that led further in.

*'ding' 'You have entered Penumra dungeon'*

*Penumra...*, Writing the name down in her notebook quickly, she took in her surroundings. Stone with roots growing through it. She just hoped they didn't come alive suddenly, the size of the things enough to crush her alone. Jumping down another couple of roots, the space below her opened up. Like a network of webs spun by tree spiders, illuminated by reddish moss growing on the walls as well as what seemed like fireflies, their golden light contrasting the red.

Jumping to the side of the massive cave, she touched the moss and grabbed a little.

*[Penumra Moss – Poisonous]*

*Is that the second tier effect of Poison Resistance?* Ilea asked herself when she heard movement a little below her. Looking down, she glimpsed something blue before it vanished under the roots. Her sphere wasn't quite close enough to give her a view of what her eyes had missed. Grabbing more of the moss and putting it in her sphere, she focused her senses around her. The fact that the moss was poisonous wasn't a good sign, enough to level her resistance perhaps but it likely wasn't anything special like the Bluemoon Grass had been.

*Considering it nearly killed me, maybe it was in a way poisonous as well... or cursed.* Ilea glanced behind her, turning just when a claw slashed at her. It broke through her veil and scratched against her armor, not quite managing to dig into it significantly. Her fist answered, hitting the head of the beast that looked like a starving dragon, two long arms and legs. The thing didn't react, its head lacking any discernible eyes as it clawed at her again, this time in a frenzy.

Ilea blinked behind it but found the beast turning quickly, continuing its assault as her ashen limbs smashed into it, not managing to break through the hide.

### ***[Drop Saurian - ??]***

At least it wasn't at three question marks but Ilea had to blink again, flying upwards this time to avoid its relentless attacks. It moved frantically, too quickly for her to reasonably dodge, using its teeth as well as all four legs to attack when it got close enough. Ilea looked at the shallow scratches in her armor, the silver metal shining through the dark coating as she frowned. The beast jumped around the roots quickly, landing upside down above her before it shot towards her. Ilea blinked again but found three more of the beasts crawling up the sides of the cave. She wasn't deep, maybe fifty meters but somehow they had come for her.

*If I can't fight a single one of them I might as well give up...* She thought but tried nonetheless, forming big swaths of ash around her as she tested blinding them in some way, heating up the ash as well. The beasts moved quickly, jumping towards the root she was on before they attacked, their aim still focused on her body as she again blinked upwards to avoid them, two of the Saurians clashing into each other before they again jumped up. The third one was nowhere to be seen until it shot downwards from above, Ilea only able to blink because her Sphere notified her early enough.

*At least the roots haven't grabbed me yet...* Four thorn like claws suddenly shot towards her, stopped by her Veil as she looked at the origins. Another two of them were crawling on the cave wall, weird growths swelling on their backs. *Some sort of mushroom?* Ilea questioned as she watched thorns grow out of them before they shot towards her. Blinking up twice more, she

was back at the entrance. The beasts didn't follow, already out of sight. She didn't hear them either, the Drop Saurians more stealthy than she would've expected with such a size.

They had been around one meter fifty in height. Teeth and claws long enough to penetrate through her skull and then some as well as a thin tail. Neither flying, ash nor heat could deter them from finding her, even with no visible eyes. Magic perception perhaps, Ilea questioned but the fact that more of them had shown up made this a difficult dungeon to approach. She would have to be able to kill them quickly and efficiently, or at least be able to drop them further down into it to be able to stay focused on a single one. The ranged ones made for another annoyance as well.

Ilea sighed and cracked her neck, looking downwards. *Knights it is.* She thought and rushed back through the valley where she had initially come from. No storms looked to be close by, letting her push her speed as she ignored the small critters that sometimes showed up. She dared thinking her eyes and ears would warn her early enough should a massive monster like that snake she had seen earlier show up. Her blink as well as second stage of Azarinth Perception allowed for a safety net should she need it.

*Maybe I can hunt something out here as well... the birds Elfie mentioned don't seem viable but maybe I can try some things with the Miststalkers again.* Checking her second stage of Mana Drain Resistance again, she considered trying it. If she could somehow outlast one of the stalkers she could easily gain experience. The problem was that more and more would come from the connected lakes of mist. One was perhaps possible but two or three at the same time? She didn't know.

Ilea quickly reached the area again where she had first entered the crack in the land, the mountain with its entrance to the Tremor dungeon visible in the distance as she carefully checked for storms. Waiting for a couple minutes, a dark cloud started moving over the very mountain, ominously moving through before purple lightning shattered the stone, the shock wave making Ilea duck down into the crevice again until the storm had passed two minutes later.

Checking around her again, she rushed back, her wings pushing her to the highest speed they could before she blinked, finding herself in the small cavern that led into the dungeon. Breathing out, she blinked downwards and hovered in the air, overlooking parts of Tremor dungeon and the cathedral at its top. Making her way down, she entered through the missing windows and landed quietly. The elf was still working on the book, looking up to meet her eyes, “Returned in one piece. Found your smith?”

Ilea released her Veil and smiled under her helmet, “Indeed. Learned something about wine?”

He snorted and continued, “Let me know if you learned anything interesting. Smith someone that could tell me some stories?”

“Not really.” Ilea lied, thinking of when or if at all she should tell him about Goliath. For now it would remain her secret. There was enough in the city below to get answers out of him without endangering her smith.

# Chapter 245 The slowing Grind

## Chapter 245 The slowing Grind

Ilea looked for and quickly found a knight to fight. He was patrolling the streets when she sent an ashen projectile towards his head, quickly running away as he followed. It took the two around two minutes to reach the small field where Ilea had killed all the previous dungeon inhabitants. She looked at the knight that arrived without a word, his weapons pointing towards her as he landed and continued in a sprint.

Ash clashed against steel, Ilea avoiding the two blades slashing towards her as she delivered her Wave of Ember with eight simultaneous strikes. Her hands moved as she dodged, deflecting one of the blades before her fist hit his side, the shock wave traveling through the two and into the dirt before she blinked away, meditation flowing through her as she prepared for the next hit, a big grin on her face. She was ready.

The fight took around five hours, the dual wielding knights easier targets thanks to their lack of a shield. Many scratches on her armor showed the more shiny metal below as she dragged the dead woman out towards the cathedral. Opening the door, she carefully removed the armor and dumped it in the corner of the hall. There was plenty of space both here and in her storage item but she wasn't about to visit the smith again in a couple days simply because she didn't have anymore capacity in her necklace.

“You can work with the armors if you want to but I need the metal. Let me know if you want any of it permanently.” She said as she walked back to the dungeon entrance, the corpse stored in her necklace as it only needed one unit. Plus she didn’t feel like having a corpse mountain in her base of operations.

Back inside, she summoned the Penumra moss and ate a bit of it. Her healing skill was active and checking for any changes that might happen.

***‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Curse of Penumra -40 Health per second -40 Mana per second for one minute.’***

*Just a poison then. Nothing to worry about either.* She thought, waiting out the minute as she meditated and canceled out the health drain. She didn’t know how much her resistance had reduced the effects but checking her health drain with no healing confirmed that the message had already been adjusted to her defenses.

No level in poison resistance but the knight kill hadn’t gotten her any levels or skill levels either. There were plenty more though, both of the moss and off the knights, the latter would be the main focus for now. Ilea went out later that night, when the dungeon was cast in darkness and the mists had settled outside.

Squeezing through the rock, she looked over the terrain, a sea of mist visible near the valley below. Some smaller specks were visible as well but nothing with less than at least a couple of the stalkers inside. *At least try...*, She thought, flying down as she checked for dangers both in the air as well as on the ground, landing near the smallest pool of mist she had seen as the first stalker noticed her. Her health and mana started draining immediately, her meditation and healing kicking in as well. Her second stage resistance against health drain mentioned it getting harder to drain from her while her mana drain resistance actually damaged the enemy if they used the mana they drained. Both effects would grow with time, meaning she should be able to damage the monsters at some point but she didn’t exactly know how much damage it dealt. Ilea waited for a while until the miststalker was at the border of the thin fog. It twirled a couple times but couldn’t actually exit. Its blade like arms ending in a scythe like bend slashed through the air but

couldn't reach her, barely. The things had a longer range than she had thought.

As soon as the thing realized it couldn't leave, it started twirling in place, the drain effects increasing drastically. Enough that her health was now gradually declining, even with her healing active. *Yea that's not gonna work.* A second and third miststalker started noticing her and soon joined in but Ilea doubted the first one would've died faster than herself anyway. Even adding a tendril of ash that loosely grabbed onto it didn't help. Though she could deliver destructive mana, the thing somehow benefited from the direct connection as well.

A numbing feeling spread inside her before her health dipped under fifty percent, making her blink backwards twice to get out of their range. She meditated and healed herself back up. It might've been a waste but if she could at some point kill the miststalkers, it would benefit her greatly. The fight would be a simple thing too, simply sitting there and perhaps sending out her ashen limbs to deal more damage. Although to effectively strike the thing with Wave of Ember, she would have to get close enough for its rather long ranged scythe arms to hit her.

Maybe it was good. To have a change of pace after focusing so much on taking down a knight. Her resistances would grow and in time she might be able to take them down. Getting back up after ten minutes, she walked back to the edge, the beings of mist having lost interest already. "Hey, ghosties!" She shouted to the closest one, the thing turning at the sound, six eyes looking at her before it slowly twirled towards her. It would be a long night but Ilea was smiling, she had Meditation after all.

Two weeks passed, days spent luring and fighting single knights in the Tremor dungeon and nights spent on resistance training against the miststalkers. Occasionally she had to run and hide, other beasts or birds hunting for her near the small pool of mist she had chosen as her training ground. It was good, to be kept on guard and to not forget where she was.



The only reason the mist beings didn't kill her was the borders of their prison. One of her armors was a little dented by now but still wearable, the silver metal definitely more durable than the Niameer steel had been.

Ilea walked out of the dungeon, dropping the latest set of armor on the pile. *Number fifteen...*, She thought, checking her messages again.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 310]. For defeating an enemy seventy or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

...

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 278]. For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

Checking through all fifteen of them, she found that only two of them had been above level three hundred. Weirdly she hadn't noticed much of a difference, just realizing after the fact that they had been of a higher level. She assumed class evolutions might happen at that level but monsters were different after all. Perhaps they didn't evolve at all or it didn't make a big difference. They were thoughtless undead after all. Looking at the empty armors, she frowned. Maybe they were trapped souls as well, screaming for her not to kill them but their bodies wouldn't allow it, an old spell keeping them in place, keeping them fighting as she slowly killed them. One after the other.

She stopped that train of thought and shook her head. *Simple undead. Defending their old city from any intruder that might attack.* Perhaps she was going a little crazy from all the fighting. At least neither her fighting with the knights nor her training with the miststalkers had been fruitless.

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 233 – Five stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 234 – Five stat points awarded'***

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 235 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 236 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 227 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 228 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 229 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Meditation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2'*

...

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*

It was getting slow considering she had been fighting for her life for two weeks but she had expected as much. The leveling had slowed down even further as she got along the two hundreds. She remembered the first couple levels being quicker. At least she had somewhat predictable enemies here that could give her good experience. As soon as she was able to face the miststalkers she'd have even more outside. Enough to never run out really. Not that she had found an end to the knights in the dungeon so far. At least the first couple streets and the big square she had initially fought on were empty by now, none of the knights further in taking up the patrolling duties of the fallen.

Ilea had thirty five stat points and invested them just like before into Endurance, Intelligence and Wisdom, putting fifteen into Intelligence. She wanted at least as much Intelligence and Wisdom as she had Vitality. The amount of mana she had was directly correlated to how long and effectively she could fight and survive. Intelligence would add to her destructive potential, something she lacked terribly looking at how long it took to kill a single knight only forty levels above her own.

Of course she knew that if she lacked her ridiculous defense, mobility and self healing, she would need a balanced party to even remotely effectively hunt these kinds of enemies. In turn the experience would be split and she would probably need longer in the end. At least that had been the case early on, when she was still below level one hundred. It would be interesting to know how fast a group of four or five above two hundred people leveled when fighting enemies like the knights or even the Drop Saurians. So much could instantly go wrong though. Even with how predictable the knights here were that was only the case because she was alone. Ilea had no idea how they would act and fight if there were more than a single enemy.

What she knew was that she was improving again. Slow but steady. Sighing, she prepared to go back in when the elf cleared his throat. She had kind of forgotten about him in the past weeks because neither of them had any reason to talk. Ilea hadn't found anything new in the dungeon, focusing instead on the enemies to fight. To improve her own power. *Is he going to leave because I didn't bring anything?*

He beckoned her towards himself and smiled, "I did it." A booklet was before him, the smaller of the two she had brought him and the elf had written the contents on a fresh notebook to the side.

"Cracked the code?" Ilea asked as she stepped next to him, ignoring the danger it could pose. The second notebook had writing she could at least recognize, it was the same one as in the book on wines.

He nodded and pointed at the first paragraph, "Service record, guard captain Reyker. Sixth day of sol, 358. The king has ordered more festivities to take place next week, despite the rumors and tensions regarding the southern border. Queen Invalar has approved of the suggested scouting troops to be sent out, as well as the reinforcements sent to the border." He traced the lines until he hit the last bit of what he had deciphered so far. Looking at her, she didn't really know what to do so just smiled at him.

Realizing she was wearing a helmet, she instead gave him a thumbs up, "Good job. So you know how to decipher it now, just a matter of writing it down now?"

The elf sighed and sat back, "It's rather difficult. Although yes, I've cracked it, it's a brilliant code... not allowing for quick translation sadly. I needed a full two days and nights for just that part. Though to think it is a service record... already we know the name of the guard captain, political tensions perhaps? As well as the name of the queen."

*We? Well I guess he is doing this not just for himself if he's a historian.* Ilea thought and stepped back, "A good find then, more useful than a book on wines."

“You should read it, there is plenty of history in that one alone. Some of the brands weren’t made with nature magic, instead simply letting the grapes grow with... well nature alone. They believed the taste would be an improvement.” He explained, not quite managing to convince Ilea to pick up the book.

She stepped back towards the dungeon, another couple hours left until night would fall, “Well enjoy translating the rest then.”

“I did not tell you for the contents. I told you to confirm the worth of what you have brought me.” The elf said, making her stop and turn back towards him.

“Meaning you’re willing to share more information with me?” She asked, sitting down on a chair while looking at him.

The elf nodded, licking over his lips with his tongue, the sharp teeth showing behind. “Alright, let me see...,” She said and opened her notebook. “Any idea on third classes? How many tiers are there for skills? Are there ways to gain levels faster?”

“That is more than one question... You have gained several levels in a single month, that is as fast as possible. You are fighting strong opponents I suppose and do so alone. This is the reason most of my kind hunt alone. It is dangerous, certainly but the rewards are much higher. Perhaps more humans would reach our level of power if they followed this simple advice.”

*Our as in me and you or as in elves?* Ilea thought but nodded, “Well the risks aren’t worth it for most I suppose.”

He nodded and crossed his arms in front of his robe, some of the symbols reflecting the sunlight when he moved, “Humans prefer to be behind walls, prefer security for both their possessions as well as their lives.” He said but didn’t elaborate. Ilea assumed he meant that elves did not crave security in such a sense or simply that it was one of the reasons he considered humans weak or incapable of reaching certain heights. Ilea had considered similar thoughts previously so couldn’t fault him for that. She however completely

understood why someone wouldn't choose a lifestyle as her own. The differences between Earth and Elos certainly made it exciting to gain Strength here but without a healing ability or pain resistance at a high degree, she didn't know if she would fight the same way.

Her thoughts were interrupted when he continued talking, "As to third classes, I suppose there might be a way. Neither me nor those openly sharing information with me have anything confirmed. There are... stories, told among the young of our domain. Usually revolving around legendary warriors said to have more skills and classes than normally possible. Elves tend to boast." He explained and smiled, "I would not give too much credence to such grand tales. The same is true in regards to higher tier skills."

Ilea sighed, "So you don't know shit is what you're telling me?"

The elf hissed, "I'm not a bloody oracle...", He blurted out, his eyes going wide before he focused again, mumbling incoherent words to himself. "I am old for a human but I have not spent my life hunting and fighting as most of our kind do. Neither have I pursued the strength and power you so desperately seek... for what purpose dare I ask?"

Ilea shrugged in her chair, mentally noting down the line in regards to the bloody oracle. Perhaps she had overestimated this particular elf. The ones she had fought so far were in the mid two hundreds, maybe he wasn't much higher than that after all. *Did I get close to hurting him when we had our little bout?* Locking eyes with him, she answered, "I seek adventure, fights worthy of songs, views that take away my breath and the freedom to do how I please. To sit and talk with an elf without covering in fear or to feel obligated to destroy him as a service to my empire or species."

The elf looked at her, as if seeing her for the first time. A gray mist swirled in his eyes, "I will answer one more question human."

"Hey you didn't even sneer when you said human this time?" Ilea said and laughed, "Ah there it is again. What else? Well I always wondered about Dragons. They are a mystical being where I'm from, one only existing in

legend but usually an insanely powerful being of some kind. Dragonriders being the deciding forces in many fictional world.”

The elf looked at her, his eyes going wide before he started laughing. He nearly choked as he tried to stop himself, “What? People kind of avoid naming the beasts so I thought it’d be a valid question.” She said, sulking a little in her chair.

It took him another minute to calm down, summoning some kind of blue drink and taking a sip before he said anything, “Dragonriders... ridiculous. Ludicrous. Thoroughly laughable. I have not heard of anybody avoiding to say the name but with what I learned about human superstition, I suppose they wish to avoid bringing the terror down on themselves. None of those proudly proclaiming they would hunt the legendary beast have returned. Not even the legends themselves proclaim such an absurd victory. My only advice is to run... run and hide if you should ever come across such a monster. The only records, only tales possibly holding a kernel of truth speak of despair.”

# Chapter 246 Knights Knights Knights

## Chapter 246 Knights Knights Knights

*'Despair'* Ilea wrote down in her notebook, taking his words seriously. *First Dragonrider Ilea – The legendary warrior healer returns from her journeys.* She could already hear the proclamations of the newspaper boys. If newspapers have become a thing by the time she reached the apparently ludicrous goal. *To be fair, they are usually supposed to be game changers for whole empires.* “I get it. Don’t fuck with dragons.”

“Your little human body will combust even getting close to one of those creatures. The forces are something completely beyond your imagination.”

“I said I. Get. It.” Ilea said again, not letting the elf destroy her dream so easily. If her levels weren’t somehow capped at some point or her body vaporized, she didn’t see how it would be written off as unachievable. *I guess it kind of rules out that the elves are serving dragons... they wouldn’t go look to fight them if that were the case.* She considered.

She got up from her chair and made her way back into the dungeon, “You’re not the source of unlimited information I thought you’d be elf.” He only grumbled something in return, continuing his work. *Would a truly strong elf really hang around here, in front of a dungeon he could instead explore himself? I doubt whatever pain, fear or religious beliefs keep him from entering would stop someone with a mission.*



At least she could take her time to clear out the whole place on her own without an annoying second person stealing her experience. Another knight would fall before she left the cave to train with the stalkers of the mist.

*‘Tenth day of Nul, 358*

*The Soul Rippers have proven to be most dangerous, even to experienced veterans in the ranks of mercenaries as well as adventurers. Queen Invalar has ordered the dungeon entrance to be shut, to avoid further incursions from the beasts at night time.’*

Ilea read through the translated log book by the guard captain. *Kingsguard captain likely... can't imagine how powerful that one was...*, Around half of the log book was already translated, Elfie really doing a good job. Just over a month after he had cracked the code, the elf had already transcribed so much of the book. He was still frantically deciphering, telling her about the new discoveries he had made.

A looming war with an unknown nation, a previously rather unproblematic dungeon suddenly taken over by a beast described as Soul Ripper as well as the daily business of the guards. Assassins and spies apprehended, questioned and likely tortured. All overseen by the man called Reyker. He didn't seem to be quite a fan of the king but never missed an opportunity to praise a decision by the queen. Invalar was the name of the two and Ilea had a feeling there was more than just loyalty keeping the man in his position of guard captain.

She left the book and checked her armor again. The fourth one already and it was time to switch again. Dents and cuts lined both her arms as well as her torso, the knights usually not trying to hit her legs or head. Ilea changed to a fresh set and chucked the barely usable one to the collection of armors growing in the corner of the cathedral.

The elf hissed at the noise, “The metal. It bothers me. Are you even trying to find anything new in there?”

Ilea rolled her eyes and summoned her notebook, flipping to the page where her map of the dungeon was growing by the day, “Look... all the buildings with nothing in it are marked. The kingsguard is too strong for me so I’m not bothering with the palace yet.”

She closed the book after he had taken a look, calming down a little. She knew he was just struggling with deciphering the book still. Apparently the captain had changed the algorithms every month, giving Elfie a new riddle every fifty pages or so. That was at least how many days the months in Rhyvor had. *Be happy it isn’t thirty*. Even if he hissed at her sometimes, the elf hadn’t attacked her a single time. He did leave from time to time but then again Ilea sometimes stayed in the dungeon for over a week at a time, only going out to get rid of the armors.

She had killed another twenty four knights but the only reason she knew the number was because of the corpses stored in her necklace. Ilea tried not to think about it too much. Getting to the last usable set of armor, she was inclined to visit Goliath again. Fighting through the Tremor dungeon proved to be a long term project, the knights making it harder and harder for her to separate them and while she was getting more used to them, she was a long way to fighting two or even more at the same time. Still, she had gotten a couple levels and perhaps a new step to further power with the last month’s worth of fighting.

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 237 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 238 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 239 – Five stat points awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 240 – Five stat points awarded, 3rd tier skill point awarded’***

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 230 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 231 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 232 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 233 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

While her levels were steadily rising, the knights still providing good experience, her resistances against the Miststalkers were taking a long time to grow. Considering how long she had trained with Trian, Eve and Kyrian,

she was certainly prepared for the time consuming resistance training. Still, some of the nights Meditation was all that prevented her from just going back into the dungeon and fighting more knights instead of sitting near the sea of mist. She kept telling herself that in the long term it would be worth it.

Ilea was at level 240 already and in another thirty to fifty, she would get little experience from the normal knights. Either she had to face whatever lay deeper in the dungeon or she could simply kill a couple hundred Miststalkers. The latter would probably be easier considering the hard time she had with the knights. Her forty remaining stat points she distributed into Endurance, Intelligence and Wisdom. Twenty into her main damage stat and ten each into her resources. She was now at six hundred for both Vitality and Intelligence, the two skills she considered most important next to Wisdom.

Her skills enhanced a variety of things like Resilience which likely had something to do with how much damage an attack actually did to her or with Vitality directly. Her speed wasn't listed anywhere but a variety of skills enhanced it as well. Strength and Dexterity were a little weird. Even the base stat improving from an initial five to now 266 didn't make sense to her, especially coupled with the fact that several skills improved both properties additionally. Her corresponding strength wasn't exactly what one would expect. At first her strength and the physical impact of her fists had done the majority of the damage, later replaced by the mana intrusion damage of both Wave of Ember and Destruction.

If this were a game, there was no reason for her not to simply invest into Intelligence and Wisdom alone. With her ashen limbs and Wave of Ember it would likely result in the highest and longest available damage. The problem was that perhaps a monster would arise with a weakness to physical damage and near complete immunity to mana intrusion. The knights she was fighting were resistant against physical damage, at least the blunt type Ilea was dishing out. Their bodies were already dead and even if she managed to break a bone or rupture muscle, the magic keeping them animated would simply ignore it. Having seen the bodies afterwards she was sure of this.

They required all her Dexterity, making her able to dodge and weave through attacks, her Strength allowing her to deflect their attacks, to stand against their kicks and to deliver punches that would damage them if they were alive. Her resource stats kept her going, Wisdom being the most important one of them. Vitality was usually left somewhat untouched, quickly healed back to the max but considering the ludicrous damage all of the monsters here dealt, she had to have enough for a couple hard and direct hits at least.

Perhaps increasing her Strength and Dexterity would be beneficial again in the future but for now she focused on her magical damage as well as how long she could fight. Next to the stats and more importantly, she had received another skill point to advance one of her Azarinth First Hunter skills to the third tier. With how big of a change the third tier of Ash and Ember Manipulation had brought, she hoped for something good.

*‘3<sup>rd</sup> tier skill points available [Azarinth First Hunter]: 1’*

*‘Skills available for third tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:’*

- Destruction*
- Hunter Recovery*
- Azarinth Perception*
- Azarinth Fighting*

*I said I’d take Recovery first...,* Ilea remembered, sitting down on a chair and thinking about it. She had enough knights in there to last her a while at least. Enough probably to reach two sixty at a reasonable pace, maybe a couple months. Increasing her healing capabilities didn’t seem to help that goal for now. Perhaps with the miststalkers but her mana drained as well while fighting against them. *Fuck it... Fighting or Destruction.*

Summoning a coin, she flipped it in the air. *Heads for Fighting. Tails Destruction.* She caught it and opened her palm. *Destruction it is.* Anything

that would increase her damage somewhat would bring a big improvement to how quickly she could reach the next third tier skill. Depending on how many knights were left she might even chose Azarinth Fighting the next time instead of her healing skill.

*‘ding’ ‘Destruction advances to 3<sup>rd</sup> tier’*

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

*Send a destructive pulse of mana into your enemy with every punch or kick. Your Intelligence stat enhances the damage potential.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> stage: The amount of mana used per strike can be regulated with a maximum of 20 mana per strike.*

*3<sup>rd</sup> stage: Due to the healing nature of Destruction it partially ignores protection against Mana intrusion.*

*Category: Healing*

Ilea read through the newly added third tier before a big grin spread on her face. *Fucking worth it.* Well she didn't know exactly how much this would change her damage output but against the knights she was sure it would be significant. A big chunk of the magic from both Wave of Ember and Destruction simply rebounded against the knights of the rose, their armor either enchanted or something else preventing her skills from being fully effective.

Before she wanted to continue, she had thirty nine sets of rose knight armor to deliver to Goliath. As well as plenty of armors to be repaired or completely remade. Still, it was hard for her not to go back in immediately and test out how long she'd need for a single knight. Even a ten percent improvement would shave off over thirty minutes per fight at least.

The elf was looking at her, “What?” She asked and he just hissed again.

“Perhaps you could check one of the other dungeons on your map. Find some new things there. The book on wines is translated and it is... difficult to keep working on deciphering this one.”

*A plea? Really?* “You’re bored.”

“If you want to call it that.”

Ilea smiled under her helmet and walked to the damaged armors, “I’ll see what I can do.”

It would take her a couple trips to get all the armors to Goliath but it was soon night and she’d be able to travel through the terrain quickly, ignoring the valleys and rushing down towards Hallowfort. Stepping towards the platform at the end of the cathedral, she spoke, “Your fire cube thing?”

The elf simply summoned the item and threw it her way, Ilea looking it over before pushing some mana into the ten centimeter cube. A swath of flame burned into her helmet, singeing her eyebrows within. The elf just looked at her and shook his head when she summoned a bunch of wood, spacing it out enough to allow for all the dead knights. It took her a while but ultimately, she had a pyre going with all of the corpses she had collected over the past month. She waited until the fire had consumed them all.

The first trip went without problems, Ilea rushing over the dark landscape, keeping her orientation through the valleys she saw in the distance, the cracks in the earth already filled with mist. Whatever creatures had occupied them now pushed aside by the Miststalkers. She had to travel a short distance through their territory but near the Penumra dungeon the mist already dissipated, allowing her to quickly make her way towards the small town.

Coming out into the cave after navigating through the darkness, she spread her wings and jumped down towards the sea, finding it the quicker way to the blacksmith than walking through the streets and down the stairs. Ilea hung in the air, stopping her momentum as she looked over the endless mass of water below. The crystals shining into the underground cave illuminated not water but mist, like a blanket covering what lay beneath.

Pillars of stone covered in crystals rising interspersed as they gave the abyss a newfound eerie feeling.

Knowing there was water below the mist didn't make it much better. Ilea wasn't sure how the mist had gotten down here but it certainly was a sight to behold. Advancing in speed again, she quickly reached the side of the massive statue, finding the spot where Goliath had destroyed the wall and blinking inside. No enchantment stopped her from entering and the smith didn't react, hammering on something on one of the anvils. "Hey. I'll be dumping some things here. Couple trips for everything."

The smith didn't interrupt his swings and replied, "Welcome back young human. Do as you please."

Ilea dumped nine armors and blinked out again. There were thirty nine from the knights she had killed and four damaged ones from herself. Nine per trip meant five total trips. The next hours were spent flying. On six of the trips she had to hide from a swarm of leathery birds, the Famine Crows circled the territory but were gone again when she sped towards Penumra for the last time tonight.

"There you go." She said, another five armors appearing on the growing stack that by now filled nearly half the forge. Goliath had sparkling eyes, having finished the helmet it was working on.

It moved towards the armor and touched one of the pieces, "How many do you wish to have this time?"

Ilea summoned the armor mold and placed it in the middle of the room, "Nine sets, the rest you can keep."

"I am in your debt then, huntress." It said as the armors vanished. It really did seem like once people hit the two hundreds, storage items became more common. Either that or Ilea just happened to run into those kinds of people all the time.

She looked at the smith and nodded, "Well if you have anything more sturdy than the Stonehammer steel I'd love to trade it. Another question,



you've been around for a while right? I was wondering if I could bring an elf here, he calls himself a historian and I thought he might be interested in this little town."

The smith looked at her for a while and then spoke, "I do not have what you desire, not at the moment. You may bring me any armor or ingots and I may reforge it for you. In regards to the elf, I of course welcome the opportunity to share stories with one so rare to find here. I doubt many in the town above would be against such a visitor. I however suggest you discuss it with the dwarf at least."

Ilea nodded and walked towards the exit, "I'll do that. How long do you need?"

"Six hours. May I multiply the mold? Then I might be done earlier."

She smiled and clapped her hands, the idea hadn't come to her earlier. Without the mold it would likely take a smith days if not longer to finish a single set for her. Perhaps in the future Goliath could make her ten sets in the span of a couple hours, "Sure, however many you think makes sense. I doubt I will need more than ten sets made simultaneously though. I'll look for other metal as well, maybe something comes up."

Waving at the happy smith who quickly got to work, she made her way up the stairs, to Terok's house with quite a lot of work for him as well as some questions. She had to optimize this as well, maybe ordering armors beforehand. Still, she'd simply go back and fight more knights while the dwarf enchanted everything. Her set was fresh and would hold at least a couple days if she didn't do a stupid mistake.

# Chapter 247 Wingwoman

## Chapter 247 Wingwoman

Knocking on the door instead of appearing inside, Ilea watched the dwarf slowly get up from his bed. He winced as he limped to the door and opened it. A smile spread on his face when he saw her, gesturing for her to enter, “Welcome back warrior... already new things to enchant?”

“Yes, let me have a look at that.” Ilea replied and touched his shoulder, healing mana flowing into him and taking care of the damage. Terok didn’t stop her as soon as he realized what was happening, the broken ribs and the cut on his leg healing up quickly. “Anything to do with that?” She asked, looking at the war machine that had a plethora of new attachments, both in the arms as well as the legs. She saw that some of the pieces were Niameer steel but couldn’t discern their uses.

The dwarf touched his chest with a big grin, “Already forgot you were a healer as well.” He said and carefully sat down on a chair in the small kitchen, “Yea. The pieces were great but I need to train a little longer to get used to it. Mobility and speed have increased quite a bit though.”

“What about the dents?” She asked, referring to the metal plating that was supposed to protect him inside of it.

He grabbed two bottles of ale and handed one to her, “Direct hits. Not much I can do there and I can’t afford most of the smiths. Not while I don’t do jobs.”

“Goliath owes me something still and I just got back a bunch of armor sets. Maybe he can make you the plating out of stonehammer steel. Holds up somewhat well. I wouldn’t suggest direct hits though. Went through four sets in a month.” Ilea said, chuckling at the ridiculous use of armors.

The dwarf took a sip of his ale and looked at her, “What did I do to deserve this? First you heal me for free and now you suggest something as expensive as stonehammer steel...,”

Ilea shrugged and leaned back, her helmet vanishing before she took a sip, “You were in the right place at the right time. And you weren’t an absolute dick.”

The dwarf laughed at that and shook his head, “Well I guess sometimes things are allowed to go right in life.” He said and laughed, lifting his bottle before drinking.

“You can go down and show him the changes you did, he wanted to see it anyway. He should be done with the first armor in an hour or two.” Ilea suggested but he frowned at that.

“Look, I’d love to meet the smith but as I said I can’t enter.”

“It’s just a slight curse and health drain. I’ll heal you through it and soon you’ll get a resistance to it. Hopefully enough to not puke and die immediately.” She laughed and he nodded determined.

“What’s your story? You come here, a human I think? To the north where I’ve seen what... two or three of your kind in my entire life? You travel alone, heal random strangers and walk into a smith’s forge infamous for being deadly.” Terok asked and Ilea told him about some of her journey. There was time enough to spare and she was waiting for new armor anyway.

Six empty bottles were on the table as the dwarf laughed, “You didn’t even know about the storms? Gods... and you survived this far. No wonder you’re so casual about sharing your healing as well as valuables. And I thought I was taking risks coming here...,”

Ilea smiled. She could heal herself, could feel no pain if she wanted to and had a higher resistance to damage than most people she had met so far. If anything she should be taking even higher risks. “I was seeking a challenge and an adventure... without annoying politics and wars. Somewhere far off. This seemed like a good place to start.”

Terok looked at her and shook his head, “There are politics here too, just at a smaller scale. At least here in Hallowfort. Still I agree... compared to the big cities in the south it is nothing. We all know what it means to survive, what it means to live in this ruthless environment. My relatives would have never even thought about coming here.”

Ilea finished her ale, “And yet you are here. Why?”

He chuckled and went to grab another two bottles, “It’s not a story quite as exciting as yours. Perhaps, in some twisted way... we are here for similar reasons. I grew up in a big dwarven city... in the Naraza mountain chain not too far from the human plains. My machines never made the cut, too small they said, too intricate. I didn’t get the financial support needed or an apprenticeship with one of the big guilds.”

“So you went north to get stronger?” Ilea asked and opened the bottle.

Terok smiled, “Not quite. War machines need metal, rare and expensive ones at that. I hoped that in the unclaimed lands in the north more veins would lay untouched. I was right of course but it didn’t come without dangers. The rig I have now has exactly zero parts remaining from what I initially started with. I think from the expedition I joined only two dwarves survived the first month, both returning after we had been saved by a group of scavengers.”

“Scavengers that I asked to join, the dark one you’ve met one of them. Since then I explore the north but for every discovery I make I nearly die

five times and my rig gets damaged every single time.” He sighed and then laughed, “I don’t have to tell you that. Four sets of armor? And you’re already back for more. To think you actually fight and kill the things here.”

“You’re close to two hundred as well... I think there might be some things you could fight as well. Especially with a capable group.”

He waved her off, “Few of the beasts here roam alone, most dungeons teeming with them. Even the rare ones below level two hundred can rip you to shreds in a mere moment of lapsing concentration. It’s a death trap, were it not for the ruins and dungeons cluttering it all. Even the city under this very town holds enough riches to make you a noble in any dwarven city to the south.”

“So you’re looking for the big checkpot and then you’re back south?” Ilea asked.

Terok waved his bottle and looked at her for a while with a thoughtful expression, “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m looking for Ilea. I can’t deny that I like the untouched land here... the ferocity of it all. To walk tunnels and halls no living being has explored in hundreds or thousands of years. The chance at riches only adds to it. Maybe if my rig improves I’ll be able to fight some of the things lurking below again. Going back though? I’m not sure.”

“I understand. Well maybe the steel I’ll gift you will help with that.” She said and smiled, “The dungeon below? What can you tell me about it?”

He smiled brightly, either at the question or the fact that she had just gifted him valuable steel, “I’m sure it will. Getting to two hundred has proven difficult with scavenging alone. The dungeon... it’s called the Descent. Plenty of routes lead down, each more treacherous than the next but compared to a lot of other dungeons in the area, like Penumra the one with the roots you must have passed, the Descent has been traversed before. It is a city, built around a dungeon that leads further down into the earth than anything I’ve seen before and trust me, dwarves like to dig deep.”

Ilea grunted at the stereotype, “The city is part of the dungeon?”

“It is... perhaps one day long past it wasn't but monsters prowl the streets and tunnels. A lot of it is submerged, the underground sea leaking into the lower levels. Groups of scavengers regularly secure some of the better routes but they often get destroyed or taken over by a wild beast. The walls are brittle, a single crack can lead to whole sections flooded in a matter of days.”

“The city is just the way there though. Most of it has been picked clean by the residents of this town or the ones coming before. The true treasure lays beyond. Some of the murals, statues and rare surviving documents written in Standard apparently talk of the Descent as the endless dungeon leading deep into an endless darkness, littered with valuable metal, machines and beasts outside your wildest imaginations. Some few care a lot about the history of the place but just like the more adventurous as well as stronger members of the town, they reside in the dungeon most of the time. Some don't come back out for years.” He explained, Ilea growing more and more intrigued by the concept.

“Have you been down there?” She asked.

He nodded, “Some of the higher levels. There are trees there... green and lush, as well as wild animals completely docile. A lot of the meat you can get here comes from there. I don't think we'd be able to sustain such a town if we didn't have that dungeon. I only explored parts of the first three layers, each held a distinct climate and monsters I had never seen before. They're strong too, too much for me or any of the teams I've had to handle.”

Ilea nodded, “Sounds like something I'd like to check out. It also seems like a better place to build a town than up here...”

The dwarf laughed at that, “Agreed. It's much safer here though. There are camps down there but the mechanical gateways, doors and magical barriers the city had put in place between the layers are broken. Beasts capable of slaughtering this whole town can roam up as far as even the city itself. The ones remaining down there are either more capable or just a little more crazy than me.”

“Why don’t the monsters come up here too? If they roam as far as the city below then why not up to Hallowfort?”

The dwarf looked at her a little confused, “They dislike the mana of course. It’s much more dense down there, more so the further you go. You’re human right? Didn’t you notice anything different when coming north? You should technically have difficulties breathing.”

Ilea shook her head, “I noticed it once when standing atop a mountain outside. Neither in the dungeons nor here though.”

“Interesting. Well you are above two hundred. Plus you probably have a resistance of some sort. Monsters born in dungeons rarely roam outside. Well it depends entirely on the beast but usually they like it inside or dislike it outside. Never wondered why the beasts here in the north never came to destroy your plains? Or our cities in the mountains?” The dwarf asked.

Ilea took a sip of ale, “I just thought it was too far away. Animals don’t like it in certain parts of the world. They need food and a climate according to their preferences...”

“As well as mana.” She added, understanding it now. Perhaps that was also why elves didn’t like to enter dungeons. The higher density was something they disliked. Monsters were just the opposite she supposed, disliking the less dense mana.

Terok nodded, “Exactly. Plus right now I don’t have the coin to pay for a safe route down. Not worth it for me either. Maybe as soon as I get used to my advanced rig now but we’ll see where it will take me. There’s plenty to gain at the surface as well.”

“Well I’ll check it out sooner or later. First want to finish my current location.”

“Any chance of sharing that one with me?” Terok asked with a smile.

Ilea grinned, “Nah... maybe once I’ve stripped it of anything useful for me. For now you’ll stay content with my gift of steel.”

“Fair enough.”

They remained quiet for a while before Ilea spoke up again, “Any idea how people react to elves here?”

Terok raised his eyebrows and grunted, “Don’t think many have a grudge like you humans. Rarely travel north and they care little about the dwarves in the mountains. Why do you ask?”

Ilea smiled and finished her ale, “No reason in particular.” She lied, seeing no necessity to share the elf’s existence with him. She had no idea if she would tell him about Hallowfort and the city below at all but maybe once she’d explored a part of the dungeon. She owed nothing to either but until she could trust the elf completely she wouldn’t let him come close to the smith and dwarf. Their work being the main reason she could continue her adventuring with worthy gear.

Getting up, she summoned her helmet again, her blue eyes looking at the dwarf, “Come now. We’ll talk to Goliath and you can start your enchanting.”

He nodded and went into his machine, the thing closing with a hiss before its eyes started glowing lightly. It started moving a moment later with much more grace than before. “The metal really made that much of a difference?”

Terok laughed, his voice coming from the middle of the machine, “You have no idea. It’s like day and night.” She grunted and opened the door, the dwarf following before they walked down to Goliath’s forge.

Checking if she could heal the dwarf through his machine, she found it possible while a little subdued. “Do you have mana intrusion enchantments?”

“Yes but healing should get through mostly unhindered.” The answer came.

*Would you listen to that? Might want to test Destruction on my dwarven friend...* She smiled and started healing him, of course not abusing him as a testing dummy. She had plenty of undead for that after all. He was a little



apprehensive as she led him further in, the curse and health drain taking effect before the exoskeleton opened up, Terok puking on the ground while she healed him. “Come on, you’ll get used to it.”

He looked sick and pale but Ilea could tell he was fine through her healing magic. His health wasn’t falling thanks to her healing and the curse would soon get better as well. Getting a resistance skill wasn’t that difficult with a healer after all. “You’ll feel better in half an hour or so.”

“Half an hour... oh fucking hell.” He cursed but didn’t object, either because he would get a skill out of it or because he really did want to meet the smith.

“Truly... impressive work. I will finish the plating as the Ash hunter has requested. It would be a shame to leave such ingenuity trapped in an unsafe casing.” Goliath said, Ilea still holding on to Terok as she healed the damage done to him. Without a health drain resistance and apparently less health than what six hundred Vitality provided, she definitely needed to be there.

The dwarf had demonstrated some of the smaller tools, weapons and intricate movements he could now accomplish with the righe was wearing but she didn’t really understand the difference between what a conventional exoskeleton could do and his. The smith didn’t even ask for payment regarding the plating, her provision of the metal alone was enough coupled with Terok showing off the machine. Ilea had already stored the four armors already done, ready to be enchanted.

“Great, then we’re settled here.” She said as the dwarf thanked Goliath.

He smiled at her and nodded, “Sure. I’ll get right to enchanting. How will I get the remaining armors?”

The smith focused on him and spoke, “I will have someone bring them to you.”

Terok agreed and went back to his house with Ilea, the latter dropping the four finished armors near his work bench before she walked to the door, “I’ll get everything tomorrow. Think you’re done by then?”

He laughed and cracked open another bottle of ale, “For you, I’ll be done in the morning. Thank you again... truly!” Lifting his bottle towards her.

Ilea smiled under her helmet and nodded once, blinking out before she rushed off the side of the massive statue, her wings spreading to avoid walking through half the town. She had a new third tier ability to test and hopefully it would increase her kill speed on the knights a little. The dungeon below Hallowfort sounded very interesting but as long as she could still reasonably grow in Tremor, she would focus on that. At least for a while. The knights were around level two sixty to three twenty, most of them below three hundred.

Rushing back through the night, she checked for flying monsters when she glimpsed a dark vanishing presence in her sphere. Flying low enough to nearly touch the ground, she stopped as fast as she could but whatever it had been, the being had vanished already. *At least I wasn’t torn to shreds...* She thought and continued, a little more apprehensive of her surroundings. Her eyes hadn’t told her a thing about the monster her sphere had picked up. *Maybe the Sphere would be a good skill too for a third tier... so much to learn.*

The rest of the way was fine, a couple crows rushing towards her in the last stretch but they were far enough away to provide no danger. Somehow the beasts didn’t like going down into caves or even crevices, as much she had learned already. The miststalkers’ humming didn’t paralyze her anymore, allowing Ilea to use the upper parts of the cracks as hiding spots whenever she traveled through the night or trained with the beings in the first place.

# Chapter 248 Ilea Spears

## Chapter 248 Ilea Spears

Black wings slowly disintegrated as Ilea landed in the cathedral. “Hey, guess who’s favorite human is back?”

The elf looked at her for a whole three seconds before focusing back on his book. “Your favorite human.” She added and walked to the dungeon entrance, summoning her notebook as her ashen limbs pushed open the heavy double doors.

The gate closed behind her, a notification popping up in her mind regarding the Tremor dungeon as she flipped to the map she had started. Plenty of buildings were on it already, few holding anything more interesting than dust and old furniture. Plenty of rotting and dusty items indicated the people had fled the city, somewhat orderly at least as it wasn’t littered by skeletons. Still, she had hoped to find a little more things, especially since she theorized the top part of the city had been the wealthier one. Seeing how the log book spoke of a king and queen she assumed the dilapidated mansions had been owned by the aristocracy.

Several sections of the district were already marked as cleared. From time to time she did encounter a knight patrolling into what she had considered safe territory but it was rare. Soon she would be at the height of the palace, the buildings spreading over the broad slope on each side, the massive monument to power remaining in its middle. Today she would take care of the last knight she had marked near one of the bigger cathedrals. She had

made it a habit to search areas only once no enemies remained, able to fully focus her skills on searching instead of expecting an ambush of sorts.

The density of undead patrols were unclear to her, some areas holding groups of up to four, others lacking even single knights. Her tactics didn't change. Lure a single knight with ashen projectiles or tendrils until she would fight them on the big square in the noble district. There was ample space, nothing to annoy them and the sunlight would remain there far longer than further in. Rushing through the buildings, she soon reached a roof from which she could see the cathedral in question. Definitely the building that stood out the most in the area.

Looking left, she saw the palace in the distance. A place she planned to avoid for now. Checking her map one last time, she closed the notebook and stored it. Ilea jumped down from the roof and walked towards the big building, knowing a single knight remained inside, the two previously patrolling around the building had already been taken care of.

The door creaked open, Ilea waving at the knight who noticed her immediately. Her casual demeanor didn't seem to either imitate nor irritate the warrior as he brandished his sword, shield at the ready. She waited at the door as he started to run, quickly choosing a side street before she rushed off. The knight was on her tail, his steel boots resounding on the dry and cobbled stone. Fifteen minutes the two would run through the dead city, Ilea avoiding certain areas she knew to be unsafe still, not cleared out because the cathedral seemed more enticing at the moment.

Looking back, the knight was on her tail. Speed unwavering, a killing machine ready for an endless hunt. It didn't scare her anymore. They were predictable and with her skills she could easily escape. Ilea could however imagine how most more conventional adventurers would treat such an enemy. Now everybody was as fast or mobile in a party as she was, perhaps the rogue and one of the mages but otherwise they would have to face the thing down. Even her, with all the defenses, all her skills, healing and Vitality rather avoided blinking away when it did attack. If it had any ability in discerning a healer in a group and didn't blindly focus on a tank class with a big shield, she could see it being quite a difficult undertaking. Even fighting a single one of them.

Finally reaching the square, she checked if not a stray knight somehow made it there but it was empty. The early sunlight seeped through the small opening high above as Ilea turned and skidded to a stop, met a single second later with a sword rushing past her dodging form. The air howled as it was pushed apart by the strong and true strike, Ilea taking a step past the knight's arm and shield before her left fist hit. Destruction activated and her mana seeped into the undead, no visible mana being deflected.

A big smile on her face, Ilea blinked away and prepared for the next attack, meditation already active. Her perception of mana was incredibly limited considering her lack of a related skill but she had previously felt how their armor blocked her intrusion. Now, it had felt like she was hitting a plain old Drake. The new third tier didn't say it ignored mana intrusion measures completely so she assumed at least a part of the attack was deflected but it definitely made a difference. Now it was simply a matter of following the steps of a dance she had damn near perfected weeks ago.

A battle of attrition, the skill of the warriors matching in their respective fields as they focused solely on destroying one another. Sword scratching against steel, fist hitting armor, the two entranced as each movement flowed into the next, the warrior in black appearing thirty meters away quickly followed by the running swordsman, sunlight reflected off his silver shell. A hunt that continued for hours, ending in neither spectacle nor grand finale.

Sweat dropped from her brow, rolling past her eyes and down her cheek. She prepared for the next attack that didn't come, recovering her lost resources as the knight broke down, as if its strings were cut. Steel shattered on the stone floor, sword and shield falling to his side, each clattering a couple times before silence returned to the square. Ilea sunk to one knee, her veil vanishing from around her armor, helmet stored in her necklace. Silver steel reflected the light on the new scratches and cuts she had sustained, most used simply to deflect his blade or shield, to allow an angle just favorable for an attack to land.

Three of the cuts were a little deeper, feints she had failed to predict.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 318] – For defeating an enemy seventy or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.***

*Three eighteen...*, Just a little bit faster than most of them were, just a little more cunning. Even with them being undead, unfeeling and brain dead, still they had retained some individuality. It was what kept her on her toes, in addition to the fact that a single true strike could seriously injure her. The fight had taken shy of three hours, a massive improvement. More than she had dreamed for an enemy at that level.

***‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 234 – 5 stat points awarded’***

A fitting reward. The last two knights had not given her a level but she hadn't expected another one from this one. *Because he was over three hundred.* She assumed, cracking her neck before she started unhooking his armor, storing each piece in her necklace before the corpse itself lay before her. Wearing an old and rotting garb, any symbols, stitching or colors long gone with time. He had been strong once, muscles now cold but prominent as they pushed through his clothing. A scar showed on his neck, beheaded by a beast or perhaps executed for one reason or the other. To become a knight of this kingdom, now falling to an invader so long after his true death.

His eyes were black, as was his hair. She crouched down and closed his eyelids before storing the corpse in her necklace, the corpse to be burned at a later time. Perhaps Indra would like the corpse but it felt wrong to her. Both to carry around so many bodies but also to hold on to them or gift them to another necromancer. Whatever worth it held, she would make sure nobody would use their body again. Even if they didn't care anymore.

To her they each held potential to grow, to level up and to get more experienced with her skills. Each a challenge to overcome, a worthy opponent to face and defeat. Worthy of at least being burnt after their death. The cathedral held nothing but dust, a whole library of books once holding more knowledge than a human could learn in a lifetime. None of the

enchancements had held through the ages, empty mana crystals found in compartments of the likely once expensive shelves.

The day continued, Ilea facing two more knights before night fell. Her training continued out in the wild lands of the north, again looking for the smallest pool of mist where the stalkers twirling in its midst quickly focused on her and started draining both her life and mana. Ilea meditated with eyes open, taking in the movements in the sky, on the land far away. The rare hunters in this barren place, interspersed by the dancing forms of an uncountable army of miststalkers.

A quick meeting with Terok the next morning supplied her with a new set of nine finished armors, the dwarf stumbling towards his bed once he had handed over the finished products. Five of the armor sets she placed in the cathedral, in another corner of the hall than the one with old sets taken off the dead knights. The elf didn't deign to give her any attention, Ilea stepping back into the dungeon. After a night of careful meditation, health drain and recovery, she was itching for another battle. She didn't check her status, excited simply to meet the next foe in battle. The next barrier as she honed her skills, incorporating whatever new abilities she gained on the road.

Ilea slept every third day, for a couple hours at most. She had chosen one of the houses overlooking her fighting square as her new home, placing her bed inside as well as a shelf from the cathedral that still looked somewhat in shape. It was made of stone, having allowed for it to mostly weather through the ages. Books she had from back in Salia and the selection she had taken from her home adorned it. The lack of windows didn't bother her, the climate cold and mostly dry. Nothing that disturbed her resistant body, even the cold winds near Ravenhall irrelevant to her.

The roof was used to eat a meal every other day, Keyla's cooking a highlight whenever it caressed her very soul, whenever the suns started rising and bathed at least a part of the sprawling city in light. Before she

would go out again to fight, an enemy long forgotten, occupying a city the intelligent races of this world did not know existed. For the sole goal of her enjoyment, with the added benefit of increasing her personal power. Ever so slightly.

Days turned into weeks and weeks into months. A life Ilea had never thought possible, sustainable or even enjoyable. Yet here she was, living a solitary life of battle and meditation. Each passing week made her more calm, more sure of every step she took. Partially because she gained more and more stat points, levels in her classes promising better skills and eventual evolutions but mostly because she felt truly free, her whole being dedicated to every strike, every blink and dodge. The only deadline she had were her armors, every strike scratching into it, every messed up dodge or unseen feint creating another dent she could not repair on her own.

She could of course fight in clothes only, or even simply shrouded in ash. There was nobody to see after all, not that it would matter in a battle for life or death. Her skin was strong, her bones durable but not quite enough to shrug off the knights' blades. Ilea would survive a fight, likely even win but the mana she would have to invest into healing as well as fleeing when her injuries inhibited her too much would stack up, would slow her down so much compared to the benefit of armor. Perhaps one day, when she had reached suitable strength, the added weight and metal shell of crafted gear became unnecessary but it proved such a benefit she questioned the reality of such a dream. A dream not to fight nakedly but to be able to block a sword with her skin alone, her natural defenses outclassing what her enemies could produce to harm her or those she cared about.

She had no desire to hear any snarky comments from the elf about the armors she ripped off each knight she defeated, the process lengthy but to her like a gesture of gratitude. For the fight they had given her, the experience she had taken. For the duty they had served long after it had ceased to be a necessity. As if to free their souls from the shell that kept them trapped in this cursed dungeon, deep within the northern lands and their treacherous mountains. Whenever ten or twenty of the knights had been killed, Ilea would build a pyre, turning them into ash that would find its way into the earth. The elf had been so gracious as to lend his fire cube



to her indefinitely, mentioning that he will be exploring on his own for a while, still working on deciphering the log book but too bored to remain in the cathedral at all times.

While many questions remained unanswered or unasked, Ilea felt no rush to please the elf or squeeze every last bit of information out of him. She was here for her own sake after all. He would be back, knowing she would progress. If he survived that is. Ilea had a feeling he wasn't quite as powerful as she would've expected from an older elf. When she had reached her last set of suitable armor, three months had passed, give or take a week or two. The only indication to the time she spent there were the number of knights she killed, writing everything down in her notebook.

Sitting atop her roof, she looked over the city that has become as close to home as any place she had lived in through her life. These months more intense and vivid than any period of time she had experienced so far, barring perhaps her adventures in the first Taleen dungeon or the initial stage of discovery and survival in the forest around the Azarinth temple. A place that still meant a lot to her, having equipped her with the tools to survive in this ruthless land. It might have been drab to someone else, to stay in a medieval looking city all this time but lacking any residents other than the silent undead, the place felt more serene to her.

As if the stones making up the once occupied buildings, each and every one having a purpose in a bustling society were now reduced to something more natural, as if the city itself was as much part of the environment as the mists and storms above and the black abyss lurking below. Urban perhaps but wild, retaken bit by bit by time. The only place she knew held life was the palace still piercing high into the distant horizon. Secrets buried underneath, hidden behind locked doors and guarded by insurmountable warriors that even after all this time would shred her like a Drake would shred a wild deer running in the woods near Karth.

Her map had grown, the area around the palace still empty but in some areas she had gone deeper still, most of the city lying higher than the palace cleaned out and marked as safe. She smiled as her notebook was lifted by ash, the element swirling around the book while keeping it steady and freeing her hand. A thought, not even that. It was as if alive, not even a thought, her explicit will needed to make it appear. The black mist not created or controlled by her but a steady companion, by her side, thoughts and emotions enough for it to respond.

Ilea had reached level 240 in her second class, the third tier skill point spent on Ash Creation. Her efficiency in fighting the knights had remained similar, Wave of Ember still unable to send most of its destructive mana into the protected enemies. Yet the skill had changed. She had become more confident, the limbs of ash moving around shields and avoiding strikes of swords as if sand swirling around fingers running running through. More of her attacks hit and less of the enemy strikes landed, deflected by an emerging part of her Veil or quickly forming ash dense enough to soften the glancing blows just enough to protect her armor from heavier damage.

The skill was the main reason she had been able to stay for so long. Eight of her nine armors damaged beyond usability in the weeks before she had gotten its third tier. Checking through the notifications before preparing to leave, she quickly double checked the defeated undead knights.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 264]’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 281]’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 259]’*

145, she wrote in her notebook. Each and every single one of them a fight worthy of mention, the memories blurring together like a sea of blades and punches.

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 241 – 5 stat points awarded'*

...

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 255 – 5 stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 235 – 5 stat points awarded'*

...

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 248 – 5 stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Wave of Ember reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1'*

*'Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 1*

*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.*

*3rd stage: You have proven your dedication. Ash swirls to aid and destroy*

*at your whims.*

*Category: Ashen Magic'*

# Chapter 249 The Need for Steel

## Chapter 249 The Need for Steel

Training with the miststalkers had progressed as well but not to the extent Ilea had hoped for. It would remain a strict resistance and meditation training for now, though the latter skill didn't manage to level even once since the last time.

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

...

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

...

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

It wasn't that the training wasn't effective, her skills were rising after all but Ilea still couldn't engage them in direct combat. Even with her new third tier Ash Creation. Of course she could damage the spirit like beings with Wave of Ember and Reversed Reconstruction from a distance but in the end she still lost out in damage, even when there were only two or three of

them. Directly fighting inside the mist was even worse, the added dodging and possible hits from their corporeal blades reduced her resources even more and while Destruction added damage, it wasn't enough to turn the tides.

Ilea gained a hundred and forty five stat points from her leveling, five additional still remaining from a previous advancement. Seeing how her miststalker endeavor was going, she decided to invest twenty five points into Endurance and the rest into Wisdom. Soon she might start with Vitality and Intelligence again, as well as perhaps pushing her lowest two stats a little to keep her physical power at a somewhat even level. Checking her stat sheet, she was definitely content with her idea to come north. More so because of the interesting fights she had but the improvements cemented her decision.

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0***

***Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 255***

- Active: Destruction – 3rd lvl 2***
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 5***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 6***
- 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 15***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 2nd lvl 20***

***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 248***

- *Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 3*
- *Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 1*
- *Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20*

### ***General Skills:***

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 15*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*

- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 11*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 2nd lvl 1*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 600***

***Endurance: 400***

***Strength 266***

***Dexterity 350***

***Intelligence 600***

***Wisdom 575***

***Health: 6000/6000***

***Stamina: 3982/4000***

***Mana: 5698/5750***

*One forty five... one stat point for each.* She remembered a time when a single challenging enemy brought several levels. With all her skills now, every single stat point would bring a big improvement on its own at least. She was a little disappointed her main class hadn't gotten an evolution at two fifty and by now she wasn't expecting anything in her second class either. It didn't bother her majorly, she was glad to be alone in this dungeon, to be able to experience it all. The leveling reason enough to justify such a solitary and dangerous lifestyle.



Perhaps it would be difficult to explain to someone that she didn't do it mainly for the sake of getting stronger. Ilea knew of course that with her personal power at this stage, she hardly needed to justify anything. To anyone. The only reason she was disappointed in the lack of fast advancement was the fact that she really wanted to explore the palace more, its working enchantments more and more becoming an enigma, a lure drawing her in. The only thing alive in this whole place and there had to be a reason for it. Still, without a major power up, there was no way for her to face even a single kingsguard. It might be akin to facing a Praetorian and she definitely wasn't ready for that yet.

It would be interesting to try of course, now with her third tier in Destruction, perhaps she could damage them a little more efficiently compared to the impregnable shield they had sported the two times she had faced them. At this level, she couldn't be as careless anymore. Monsters like them didn't forgive mistakes and would finish her quicker than she could flee. Even her encounter with the kingsguard had nearly cost her her life. Blink and her wings barely enough to get her to safety and the fact that the knight didn't pursue was her main saving grace. A human or elf at that power, set to hunt her down would be a real problem. Steadily growing stronger was in part a necessity because of such a possibility. She sadly had made enough enemies in her time here, even if it might be paranoid to think they were at the power of a kingsguard or praetorian.

With how everyone talked about the north, how the elf had talked about dragons and how few of civilization really spread through the areas she had visited so far, Ilea believed that the wild, monsters and animals incapable of more complicated thoughts and speech were the ones most dangerous when it came to pure physical or magical force. If there even was a significant percentage of ridiculously powerful people, a lot of dungeons wouldn't exist at all and the most dangerous wild beasts would simply be finished. Outliers had to be around, she considered herself one of them, as were the members of the hand but even their numbers were insignificant to the sheer size of the world. The human plains alone really.

She sighed and put away Keyla's food box. There were still over four hundred meals remaining in her necklace but she already dreaded the day

when they ran out. It would come, of that she was sure. Perhaps that was when she sneakily returned to Ravenhall just to restock. Time would tell.

Blinking into her room, she switched into comfortable clothes and grabbed the book she had been reading in the few hours every day that weren't dedicated to training. Earth had definitely been more thrilling when it came to literary works, people honing their entertainment skills rather than their fighting or magic ones. The thing that made reading in Elos just a tad more exciting though, was the fact that a lot of the mentioned legends, monsters, magic and people might have actually existed. Or still did. They lived forever after was a line that might actually apply here.

Of course a lot of the stories weren't written by the strongest adventurers or explorers but if someone like Elfie, self proclaimed historian, decided to write a couple books Ilea would definitely consider checking them out. Dagon or Elise might be good candidates as well. Or Claire, but she would probably rather write a book on economic theories and city management. *Something these guys here might have needed.* She thought and looked at the wooden ceiling. Scared of it suddenly falling down not because of herself but her bed mostly.

If she were totally honest, Ilea simply wanted to continue. To fight and clear out the dungeon but she had only a single set of armor left, her nine others unusable, a liability that she was not allowed to indulge in. Not anymore. She owed that much to her teammates, to Eve. Of course full responsibility wasn't on the table but then she wouldn't be adventuring in the first place. Putting in a bookmark, Ilea stretched on the bed and sighed. Ash flowed around her and swiped her off the bed. Having ash respond to the slightest thought definitely helped with getting up in the morning. Her muscles didn't have to move at all and activating the magic wasn't much of a conscious effort anymore either.

Blinking out of the house upwards, she twirled in the air as ashen wings materialized and took her towards the exit. The plain black pants and white shirt were replaced by black armor, heavy but framed close to her body. Full plate and horns adorning the head, she looked positively intimidating and like a super soldier with magical wings and abilities. At least according to her sphere, with which she checked herself out. Ilea could leave the

dungeon by simply flying upwards but it just felt right to use the cathedral's double doors that waited for her after the small patch of dirt.

She smiled at the fact that some grass was growing again, the only spot covered in earth with enough sunlight to actually produce something. If the silver roses would start growing was another question she asked herself but other than the flowers still remaining at the edges, no fresh ones had sprouted. Perhaps they had simply been placed there. Being made of metal was likely a detrimental factor in growth through soil, water and the sun. Then again, in this magical ass place it might just be possible.

Slamming open the double doors, she found the cathedral utterly abandoned. The chair and table of the elf had remained, as did some of his work but he wasn't there. The lack of his smell indicated him being absent for quite some time. Ilea didn't particularly mind, instead flying up to the opening in the cave's ceiling. Checking for arcane storms or any blizzards that might drift over the mountain top, she rushed off.

Hallowfort was the same as when she had last visited several months prior. Illuminated by the crystals as well as magical lights and torches spaced around the little town built on top of the monumental statue once belonging to a big sprawling city. Shimmering crystal light reflected off the water below as Ilea dived past the city, directly towards Goliath's forge before she appeared inside.

The smith looked like it was napping, sitting on top of the anvil with no light sparkling inside the black mist of a head. "Hi."

Golden eyes opened slowly and focused on her, "Human. Welcome back. I was meditation, to pass the time and here you come to provide entertainment. How have you been?"

Ilea smiled and dumped nine sets of damaged rose knight armor. "Splendid, months spent on mostly just fighting... it was, marvelous."

The smith made a bubbling noise, its eyes dancing around happily, “A treasure truly, to find joy in such a gruesome and instinctive past time.” She felt his words to be sincere, happy for her ability to fill her time with fighting.

She laughed and motioned to the armors, “It really is. And now you can forge again. Maybe we’re not so different, me and you.”

“Perhaps not. Yet the thrill of smith’s work is not quite as exotic as that of exploring, of fighting and being close to death. You wish for new armors? I assume more metal is coming?”

Ilea nodded, “Plenty. Just make another nine sets again. I assume you have plenty of Stonehammer steel left in case I need more? I don’t know how long I’ll be able to provide metal.”

“Of course. I forge and reforge. Most of the metal you have brought is here still.”

“Good to know. What are you making anyway? Care to show me some of your work?” She smiled, the smith’s eyes sparkling with joy.

Ilea was a little dazed, leaving the forge a couple hours later after the demonstration, explanations and monologues of an old smith. Artist of abstract shapes more like. She had no idea, nor did she believe even now that a crude forge and big hammers could shape the intricate designs it had shown her. Even having seen it all and hearing it talk about it. Goliath’s philosophy implied, as far as Ilea understood, that metal was living and breathing. Form always changing and the work of art, the enjoyment he got out of his skill not bound to the result, a usable tool or weapon but to the change it could bring to the metal.

It had talked half an hour about the intricacies of shaping a perfect sphere and how thirty two different kinds of metals reacted to the treatment, how

the result changed. Ilea didn't have the heart to stop the smith when it went on to talk about alloys in accordance to the sphere. Not because she was being nice but because the smith showed genuine enthusiasm, passion and love for the work it did. For the skills it had acquired over the years, decades and centuries. Plus it was a good talker. Still, it wasn't exactly her topic but she bet Balduur and Goliath could talk for days on end.

Neither seemed to have much joy left in forging weapons and tools of war, both of them not in much need for gold anyway. Still, Balduur had been more enthusiastic when making her gauntlets than the newfound master had in making her armor. She had asked Goliath to forge her a set of armor in the smith's own design, to perhaps provide some interesting work after all. Ilea had no idea what kind of impractical sphere shaped Christmas tree of an armor she would get but it certainly would be worth seeing.

Terok wasn't home but she had plenty of runs to do until she got all the metal back to Goliath. Over a hundred sets of armor remained. The smith had reassured her that there was enough space. Most of the steel would be melted down into ingots, to be tested, used in later works or simply stored by the smith. Ilea thought that next to forging, the smith might have a bit of an addiction to collecting and storing different kinds of metals. There was no other reason to have use for that much steel. Other than maybe building a Mecha.

*Maybe Terok could be the one moving it. Drills, drills, drills.* She smiled and made her way back, rushing through the valleys, the only signs of life small critters rushing away as soon as she approached. A massive eagle flew high above at some point but either she was too quick or too small of a target to get its attention. If it was anything close to the last one she'd seen, Ilea would hardly constitute of a tiny snack. Not enough to fly down if the hunger wasn't biting.

After her fifth trip, Terok was actually home. Checking his rig that showed some minor scratching. Ilea knocked and blinked inside, the dwarf not even reacting to her invasion of privacy. "You're alive. Good on ya." He simply stated as he frowned and screwed away a rather small piece of plating. Beneath was a sea of metal pieces and gears, interlocking in ways Ilea couldn't understand. It reminded her of the inside of small clock. Just

extended to the two and a half meter robot. A single blow capable of bending it must deal tremendous damage to the thing.

“Same to you. New armors need to be enchanted. Do you have time today and tomorrow?” She asked, taking a chair from the kitchen and sitting down next to the battle machine.

The dwarf nodded, “Just came back from a small expedition. Didn’t go particularly well but this thing is better than I imagined. Thanks to your generous donation and Goliath’s outstanding work.” He grinned broadly, “Of course I have time. For you always.”

Ilea smiled and nodded, “Great. I’ll leave you to it then and I’ll let Goliath know to deliver the armors to you. I’ll be back in two days, need to get some more of the metal.” She said and shook his hand before she left him to the further inspection of his rig. Ilea saw him look at the ceiling after she had blinked out. She jumped off the cliff and spread her wings, more deliveries to be made. Perhaps she should have asked what about his expedition didn’t go particularly well. Ilea hoped none of his friends had died or gotten lost but he didn’t seem to be that down.

She’d ask him when she got the armors in two days. Just her further deliveries would take another half a day if not longer. Mostly due to moving through the day, limited to the valleys and cracks in the land to avoid the arcane storms. Blinking out of the cave, she rushed off towards Tremor.

# Chapter 250 Undead Rose

## Chapter 250 Undead Rose

Delivery and armor manufacturing was prepared and underway a day later, Ilea getting her first couple sets from Terok who seemed a little off that day. *Maybe he's been working too much.*

“Everything alright? You’re strangely serious.” She asked, putting the four finished sets into her necklace. As much as she would carry with her on a normal day. The other five she would put into her apartment, to be switched out as soon as they were needed.

The dwarf sat down and shrugged, “Lost three people on the expedition.” He ultimately said.

“I’m sorry.” Ilea said but he waved her off.

“Keep your pity. They were young, overconfident and frankly incapable. It was only a matter of time.” He said and sighed.

Ilea didn’t reply for a moment. She had never been good with situations like that and she didn’t know the dwarf well enough to gauge what might help him. Shutting up seemed like the best bet for now. “Told them it was stupid but of course the fucking wall breaks right when we make our way through.” He didn’t elaborate any further, downing a bottle of ale before he threw the empty container to the corner of the room.

*Why did you go when you thought it was stupid?* Ilea didn't ask of course. He was either blaming himself or annoyed that whatever they had tried hadn't worked out.

“What do you do all the time anyway?” He asked suddenly, cracking open another cold one.

Ilea shrugged, “Exploring a dungeon.”

“And you just find all that armor laying around?”

She locked eyes with him and sighed, “I kill them.”

The dwarf nodded and looked at his bottle, “Need a hand with that?” He asked, not looking at her, a hand scratching his black beard.

“I'm fine. You've got plenty of places here to explore. Safer than what I'm doing.” She said, not seeing how it would benefit either of them.

He snorted and opened his mouth but closed it again, “I see. Well good luck then. I'll be finished with your armors by the morrow.” The dwarf said and got up, walking out of his own home and leaving her there.

*Did I say something wrong?* Ilea questioned but chalked it up to his failed expedition and the losses that came with it. Sighing, she prepared to go and blinked out. She was ready again. Fully stocked and soon with five additional backup sets of armor. Making her way back, she quickly dropped through the mountain hole and entered the dungeon. There was still no sign of the elf but he would return eventually.

*And I don't have anything new for him.* She still had a lot to learn about elves and their culture. A lot that might help her friends in the south have an easier time with their race. Especially Dale in Riverwatch. She didn't expect him to be gone for long but seeing the empty chair and the abandoned cathedral made her think he might actually leave for good if she stayed empty handed. *Could still tell him about Goliath...* The smith was ok with it but she still didn't feel comfortable with bringing the elf to Hallowfort. Just because he might make a mess. *You're being racist...*



Still, it was worth a try to get something else first. To find out more about his nature, his people and his motivations before she brought him to the only source of new armor and enchantments she had so far in the north. Entering the dungeon, she spread her wings and hovered downwards, over the first line of buildings. Her notebook opened, she looked at the areas marked as safe. There was plenty to go before the thick black line was met where she had found the broken down wall.

The sunlight didn't reach there, even a couple dozen meters before the wall in most places. There had been plenty of knights to fight in the areas before the darkness but she had found nothing of worth, nothing other than the palace guarded by kingsguard. Tapping on the map, she chose the safest spot to retreat from quickly and put it back into her necklace. Today she would go a little further. Her stats and the third tier of both Destruction and Ash Creation gave her a little more confidence but she couldn't help but be a little apprehensive.

Not because she was scared of an unexplored section of dungeon or because a dangerous beast might lurk within. Simply because she had trained for so long in the city of Tremor, the wall to the dark area constantly being a line she didn't cross. A mental barrier of sorts, reinforced by her behavior in the past months. And today she would cross it.

Reaching the wall wasn't a problem, a big section before already cleared out of enemies and the last stretch devoid of patrols, Ilea slipping through the houses in silence. Several clumps of ash had formed around her, culminating near her back and getting more and more dense by the minute. Veil of Ash was moving around parts of her armored body, her blue eyes piercing the darkness before she vanished. Her blink bringing her beyond the wall.

Immediately she noticed the smell, the higher humidity as well as the more rotten state of all the buildings around her. A lack of any sun for hundreds of years hadn't improved the charm of this part of the city by a long shot. If

anything, this part of the dungeon actually looked the part. Dangerous, abandoned and smelling a little weird. The further she went downwards, the more houses lay collapsed. Her hopes of finding any useful information revealed themselves as mere delusions. At least it was intriguing, the thrill of a new discovery taking over as she slowly stepped through the dark, her sphere the only thing that let her see.

*Pitch fucking black...*, The thought was interrupted when she heard the sound of metal scraping against stone. A sound she had heard before in Tremor. Quite a while ago when she too had been close to the wall that separated what she assume to be the noble district from the rest of town. The creature appeared in her sphere a moment later, both of them walking closer towards the other. Glimpsing around the corner, she saw it.

### ***[Undead Rose Knight – lvl ???]***

*Oh boy.* The thought not only in regards to the three question marks but the dents and missing parts on his armor and body. A chunk of the knight's head was missing and his left arm was completely gone. The sword, the same size as a normal knight would use was dragged behind him, the one remaining hand holding onto it in a lazy manner. She had a feeling that wouldn't be much of an advantage in a fight. Cracking her neck and spreading more ash around herself, she stepped out from her hiding spot.

The undead looked at her immediately, tensing up and screaming with a voice that sent shivers down her spine. *No paralyze effect...*, The thought barely processed, the knight had jumped off and smashed his sword into the ground where Ilea had stood the blink of an eye earlier. Screaming again, it didn't relent. She stepped backwards once more, the knight not hitting the ground this time but simply landing and following. His sword slashed sideways, Ilea dodging downwards but not quite quick enough to get away.

A blink saved her but the monster was on her again, moving with force unlike anything she had encountered in Tremor so far. When the Kingsguard had been deliberate and deadly, the knights controlled, efficient and precise, this undead was more wild and savage. Ilea read as much in the three or four movements it had showed her already. Another strike was

dodged, this time without the use of blink, the sword crashing through the wall of the house next to them.

The blade hadn't been angled perfectly well but the sheer force of it still broke through the stone, the knight following the sword as if his body was dragged through the wall with it. The wall next to her exploded outwards, Ilea already away thanks to her Sphere and Blink abilities. The knight followed.

She tried to analyze his movements, the turns and twists he did but found it bizarre, unpredictable. Some of the strikes missed her completely, striking houses, the floor or even just air, the knight spinning with the heavy blade as he completely overextended. Other strikes were deliberate, feints or clever thrusts that anticipated her movements and dodges, as if some of his former experience remained and shined through between the craze in his mind.

A quick step brought the knight towards her, his sword creating sparks as it dragged on the ground behind him before it swung at her. Ilea stepped to the right, her ash instinctively expanding on her left before his sword swiped past, shaving off some of the black floating mass before it crashed into the ground behind him. The loud crash and strong swipe dug the sword deep into the stone, Ilea stepped forward, her fist hitting the knight's back with all her skills when he let go of his sword in a split second and slapped at her with the one hand he had.

Her ash moved in and blocked some of the force, her Veil taking the rest before she was thrown backwards a little. She heard the knight's steps before he was upon her, his sword thrusting at her chest before she blinked behind him. Appearing, Ilea's eyes opened wide, ash forming a thick layer before her when the thrown sword impacted it all, cutting through sideways and punching into her chest.

The world spun as she was flung away, the sword punching through a stone wall on the way before she crashed through two walls and into another street entirely. Her armor was dented, and her chest bruised and bleeding from within. Nothing that would stop her. She blinked to the side when the undead landed next to her, his sword scraping through stone where she had

just sat. A hundred health were sacrificed as she watched his movements, her chest healing up when she let his thrust scrape past. Her fist hit into his body, his forward momentum barely interrupted as her destructive mana flowed into him, eight limbs of ash slashing around his body to find gaps in his armor to deliver Wave of Ember.

The highly damaged armor he was wearing made it simple, especially with her ashen limbs that moved as well as her own two arms. The lack of joints added to their versatility, Ilea just waiting for an opening before she could attack. His movements grew more wild and ferocious with every attack she managed to deliver and the two of them crashed and brawled through an increasing number of houses when he managed to get through again, a wild slash after which he let go of his sword to deliver a kick. Ilea's ashen limbs were still touching him, not allowing her to blink before his kick landed, a piece of his armor getting caught in a connecting part of her chest and leg piece. Ash culminated above her when the force of the hit traveled through her, dragging the knight a little forward before his fists landed on her defenses.

Two hits landed, Ilea's ash trying to disconnect the interlocking pieces of armor preventing her to blink. The third punch broke through, Ilea's skulltaking the brunt, her helmetdenting before finally she managed to dislodge his leg armor and blinked away. The hit disoriented her for a second but she was back again when she saw the sword flying at her, the woman jumping over it with ease. His sheer strength was too much for her to simply grapple on and deliver her own attacks while he attacked her.

While his sword skills were wild and in a way brilliant, his hand to hand was lacking. An arm to be specific. She stepped into the way of the running knight who looked to nearly stumble. Ilea moved to the left with a spin and kicked low at his shin. A loud sound of crying metal resounded before the heavy knight lost his balance and smashed into a house, the whole thing tumbling down as Ilea healed the bruise on her shin as well as the lightly cracked bone beneath. Her resistance training certainly showed its worth here. She doubted her bone would have held without the second tier of Earth Magic Resistance.

Bricks were sent flying when the knight jumped out of the pile, sword in hand again before he screamed. Ilea jerked her head to the left when a second knight came flying, this one without a head but both arms intact. She knew two were too much but the grin on her face wouldn't suggest fear or struggle. Her dented pieces were replaced by fresh armor, Ilea identifying the second knight as she dodged his blade.

### ***[Undead Rose Knight - ??]***

*Let's see how long I can go before it gets impossible...*, Ilea couldn't help it, the two knights rushing at her without abandon. They weren't outright attacking each other but every uncontrolled strike hitting the other gave Ilea an opening to get in and deliver a couple hard hits. She was already angling herself so that her controlled retreat would go towards the upper city and not further down. Ilea was quite aware that killing the two of them would not be possible, not while they fought against her together.

She dealt more damage than against the knights, that was sure but each movement, each graze of their blades was unexpected. When one of the knights caught the thrown blade of the other and slashed at her with both at the same time, she laughed out loud. Moving backwards over the pitch black rooftops, now three knights were following her. One of them jumped towards her when a sword caught him in the side of his head but it simply shifted his momentum a little, the flying blade deflecting and making Ilea blink.

The third knight was already next to her and his blade crashed into her side, crushing her arm and digging into her chest piece. Pain deactivated, Ilea landed in the second floor of a building, the walls giving in before she tumbled onto the street beyond. Her armor had been pierced, blood streaming down as she closed the wound. Several ribs had been broken but the damage wasn't as bad as she had expected. Before she could stand up, she turned her head towards the movement she heard from her right. *Oh no...*,

Two yellow lights flashed at her from a familiar robot's eyes, headlights bathing the whole broken down street in light. "Ilea are you alright!?" Terok's voice came to her as if in slow motion, her healing taking care of

the wound as she blinked up, her damaged armor replaced by a fresh one. He rushed next to her when she grabbed his arm and jumped up, the first of the knights landing in a loud boom where they had just stood.

“Shut up and run!” She shouted, dragging him as her wings spread while she ran through the street.

Terok looked back and vanished upwards when a knight’s blade slashed through the air, Ilea ascending quickly to dodge the blade. She saw the knight crash into the flying dwarf a moment later, the two tumbling down before they crashed to the ground. Blinking, she accelerated to her highest speed as she watched the knight lift his fist and smash down at the dwarf. Her heavy gauntlets replaced her armor before she smashed into the undead and pushed him aside, tumbling with the knight before she blinked back to the dwarf.

His head was smashed in, as flat as the sword coming her way. Sliding the dwarf away, she dodged the blade of the second knight. Getting him away from Terok, she dodged another two strikes and blinked away when the third knight landed. Ilea’s wings spread and a thousand health were sacrificed when she grabbed the dwarf and flew off. She swerved in the air as a blade whistled past, the second one deflected by the accumulating ash that formed behind her, cutting into her wing that quickly recovered.

The flying warrior wobbled in the air before stabilizing right above the ground, her orientation bringing the two back towards the wall before they passed it, light returning to her eyes as they got higher up. She checked the dwarf’s status and found him breathing. Injured but alive. The undead didn’t look to be following but she didn’t let up with her speed just in case. Holding the dwarf close, she passed over the houses, soon reaching areas she knew to be secure. “You fucking idiot...,”

Ilea didn’t stop until they were out of the dungeon, landing in the cathedral as she started to heal his injuries. “Good thing that wasn’t actually your fucking head.” She said, the dwarf groaning when he came to. The robot moved backwards but Ilea held on, “Get the fuck out of this thing.”

He calmed down when he heard her but the mechanism to open didn't react, "It's damaged." He said in an angry tone, Ilea simply grabbing the two pieces and ripping them open. She stared at the dwarf within.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" She asked, trying to stay as calm as possible.

He stepped out of the machine and stumbled to a nearby chair, sitting down as he checked his brow. He spit on the ground when his hand came back covered in blood. "What the fuck are You doing here?"

Ilea was baffled, staring at him with wide eyes. Her helmet vanished before she pointed at him, "Your fucking head was smashed, I saved your fucking life you ungrateful shit! Now why are you here? You followed me?"

"Of course I did you dunce. Bringing all that armor back you must have somehow found a gold mine. Never thought you'd actually be fighting something like that!" He shouted and gestured in the general direction of the dungeon.

Ilea balled her fists before she grabbed his armor and flung it at the wall, the thing crashing before it tumbled to the ground. He seemed to have calmed down a little, holding up both hands in resignation as he looked at her, fear now in his eyes. "I'm sorry! Alright. I'm sorry! Don't kill me! I beg you, I had..."

"Shut it." Ash swirled around her, eight distinct limbs swaying through the mist with frantic movements before she turned away from him. "Stay here. We talk later." An unlucky knight would be the target of her anger at the bloody idiot. *Following me to this god forsaken city. MY god forsaken city.*

# Chapter 251 Compromise?

## Chapter 251 Compromise?

Her adrenaline shot up again when she finally found a knight. The ash spread, flowing around the two as her limbs smashed into him, his fist sword dodged before her fist smashed his helmet with all the force she could muster. The metal dented a little, the unfeeling knight slashing his second sword at her but Ilea turned her body a little, the blade scratching through her Veil and past her armor before a second hit smashed straight into his chest.

Crouching low to avoid his first blade moving back to slash her, she grabbed his leg and twirled, screaming as she flung him into a nearby wall. The knight got up when she crashed into him, ignoring the swords that left deep cuts in her Veil and armor, breaking through the wall as she pushed them inwards. Her ashen limbs smashed into him, some deflecting the blades enough to prevent high damage on her as her fists smashed into his stomach again and again. They broke through another wall, falling down as he let go of one blade.

The knight's fist rushed at her only to be stopped by her own hand, destructive mana flowing into him as they struggled. His pure strength against her magically enhanced body, anger fueling her as their hands shook. Finally freeing his left hand, the knight slashed at her with the short sword, cleaving into her helmet. Blood ran down her cheek as she grabbed his arm and pushed it away. Ashen arms went under his helmet and ripped



the thing off his head before they cut into his flesh, tearing deeper and deeper before the unfeeling, dead thing was ripped off.

Ilea jumped back and healed herself, ash filling the whole room while the headless knight stood up and rushed at her. Moving with experience and ease, she dodged the blades and kicked at his leg, the knight getting off balance before she grabbed his arm, again turning and sending him flying. This time she had gotten enough momentum to break through the wall. Ilea stepped towards the dust, ripping away her helmet and throwing it to the side, a smile on her face as well as a deep cut that quickly faded. “Stand up you fuck!”

The knight followed her orders wordlessly, no mouth to respond or brain to form the thought yet still, he got up. And he rushed at her. They clashed again and again, more of Ilea’s armor denting as she delivered heavy blows, ignoring safety and conservation of her gear for the sheer thrill. A hissing flash of pain ripped through her shoulder when his blade cut into it, her fists smashing into his side to dent his armor and break the bones underneath. He didn’t care, unwilling to feel or respond in any other way than to fight.

His second blade was stopped by her hand, the weapon struggling to cut into her ash, the Veil and her armored hand before a kick sent the knight stumbling back. Her ashen limbs focused on a single spot and finally, after over a hundred strikes, the shoulder guard was shattered open, his arm ripped off a moment later. One blade remaining, she dodged and weaved around him, her limbs and fists punching into him before finally he went down. Ilea grabbed the corpse and flung him into the nearest wall before she screamed.

Sweat and blood covered her face. Her armor was pretty much done for, deep cuts and dents in many parts. The guard on her left arm was barely hanging on a thread and her helmet lay destroyed in a corner of the room. “Fucking waste.” She said and went to grab the knight, putting him in her necklace as well as the damaged pieces of armor laying around. It was the fastest kill she had managed so far, that was for sure. Ilea didn’t exactly know how long she had fought but it was less than two hours. Perhaps less than one. *And for a below 300 creature at that.*

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 291] – For defeating an enemy thirty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

Sighing, she walked back to the exit. She needed a shower, a meal and meditation but first she had to talk to a certain dwarf. Terok had nearly killed them. *He rushed in to help you.* The thought didn't make it less annoying. He had no idea what he was getting himself into. If she had misjudged the undead they could both still be down there, ripped to pieces by the savage beasts.

Pulling open the double doors, she stepped through and found the dwarf standing near one of the missing windows. His armored rig was still where she had thrown it when he turned to her, one of the bottles she had found in the palace opened and in his hand, “I don't suppose you have glasses?” He asked with a smirk. She didn't miss the slight crack in his voice when he had looked at her.

Ilea hadn't bothered with cleaning up, summoning two glasses as she sat down on a chair, throwing one to the dwarf. His hand shook while he filled it, chugging it down in a single swig before he filled it again. He walked to her and filled hers as well, Ilea taking a sip and breathing out. “You're aware of how close we just got to death? You specifically.” Ilea spoke, spitting out some blood that remained in her mouth before taking another sip.

It was something like scotch. She didn't like it. Nor would the alcohol do anything, her poison resistance taking care of that. Downing the rest, she put it back in her necklace as she watched the dwarf. He nodded and finished his drink, pouring another one immediately, “I noticed.” He said and glanced at his rig for a moment. “I'm sorry for coming here. For following you. I thought... maybe I could benefit too, could sell something I found or join your group or something.”

“There is no group.” Ilea said, shrouding herself in ash before she removed her armor, the ash swirling around her to take care of any blood, sweat and grime that still stuck to her. Casual clothes appeared before the ash flowed into limbs, lazily swaying behind her back.

Terok watched it all in fascination, taking a little longer to reply. “I noticed. Didn’t believe you when you talked about your story, the way you fought alone. Having seen it I still don’t. You’re a lunatic. Your side was open, bleeding, you should be dead.”

Ilea smiled at him, “Well I’m not. Now you better fuck off, I’ll get my enchantments somewhere else. This dungeon is mine to clear and I don’t want some greedy idiot sneaking around.”

Terok didn’t step back, he just looked at her before he took a swig from the bottle itself. “My rig is fucked. I’m in debt and I’m sure as hell not making it back to Hallowfort alive.” He set down the glass and sat down on a chair, sighing as he stared at the floor. “You’re tough... I’ve seen that. I don’t think I’ve seen a warrior as fierce as you... but those things were winning. You were hurt and you had to flee.”

Ilea summoned a meal and started eating, energy flowing back into her as she mediated. She didn’t react to his talking. He had fucked up, nearly gotten himself killed and now he was apparently stuck. His machine was definitely unusable. *After a single hit...*, Ilea knew she would’ve survived. Having taken several direct blows from the undead knights, she knew she had been fine.

He tapped on his knee before he spoke up again, “You didn’t have to save me. No reason to do that, not with that injury. Probably wasn’t as bad as it looked now that I think about it but still.”

Ilea was getting tired of his speech but she had sat down and wouldn’t leave until she was done with her meal.

“Why did you save me?” The dwarf looked at her as she ate.

“It’s common courtesy. You were out of your league in there.”

“You’re a lousy liar. And I won’t believe it for a second if you tell me you were handling those monsters. You came to help us in a convenient time before but this here was different.”

Ilea stopped eating and thought about his words. “Alright, maybe I didn’t want your blood on my hands. Maybe I didn’t want someone else I know dying in a shit hole when I could prevent it.”

She continued eating, the dwarf looking at her as he nodded. “Doesn’t change anything.” She added.

“Of course it does. I’ll work with you to repay this debt. And whatever I owe you for the metal and help you’ve provided so far.” Terok said, Ilea just staring at him with a spoon in her mouth.

Taking it out, she placed it in the box, “Look, I appreciate the offer but you’re a level one eighty mage, your machine is fucked and you’ve proven you’re incapable of fighting anything in there. Plus didn’t you listen? That’s my dungeon.”

The dwarf stood up and walked to his machine, checking the arms and punching the open chest plates, “Aye, I’m proper fucked. But I’m not a fighter Ilea. Never was. I told you I’m a scavenger. An explorer. I don’t waltz into dungeons in the northern wastelands to fight the beasts within. No one bloody does. I go in there to pick ancient locks, to clean out graves of long dead kings, to snatch artifacts worthy of a mansion back in ass creek Eranur.”

“Now I know you just want to go back in there to fight until you either come out stronger than whatever resides in that hell of a city or until you lie dead and cut apart within but tell me that place doesn’t hold any secrets. Anything you can’t crack open with those fists of yours. You’re not one to invest in such skills, to learn about enchantments that could even stop those three monsters we saw in there if enough mana crystals were put in place.”

“I spent sixty years living here. If hunting monsters is all you’re here to do then fine. I’ll try to leave but if there’s anything else you’re after. If any of

my skills that I honed for half a century can help you then I'll make sure to make it worth your while."

Ilea was impressed by his tenacity, the dwarf certainly knew how to make a convincing speech. "I can also show you around the Descent and a couple other dungeons and places you might be interested in. With your abilities you'll find easier monsters to kill than undead knights. Coupled with my knowledge and skills we'll be able to get rich, powerful and whatever else you fucking want."

Terok was desperate, Ilea knew as much. He knew as much. Still, she had liked him before and just because he had fucked up here didn't immediately change that. She was mad at him, yes but it was a ballsy move. One she might have done as well if she had been desperate and a powerful possible ally had shown up so suddenly. "I'll think about it." She said with a mouth full of food. "How long until you have that thing back up and running?"

Ilea pointed at the damaged metal armor sitting like a dead or dying robot at the wall of the cathedral. Terok's eyes opened wide, "I don't have my tools... some of the plating is completely gone..."

Ilea stopped him and turned towards the rig. Its head was smashed in, only cracked glass remaining of the two yellow eyes. There was no indentation, the thing was pretty much flat. Whatever intricate designs had been hidden within were completely unusable. The torso looked alright, the plating he had colored black and red showed silver on several damaged spots. The metal she had given him. Arms and legs were connected with slightly bent but still intact rods, around five for each limb formed the grid to hold the tools openly visible within as well as the hands and feet at the end of each.

Openings in each limb would allow whatever surprises he had stored inside to be used. "You were hit once. In a dungeon. How can you call yourself an explorer if that is what stops you. You want to prove your worth? Get it running again while I kill another knight."

Terok scratched his unkempt beard and furrowed his brows. The age didn't show on his face, his one remaining healthy eye looking at the machine and then her. The mechanical one stayed focused on the rig before his big hands

clapped together and a big grin showed from within the beard. Perfectly white teeth, Ilea noted. “Alright.” was all he said as he walked past her, Ilea still finishing the meal.

The dwarf, clad in a dark green one piece suit that reminded Ilea a little of a onesie started inspecting the different parts of the machine. Some of it floated away as it came apart, what she now knew to be metal magic acted on the mech suit. *Probably how he powers it too.* She couldn't imagine another power source but his mana and metal magic would allow quite a bit of control. Kyrian had some movable and removable pieces in his armor he would sometimes use but his control was not at the extend of controlling the armor itself.

Perhaps the dwarf hadn't lied about his experience at least. And if he could actually be of use, she wouldn't deny him. Locations and specific information about more dungeons as well as a way perhaps into the palace would be welcome. Stepping into the dungeon as she finished her meal, Ilea looked up at the sunlight shining down on the town. A part of her wanted to go straight back to fighting the undead knights, their unpredictable attacks and ferocity something fresh after all the methodical knights she had bested in the past months.

The problem was noise. They screamed, shattered walls and their sheer power forced her to move around a lot. It was only a matter of time until a second or even more of them showed up, as proven by her earlier encounter. Ilea could take one down perhaps, after a long time. Still, she had been hit but with time perhaps she would understand their movements better. The chaos she had gleamed in the way they wielded their blades and bodies.

However she obviously lacked the firepower an offensive mage or warrior would have at her level. While their defensive capabilities would leave them dead and broken after a minute against the knight, the could likely dish out just as much damage in a couple attacks as she managed in an hour. Viper's white fire beam had proven as much, burning even through her resilient body with ease. *At least before I got the second stage of Heat Resistance.*

Ilea was pretty sure she could hold her own against people her level when it came to damage simply because their defenses were just fucking lousy. The sound mage working with Arthur had died with a couple hits to his head. Here she was fighting monsters nearly twice her level. It was fun of course but she couldn't help but wish for a little more punching power. *I'd just find even stronger opponents and the fights would drag on again.* Ilea smiled at the thought as she walked through the city on the lookout for a knight. Maybe Terok was right, maybe she should find enemies that suited her more. In the end she needed monsters with higher levels than herself to increase her power, their defensive capabilities mattered little. It was so much fun to fight them though and now that she had found the undead, a part of her itched to go back.

The mind flayer was a good example for a more suitable enemy. The thing could likely be squished by her very hand while its magic could probably knock out and kill a whole expedition not prepared for mind attacks. With her resistance to its magic, it was an easy thing for Ilea to kill. *First Terok has to prove himself, then I'll ask him if he knows about better enemies.* Rounding a corner, she spotted a knight in the distance. A single one patrolling the streets. *Would it be fun though? To be done with them in mere minutes?* Her buffs activated as she started sprinting towards her next foe, fresh armor on her body as she slipped into a trance like state. *Of course it would be,* A part of her thought, ash moving around her, ready to hit into the knight.

Standing over the dead knight, this time Ilea didn't have a scratch. Her ash moving in to help deflect the blows before her Veil took the brunt of the attacks helped tremendously. Plus the knight had been a shield variant, already lacking in offensive potential compared to the dual wielding sort. Storing the corpse and armor, she rushed back to the cathedral. The fight had taken around two hours, the knight finally falling after she had whittled away at its health with Destruction and Wave of Ember.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 281] – For defeating an enemy twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

*Another knight down, Ilea wondered how many of them even remained. She could still level for a while but another dungeon would become necessary at some point. While the Undead knights were interesting, she doubted she could fight them efficiently. Not yet. Same with Penumra, the beasts grouping up just like the Miststalkers outside at night. *If he managed to get his machine back up and running, I'll be happy to listen to his suggestions. Perhaps the Descent is the next reasonable goal.**



# Chapter 252 Questioning a Robot

## Chapter 252 Questioning a Robot

Coming back into the cathedral, Ilea was happy to find the dwarf back in his rig. It looked dented still, his metal magic apparently not enough to fix it completely. The head was missing entirely, instead two small holes had been drilled into the chest plate to allow him to see through, “Can you see in the dark without the light?” The first thing she asked. Ilea wouldn’t make it easy for him. And if he was a liability after all, she’d leave him behind. *Perhaps I’ll bring him back to Hallowfort at least.*

The robot moved, testing its legs as the dwarf answered, “We can see in the dark. Not perfectly well but we can see. The flood lights are not just for me to see. They’re to blind and to detect enchantments as well as magical connections and spells.”

“Your machine can do all that? I had a skill once called Magic Perception but you just have tech for that? Can I have that too?” Ilea was curious. If she had glasses or something that could give her all those abilities it would certainly be helpful.

The metal arms crossed before his chest, “I’m a metal mage and an engineer. Those abilities come from the second class. It’s not as straight forward as you warrior kinds but if you’re good enough and have the resources, your gear will make quite a difference. Sadly the enhancements like my magic perception don’t work for others.”

“What else can you do? And what did you see in there? Anything that might be useful for me?”

The dwarf might have nodded, had he not lost his robot head. The two tubes exiting behind his back sent off some steam, “I have tools to drill, cut and force myself into wherever you want to go to. I can see runes, enchantments and know my way around them. I’ve deactivated traps whole expeditions couldn’t figure out.”

“Sure. I’ll have to see that in action before I believe it.” Ilea interrupted but gestured for him to continue.

“I’m willing to demonstrate. The same as for enchantments goes for magical barriers. As long as I have time to figure it out. Also how I noticed that the knights patrolling parts of the city have a magical connection to somewhere. The undead knights didn’t have that, not sure what that is about. Normally undead are the ones having a connection to their summoner. Naturally occurring ones are a little different.” He explained, Ilea lifting an eyebrow as she took off her helmet.

“You mean the knights are controlled from somewhere, while the crazy undead ones that nearly killed you weren’t?” Ilea asked. The robot shrugged.

“I didn’t have time to examine the connection. Perhaps it’s more than just mere control. You said you’ve killed some?”

Ilea nodded, “What did you do with the bodies?” He asked, his voice a little uneven.

*Is he afraid?*, “I burned them.” She replied simply.

“Good. Good. Usually one of the best ways to sever the connection. We can examine it if you’re willing to let me watch. Although I’d need to repair my head first.”

Ilea thought about it, “So they could’ve stood back up... even after I had killed them?”

“As I said, it’s hard to say. Even if I see the connection it might be impossible to tell. Depending on how good the necromancer is. Undead are pretty rare in dungeons as well as naturally so I can’t say if this is special behavior for sure. I simply haven’t ever seen anything like it.” The dwarf explained.

“Well I’ll have you fight one of them anyway, you’ll be able to think about it then. Can you repair the head here or not?”

Terok was quiet for a while but spoke eventually, “Fight one of them?” He took a step back, “W...why?”

Ilea cocked her head, a little confused at his question, “What do you mean why? Why not? You’re level one eighty five. They’re between two fifty and three hundred usually. And they just attack with their swords or bows. You’ll have to be able to at least flee from them if you’re ever going to work with me.”

She heard him breathe out, “Fleeing is different than fighting.” He grumbled and went on, “I can repair it but I need a little more time. The enchantments were literally smashed. Takes me a while to get everything running again.” He pointed towards where his head would be. “What level are you by the way? Just so I know what I’m getting myself into.”

Ilea didn’t see a reason to hide it from him, “Two fifty five right now.”

“And you fight them alone? They’re two fifty to three hundred?” He asked but continued right away, “How old are you?”

“Why does it matter?” Ilea asked, strolling around the hall.

“Never mind. Well you have survived so far but fighting higher leveled enemies, alone. I’m not going to lecture you. You’re the one who saved me after all.” He said and chuckled, “So how can I prove that I’m useful to you?”

Ash slowly flowed out of nowhere, swirling around Ilea as the limbs on her back focused on the dwarf. Her hands crossed before her, a set of five ashen

walls formed and grew as dense as she could force them. “Attack me. First as fast as you can, then as hard as you can and finally you simply try to break through with as much time as you need.” She walked towards the double doors and entered the dungeon, “Not here though.”

Terok followed her, the dwarfing as fidgety as an exoskeleton possibly could. “Don’t stress over it. I thought your long time experience speaks for itself... I will only defend so don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.” He snapped, “I’m not supposed to hold back am I?”

Ilea smiled, her helmet appearing on her head, “I would hold it against you if you did. If you manage to deal significant damage to me I’d be impressed and not just a little.”

“Then here goes nothing.” He sighed and vanished, Ilea immediately grinning. Teleportation was already quite useful. She saw him appear to her right, a drill arm quickly slashing towards her side when all her ash shifted his way, intercepting the attack that drilled into it. Terok jumped back, his mech pulling hard to the side before it quickly closed the distance again, Ilea’s ash swaying to intercept him when he appeared behind her.

Instead of using his drill arm, this time a small barrel had extended and sent a thick needle like object around thirty centimeters in length and two thick straight at her back. The ash didn’t intercept, Ilea instead curious what it would do. Her armor of course stopped the projectile but it didn’t rebound, instead floating where it had hit. The needle scratched against the armor and moved upwards before it found the gap between her shoulder piece and chest plate. Ever so slightly it pushed inside, Terok in the meantime moving to the air and floating around as he shot another two of the projectiles at her. These she let her ash intercept, the element pushing back against his magic that willed them forward.

The projectile near her shoulder had started to spin and slowly dug into her flesh. It apparently wasn’t easy to penetrate so the projectile instead exploded into tiny shards that dug a little deeper. He did manage to draw blood, the shards themselves slowly pushed out by her healing as she recovered. Terok didn’t let it stop him and instead continued circling

around, appearing closer before hitting into her quickly moving ash. *This really has become a second protective shield...*, Even before her Veil had to step up to take damage, her ash alone was intercepting.

She let the dwarf attack for fifteen minutes straight until she held up her hand. He had not let up, his speed kept at the same level and his metal needles, quite reminiscent of Kyrian's attacks had kept coming. Compared to her friend, the dwarf chose fewer but more intricate projectiles. The fact that he could recover them spoke for this approach. *I'll inform him if I ever meet him again.*

Terok was breathing hard, under his machine but the exoskeleton didn't let on that anything was amiss. "Good. You're quick and I think with your teleportation as well as flying you have a good chance to escape most situations. You see in the dark... any abilities that let you see around you?"

He breathed out heavily before he answered, "No. The magic perception however lets me feel spells coming from behind for example. Most of the time ranged attacks are magical. Arrows usually carry some as well so it's rarely been a problem."

"I see. Well next is pure force. Come on." She said, several layers of ash forming in front of her as she casually stood behind them. "Hit me."

The dwarf's right arm reformed, pieces moving in place like a well oiled machine. Even with the dents she could see through her sphere, his robot suit held up and worked well. The right arm had formed a heavy plate at its front, pipes and rectangular extensions coming out of the metal grid behind it. "Here I come." Terok whispered, a quiet motivational speech for himself before he started running. His speed picked up quickly, metal magic pushing his otherwise slow limbs to heights reserved for people above two hundred.

Mana built up on the squares extending from his arm before in the last moment everything was released, all the pressure forcing his arm forward as it smashed into her defenses. The ashen layers were first penetrated, then pushed aside before finally her Veil was punched onto her armor. Ilea had to

take a step back to stabilize. Air was pushed out of her lungs before she breathed in again, “No bad.”

The dwarf stepped back, “Not bad? Are ya fucking kidding me Ilea?” He grumbled something, “That is enough to take down enchanted and reinforced doors. You have the defenses of a tank... your ash is insane. You’re a body enhancer aren’t you?”

“Stop the flattering. I have dual body enhancement classes, can heal myself quickly and my attacks are based on mana intrusion and physical force.”

“It’s not flattery. I don’t mean to insult you but you obviously don’t have a lot of experience with all this. No wonder you can fight these knights. Although both mana intrusion and physical force will help you precious little against undead on that level. Especially if they’re still being fueled from somewhere.” He mused.

The ash in front of her parted, revealing Terok in his machine. His right arm had reformed to the normal variant, the pieces she had seen in action now residing between the grid of metal rods again. “I mean I know it’s a bad match up. I can kill them in a couple hours though so it’s fine.”

He didn’t say anything at that for half a minute, his eyes both mechanical and dwarven staring at her from behind the two small holes in his robot’s chest plate, “You fight them for hours at a time?” This time he laughed, “I’m curious. How can you keep that up? I mean you don’t take all their hits do you? And you need to keep all your buffs active. Body Enhancers can usually fight longer but concentration lapses, especially when you’re in a dangerous situation.”

Ilea walked to the destroyed fountain and sat on a piece of rubble, her helmet disappearing. “I mean it’s just not that interesting if it’s not dangerous. Plus I usually blink away to meditate and heal whenever I got in a good hit.”

“You’re living for this don’t you?” Terok asked in a sad voice as he turned away from her.

“Don’t pity me. I enjoy it. This is exactly why I wanted to be alone here...,” Ilea murmured the last part.

The dwarf turned to her again and quickly spoke, “I’m not pitying you. It’s just a fact that people like you find early graves, no matter their talents, their luck or preparation.”

He remained silent for a while, the both of them basking in the sunlight that illuminated parts of the dungeon city, “Well at least you’re more durable than most and you can heal yourself. Still, a couple hours for an enemy fifty levels above yourself? How is your offensive potential looking?”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “This was about testing Your abilities Terok, not mine.”

“And one of those abilities is decades of experience in the north. I doubt you sport that lassie, no matter how capable of a fighter you are.” He said and she knew he was smiling under his hood.

“Should I test it on you?” Ilea joked and walked to the side of the square, the dwarf following. Activating her buffs, her ashen limbs smashed into the wall of a house, cutting and breaking through with ease before her fists followed suit.

“That would be a bit much for me. Have you fought enemies at that level before? Two fifty I mean?”

Ilea remembered plenty of encounters and nodded, the dwarf thinking it over for a moment, “Well that is more power than I can put out and I’ve killed some rare beasts in that range as well. You shouldn’t need that much time to kill one if you hit that hard. Especially coupled with mana intrusion. I mean some beasts have higher durability, sure. Their armor is good too but it seems weird to me. We both use the steel as well and as good as it is, it dents. It’s breakable.”

“I mean I welcome them being so durable.” Ilea smirked. Fighting the knights was one if not the most enjoyment she’s gotten so far, mostly because of the complexity her many abilities brought into the duels. They

were both durable and challenging. Hit like trucks but were calculated and masterfully competent with their weapons.

“Oh I know that much. You’ve probably been fighting them for all this time when you were away right?”

Ilea nodded, still smiling as she thought back on all the fights.

“I’d like to see you fight one later. Maybe we can figure it out. I know it’s fun and you’re still gaining power but if you’re looking to improve your levels then I have plenty of possible alternatives for you. Depending on your resistances and healing power.” Terok suggested.

*Gaining levels and power...*, Ilea wondered if that really was the goal anymore. Of course she had justified her solo expedition north with that but in the end a part of her knew it was just about finding interesting enemies to fight, about being in dangerous situations and unknown places. She shoved those thoughts away. “Sure, we can do that. I have plenty of resistances so if it’s not something super rare I should be able to deal with it.”

“Good. We can talk about that later. Being able to heal, to flee and to resist strong attacks is what everyone usually lacks... offensive power is rarely the issue. I think we’ll find you something better than this creepy place. Still, you first wanted to see if I can break through your defenses with time?”

Terok got to the point and Ilea nodded, focusing on the task at hand as ash spread around her. This time she stored her armor and instead just wore a shirt she wouldn’t miss if it was damaged. Her Veil stayed up as well as a thick wall of ash that formed in front of her torso. “I’ll let you know when to stop.”

The dwarf gave her a thumbs up with one of his robotic arms before he appeared next to her, Ilea’s ash swirling a little but she willed it to stay put. His left arm transformed before group of mirrors aligned inside of it, each having enchantments cut into them with perfect precision. At the end of it a small barrel looked out, aimed at her ash and chest behind. Mana was released before light traveled through the thing, hitting each mirror before



gathering at the barrel. A white beam of light exited and burnt into her defenses right after, getting through her ash with ease.

It hit her Veil and struggled harder to get through. Ilea didn't rebuild the ash where it had already pierced, instead waiting for it to get through her last layer of defense. It took a while but the dwarf didn't let up, instead intensifying the power of what was essentially a laser. Ilea felt the ash heat up and slowly burn through but the Veil wasn't so easily shoved aside, rebuilding nearly as fast as he damaged it. After two minutes, he finally did it. The scorching heat burned a small dot through her shirt and started biting into her skin.

“Go on.” She simply said, feeling the laser subside and then pick up in power again. This time it had to get through her skin and she wasn't sure if it was an attack considered light magic, arcane magic or fire magic. Against all she had resistances and coupled with her tough skin, it definitely showed. Her healing rebuilt the tissue faster than he could burn it so she stopped healing herself after a while. Slowly the laser made its way into her skin before it stopped on her rib cage. With her recovery magic she could tell the bone wasn't getting damaged which prompted her to lift her hand. “That's enough.”

# Chapter 253 Resourceful Dwarf

## Chapter 253 Resourceful Dwarf

“How did I do?” The dwarf asked, all the fighting tests through. Ilea healed up the wound and switched to her armor again. The helmet stayed off as she sat down on the fountain rubble.

He could teleport, could see magic and could definitely crack into some places. She was sure his pure physical force didn't topple her own but he could focus it better than she could. Perhaps if her ash improved more she'd rival him but for now it might be an asset. Ilea was definitely more interested in what information he had to share so far. Elfie had precious little to say about the undead and the dungeon as well as other monsters in the area.

“You did alright. Now try not to get hit.” Ilea said and punched at him, happy to find only air where her fist landed. The dwarf was in the air, flying towards the exit of the dungeon. *He's actually running. Smart move.* Wings materialized behind her, ashen limbs moving to her side to create a more aerodynamic form before she blinked up and sped up. The dwarf was teleporting as well but Ilea's speed was on a completely different level. Appearing behind him, she grabbed on and pushed down, the two of them tumbling in the air before they crashed into one of the houses close to the top of the city.

Ilea held on, her hands bending the metal away a little as she tried to pry open his chest. His laser formed but ash moved into his arm to prevent an

attack. His drill she simply ignored, the blade cutting into a wall of ash that grew and grew, more of it pushing into all the openings in his exoskeleton. Finally overwhelming the mechanism, the two plates moved aside and a bleeding Terok was revealed, looking at her with big eyes. Three metal spikes rushed out towards her but Ilea caught two of them, the third one deflected by an ashen limb. “Give up?” She asked, three more limbs ending in hardened spikes hovering close to his face.

“You win.” Terok said, holding up his hands as the kinetic power in the metal projectiles subsided. “Couldn’t even get to the entrance.” He spat some blood, Ilea pushing healing magic through his armor with her ash. Standing up, the ash moved out of his suit and spread around her, a lot of it disintegrating.

Ilea leaned on an intact wall, looking at him as the machine closed again, even bent and damaged it worked. “How does it close at this point?”

“You mean my rig? Metal magic. Otherwise I’d have to dump it after every little bit of damage. Broken enchantments are more of a problem usually.” He explained, standing again.

“Good thing the knights aren’t exactly as quick as I am. And they can’t fly. Ready to face one?” She grinned.

“You really meant that... can’t be worse than you if you manage to kill them.” He grumbled, smashing two fists together.

Ilea wasn’t so sure about that, “They won’t hold back. And they go for the kill. Whatever they were before, they’re the best swordsmen and women I’ve ever faced.”

“Doesn’t mean much with your age.” He said and chuckled but definitely not as casually as he behaved back in his house.

“You be the judge of that.” Ilea said and jumped out of the now damaged ancient house, landing with a thud on the cobbled stone floor. Terok followed quickly, landing with grace. She observed through her sphere and

was sure now that his control over metal was miles ahead of Kyrian.  
“What’s your metal control at?”

“Two twenty. Third stage as soon as I reach two hundred but I don’t expect that to happen anytime soon.” The dwarf replied.

Ilea grunted and summoned her notebook, starting towards an area she still considered unsafe. “You don’t look as old as you say. I thought people wanted to hit two hundred before they’re past their prime.”

“Don’t know a lot of dwarves do you. Our lifespan is quite a bit longer than a human’s. No wonder you lot rush leveling like that.” He said and laughed. “You can’t be under fifty.”

She raised her eyebrows, “Fifty? Someone else might’ve interpreted that as an insult.”

Terok held up his hands in defense, “Not a lot of humans around here. And those that are have reached high levels already. I never learned about age differences in your race.”

“I’m closing in on my mid twenties.” Ilea said, “I guess I look that age as well but having reached two hundred I’m not sure how I’ll go from here.”

“You can heal yourself. I don’t think your face will change any time soon. Higher chance of having it smashed in by some unreasonable monster you challenge.”

Ilea nodded. It was nice not having to worry about that but it had never really been a concern of hers anyway. Perhaps she’d learn to appreciate it more when she had hit her fifties. “You said humans rush leveling?”

“Sure you do. I doubt you had all skills at the end of the second tier before you passed the threshold.”

“I don’t think I did but it was close enough.” She said. Most of her Azarinth skills had been in the second tier before hitting level hundred already.

“Well you should try to max them before you get to three hundred. Bonuses from more specialized and rare classes are usually worth much more than the stats you get for pure levels.” Terok explained.

Ilea stopped walking and turned towards him, “Three hundred is always a class evolution?”

“Mostly. Before two hundred it can happen pretty much randomly. Had one guy tell me he could evolve at one eleven. Weirdest one I heard of. Two fifty can happen as well but it’s rare. Three hundred is always one as far as I know.”

Ilea was skeptical, “You seem to know a damn lot about high level shenanigans. Being at one eighty. How’d you get that knowledge? And how do you know it’s true?”

Terok just shrugged, a gesture that looked rather impressive with his massive metal suit on, “Living in the north for this long I got around. Travelers, explorers and dark ones visiting Hallowfort have made similar experiences. We’re survivors Ilea and information like that benefits everyone. I know you humans don’t think like that and trust me back in Eranur, the city I grew up in people were the same.”

“As to if it’s true at all... well I don’t know. I don’t think everybody is a liar and the stories I’ve heard came from direct sources. Comparing them gives me somewhat of a picture. Though it’s rare enough to meet someone above three hundred after all.”

Ilea listened to him. Compared to the elf, he was ready to share whatever information he could with her. Perhaps he was making some of it up but it sounded plausible enough so far, “Anything else you would suggest me do before hitting three hundred. Not that these knights are enough for that.”

Terok laughed, “I’m sure you’ll get there eventually. Quicker than me, that’s for sure. If I had a self healing spell to add to my abilities...,” He was silent for a moment but then answered her question, “You only get third level skill points every twenty levels. At least that’s what some people have told me. Your choice with them might influence the evolutions your classes

might take so keep that in mind. Also general skills might help. Resistances and such.”

Ilea smiled at that. She didn't think her third tier choices were bad in relation to a class evolution. She just hoped her ashen class choices would remain somewhat focused on Body Enhancement considering her choices there. The bonuses from both her classes related to body enhancement were the highest multipliers she had, splitting too far from that would be a problem. “I have plenty of resistances, so that shouldn't be an issue. I don't feel like waiting until all of them hit the maximum in the second tier to level higher.” She had invested quite a bit of time already and it might take years to get them to the required levels, “I mean I can do that eventually, leveling doesn't stop after three hundred, does it?”

Terok shrugged again, “Not as far as I know. It slows down at two hundred and then again with every ten to twenty levels. At three hundred I'm told it gets even slower. So much so that you're basically forced to fight alone and similar or higher level beings to advance further. Not that that would be a new thing for you.”

“Might want to think about it though because if it gets even slower you definitely want to get the best classes you can get.” He added.

Ilea nodded. *I might think about another resistance session. After three hundred though. I have enough now and if I doubt it constantly I'll just be stuck for years or decades before I finally decide to advance.* “Speaking of general skills, any idea how to get them to the third tier?” Meditation was getting somewhat close, although it had taken ages to get the last couple levels in the skills.

The dwarf crossed his metallic arms in front of him and sighed, “On this I've heard different stories. Most of the people I talked to supposedly at or above level three hundred had nothing to share on the topic. It's a mystery apparently, same with third classes. Seems like something that should be possible at some point. A dark one I've met twenty or so years ago claimed to have three classes but he had no way to prove it. He did however say that it wasn't equal to his main two classes, not close to it even. Claimed to have faced and injured a Basilisk to get it. Mad lad that one.”

Ilea smirked at the mention of the Basilisk. She knew where to start looking for one to maybe get her third as well, if what the dark one said was really true. *If what Terok is saying is really true.*

“So he got it not because of some level but because he did something remarkable?”

Another shrug, “I suppose. He died a couple years later. Got trapped in a poison swamp of some sort I heard. One of his teammates survived, the healer. Otherwise nobody would know about it at all. He was below two hundred which made it even more remarkable, claimed to have a high poison resistance but some believed he somehow killed the team.”

“What do you think?”

“I knew him, good kid. Blamed himself for their deaths and I believe him. The mage I talked about was always cocky. Had insanely high damage output and more Wisdom than anybody should be allowed to have but still he needed a healer in his team. That tells me enough about his survivability.”

Ilea chuckled at that, “You think everyone who needs a healer won’t survive?”

“Doing what he did nobody would survive indefinitely. You should keep that in mind but I’m likely not the first one to tell you. Getting resistances, healing, good armor, a high Vitality and ways to escape is the best way to stay alive. Getting high damage is the best way to get strong quickly. If you face stronger monsters alone, you better go the defensive route.” He explained and Ilea had to agree.

There had been dozens of situations where she would’ve died had she not had one or the other resistance, her blink skill or self healing. And a lot of luck. Now that she was at this ridiculous level, she couldn’t rely on the latter anymore. Not that she ever did. Her resistance training was a part of that, the armors forged by Goliath another. She could probably face the knights without armor but it was risky. A single bad slash and a leg or two

could be unusable. She doubted they could separate her bone but she wasn't about to put it to the test.

Hunter's Sight, Embered Body Heat and Ashen Wings were the only skills that hadn't reached the maximum of tier two yet. Definitely something she would want to get done before hitting three hundred. Maybe getting one or the other new resistance on the way would be good too. Some of the Hallowfort residents would surely help her get them or level them to the second tier for some good old cash. Scrolling through her skills in her mind, she stopped at Veteran. "Any idea if getting Veteran to the second tier would be beneficial?"

"Anything in the second tier or even higher will be I'm sure. You've had class evolutions... you know how random and specific some of the requirements are. I would assume there might be some that require it. Never had anybody share what the second stage does." He said and laughed, "Though mine is at level twelve and it helps not get splatted by random walking forces of nature. Especially around here. I don't encourage specifically trying to level it up but I guess that won't deter you."

It wouldn't of course but in the end Ilea set her goals simply to reach the end of the second tier for all her class skills. She had a ton of high level resistances already but maybe some people would be willing to give her a rare one or two additional ones. Waiting too long just for that wouldn't be worth it as she had no idea what the possible class evolutions required anyway. Focusing on her fighting and leveling would be reasonable enough. Getting to three hundred would be hard enough already. "Alright, let's find you one of those knights to fight then." She said with a smile, closing her notebook with some new plans written within before putting it into her necklace.



Ilea watched Terok as he teleported away from another sword strike, the knight quickly taking out his bow to shoot at the now flying dwarf. It was a reasonable approach, sending out his spikes of metal to try and penetrate the undead's armor while circling it and avoiding any attacks that might come his way. The dwarf definitely struggled hard in close combat range, the rose knights simply too fast and powerful for him. Ilea didn't know if it was a simple difference in stats or if his skills just didn't stack up well enough. *Probably both*, she thought, blinking between the two when Terok was slowing down noticeably.

"I'll take over. See if you can figure out anything." She said, not getting a response but seeing him fly a bit further off before he went on one knee. The knight's blade slashed at her ash that moved around her, more and more added to it by the second. Wave of Ember crashed into the knight, Ilea adding Destruction whenever an opening presented itself. She played it safe, stepping away and blinking whenever necessary. Even if the blows would likely just scrape against her ash or armor. Some of the feints were simply too difficult to spot, even with all her skills and enhanced reaction speed.

After about half an hour of fighting, she stepped back and spoke, "Feel like taking over again?" The sword of her foe slashed at her sideways, dodged by a single step back before she moved in, a wall of ash forming to push the incoming shield bash aside. The maneuver allowed her to deliver a single punch with a full load of Destruction and Wave of Ember before she had to blink to avoid the blade again.

"I'm alright. I know I won't impress you with my fighting capabilities. We'll see again at two hundred but I doubt I'd ever be able to take one of those." Terok denied the request but she had already assumed as much. While his information and possibly his scavenging skills would be helpful, he wouldn't be a big help in battles. Not that she had planned to team up with him in such a way, putting him against a knight was simply to gauge how he would handle himself under stress. Terok had done well, had fought and tried his best while staying as safe as possible. A little too safe perhaps in her opinion but he had stressed about not having a healing ability and she certainly knew about the importance of that.

Ilea wondered why not everybody simply started with a healing and fighting class. Evolutions would surely help along the way to become something similar to her. More people must've thought about the possibility. Still, while some people in the Shadow's Hand had abilities to self heal, nearly none of the people coming to her resistance training had been healers of any kind. Dany had used a bow and sword so at least there were some.

The fight continued while Terok watched, blow after blow, Ilea falling into her fighting trance before finally the knight fell.

*'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 289] – For defeating an enemy thirty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.'*

None of her skills had leveled but Ilea itched to fight more of them. To continue where she had left off. One knight had fallen and another would take his place. Until she would face the undead knights with their unpredictable styles again. Terok's voice shook her out of her tunnel thinking, "Ridiculous..."

"What is?" Ilea asked, kneeling down as she started to unhook the knight's armor piece by piece. Goliath somehow still had use for Stonehammer steel even after she had brought him so much of it. *He reforges it all again and again. Why does he need so much?*

Terok walked up to the undead and looked at it before he touched the armor, "There is still a connection. Weak but it's there. You should've seen the amount of mana that flowed through while you were fighting. No wonder you took nearly three hours to beat it. They're powered up by a necromancer and not just a little. The mana bursts didn't change their fighting behavior as far as I could tell so I assume it simply recovered some of their health or stamina."

"You mean to tell me undead have stamina? I thought they were simply unstoppable killing machines." Ilea chuckled, taking off the man's helmet. White eyes looked at her, the woman closing them with a smooth motion.

# Chapter 254 Questionable Cooperation

## Chapter 254 Questionable Cooperation

“You thought they just fought like that for three hours without rest?”

Ilea remembered Taleen machines fighting for much longer than that. Miststalkers didn't let up with draining either. “Plenty of monsters can do that.”

Terok grunted, “Aye, emphasis on monsters. Well I can tell you that these are definitely great if you want to train your skills and learn to fight against swordmasters. As much as I hate to admit it, I've not seen a better one than those either.”

Ilea didn't feel like being a smart ass and just nodded, “So they're like me in a sense. Durable and self healing? I never felt anything through my skill though and it allows me to understand the state of someone's body.”

Terok shrugged in his exoskeleton, “I suppose that could be said. Though I think they'd do more damage to you.”

“I feel personally attacked.” Ilea said but she knew from experience that it was true. Her fists weren't blades and had no way of cutting or heavily denting their armor. Neither of her gauntlets had that ability either, her heavy ones too slow to get a clean hit anyway.

“You shouldn’t. You’re not an undead. They’re unfeeling, single purposed in fights and equipped with high quality gear.”

Ilea was all that as well when it came to fighting but she wasn’t about to get into that. “Something’s fueling them then. Is that normal in a dungeon?”

Another shrug, “Guess we’ll find out. Necromancer might be part of the dungeon, any idea where they might be?”

“The palace. It’s in the lit up part of the city but the knights there are much more nasty than anything else I’ve fought here. I don’t feel safe with engaging them.” She explained.

Terok thought about her words, “Maybe I can sneak in?”

“Getting in isn’t much of a problem. Teleporting gets you there but if we alert even one of them it might be over and I’m not dragging your corpse out of there.” Ilea said, “I’ll explain the layout and everything I know. You think about places for us to visit where I can fight non regenerating enemies.”

“Does ash blind them?” She asked, tapping on the notebook with her pen. Terok was working on his rig a couple meters away, both staying in the cathedral at the highest point of Tremor. The dwarf’s metallic eye swirled and zoomed in on the steel plate he was scratching into, part of the previously destroyed head. Night had fallen and the two were sitting in warm magical light provided by the engineer. Ilea had spent most of her nights outside with the Miststalkers, the lack of light in the dungeon never becoming an issue.

Terok had put up the two repaired lamps on the railing of the first floor, overlooking the big hall on ground level. “We tried smoke before, freezing, fire, dark magic. They seem to rush into whatever magic they can find. You’ve seen how big they are haven’t you? Once they notice anything

intruding the dungeon, they group up, more and more appearing. Your high poison resistance might be enough to battle them but combined with the ranged monsters I doubt you'd be very effective. At least I don't believe they can heal themselves." The dwarf explained. Ilea put a question mark next to the hastily sketched Drop Saurian inhabiting the Penumra dungeon.

It would've been the closest to Hallowfort, next to the Descent of course. "Levels unknown?" Ilea asked and saw him nod through her sphere, a small white spark visible in the corner of her eye when he finished fixing another enchantment. "I could try again but it might not be the best start. If they catch me and prevent me from blinking I'd be toast... probably." Their damage potential was hard to gauge but it likely wasn't below the knights of Tremor.

"The city leading to the Descent. You said it was dangerous?" The page in her notebook was flipped, the name of the dungeon in question written at the top of the page.

"Ye. People aren't as nice as they are in town so you have to look out for any random person, dark one or otherwise down there. It's all very old, different monsters from further down sometimes make their way up and walls break, flooding entire sections. Some tunnels leading along the sea bring the most dangerous creatures inside, other than the miststalkers sometimes wandering in at night."

"Blue Reapers they're called. Mind magic supposedly and lightning. They're pretty small but anybody encountering them drops dead damn near immediately. Fuming at the mouth and paralyzed. Even groups can't take them down, the monsters just switching to area attacks just as powerful. The only saving grace is that they don't seem to be interested in the place, likely they wander in from a further away dungeon. Neither do they attack if not provoked."

"Might be a stupid idea to do so then." Ilea said, "Mind magic and lightning are some of my highest resistances though so depending on just how hard they hit they might be perfect for leveling."

Terok laughed at that, waving her off, “Of course the most dangerous magic is what you’re best against. And you struggle with mindless undead swinging swords. Don’t worry though, most everyone in Hallowfort would love to see the little fuckers taken care of. We don’t have guilds here but there are prices for their tiny heads. An easy way to make money as well if you’re looking for that.”

Ilea tapped the notebook and wrote down Blue Reaper below The Descent. “What about further down? You said there were layers to the dungeon, different entirely.”

Terok walked over and gestured for the pen, Ilea handing it to the dwarf who quickly added a couple sections on the page. “The first layer is mostly harmless, to a human it might even be nicer than Hallowfort. Why some of the more nature inclined races rather reside there. The second layer is a big cave with traps and earth magic insects of varying levels. After that comes a big layer filled with water. I never ventured there but came close several times. Further below lies Heroes’ Descent, probably a place built by the city above and those who made the statue Hallowfort sits on. People don’t share information on it but those who can venture there or further either come out rich or die trying.”

He added some information on each of the layers, not many Ilea admitted. If there was a town at the fourth layer called Heroes’ Descent then it probably meant that was the starting point for the initial citizens. “You think it goes much further down?”

“The language of the city is Standard and they liked their statues, murals and inscriptions. It is said that Heroes’ Descent is where the strongest are tested, where they are trained and sent to recover artifacts, magic and technology of the deep. That dungeon was like a religion to them. There is information on more layers there but it’s apparently neither accurate nor plentiful.” He explained, moving a hand through his black greasy hair. “Guess you’ll find out when you go there.”

“Unrelated... did you see the same necromancer connection for the undead knights that nearly killed you?” Ilea asked, switching back to the page about Tremor.

“Now that you mention it... no. You really mean to face them again? One had a triple mark. I doubt you can reasonably fight monsters at level five hundred and higher. Not when they’re so small and specialized.” He said.

Ilea considered it but having fought them she had to agree with him. Even if they didn’t have an ability to recover, the noise and required space to fight had already brought three of them upon her. *Maybe I can lure one out...* A test for later.

“Why would you even fight them? Just go for something you can kill much easier until you’ve safely increased your powers.” Terok suggested.

Ilea couldn’t deny the logic but it hadn’t brought her to where she was today, what she was. “Doesn’t sound very fun, now does it?” He laughed instead of lecturing her, a trait she definitely appreciated after the treatment most humans had given her.

“I think you should try the Descent then. Maybe... but only maaaybe try to fight a Blue Reaper. Only if your resistances are in the second tier and you have some way to heal damage to your mind. Otherwise I strongly suggest not doing it. The monsters in the descent range from level two hundred to triple marks in the third layer already, depending on how unlucky you are. Or lucky as someone like you might see it.” He said with a smile.

She nodded, “Sounds reasonable. What about the monsters in the lake below Hallowfort? I saw some shapes but decided not to engage back when I was there.”

Terok shook his head, “Nothing that would be worth the trouble. Most creatures are below two hundred even, except the whales. Black creatures lined with bone if the stories are to be believed. Some say they feast on Miststalkers at night. I suggest you wait with finding out until you can survive and kill whole groups of stalkers.”

Ilea grunted but if there was a reason not to fight underwater, she definitely welcomed it. “Any other places or monsters? Not underground maybe?”

Terok scratched his beard but looked skeptical, “None of the beasts are any easier to deal with than what is down here. The few you might be able to kill without getting overwhelmed are either below your level or too elusive to catch, even for specialized trackers. You could go look for dark ones farther north or hunt Feynor but you don’t strike me as a murderer.”

*At least I don’t look it.* She considered coldly, her mouth a thin line as she remembered all the people she had killed. The faces blurred together. His assumption was right of course, she wouldn’t hunt intelligent life, conscious feeling creatures for her own power alone. Revenge, self defense or at least a highly irritating character would be reason enough but purely for her own gains? That was a line she didn’t want to cross. The human in her, the one born and raised on Earth with modern morals and ideas couldn’t simply shed it all. Perhaps, she thought, if there were a reason standing above life itself. For the greater good or to stop some overwhelming force threatening all she holds dear. Even then it would be a hard choice, one she hoped she’d never have to face.

“Never heard of Feynor. Another kind of awakened beast?”

Terok grunted as another plate of metal floated his way, the dwarf starting to cut into it with a thin black knife, “No. They reside as close to the highest mountains in the north as they can. Sentient and apparently related to Dragons themselves. The look apparently is closer to Lizardmen but I’ve never met any. Everyone who has though reports they attack on sight. A tough people but as long as they stay far away from here I don’t care what they do.”

“Well I don’t care about sentients as long as they don’t stand in my way.”

The dwarf finished another enchantment as he talked, “You mentioned you’ve fought Taleen? There’s a dungeon a couple hours flight northwest but I’ll be honest, that one would be more personal interest. Guardians would hardly make a dent in your experience and any of the higher class machines are few and far between.”

Ilea looked at him, “Fought Centurions before. I think I could trash them easily now. They were around three hundred so if there was a dungeon with



more of them...,”

“Doubt it. What I heard was a bunch of Guardians and enough traps to kill a whole expedition of veterans. Then again that’s the usual when it comes to Taleen. Paranoid fuckers.” He murmured the last part.

“Sounds similar to what I’ve seen. I think I’ll go with something else. Definitely plan to face another Praetorian if I hit another power spike.” Ilea said offhandedly, the dwarf just shaking his head.

He continued his work, “Well let me know, their tech is amazing and I’d love to see the inner parts of their production facilities.”

“You think you could replicate anything?” Ilea asked, remembering the teleportation gate Claire and Christopher were working on.

Terok laughed, his voice reverberating in the big hall. “You don’t think anybody has tried? No, I go my own way about it. The best dwarven engineers have cursed the designs as impossible, I’m not going to pretend I’m better than them. Inspiration is what I seek. I’m a metal mage and engineer, not a machine designer. They can try to figure out the autonomous designs of the Taleen for as long as they want to. I doubt they’d have made it easy enough to simply replicate. Not with how many traps and defensive measures their towns are lined with.”

*Maybe a teleportation gate might not be in the books then.* Christopher would continue to try of course and both Ilea and Claire would likely fund him anyway. Just for the chance of bringing such a technology to humans and the Shadow’s Hand. Travel time and supply lines could be cut significantly if something like a working teleportation network existed and was in their hands. “I’ll think about it. Maybe if all the other options don’t work out.” Ilea said but she saw the chances of that as rather low.

The Descent already seemed much more promising, even the Miststalkers did. If at some point she could overwhelm them with her own magic. “Tell me about the Kingsguard. I won’t be much help in the Descent but I can scout out this palace you talked about and maybe find out how to get in.”

Ilea sighed, “Didn’t we talk about this? I don’t want you to die Terok.”

The dwarf clasped his hands together and smiled, “I think you want to fight by yourself. You don’t want to look after someone and you don’t want to be responsible for people’s deaths. I know how you feel. Trust me, I do. With that said you’re not going to change the way I think, I live. I’m not going to let an opportunity like this go and the people waiting for my debt are not going to wait forever. I’d like to still have a house when I get back. Either you give me ten pieces of gold or you tell me all you know about this palace and I’ll find my own way around and into it. My choice and my fault if I end up as a bloody smudge in this city.”

Ilea grinned, “Are you blackmailing me with your own life?”

“Why not? You obviously care. I’d expect you to do the same. Maybe you should start trusting in my abilities as much as I trust in yours.” Terok said.

Ilea stared at him. He was calm and cocky. A grin was on his face as he waited for her response. There was a reason she liked him, the feeling hadn’t been wrong after all. Despite his abilities he had a drive and he was willing to take risks. Risks that would cost his life if he fucked up. “Yea alright I’ll tell you what I know. Not much by the way. Whatever you find I get first pick. Take any history related things, books and such as well. The elf likes that stuff.”

One of his eyebrows was raised at that but Ilea kept talking, “If I find anything I can easily kill we can at some point go together so you get to two hundred finally. You’re working with me now understand? No secrets. Try not to be useless.”

“I won’t be. I’ll repay the debt I owe you doubly. We can work out the relationship as we go.”

Ilea snorted, “You’ll be dead before that ever happens. The elf I mentioned, he should come back here at some point. Just mention that you work with me and that you help me look for artifacts. I doubt he’d kill you but I’d definitely give it a chance.”

He waved her off, “At least I can work with him if you never return. Only reason he probably talked to you is because he doesn’t want to go in there.”

“Then you know how to bargain with him at least. I don’t think he’s particularly dangerous anyway. Maybe he can train you to resist curses if you find something to trade with him. Then you could visit Goliath without me babysitting you.” Ilea suggested with a smirk before flipping her notebook to the Tremor map. “Come have a look.”

Terok put down the metal plate he was working on and checked out the map she had already worked on. “You’re a lousy cartographer.” was his first comment, Ilea flipping the side of his head before she moved to the next page, a rough sketch of the palace and the different rooms.

“Copy that and go from there. The doors are closed and in this section everything is still powered.” She motioned to some of the rooms and hallways. *I think it looks nice.* “This would probably be the best place to try and get in. There’s a single guard and he didn’t patrol as far as I could tell. The door is open. I suggest putting something between to allow teleportation to work.”

“This door here has two guards, why I think it’s the most interesting but they’re somewhat close and you might have difficulties getting there depending on how far you can teleport. I’ve only fought one of them, the variant with a single big sword and no shield. They have wind magic or something of the like that could cut through my Niameer armor from fifty meters away. Faster than I could move with my wings so I suggest you don’t alert them.” Ilea explained what she knew so far.

“The elf is still translating the log book of the captain of the guard but he got bored and went to explore other places. Maybe you’ll find something in there that helps.”

Terok nodded, “Not a lot to work with but I’ll check it out. I assume that coloring means you’ve cleared the area?”

Ilea confirmed with a grunt, “You can check the rest out as well but I didn’t find anything other than undead, dust and really... really old furniture.”

# Chapter 255 Alien Town

## Chapter 255 Alien Town

“I’ll try not to alert them at all.” Terok said, “Can you leave the notebook here for a while before you go?”

Ilea looked at him, “No.” There was plenty in there she didn’t want the dwarf to know, information that might be worth something to him as well or could be used against her. “Hurry up and copy it now.”

He frowned, “I don’t have paper.”

“Lousy cartographer my ass.” Looking through her necklace, she summoned a book she remembered was a collection of poems, many pages empty or only containing single paragraphs, “Use that.” She said, adding a piece of coal.

Terok looked at her with a smile before he spoke, “You’re shitting me right? You don’t have a second pen?”

“You didn’t have a second ass when I saved yours back in there.” Ilea simply said in a dry tone. “To reach the city below Hallowfort I just go down?”

Terok took the coal and started cutting into it with his small knife. He either didn’t have a pack or lost it somewhere in the dungeon. Ilea left food, water and other necessities up to him. If he was to work with her, that was the least of his concerns. “There’s an old elevator. Ask the guards or Goliath.

They'll let you know where. Doubt you'll miss it." He grumbled, having cut a perfectly lined piece of coal that he quickly sharpened and clad in a casing of metal to create a professional looking pencil.

Ilea looked impressed, "At least I can use you for my pencil needs."

Terok chuckled and started copying her map of the palace and Tremor itself onto an empty page of the book she had lent him. Summoning her helmet, she sat next to him while he worked, making sure he didn't check any other pages of her notebook. They didn't talk anymore, the dwarf expertly sketching what she had created in the past months of exploration. He was done twenty minutes later, closing both books and handing hers back. "I'll start as soon as all enchantments are back up and running. Are you going to wait out the night?"

Ilea stretched as she got up, the notebook vanishing into the necklace under her armor. "No, I'm leaving. Guess I'll be back in a week or so depending on how it goes. Leave a message if you're not here. Mention me being away as well in case Elfie gets back."

Terok nodded, metal floating back to him as he continued his repairs, "Will do. Good luck Ilea. You won't regret saving me."

*I don't think I will.* She thought and spread her wings, flying to the top of the massive cave and the opening she knew would be there in the darkness. Looking back, she found the two floodlights illuminating the cathedral hall and the two meter headless robot standing within. A smile was on her face, the new information as well as new possibilities floating in her mind as she exited the mountain.

Mists covered the land, crows flying in the distance, moonlight reflecting off their leathery wings as ash shrouded her in darkness. Quickly, she moved over the desolate terrain, ignoring any moving creatures as she sped up and made her way towards the Penumra crack. The place that would lead

to Hallowfort and the Descent. She had to find enemies in a similar or higher level range as the knights, preferably less durable against her attacks.

*Perhaps able to advance some of my resistances as well.* Diving into the crevice in the mountainous terrain, she quickly found herself in front of the gaping cave leading down into the Penumra dungeon. Terok had confirmed her instincts with what he had told her about the Drop Saurians. An enemy she might want to face at a later time. So many she had already added to that list. Ignoring the dungeon, she made her way down the caves and towards Hallowfort.

Quickly moving through the darkness, Ilea finally blinked out into the open. Light shining off the crystals reflected off her ash and armor, the woman landing as her wings disintegrated. The dark one standing on the other side of the bridge looked at her but didn't move as she walked over. The ropes strained to hold her weight, the wood groaning below her. Stepping onto the massive statue on the other side, she looked up at the three meters tall warrior. The dark one was clad in heavy black full plate armor, two big horns jutting upwards from his helmet.

***[Warrior – lvl 228]***

Ornaments of varying detail and design decorated each piece. The helmet was closed off entirely, neither eyes nor face visible, if such were even part of the being standing before her. “Greetings.” Ilea said and bowed her head slightly towards the warrior in black, “I am told the elevator leading to the Descent is located in town.”

The massive form bowed, an ethereal voice speaking to her a moment later, “Greetings friend of ash. You speak truth. Find the stairwell leading down from within the establishment called the Abyss. I would lead you there yet I am not to leave my post.”

Ilea smiled below her helmet, her smaller form as well as forward curving horns making her look a little like his younger sister. “I’ll find it. Thank you, dark plated warrior.” She said, a little unsure of the title in the end but it felt right to her. Goliath had used random descriptions of her in their conversations and she liked the aesthetics it added.

“You honor me ashen one.” He said and bowed again. For a simple guard, this one was definitely both the strongest, most stylish and friendliest Ilea had ever met.

*The Abyss...*, She checked the signs and descriptions of the various different looking shops and houses as she walked through town. Now that she wasn't just passing through, she noticed more of the architecture. Most of the houses were built from stone or metal, with varying degrees of craftsmanship. Either they had very different ideas about how and what to build or it was somehow normal to build your own house, however basic it looked in the end. Ilea stopped in front of what looked like a big bird's nest, closed off at the top where a latch had been placed between the dense mesh of steel thread.

*Perhaps some kind of metal magic bird?* Other buildings looked like what a more advanced bug would build. Mud and stone somehow hardened and formed into the sad dome shaped houses that looked to be melting. Many of them she couldn't penetrate with her Sphere. Priorities were different here, warding and enchantments cheaper than capable builders it seemed. The places she could look into were empty for the most part, some even gave her the impression of being completely abandoned. There were people on the street but it was definitely not busy.

Nobody acknowledged her, Ilea identifying them all. Dwarves, dark ones, cat and lizard beings as well as some more exotic creatures floating or crawling about. Most were below two hundred but definitely close enough, just like Terok. A certain strength was required to survive in the North but apparently it was less than she had expected initially. Surviving was of course different to thriving. She doubted many of them had seen a level up message in months, years or even decades.

They were veterans, every single one of them. While she wanted to fight the monsters lurking in the north, the people living here had to survive around them. Had to somehow make a living, collect things to sell or grow food themselves. Hallowfort was a safe haven, a place to rest and prepare. For creatures of all kinds. Ilea wondered how many of them were actually born here, how many knew no different life but the one surrounded by vicious beasts and dungeons. Nature that wanted to kill you just as much as the

monsters looking for food. How many of them cared? Terok seemed content enough about his scavenging life, about going into dangerous places to make a bunch of money or find some rare metal he could use for his rig.

Goliath was probably hundreds or thousands of years old but he was content with forging and staying in his domain. *A human would go mad after all that time...*, Then again there was no human on Earth who could get to that age, at least not to Ilea's knowledge. How one of her kind would react and change after all that time was unknown, especially with existing skills like Meditation, Hunter Recovery or Mental Resistance. Goliath didn't seem to strive for power or domination, only focused on creation and metal. She could definitely see someone like Balduur following a similar path. Ilea had survived alone for months as well and she was pretty sure there was no major damage to her psyche, mostly because of the Meditation skill.

To think she could now fight for hours at a time without even getting a headache was definitely scary, thinking about the possible heights a human or any other species could get to when the system governing skills and classes was involved. The reliance on killing to level up wasn't lost on her, the saving grace for the world's morality was that wild beasts were still worse and more powerful than any sentient she had met, be it elf, dark one or human. Taking a random stairwell leading downwards and into the statue, she soon found a sign that read '*Abyss*'. Most of Hallowfort seemed to be located within the statue and not atop it, many of the races living here likely not reliant on light, perhaps even averse to it.

The living quarters were much more chaotic here, Ilea only really understanding the holes, doors and windows through her sphere. Even then some of the openings looked too small, the furniture too alien for her to grasp its purpose. It was there however and in a way she was happy to find herself in a place so distant from a human settlement. She was the stranger here, in connections and race as well as culture. Nobody looked at her black armor twice other than perhaps thinking about stealing it. Her cold stare at whatever feline or reptile eyes looked at her in a shady way quickly put those thoughts out of their minds. They would regret it if it didn't.



A single magical lamp placed in what looked like a worn steel lantern lit up the underground street lined with closed doors of stone, wood or steel. It flickered from time to time as she made her way towards the torchlight illuminating white lettering spelling out the word Abyss. Warm golden light fought hard to penetrate the murky glass windows of the building cast into the stone wall, simply cut into the the inside of the once impressive monument to whatever civilization had resided here. The name definitely fit with the surroundings, the slightly damp street leading up to it, holes and loose rock as well as mushrooms decorating the tunnel.

Ilea wondered if her poison resistance prevented an early death a normal non fighting human would experience in these parts. The smell definitely wouldn't be a tourist attraction but she was used to much worse. The control over her senses inside her sphere additionally allowed her to reduce the intensity of the stench at least somewhat. Nobody checked patrons at entry, so she simply walked in. The heavy wooden door was painted in black but the smell suggested an alternative color source. At least compared to what humans used normally.

The room opened up, an immediate stairwell leading down into the big hall. Magic lights lined the walls, most of them warm but some going towards a reddish or even blue tone. Wave lengths some creatures might prefer. Ilea noted that parts of the pub were completely dark as well, as if the light was sucked from there. The whole left side was a bar with bottles, trinkets and apparatuses lining the shelves and wall. Their colors and shapes reminded her more of a medieval alchemist's shop or how she'd envision one. *Still haven't been to a really high end one...*

Perhaps this was what she was looking for. With self healing there was rarely a moment she could use a health potion and if she really did, Ilea doubted her body would be capable of summoning and opening a bottle, let alone drink it. Other tinctures might be interesting though. Maybe there was something like a spell potency or strength potion. Considering how expensive low level health potions already were it might not be worth it.

She walked down the stairs, some of the people looking at her as she made her way towards the bar. A jingle played in the background but she didn't notice until she was standing at the bar that there was a group of floating

creatures moving and summoning some sort of black swirls to create the sounds. *Magic band*. The whooshing sounds and high pitched noises in between reminded her more of an alternative meditation session rather than background music in a pub. She was the stranger here, that was for sure.

“What can I get ya?” The cat person behind the bar asked, black fur and yellow piercing eyes as well as ears at the top of his head finished the look. The male voice almost a purr made her smile. If cats became more humanoid, this one definitely kept the smoothness she associated with the animal.

*Do they keep cats as pets as well?* “Ale if you have any.” She replied, looking at his casual pants and lack of a shirt. The black shorts seemed to be there more for the pockets and belt lined with tools, daggers and cleaning rags rather than fashion. The cat person purred and looked into her eyes for a moment before stepping aside smoothly. She noted that no noise came from the movement.

***[Mage – Lvl 211]***

*He could compete with Walter.* Ilea doubted however that he ale was anywhere close as good, especially with what Terok had given her previously. Perhaps she had to get the old barkeeper to visit and teach some of the brewers.

An open bottle was placed before her a moment later, “Five copper.” He said, Ilea summoning the amount and putting in on the counter.

“Looking for the elevator leading to the Descent.” She said, the cat cleaning a glass with one of the rags.

He pointed towards the opposite corner of the room, an opening in the wall revealing steps leading downwards, “I suggest waiting. A Blue Reaper was sighted yesterday. Sorry lad who went down made it out half dead only thanks to the healer close by.”

“Any money to be made if I kill it?” She asked, noticing a nearby lizardman looking her way with interest.

The cat shrugged, “The usual price. Ninety silvers for the corpse. Maybe one gold coin.”

“Where do I bring it?” She asked in return.

“Big building up top, has a Dragoon skull hanging outside.” The barkeeper supplied, Ilea tipping a piece of silver for the information. The cat’s eyes narrowed but he nodded and took the money.

A creature clad in a long black coat, white mask resembling a vicious predator adorning its face approached her. It looked like black mist was all residing inside the closed coat and behind the mask, “Warrior in flesh. Human. I greet thee. Though no dark one I beseech thee to heed the call of the Dark Protector. The one to unite all and bring peace...,”

Ilea grabbed the bottle and took a sip before she stood up, completely ignoring the rambling priest. *Yep, definitely need Walter here. Or bring some apprentices to him. Business idea maybe.* Walking towards the corner with her bottle, she noted that the closer she got the more people looked her way, some speaking in weird gibberish to each other before what she assumed was laughter came from wherever their voices were produced. Insect like beings, possibly dark ones.

“Meet me here, the Revered one Sato if you will fight in the great war. Treasures and fame wait for thy human soul...,” the ethereal voice somehow carried to her ears but Ilea had no interest in another war. Human or not.

The band kept on playing as she passed through the opening in the wall, making her way down the stairs and coming out in a big stone cellar.

A warrior at level two hundred stood guard, looking similar to the one near the bridge but smaller. Smaller even than her but the sword on his back looked vicious nonetheless. “Blue Reaper down there somewhere. Here to kill it?”

Ilea didn’t reply as ash formed around her, swirling lazily as some of it condensed in spheres behind her back, limbs forming at the same time. Her

buffs went to their heights before she walked off into the open elevator shaft, chains leading downwards on each side but no platform visible. Wings spread behind her, not quite enough space to expand fully but still slowing her down. The descent was longer than she had expected, Ilea floating for a minute at least before she hit the ground.

No light was around her, more and more ash coming to life as she took in the surroundings. A tunnel, built by something sentient. Somehow the way the bricks were laid in the stone walls, the way the ground was cobbled and lined up, she thought it more familiar than the town up above. It had been a city at some point Terok had said, a city that revered the Descent, the dungeon above which it had been built. *Or in which it had been built.*

***‘ding’ ‘You have entered The Descent dungeon’***

Nothing more, nothing less. She couldn't detect any movement, any noise coming from around her. Already she could chose three directions, hallways leading into the dark. Activating her Hunter's Sight, she focused on what she knew about the Blue Reapers. Mind magic and electricity, as well as more than two legs. The ground was worn, many travelers, scavengers and adventurers having walked here before.

# Chapter 256 The Blue Reaper

## Chapter 256 The Blue Reaper

Not finding any sign of life, Ilea walked into one of the adjacent tunnels at random. A couple minutes of walking later, she noted there was blood on the floor. Somewhat dry but her sphere picked it up in the pitch black darkness. No corpse either but that could mean anything. There was however no trail leading anywhere so she kept walking onward. A clicking noise soon started resounding as she walked farther.

Stopping near the opening at the end of the hallway, she was pretty sure whatever was causing the clicking resided inside the room or hall beyond. *Alright Jalapeno monster...*, Her wings taking her upwards, she floated in when a hard push of mind magic smashed against her mental defenses. A blinding headache made her stumble before her healing repaired the damage. Another wave washed over her, bringing her to one knee as she breathed hard, blood flowing from her nose when she heard a shrieking noise coming from ahead.

Taking a stumbling step, her healing mana flowed through her brain. The next step was more steady and now the creature was in range of her sphere. Six legs ending in sharp bone, two legs held up and a sparkling ball forming between them. Its head looked a little like a mantis, two antennas growing upwards. The blue lightning illuminated the creature like an ominous predator in the dark, its bony carapace interspersed by blue color before a flash of lightning zapped towards her. Ilea dodged to the side, quick enough to avoid the scorching beam.

Her mind heated up again as she saw the creature recoil, screeching in pain as it scuttled backwards. Another ball of lightning formed and it would have certainly made for a dangerous look were it not for the fact that the monster was barely as big as a dachshund.

*[Blue Reaper - ??]*

Lightning zapped her way, ash forming a wall before her. It barely managed to penetrate the wall of ash and her Veil behind. Muscles tensing up, Ilea felt the energy course through her, some of it converted to mana and stamina, the rest burning through her skin and organs. Healing the wounds, she decided to dodge the blasts again. It wasn't enough to incapacitate her but a series of attacks would be dangerous. *That small little fucker is more powerful than Trian....*,

The concept was somehow hard to grasp but it was the reality of things. Ilea decided not to take anymore attacks, the testing phase over and she had learned what she had wanted to know. Can she take the attacks and stay alive. The mental note was ticked off while she blinked next to the creature. Landing on it, she spread ash around, her limbs crashing into it with Wave of Ember as she held it down with her hands and body. Lightning coursed through her from the panicking beast as her mind was rattled by the powerful magic.

Her fist landed on the monster's head, damaging one of the antennas as it screeched, trying to get out of her grasp. It had a surprising amount of mana stored in that small body, Ilea's healing barely keeping up with the ridiculous damage it put out every second. The second hit of her fist onto one of its legs broke both the bone and the stone floor below. The mental attack subsided somewhat but the lightning continued. Ilea repeated the attack on another of its legs, the creature still trying to get away from her, clawing at the ash with its sharp arms.

Another crack resounded and then another, the monster screeching as a massive mental attack blinded Ilea's senses for a moment. Her body locked up, the creature crawling out from her grasp in the short time. Three of its eight legs broken, it still moved rather quickly but Ilea still heard it, saw it in her sphere as soon as she had control over her senses back. She saw one

of its eyes had blown out, likely from the feedback of the mental attack it had just used. A blink brought her right back next to the beast, her ashen limbs smashing into it, Ilea stomping down as hard as she could.

Lightning flashed in the dark, the smell of burnt skin in her nose as she stomped again. The exoskeleton was tough but nothing compared to the knights in Tremor. A third kick broke another leg, Ilea now kneeling down and wailing on the creature as it spend the rest of its mana to send out waves of lightning and mind magic. All taken in by Ilea, resisted and healed. A final crack resounded, the back of the creature breaking and killing it instantly.

Ilea coughed and rolled to the side, breathing hard as she noticed the pain in her throat and eyes. Blood had ran down her face and several of her organs had been damaged by the lightning. *Resistance my ass...*, It was no wonder scavengers feared them as much as they did.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 363] – For defeating an enemy ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 256 – Five stat points awarded’***

Ilea coughed as she lay there, pain turned off now that her adrenaline wore off, eyes reconstructing in the bloody sockets left behind after the energy had popped them. She felt alive. Another level had been gained. *Probably five to ten of them for a level... maybe less.* What they lacked in defense, they certainly held in magic power. For Ilea the difference was that these enemies she could kill in a couple minutes while knights even at her own level took hours to take down.

Problems would occur when there were groups of them. She was fairly sure two she could handle. The mind magic at least but the lightning only started

when she had touched it. It was surprising that their defense was as tough as it was considering the powerful magical ability. *Has to stand against the monsters too, probably more often than any human or other sentient explorer.* Calming down from the short but intense battle, she checked her health and found it topped off again, her mana recovering quickly thanks to Meditation. No pain remained and her resistances coupled with defensive skills and healing had prevailed.

Blue Reapers were on the menu. Grinning at her success, Ilea stood up and lifted the small corpse. Trying to smash its head proved difficult, the skull while tiny had insane resistance. So much so that the stone below cracked before the bone did. The joints in the legs were the weak spots and Ilea carefully checked where they were and in which way they could bend. Simply smashing them might be less effective than just bending them backwards with enough force.

After a couple minutes of testing, she found that holding them at a certain angle and then punching down was the easiest way to crack them. As soon as the creature couldn't move as quickly, it would be a sitting duck. If it overwhelmed her, she could simply leave and heal up before coming back to finish the job. She considered even several of them could be manageable using such tactics. It had a way to see her, both in the ash as well as the dark hallway but as much was expected. Ilea assumed most higher level beings had some way to sense mana or living beings other than purely their eyes.

Otherwise more people would've used such a loophole to hunt blinded foes. *Some probably did...*, It would be the absolute jackpot to find an animal easily blinded by ash and unable to respond to her ashen limbs. Blue Reapers weren't that but they were high level and quickly killed monsters. "Now to find your nest little bugs..."

Storing the broken and bleeding corpse in her necklace, she walked on. Another positive of the reaper was that her armor hadn't been damaged. The coating had heated up a little, small lightning forms showing where the magic had surged the strongest but otherwise the Rose Hunter set was perfectly fine. Ilea hoped she wasn't murdering a perfectly sentient tribe of insect people or dark ones that simply couldn't communicate with her.



Maybe the clicking had been a warning. *Not enough to justify attacking me with a killing blow to anybody with less resistances and defense.*

More cave openings and tunnels as well as cracks leading to lower floors showed themselves to her as she walked onward. Trying to busy herself, Ilea used her wings to navigate through the small tunnel, keeping them a little tucked in at all times whilst heating up her body and ash with Embered Body Heat. Hunter's Sight worked overtime as well, Ilea looking for any trace of Blue Reapers or anything else she could hunt. The goal was of course to get all her remaining skills to at least the second stage and level twenty. Resistances would get to whatever she could manage but considering that monster had managed to blind her with mind magic alone and she hadn't even gained a level there, she wasn't about to have her brain fried. Not if it was a wild beast doing the magic.

Half an hour passed before she heard another clicking, the grin on her face returning as she prepared for battle. This time she slowly floated towards the noise, her magic adding more and more ash to the swirling and writhing mass that surrounded her. A pulse of magic punched into her mind, her wings wavering as she lost control, catching herself a split second later as her ash surrounded the reaper. Limbs of ash extended and smashed into it, Wave of Ember coursing through the monster while its destructive power flowed through her mind. Ilea found that with meditation and her healing, the damage was controllable.

The lightning attacks it sent out were blocked by her ash and Veil, the damage that got through was healed as well, Ilea building up more ash than she could reasonably control but it made it harder for the enemy magic to get to her. Focusing on the eight limbs, she kept on attacking, dodging the lightning strikes whenever possible. Jumping closer right after it had missed an attack, she grabbed one of its legs and broke it just the way she had done with the corpse's. Other than the lightning nearly locking up her muscles in the process and frying a good portion of her right side, there were no problems with the move. The leg cracked at the joint and Ilea moved back again, healing and meditating as the beast screeched in pain and anger.

Its magic continued to blast into her but she simply out healed whatever got through her defenses, a thick mist of ash clouding the whole area up to the

ceiling. The mantis like head kept its eyes on her, broken limb uselessly dragged at its side as it continuously sent its destructive waves of magic power towards her mind and body. Again, Ilea blinked next to it and broke another leg at the expense of her own health. With two of its legs broken and more damage coming in from her ashen limbs continuously, it finally decided to try and flee.

Checking her health, Ilea found it well above half and simply appeared next to the running creature, grabbing on before she started smashing her fist into the carapace around its small frame. The dull sounds of bone hitting against rock resounded through the dark halls, only the thrumming of lightning occasionally adding to the noise. Ten hits later, something cracked and silence returned to the halls of the old city, leading farther down into the Descent.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 329] – For defeating an enemy seventy or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 249 – Five stat points awarded’*

Ilea smiled, much less damaged from this encounter than the last. Not overextending at first certainly helped. Blinking before the lightning hit her was preferable but having the whole area full of ash made it hard to get it all away from the moving critter. If the ash touched her and the enemy, she couldn't blink. *Next time I'll do better.* Still, it was much simpler than facing the knights. She was a little annoyed at how much experience these simple insects gave her just because of the high level and powerful magic. They were less of a challenge that was sure. *Terok would be fried immediately though... as would many others. He could fight the knight and survive.*

Of course she could see some logic in it all but already she was craving to fight two or three at a time to make it more of a challenge. *I really am a nutty masochistic fighting crack...*, She knew it already but thoughts like

that still sometimes surprised her. She had reached level two hundred, had a house and thousands of gold pieces invested in a growing city. Ilea had the option to lie back, enjoy all the food in the world and maybe bring skiing to Ravenhall and Elos. A life of comfort and pleasantries, with friends and maybe even family at some point. Behind the walls of Ravenhall. One of the strongest humans and a power to fear.

Yet she was here, in the Descent, a pitch black tunnel somewhere in the north with blood dripping down her chin from the lightning blasts that had again nearly fucked up her eyes. And she loved it. Loved the thrill, the next challenge, the next monster to kill in a fight for survival. Considering the damage they each dealt to the other it wasn't just a hunt, not a predator and prey, just two magic beings brawling until one was dead. Ilea refused the notion that she was simply doing this for power. It felt more like monsters acting on instinct. If she wanted to, she could already be an influence in human territory. She didn't do this to become the empress of Lys, nor the head of the Shadow's Hand. She did it because it was fun.

Storing the corpse, she continued onward. Next to experience she'd be gaining silver from the Blue Reapers as well. Not the reason she was there but it was a welcome addition. She noted that the hallway ended, a big chunk in the wall missing to reveal a cave like tunnel beyond. The marks and cuts on the walls as well as the size of the opening indicated that the reapers had carved it out. *How long did that take to do?*

It was likely the place or one of many they used to come into the Descent. Ilea crouched and moved into it, finding the opening just high enough to crawl. Were this a tunnel of Rhyvor, filled with Rose Knights crawling around she'd turn back and seal it with whatever she could find. Though a hyper aggressive behavior on her part coupled with the small space for reapers to escape, it might work. Ilea followed the tunnel, crawling through as she listened for the clicking noise.

Ten minutes later, she heard it. The tunnel wasn't completely straight, allowing her to blink to safety, at least against lightning blasts coming her way. Either the reapers hadn't anticipated a foe to do something like this or this was literally the stupidest way to engage them for anybody but her. She

found the critter behind a bend, her mind immediately blasted with magic as soon as it heard her. The thing didn't even need a line of sight. *Just like me.*

Listening carefully while she healed her mind, Ilea was pretty sure there was only one of them. Blinking behind the reaper, she wrestled it and resisted the lightning that immediately spread through her body. A crack resounded and then another before she let go and blinked back to her safe spot, at least lightning wise. The smell of burnt skin came to her nose as her tissue reformed and healed. Watching the beast writhe in pain at its broken bones made her focus on recovery for a minute before she blinked in again, all her offensive skills working in tandem. Another two of its limbs were broken, its central shell showing a crack before Ilea blinked back again. The tunnel was an even better way to fight them than the hallways from before.

***'ding' 'Mental Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'***

Smiling at the news, she appeared above the creature and smashed her fists onto the carapace as well as the little space allowed. With her high Dexterity as well as perception it was less of a detriment than she initially anticipated. Another four hits and several sections of her body burnt and damaged, the reaper fell.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 341] – For defeating an enemy eighty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

Storing the corpse, she crawled on to find more. Meditation and Hunter Recovery worked hard to restore her to full health in the process. Her crawling speed wasn't exactly spectacular, allowing her to meditate during her search.

Ilea grew a little frustrated after crawling for two hours and not finding a single enemy. The tunnels weaved into the stone, more and more ways to explore or get lost in. She tried to sketch it out in her notebook but made sure to cut into the stone as well. Little crosses to mark where she had been before with arrows to show where she had come from. The markings were perfectly visible to her sphere in the dark tunnels. Ilea had expected the

claustrophobic and dark space to be at least somewhat of an issue but she felt like a crazed miner sure to find a new vein in the gold rush.

The only problem she saw was if the reapers repaired the tunnels, perhaps removed her markings but she had no idea to know. At least the critters weren't that fast, her blink likely able to outpace them easily before she could heal and meditate. For a while at least.

# Chapter 257 Wormholes

## Chapter 257 Wormholes

Ilea stopped still in her tracks, already in the dark tunnels for hours without finding a single Reaper. Straining her ears, she heard the clicking. Quicker, alert and still quite a distance away. There were at least two of them. A challenge she wasn't sure she was ready for. Still, she wanted to test it. After such a long search she wouldn't just turn around and crawl back. Ilea trusted her defenses and her recovery. Blinking away was always an option. *If you manage to stay conscious...*

It was the biggest danger of course, the beasts simply overwhelming her with mind magic. Ilea had no idea how two of them together would enhance the attack. Was it just twice as strong? *Guess we'll find out in a second.* Crawling around the bend, the clicking intensified, two Reapers quickly crawling towards her before the magic wailed on her mind. Ilea stayed awake. Counting the seconds as she watched the monsters form balls of lightning, she blinked back around the bend and saw the bolts flash into the walls. Her health was draining and a pounding was inside her head that hadn't been there before.

A headache so strong she had to turn off her perception of pain, most of her focus going towards it. She heard the sound of dripping, realizing it was her own blood coming out of her nose and ears. The damage was still manageable, her healing working hard against the enemy attacks that kept on coming. In waves at least and not as a constant stream. She filled the

tunnel with ash and heated it up, seeing the critters move through and towards her.

When one of them was around the bend, she blinked behind the one in the back. Grabbing on to its hind leg, she cracked it while the lightning coursed through her. The mantis like head of the Reaper ahead turned, lightning flashing towards her. Ilea held up the monster she was still holding onto, the magic running through it, through her and then into the ground. The dazed state and movements of the beast before her made her grin, despite her draining health and heavily injured body. To her dismay the current on her touch didn't stop. Ilea instead broke another leg and then blinked away.

*Four seconds...*, She thought, the mind magic having gotten weaker. The injured Reaper not quite as proficient anymore with two broken legs and a burnt up body. At least the lightning could injure them as well. She coughed, several spots in her throat bleeding and burnt. Ilea focused on her organs, bringing them back to working order before she blinked again, making more distance between the healthy reaper and herself. It was dangerous as she was moving into unknown territory but so far she hadn't heard more clicking.

Another bout of healing and she noticed that the injured bug was falling behind. Coughing again as she tried to smile, she blinked next to the healthy one and then again to the already injured one. Grabbing on, she broke another leg before she started wailing on its central shell. Each hit sent sparks into the dark tunnel, bouts of lightning surging around them before cutting into the stone and scorching both the woman and the wall. Finally a crack resounded and the beast died, Ilea blinking away immediately right before a flash of magic burned into the ground.

Again and again she blinked, trying to make as much distance as possible between her and the healthy Blue Reaper, the marks on the walls visible in her sphere like a lifeline guiding her to safety. Stopping when the mind magic didn't reach her anymore, she started healing. Her body was in a rough shape but she had been through worse. Perhaps not much worse but definitely worse. The dangerous part was that one of the monsters was still alive and looking for her.

Ignoring the message about the first Reaper for now, she simply focused on healing as much as she could. When she felt comfortable to face the remaining foe, she blinked towards it. Twice and she was next to it. Ash spread out and heated up, limbs smashing into it with Wave of Ember before she grabbed and broke one of its limbs, blinking back right after as the lightning still wreathed through her body, destroying what it could before it burnt into the stone. Taking a moment to heal, she continued her now tried and proven tactic against the Blue Reapers. Five minutes later, the beast was dead.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 380] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 333] – For defeating an enemy seventy or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 257 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 250 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14’*

*‘ding’ ‘Lightning Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6’*



*‘ding’ ‘New Skills available in Inheritor of Eternal Ash’*

Ilea was lying on her back, coughing and healing. Her sense of pain was entirely shut off but her recovery skill certainly painted a bleak picture of her body’s state. Soon it would be fine again but fighting two at the same time was definitely a stretch. She would survive it if she didn’t make a bad mistake or a third one would show up but their damage potential was ridiculous. *And I worried about a knight cutting off my leg...*, The kingsguard and undead knights didn’t seem quite as dangerous to her anymore. Problem with them of course was the lack of damage she could deal and the apparent healing they received from wherever the fuck the necromancer was hiding.

*Could also be a machine powering them, an ancient artifact or something...*, Ilea now had twenty stat points but wasn’t sure yet where to invest them. Vitality seemed like a good idea as she laid there, blood leaking through every opening in her armor, her body writhing as its tissue reformed, the woman thanking whatever cruel system or magic governing this world that she could shut off her pain. A blanket of warm ash had formed around her at some point, trying to comfort or protect her. A sigh went through her a couple minutes later, her body fully recovered.

*Three of them is a no go right now.* In an emergency she would try but if she could avoid it, she would. Ilea kept lying in the tunnel, no noise or light anywhere close as she checked the apparently new skills available for her ashen class.

*‘Active – Ash Coffin*

*Wrap your foe in ash to squash and suffocate them. Ash Manipulation increases the strength of this skill.*

*Category: Ashen Magic’*

*‘Would you like to learn this skill?’*

*‘Passive – Ashen Perception*

*Ash has become your ally. See through ash connected to you and no further than ten meters away from you.*

*Category: Ashen Magic’*

*‘Would you like to learn this skill?’*

Two new ashen magic spells. Perhaps she would’ve been interested when she first got the class but right now neither seemed useful. Ash coffin might be but if she had to stay connected to the ash that surrounded the target then she’d rather use Wave of Ember with her ashen limbs. Plus she would have to level it back up to the second tier and level twenty by the time she reached three hundred. From her active skills in her ashen class, Embered Body Heat was the obvious outlier that might need to be replaced at some point but it was already at level fourteen in the second stage.

Without a perfectly good reason to replace it right now, she’d at least wait until after three hundred to get the best class bonus out of it. Maybe other and better skills might present themselves anyway. The passive skill was great, if she didn’t already have her Azarinth Sphere. Plus ash needed to be around her at all times. Now that her body was connected to it she couldn’t both see an enemy and blink away if she chose to use it. Her passive skills were all exceptionally useful already anyway. *No way am I going to replace any of that...*

Somehow she felt averse to replace a Body Enhancement skill with an Ashen Magic one. Just because it might influence her class evolution. *Speaking off, no evolution at two fifty either. Guess they’re both just pretty amazing classes already.* The class bonuses themselves gave her a four hundred percent increase in Body Enhancement skills. Splitting that with Ashen Magic would be problematic.

*May as well end up weaker at three hundred than I am now if I get shit selections.* She doubted that possibility. Whatever had happened in this world so far, Ilea hadn't been betrayed by the leveling system so far. It somehow knew where she was going, what she desired. While the skill descriptions didn't offer much in regards to the actual bonuses, her two classes synergized incredibly well together. Having seen other people fight, she was pretty sure the same was true for everyone. Even someone like Aliana who had a fire and water class used it in an interesting yet powerful combination.

Ilea spent her twenty stat points, fifteen on Wisdom to top it off at 600, four on Strength to bring it to 270, simply because the round number was calling her. The last point was spent on Vitality, giving her ten more health that might or might not make the difference some day. Considering her healing skill could recover her even if her body was smashed to a pulp and her Vitality had reached zero, she would probably reach a better result by investing more into Wisdom but one didn't know what could happen after the body was destroyed. Something like a Miststalker might even continue to consume her mana once her body was destroyed, effectively draining her until she was truly dead. Ilea didn't know any of this for sure of course but she wasn't about to test it either. The Blue Reapers came close enough, her health hovering below one thousand from time to time.

*No wonder they're so feared.* Facing two at the same time was not something most people in her level range could do. At least not close up while facing their retaliation. While the small tunnels gave her a bit of an edge with dodging the lightning, it would pretty much prevent any other mage or warrior from sneaking up on them or getting a long ranged highly damaging spell off. A team would have difficulties coordinating in the tiny space as well, leaving it as a big advantage for the Blue Reapers.

Maybe someone able to flood the tunnels with poison could deal a lot of damage but the Reapers' durability wasn't to be ignored either. Smelling the blood on her, Ilea decided to go wash her armor in Hallowfort as soon as she got back. Collecting the corpses, she continued her search. Ash heating up around her while her Hunter's Sight worked to find any clues towards more of the enemy monsters.

Days passed, Ilea finding five more of the critters that she took care off with continued ease. Knowing the weak spots and what exactly they were capable of made the one on one fights a simple bug extermination. Finding her concentration lapsing, she looked for the markings on the walls and made her way back. She needed some sleep but wasn't about to pass out in the enemy den. A last Reaper confronted her when she was just about out of the tunnels, Ilea taking care of it and storing the corpse to top off at eleven dead critters.

While fewer in number, they were much higher in level compared to the knights. At least most of them. Checking her messages and her skills, she was quite content with the decision to face them.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 352] – For defeating an enemy ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

...

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 361] – For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 258 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 251 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 258*

- Active: Destruction – 3rd lvl 3*
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 6*
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 7*
- 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 16*
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 20*

*Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 251*

- Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 3*
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 2*
- Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 15*
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2*
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 18*

- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20*

**General Skills:**

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 15*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*

- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 611***  
***Endurance: 400***  
***Strength 270***  
***Dexterity 350***  
***Intelligence 600***  
***Wisdom 600***

***Health: 6110/6110***  
***Stamina: 3128/4000***  
***Mana: 4201/6000***

The ten points were spent on Vitality, bringing just a little more survivability to the table. Coming back out in the corridors of the Descent, she noticed the message informing her that she had entered the dungeon. Ilea felt like the small tunnels were quite a bit more dangerous than whatever this underground city could throw at her. At least at the high levels starting above the actual Descent. Finally stretching her body and moving her arms and legs in the free space, she sighed in relief. Form of Ash and Ember had been the only light coupled with the lightning and usage of her third tier State of Azarinth.

Her thoughts were focused on getting a bottle of ale in the Abyss and maybe renting a room suitable for humans. She trusted the citizens even less than the monsters lurking below but at least she felt more capable in dealing with them in a surprise attack. Not a single one she had seen so far had been above her level and she would sleep in armor after all, clad in ash,

her Veil and other skills active as well. Ilea's Meditation allowed to keep them all going even while sleeping.

"You sure it's this way?" A squeaky voice resounded through the corridors as Ilea floated with her wings and heated ash towards the exit.

She saw the group of adventurers a moment later in her Sphere, completely oblivious to her approach still hidden behind a corner, "Wait, something's there." Another voice spoke, making them all stop. Torchlight illuminated a part of the hallway as Ilea's wings disintegrated, the ash around her cooling down and forming limbs and small spheres behind her. Landing on her feet, she rounded the corner to the apprehensive group of warriors and mages.

Five of them in total, each armed, armored and ready for whatever was to come. One was definitely a dwarf, two were hidden in full plate armor, tall but impossible for Ilea to determine their species. The last two were mages if she went with clothing stereotypes. Armored robes, metal reflecting the torchlight. Quickly identifying everyone, she found all except for one below two hundred. *Scavengers then...*

A likely assumption. Or the first layers of the Descent could be traveled by the likes of these as well. She didn't know. "Greetings." She said to the tense group, ash shrouding around her as they tried to look at her. Torches were held closer towards her but it didn't reveal much other than a warrior clad in black, shrouded partially in black mist. The light reflected from the burnt out parts of her armor's coating, where the lightning had struck hardest. An intricate design had formed and it might have looked deliberate.

"Warrior... greetings. Is this the way down?" One of the big armored men asked.

Ilea cocked her head before replying, "There were some stairs and holes leading down but I didn't go there."

"What did you do then?" The squeaky voice asked, one of the mages. Two of the others looked at him, one even hissing. They weren't sure what to make of her, that much was clear. Ilea wasn't out for conflict at least, she wanted to go sleep.



Summoning one of the Blue Reaper corpses, she held it up and dumped it between her and the group, the closest warrior taking an instinctive step back. Light flashed from one of the mages but he put away the spell as soon as he understood what had happened. “I was hunting these. I would suggest not going that way, there’s a tunnel system they use ending in one of the hallways. Good luck on your hunt.” She said and took the corpse, walking between the group who parted at her approach, blue blood dripping down from the dead reaper.

# Chapter 258 Cake

## Chapter 258 Cake

Odin looked at the female depart towards Hallowfort. *Was she the one who killed the Blue Reaper...*, It had to be, she had presented a corpse after all. Bowing as much as his bulky body allowed, he turned back to his group. “We will not be using this path.”

“Why not? Who says she spoke the truth?” The friend of shadows said. Odin smiled under his helmet, the stone cracking on his face.

To doubt and deceive was in his nature, “She is a wielder of ash. A powerful warrior to be sure, one I could not identify. We should listen to her words and seek an alternative path.”

“I agree with Odin. We should listen to anybody capable of killing Reapers.” The moth mage said.

“A reaper, single. Maybe she found it dead. We could take her together, the storage item she has would sell for dozens of gold.” The Shadow mage insisted.

Odin smiled again, speaking in a calm voice, “And who would buy such a thing from the likes of us? It would be stolen or taken by force. Come now, we should find a way to descend. The longer we dwell the more energy we waste.” He walked on, ready to smash the shadow mage to pieces should he try to betray him. *Alliances forged by need are not to rely on.* Odin

remembered his brother's words. Perhaps in the second layer they would forge the bonds necessary to survive. It would be a difficult journey.

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Ilea had seen the look in the mage's black eyes. Was it her storage necklace, her armor or the corpse of the Reaper perhaps? Still, they had let her go without any further questions. Her level was high enough to justify as much, at least compared to theirs. Some must have debated if it was worth fighting her. *Might be better if I try to avoid any random groups down here.* If there was a group of five level two hundreds with varying abilities countering her own, she might be in trouble. Probably not as she could still try to flee but if they followed her and attacked when she was injured.

Shaking the thought, annoyed that her hunting and fighting was again being influenced by people. *Greed doesn't seem to be a human exclusive.* At least only one of them had looked at her that way. The big warrior had even bowed to her when she was walking away. Likely a gesture towards her ash. She was pretty sure he had been a dark one of sorts. Most of them so far had reacted in some respectful way to her magic. *On the way to being powerful enough not to fuck with.* She grinned at the thought but knew it was a mere dream. Even if she were, people devious enough would find a way to challenge her. If not through fighting, then through lies, blackmail or hostages.

Ilea reminded herself that the world wasn't out to get her. The enemy in Elos was nature and the monsters living around her. It was however hard to shake off the distrust she had learned through Edwin, Alice, the nobles in

Virilya as well as the Golden Lily. Focusing on the task at hand, she spread her wings and flew up through the corridor that led to the Abyss.

Coming out on the top, her wings disintegrated, the guard nodding as he let go of the sword on his back. It was still the same warrior she had met when going down. Music played from within the bar, this time less alien than what she had heard the last time. The instruments looked like more intricate guitars and the sounds reminded her of old samurai movies she had watched. A serene kind of atmosphere. The masked priest person was still around, talking to two patrons on a table, trying to convince them to join the great war, whatever that was.

Ilea reached the counter and nodded to the cat waiter. He sniffed at her and frowned, "Exactly. Room and a bath?" She asked and he put a silver key down.

"Thank you for taking care of the Reaper. The room is on the house. For three days. Water runes for a bath are inside. Last one on the first floor." He explained, Ilea taking the key and twirling it on a finger.

She was curious how he knew it was her to kill the Blue Reaper. Either he smelled it somehow or the markings on her armor outed her. "Thanks." She said and put down five copper, the cat person sliding a bottle of ale her way.

The key slid into the lock and a click resounded when she turned it. Entering, she locked it again and pushed mana into the runes near the door, knowing them to be intrusion barriers against sound and teleportation. Blinking out and back in revealed them to be of somewhat low quality but hey, it was something. More than she had expected from a place like this. The furniture was dark blue and black, leather mostly. A blueish light shined from the middle of the room, an intricate metal sphere with rings and floating pieces surrounded the magical bulb, forming a mesmerizing pattern on the stone walls around her.

There was a bathroom with a tub, big enough to accommodate most creatures she had seen in the bar below. Runes would gather the water in the air and ground before filling the carved stone bath. Ilea questioned how the runes gathered enough to fill the whole thing but she had seen similar feats in human inns. Even Earl had a bath with runes like that. Touching the intricate patterns on the metal plates, water soon started flowing. Ilea put her armor into her inventory before dumping it on the ground next to the tub. Moving a couple of her ashen limbs into it, she quickly heated it up to a boiling temperature before stepping in herself.

A sigh left her, continuously heating up the water, steam filling the bathroom as the runes gathered and brought the water back into the tub. Ilea took her time to rub off all the dried blood as well as pieces of remaining muck. Sighing, she went under, the boiling water bubbling around her. A bubble bath for cheap yet resilient people. Certainly enjoyable.

Her armor pieces came in half an hour later, the boiling water taking care of whatever was left on them. She noted that the lightning cracks on the coating remained, burned deeply into the metal from a heat quite different than boiling water. Ilea found she liked the look of it now that she saw it with her own eyes. Putting the set into her inventory, she put it onto her body before heating herself up to dry it off. Steam rose from within the thin slits connecting the pieces.

The main room had several sleeping options, different forms and sizes. Ilea turned her head a little when she looked at the cocoon like blankets hanging from the ceiling in one of the corners of the room. Definitely peculiar but considering the varying patrons and their species it was only to be expected. She wouldn't be happy to find only that in her room either.

The bed creaked a little when she sat down, the thing not quite as soft and comfortable as she liked. Standing up again, she summoned her own. There was enough space for it, just barely. Lying down, Ilea planned to sleep for an hour or two, thinking of magical lightning sizzling in the dark. Meditation helped her fall asleep as quickly as if she were completely exhausted.

Putting the key on the counter, Ilea waited for the cat person to approach her. "I don't know how long I'll be gone."

He nodded and took the key, his ears twitching once. "I'm Ilea, thanks for the room." She added.

"Haiden. Fortune on your hunt." He bowed his head a little as he said it, eyes closed.

Ilea didn't plan to go down right away, instead wanting to sell all the dead Blue Reapers she had acquired from her exploration. *I really have to clean out my necklace...*, perhaps she could sell some other things she had with her. Leaving the Abyss, she made her way up to the top of Hallowfort. A group of cloaked warriors and mages walked past, one of them glancing at her with what looked like human eyes. The first one she had seen in the north. Neither of them initiated conversation. If the woman was anything like her, she was glad there were so few of their species around. They were all below level two hundred, scavengers most likely.

*Maybe a survivor from one or the other expedition.* She thought, walking up the stairs to the highest floor of the small town. The small square after coming up was in the center of the statue. Ilea spotted the building likely to be the store she was looking for immediately. A big stone house with a long edged roof. Moss grew from the top, reaching down on the walls in some parts. Ivy as well as dozens of pots with varying herbs and plants finished the mostly green picture. It was situated close enough to the edge to overlook the crystal sea below. The door was wooden, a dark brown that nearly vanished in the gray of the stone around it.

*Hunter's Den*, Ilea read the sign hanging a little crookedly from the roof right next to the door, a small lantern right next to it, its light brightening the black letters. Few people were around but it was definitely one of the busier places in Hallowfort. Her sphere only detected a single occupant inside the shop, Ilea quickly entering, curious about the shape of the person.

A jingle resounded when she entered, the door connected with a string to a small assortment of blue crystals that hung next to it. There were even more pots with plants here, small glass cages with what looked like full ecosystems trapped inside. In the back of the store big shelves filled with monster parts, books, trinkets of all sorts as well as weapons covered the walls. Much of it was laying around in boxes all over the floor with no discernible system or structure. A counter was placed somewhere in the middle of the whole cluster of things, a small bell the only thing placed on it.

Behind it there was a big table, more a work bench really with how wide and sturdy it was. Pale wood and covered by mortars, bowls, glass jars and tubes as well as knives, cutting boards and an assortment of plants, herbs and meat. Ilea wasn't quite sure if it was a meal that was being prepared or some alchemical tincture. The fox dozing in the middle of it all didn't seem to know either, head resting on its front paws as it calmly dreamed.

Walking up to the counter, Ilea tapped the bell once, a clear ring resounding. Her sphere revealed no other being than the fox but it had been deceived before. Eve wouldn't be the last, of that she was sure. The fox opened its eyes slowly, a yawn escaping its maw as it stretched its paws forward, reminding Ilea more of a cat. "Yesh...yes yes. Welcome." The fox spoke, its voice distinctively light and female. The lack of a penis was what tipped her off though.

Ilea held up her hand and smiled, her helmet vanishing into her necklace. Orange red eyes opened wide as the fox sat up, "A human... and at such a high level. Remarkable. I wouldn't flaunt that thing so openly, the wrong people will get interested. Especially knowing your weak species."

Ilea was pretty sure she was talking about her storage necklace. She had hoped with going north things like that finally ended but she had obviously been wrong, "I'll bear the consequences."

A light giggle resounded, not a noise she would've expected from a fox. "I'm sure you do. I'm Catelyn, owner of this store and it is my joy to meet you, bearer of ash." She bowed her small head a little towards her.

Wisps of the element were dancing around her armor. It was a conscious effort now to keep the ash hidden and away from her with the third tier of ash creation, not needed here where being an ash creator opened doors. Not that she would care if it were otherwise. “Greetings Catelyn, one blessed by fire. I’m Ilea. I was told one can sell monster corpses here.”

Another giggle, the fox standing up on all four legs. It wasn’t taller than a normal fox from Earth but her presence was nearly graspable, a glint of fire dancing around the small vulpine eyes.

*[Mage - ??]*

Above her in level too but Ilea had no idea just how much. “You flatter me. To think a human honors the customs of the reborn. Rare to see one of your kind here, rarer that. You may sell and buy, with gold and silver as well as other... interesting valuables.”

Ilea summoned one of the Blue Reapers and held it up, “A Reaper... so you were the one to silence it. Bring it here, before it grows entirely cold. I assume your storage device keeps them fresh. Wait with the others if you have more.” Ilea nodded and walked around the counter, avoiding any rogue boxes and containers on the ground before she put the thing down. Catelyn had made space with her two tails, expertly moving everything out of the way as if they were arms.

Ilea could’ve sworn there was only a single tail before. “Don’t mind it. I can grow more than just two. Without thumbs on must find other ways to handle a knife.”

Carefully opening the broken shell, the fox filled an empty vial with the blood of the creature before putting a cork on it. A knife was lifted up a moment later, cutting through some of the creature’s throat before the mantis head was ripped off. Ilea raised an eyebrow at the strength and quality of blade that must have required. *Don’t fuck with the fox.* The mental note was made as Catelyn cupped the head in her paws before slurping out the dead eyes.



A long sigh left her after, Ilea just standing there and waiting while the fox consumed the second eye as well. “Excuse me. They’re just so fucking delicious. One gold coin per corpse, just pile them up Ilea.”

*Aren’t foxes supposed to be kid’s friendly?* Putting the other ten dead reapers down, Catelyn opened one of the table’s drawers and rummaged around before handing over eleven pieces of gold, one of the coins tumbling down before Ilea’s ash extended to catch it. All of it vanished into her necklace a moment later.

“Mmmhm, I’ll have a feast with all these later.” Catelyn purred before the corpses vanished. “Anything else you are willing to part with?”

“You’re an alchemist?” Ilea asked as she went through her necklace, mentally scrolling through her possessions.

“Among other things yes. Are you interested in trying some of my tinctures. I have always wanted to test them on humans. Few agree.” Catelyn said, resting her furry head on her front paws as she lied down on the table. “Isn’t it weird for you to see a talking fox?”

Ilea was caught a little off guard by the question, summoning some green moss she had gathered back in the Taleen dungeon, “I’ve seen weirder things, like mind magic electric bugs burning my eyes out.” Ilea replied and held up the moss with a questioning look.

“Isn’t that the stuff growing in Taleen dungeons?” Sniffing on it for a moment, one of her tails grabbed the moss before it vanished as well. “I’ve yet to have any survive in another location... maybe it’s the metal in the air, or something about the green lamps they used.” The fox mused. “It’s not rare but I’ll give you one silver coin for it.”

“I don’t suppose you’re interested in moss from the Penumra dungeon?” Ilea asked, the ensuing groan from the fox answer enough.

“I still have some cakes... for whatever reason they take up a lot of space.”

“What are cakes?” Catelyn asked, sitting up and cocking her head to the side.

Ilea summoned one, the plate appearing on the table with the heavy strawberry and cream goodness on top. The five cakes she had used up as much space in her necklace as her four hundred meals from Keyla did. Ilea tried not to question the logic of it all and was simply glad she could carry so much food. “It’s food, take a bite. Decide what you want to pay for it after.” She said with a grin, hoping that sugar was as addictive to the dark one as it was to humans. *She had never even heard of cakes.*

Catelyn was a little suspicious but still lifted up the knife. A quick blazing flame enveloped the metal and vanished again before she cut out a piece. Ilea’s ash had gathered a little around her but condensed again when the flame was gone, “You first.” The fox said after bringing the piece towards her mouth. Ilea shrugged and used an ashen limb to cut off a piece for herself, lifting it up before separating a smaller piece and eating it. It had been a while since she had eaten desert and Ilea couldn’t help but smile at the taste.

*Fresh as if it was made today...*, Really one of the best features of her necklace.

“They probably take up more space because you store them individually. Put them all in a big box and it will take up less...,” Catelyn said while taking a bite, her eyes opening wide before red flame surrounded her, heavy mana pushing against Ilea as her Veil wrapped itself around her, ash flowing to defend against the powerful magic. Catelyn’s eyes glowed a deep red, her teeth more vicious and longer as they smashed into the piece of cake, following up with the rest until not a single crumb was left.

The fire calmed down again quickly, an embarrassed looking fox avoiding Ilea as she licked the side of her snout. Some of the herbs on the table were singed or completely burnt but she noted that the table itself was unharmed. “What kind of wood is that?” Ilea couldn’t help but ask.

“That’s a secret. Maybe I’ll tell you for another cake.” The orange eyes met her blue ones.

For a moment they were both silent, “I’ll take the money.” Ilea finally said and put the other four cakes down. Catelyn put them in whatever space magic item she had and put down ten gold coins, Ilea putting them away. It was understood that this wasn’t to be mentioned and that an urgent request for more cakes was put out unofficially.

# Chapter 259 Exterminator

## Chapter 259 Exterminator

Summoning the last of her Dragcal meat she still had, Ilea freed another two space units in her necklace. Cutting out a piece, sizzling it and eating the thing, Catelyn put a big coin on the table, worth ten silvers. *Popi could make a killing here....*

“The rest is mostly weapons, armor and clothing. I doubt you’d be interested.” She said after going through her belongings. The fox didn’t seem to disagree.

“You mentioned something about potions? What do you have? I’d be willing to try things out as well.” Ilea was pretty confident in her healing as well as poison resistance.

A vial of glass, filled with yellow liquid suddenly materialized before the fox. Her orange fluffy tail caught it and motioned it towards her. “It’s supposed to make you heavier but I’ve experienced... side effects.” Ilea stared at her inquisitively, “Mostly throwing up and diarrhea.”

Ilea took the vial, removed the cork and smelled it. Her poison resistance didn’t inform her about anything so she downed it. The potion took effect after half a minute, Ilea’s healing monitoring the whole thing as a surprised and quick fox moved everything away from near Ilea’s head and ass. “I am a little more heavy, interesting feeling. Nothing more than what a minor lightening enchantment would bring to a set of armor. Opposite effect of course.”

And then it started, her stomach suddenly contracting before her healing calmed the muscles down. It was gone again quickly, “Something happened to my stomach about fifty seconds in. Can’t say what exactly went wrong but you definitely have to work on that.”

Catelyn grumbled and handed her another potion, “I hoped it worked on red blooded individuals at least... this one is a health potion. Paralyzation as a side effect. As well as... vomiting again.”

Ilea took it and twirled it around before opening the vial, “Am I getting something for this testing as well?” This time her poison resistance warned her about a low level poison.

“Of course... of course. I’ll pay you with shiny coins.” The fox said. Ilea grunted and sacrificed five hundred health, red runes lighting up below her armor. Catelyn looked on with interest as Ilea drank the liquid.

Fifty points of health were recovered almost instantly.

***‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Red Beetle juice – You resist the poison’***

*Interesting... complete resistance?* Ilea put the vial down and had to stop her stomach from convulsing again. “Poisoned but I resisted the effects. The stomach thing again. Catelyn are you sure you’re an alchemist?”

The fox turned around herself on the table, avoiding her eyes again, “Of course I am. The best in town.”

“Do you burn and eat the others?” Ilea grinned.

“Now don’t challenge me young huntress. I’ll show you why I’m in the council if you do.” Catelyn replied.

Ilea didn’t care about whatever council it was, probably some form of governing force in Hallowfort. She wouldn’t gain anything useful from Catelyn other than gold and perhaps information she was actually interested in. “Calm down fire fox. I was wondering if you knew more about the Blue

Reapers. I discovered a cave system that looked to be dug by them. Is there a dungeon somewhere with the beasts inside?”

The fox seemed to have calmed down a little again, “They dig wherever they go. The ones you faced are hunters and explorers looking for food sources for their nest. I would assume there is a dungeon somewhere but even I don’t face them. Your resistances and healing must be impressive if you survived them.”

“I hear there have been bigger ones sighted as well so be careful where you go.” The fox added.

Ilea nodded, “I’ll be back with more corpses. You buy everything from the Descent?”

“Pretty much. Though I don’t have infinite gold so don’t think about bringing hundreds of dead Reapers to me.” Catelyn said, resting her head again.

“I don’t plan to, don’t worry.” Ilea said and walked towards the exit, waving her hand, “I’ll stop by when I have more interesting things for you.” Maybe she would browse all the trinkets and tools at some point but for now she was glad to have a place where she could sell the stuff she would find, especially corpses. *Wouldn’t want undead blue reapers, if that’s a thing. Maybe next time I’ll ask if I can pet her.*

Grabbing a bottle of ale from Haiden, she made her way back down into the Descent. Twenty gold coins, enough to get equipment made by Balduur. Not that she necessarily needed something from him now that she had Goliath. *My cakes made just as much money as several days worth of fighting...*, a bizarre thought but it made sense. They didn’t have any animals here to get eggs and milk, sugar would have to be brought in as well as strawberries and any other ingredients necessary. Traveling

merchant with high survivability skills would definitely be a good way to get rich in Elos.

Finding the right buyers was key of course but she had the notion that smiths all over the human plains would pay quite handsomely for Stonehammer steel, the way Balduur and the others in Virilya had fawned over her elven Niameer armor. Going back the same way she had taken days prior, she quickly found the tunnel entrance to the Blue Reaper cave system. Ash was constantly moving around her, ready to intercept an enemy attack in the darkness of the underground maze.

It took her hours to find any sign of life this time around. A lot of dead ends, as well as flooded sections leading out into the sea. Ilea avoided those areas or passed through as quickly as she could. The tunnels led along the cliff side and away from Hallowfort but still remaining near the underground sea. When she finally heard a clicking in the distance, she stopped immediately and quietly walked backwards. There were dozens of them if not more beyond the tunnels she was currently in.

Taking another route a couple hundred meters further back, she found a single one of the Blue Reapers coming her way. It attacked immediately upon seeing the intruder, Ilea making sure there were no more of them lurking. Jumping in, she risked a little more to make it a quick kill. Too much noise or perhaps a screech for help from the beast and more would surely join, perhaps even hunt her down. A couple minutes of breaking bones, burning organs and cracking bone later, she stashed away the body and healed herself. She remained silent and listened for any other crawling critters as the destroyed tissue in her body reformed through mana.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 331] - For defeating an enemy seventy levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

Walking on through the same tunnel, she quickly found another two reapers. Ilea managed to take them out one at a time thanks to the distance between them. Healing up again, she summoned the rest of her ale and finished it. Ilea still had several barrels from Walter but wanted to keep them for a special occasion. She wasn't quite sure what that would be but

certainly not killing a mind and lightning magical insect somewhere in butt fuck nowhere.

An hour later she again found a group of the buggers, this time one of them noticed the noise she was making. Her sphere picked up five of them before she blinked away. Again and again until she was at the last diversion. Only two or three had managed to get their magic off before she reacted but the headache was still quite overwhelming. *How are you supposed to defend against that?* If she wanted to invade their living space, she'd have to have quite a bit more mental defense. Perhaps it wasn't supposed to be, that someone would be stupid enough to rouse monsters like that in their home.

The Miststalkers were similar, as were the Famine Crows. Dangerous because they appeared or moved in groups. Ilea doubted she could take out a single Miststalker but she'd definitely try if the opportunity ever presented itself. Waiting for ten minutes, none of the monsters came to look for her. Ilea quickly checked if maybe a straggler was left behind but found them waiting in the same area of the tunnels again. This time she made sure to be a little more sneaky.

Two more ways led to similar results before finally she found two of them alone again. Using the same approach as with the first double she had faced, she took them out in under ten minutes. Her health pool was resting at above two thousand this time but that was mostly due to her taking the time to heal in between killing them. Getting out of range of their mind magic was pretty easy, especially with her teleporting ability. They didn't pursue far either, at least not when they didn't see her anymore. The tunnels quickly broke off line of sight, allowing her to have a breather. Ilea briefly considered a similar approach to kill the others or perhaps collapsing parts of the tunnel to separate them but in the end it felt too dangerous.

She remembered when her Shadow team had nearly been taken out entirely by a group of mind magic beasts. If she were to be overwhelmed even for a couple seconds, it would be over. No Eve to bail her out this time. She knew her capabilities, her newfound power since that time in the south. Ilea also knew how powerful the little critters were that she was facing down right now. Getting one gold coin for a corpse alone was prove enough for



that. Tapping the side of her helmet, she walked back to the last divergent path while checking her notifications.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 372] - For defeating an enemy one hundred and ten levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 312] - For defeating an enemy fifty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 259 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 252 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4’*

*‘ding’ ‘Mental Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13’*

She was progressing much quicker again. Though with the added time to find isolated monsters, she'd get more out of fighting the knights. At least personal experience wise. Knowing how to deal with feints from a swordsman seemed more beneficial than knowing how quickly her heart and brain could be burnt up by ridiculously powerful lightning. In the end, Ilea believed that both leveling experience as well as just plain old know how was necessary. Dale for example was at a pretty low level compared to most people Ilea had to deal with in the past year but she still considered him one of the more experienced swordsmen. She put the ten points she had gotten into Wisdom and continued her search.

*Plop, plep, plup...*, Ilea shoved another mouthful of warm food into her mouth as she imitated the dripping water around her. She was close to the sea, that much was sure. After hours and hours of searching, Ilea had mapped out a big chunk of the area and was somewhat certain about the Blue Reaper nest. Or at least the beginnings of one. Groups of dozens occupied bigger chambers further in, Ilea only escaping thanks to her blink.

Around her in the dark were a bunch of old bandages, a fucked up mace, a Taleen sword and dagger as well as six dwarven helmets. The remaining shield she kept for now as it might actually come in handy in a special situation. After hours in the dark, each more frustrating than the last, Ilea had finally found something to do. The complete opposite of what she came here for. Going through her necklace. Most of the work was just piling loose books, maps and small trinkets into the big crate she still had from Salia. It was only half full of books and now what previously used up at least ten spaces only used one.

*Yey me!* Ilea rejoiced, very sarcastically. She had food from the restaurants in Ravenhall remaining, from before the demon attack. *Ghost cooks*. She couldn't help but snort at the thought. At least someone remembered the poor souls slaughtered by the whims of Adam Strand. *Had to have a damn good reason to do that... maybe his dog was killed by the big demon lord or something.*

Being in the darkness with little to show for her last day of hunting, she didn't feel like eating Keyla's godly meals. The restaurant food wasn't bad by any means but it wasn't quite the same after all. Her necklace was down to 158/250 storage units, even with four full sets of Rose Hunter armor. She decided to give it another day or two before going back to check in with Terok. She had said she'd be back in a week or two. Exploring the actual Descent would definitely take longer than that. Or she would at least plan for longer.

Ash cleaned off her gauntlets as she got up, ready to continue her search for single or double features of the more and more elusive Blue Reaper. *Maybe they learned that going out alone is stupid...*, Thinking about the possibility

made her hope they didn't send a kill squad after her. She'd probably still escape. The things weren't terribly bright and other than the massive blast cannons of magic they had, they didn't have a lot going for them.

“You can piss off you fuck shits!!” The shout went down the tunnel before she blinked again, making more distance between her and the group of Reapers further down the cave. Her self imposed deadline was coming up and she had only managed to kill another five critters. *I'm so close to 260...*

Giving herself another couple hours, she came up on clicking after two more hours of searching.

***‘ding’ ‘Hunter’s Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17’***

The more and more frustrating search was at least not for nothing. Her wings took her the last couple meters towards the clicking, her flying form much more quiet than the steps of her steel boots. Ilea's eyes opened wide as she perceived the enemies in her Hunter Sphere. *Three...*, Previously she had avoided more than two but her battles had improved and she knew at least that even five of them at the same time couldn't easily knock her out. A little bit more Vitality and Wisdom would make a small difference as well as the skill levels she had gained along the hunt.

Pumping out as much ash as she could, she tried moving a projectile around the bend in the dark stone tunnel. The three Reapers were clawing at the wall, the ashen spike hitting the one closest to Ilea. Its mantis like head was knocked forward, all three of them turning towards her, their six legs crawling as magic gathered around them. Ilea frowned but simply moved back to the last bend, her healing already fighting the mind magic flung her way. Trying to create walls between two of the critters and the third proved ineffective, lightning flaring up as soon as they touched the barriers, burning through in an instant.

The longer she waited, the lower her health would go. Blindly charging in without any recovery time in between would prove fatal as well. After having fought a bunch of them, Ilea already felt that the three of them were not all above three fifty, otherwise she'd be forced to flee already. It was difficult to gauge the exact levels but she assumed two of them were below that threshold. Blinking to the one furthest back, she wrestled it down and grabbed onto one of its hind legs before a snap resounded, Ilea quickly blinking away four times. Blood was streaming down her face, healing magic flowing through her as she breathed heavily. Eyes closed, she trusted in her Sphere, knowing the conventional seeing organ had failed her already.

Mind magic, at least cast by the Blue Reaper had an effective range of around forty meters, a little more depending on the level range of the critter. With their walking speed, she had just brought herself a couple seconds to heal. The hind legs she found, had the highest impact on their speed. The injured bug would fall behind. Moving too far away would make them flee if too injured or would even make their numbers increase. They had some sort of defensive system in place which didn't allow her to simply blink in, break a leg and blink out, recover fully and go back at it.

A pain really but Ilea was kind of glad it wasn't possible. Otherwise she'd just be stuck in these tunnels for months breaking one leg at a time. Neither a challenge nor exactly entertaining. She'd still do it to get more powerful of course, to face the kingsguard and undead knights as well as other interesting foes she currently had no means to even touch. Taking care of the worst injuries and getting back a bunch of mana as well, she prepared herself and sacrificed a hundred points of health.

# Chapter 260 Survival

## Chapter 260 Survival

A blink brought her close to the two critters, smashing the head of the one closer to her, crouching low to use its small frame as a shield against the second one charging lightning further back. The Reaper tried to get away but wasn't quick enough to escape her grasp. Several walls of ash formed to intercept the lightning bolt that nonetheless broke through, damaging both the beast Ilea held on to as well as spreading over her Veil, some of the blast burning through her skin and muscles beneath. Another leg broke before she let go of the charged monster, blinking this time to the critter lagging behind. Its second leg broke, Ilea continuously healing herself, this time hanging on to the creature until its carapace cracked. One lightning bolt was evaded by her simply moving with the Reaper held by its broken limb.

The creature screeched as it was smashed into the wall, another two hits finally breaking through and killing it. Ilea had no time to rest, two of the monsters still enough to challenge her defenses and now that it was already severely weakened, her health below half and her healing fighting hard against the continuous assault, she was forced to take a step back again.

Checking quickly, she found no level up from the kill. Her recovery brought back health about as quickly as one of the critters could take with their mind magic alone. Both numbers completely ridiculous to her. How such a powerful critter hadn't taken over this whole area was a mystery to her. They hadn't shown a high level of intelligence, likely no desire to colonize

the world with their monstrous offensive power. *Good for us humans and other species.*

Feeling somewhat confident that she'd at least not die, she blinked back and faced the injured monster lagging a little behind. The only reason the speed difference of a broken leg made a difference was the fact that the bends in the tunnels let her avoid the lightning strikes of the ones a little ahead. If they had been intelligent, the beast would've stuck together at all times. Perhaps even hugging each other so that their defensive lightning could stack against her. A second leg broke and then a third before the healthy enemy had finally reached her again. Not stopping, Ilea smashed downwards, once, twice and finally cracking the shell.

Ignoring the damage her body had sustained from the continuous lightning, she grit her teeth and blinked to the last bug, grabbing it by one leg and smashing it into the wall. Her fists lashed out and delivered whatever she could into the small monster insect. Ashen limbs moved behind her, all eight bashing into the armored carapace as her health slowly drained, her body burnt up by lightning. Meditation and her healing were the only things keeping her conscious, standing and attacking. At some point Ilea realized she was kneeling on the ground, her arms limp to her side. She felt neither of them, a big part of her brain fried up. Her healing was still active, reporting the disastrous condition her human body was in.

All her senses didn't report much anymore, her Sphere the only thing that gave her a picture of her surroundings. Ashen limbs still moved out from her back, smashing into the creature that still struggled against her attacks. She knew she could blink away, away to safety, some part of her mind wanted to get away, wanted to get out to find sunlight, to rest. To sleep. Ilea didn't stop, her attacks not letting up. She couldn't move her limbs but the ash followed her simple command, to destroy, to maim and to kill. With a final crunch, her ash broke through and the Reaper stopped struggling. Several notifications popped up in her mind but Ilea remained kneeling, ash whirling around her as it formed a protective cocoon.

Her brain wasn't working properly anymore, the organ too damaged to form complex thoughts. Her healing skill didn't stop, mending her mind and brain, now unimpeded by enemy magic. Her ash lazily floated around her,

Ilea's last wish fulfilled and now without an enemy to destroy it instead sought to protect. A minute passed and then two, clarity coming back to her as her healing moved on from her mind to her organs and then the rest of her body. Soon her health started to rise, the bleeding and burns not preventing so any further.

A cackling resounded in the dark tunnel, followed by wild coughing and the wet sound of blood hitting the floor. The dull light of Ilea's Form of Ash and Ember lit up her immediate surroundings, her helmet taken off and cast aside. Perhaps it wasn't wise to start laughing so close to the Reaper's nest but Ilea didn't care. In the situation to either flee and survive or destroy, she had chosen the latter, trusting in her healing to keep her alive and in her ash to kill her enemy. Ilea knew the decision had been unnecessarily risky but she had taken it nonetheless. If she failed against something minor like this, how would she ever face a Praetorian, a kingsguard or even an undead knight. To gain power she had to take risks, had to push herself, more and more. Because she knew her body could take it, knew her mind could take it.

Ilea knew she would prevail. Because she knew she had prevailed against the Drake. Against all odds she had survived, had eaten the Bluemoon Grass and had survived. Had seed the elves and had escaped, had faced the Praetorians and had survived. Maybe she had not fought and won but she had survived. And she would continue to do so. Even if her mind had cracked, her ash had failed. Until her last ounce of mana was depleted and her body shredded to its last cell, she knew she would survive. That was who she was, what she had become. She would seek stronger enemies to fight, seek to advance. For herself. To face and destroy the horrors of this world. To protect those she held dear and to experience true freedom. Neither restricted by the wild and unpredictable nature of Elos, nor by the organizations and machinations of its denizens.

Her laughter ended in a scream, ash spreading out and cutting into the stone walls. Clicking sounds soon could be heard and Ilea grabbed her helmet before getting up. Her black hair flowed over her shoulders, blue eyes staring into the dark as lines of cinder shined on. She put her helmet on and stored the three corpses, blinking away a moment later. Ilea was silent

during the short journey back, only allowing herself to breathe when she ascended through the small corridor.

Coming out on top, she was greeted by the dark one who had guarded this entrance the last times she had traveled through. Landing on her feet, she stepped back and slid off the wall. A deep sigh left her as she closed her eyes, legs sprawling before her. The guard didn't speak, stoically remaining in the middle of his dedicated wall, sword at the ready and head focused on the entrance. Ilea wasn't quite ready yet to walk through the bar. Instead, she checked if indeed she had reached her short term goal.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 321] – For defeating an enemy sixty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 392] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and thirty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Blue Reaper – lvl 330] – For defeating an enemy ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 260 – Five stat points awarded. One third tier skill point awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 253 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*



Checking out the third tier menu, Ilea didn't have to think very long to make a decision.

*'3rd tier skill points available [Azarinth First Hunter]: 1'*

*'Skills available for third tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:'*

- Hunter Recovery*
- Azarinth Hunter Sphere*
- Azarinth Fighting*
- Azarinth Perception*
- Azarinth Reversal*

At least a bunch of her skills were now available to be upgraded but one had again just saved her life. More offensive potential was definitely a good thing and she didn't doubt the third tier of Destruction had played a vital role in both her fights with the knights as well as the Blue Reapers. Still, seeing her body ripped through and burnt, her brain barely functioning, she selected her only recovery spell. The reason she had come so far, the reason she could survive even when she had been beaten to a literal pulp.

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery advances to the 3<sup>rd</sup> tier'*

*Active: Hunter Recovery – 3rd lvl 1:*

*Send a healing pulse of mana into yourself or your ally with a touch. This skill can be channeled. The effects on your own body are vastly improved.*

*2nd stage: Your control is increased greatly, you can now focus your healing on specific parts of the body. As long as mana and health remain, your Hunter Recovery will restore your body. Lose your head and see for yourself!*

***3rd stage: You have healed your body time and time again, knowing every cell and where it belongs. Sacrifice a large amount of mana to rush your healing to unprecedented speeds. Lack of knowledge about your body may result in heavy damage.***

***Category: Healing***

Reading through the notification, Ilea sighed and closed it again. She'd have to test it later but it sounded good enough. Right what she would have needed against the enemies in her last battle. Her mana had never dipped far, the fights short and nasty. Against the knights it wouldn't help much but there she had never really taken much damage anyway. *Other than the leg against the Kingsguard.*

Two sixty reached, Ilea quickly stopped by the Hunter's Den to sell the eight reaper corpses she had from her hunt. Catelyn mentioned the the price would go down the next time she would try to sell any, saying her needs for the materials were met. The eyes, she said, Ilea could bring whenever she felt like it.

Her journey back to the Tremor dungeon went without any trouble. It was day and Ilea was quite glad to see the sun after a week, maybe two down in the tunnels. The ten stat points she had gained from the recent level ups were spent on Wisdom, the new third tier of her healing spell having brought additional use to a higher mana pool.

Ilea waited out several arcane storms before she rushed up, slipping in through the small entrance between rocks on top of the mountain. Flying down to the cathedral overlooking the big city below, she soon picked up two familiar voices, a grin weaseling its way onto her face as she landed softly in the middle of the hall.

“And I tell you it's not going to work. The enchantments are directly powered, if you overcharge them they'll simply snap back into place. We're not talking about some old shit ruin back in the Navali forest. You lot don't even explore dungeons, don't try to teach me about my craft elf.” Terok

spoke, obviously irritated as he looked up from the design plans of something that looked like a key.

The elf Ilea had met in the Tremor dungeon was hissing next to the dwarf, one of the chairs cut in two by his barrier magic before he grunted, “Watch your tone dwarf!”

Terok just laughed, patting the elf on his back hard enough to get a yelp out of him, “We’ve been through this. If you kill me you’re stuck with her and she’d not likely to get in there for another hundred years.” He said and smiled at Ilea, winking after he had finished. “Speak of the demon spawn.”

Ilea joined them on the other side of the table and looked at the plan, “The gentlemen have met each other I see? You’re underestimating me if you think I’ll need a hundred years.” Ilea said with a smile, her helmet vanishing.

“Gods what did you do to your face!?” Terok exclaimed, taking a step back.

*I forgot to clean myself didn't I?* Ilea thought and shrouded herself in ash before she stored her armor and scratched off all the grime remaining. Mostly her own splattered skin, blood and occasional organs. A fresh set of armor back on, the ash parted and revealed her now clean smile, brushed by ash.

“You have grown in power again. As much as I’d like to agree with the dwarf, you’ll be destroying those barriers in less than a decade.” He snorted, “Or you’ll end up as paste somewhere along the way.”

Ilea took a chair and sat down, “Paste isn’t quite enough to kill me.” She commented offhandedly before summoning three restaurant meals from Ravenhall, two of them moved to the table by ashen limbs.

Terok smiled and took the plate, grabbing a spoon out of his robot suit that stood a couple meters away, “Cheers lassie, you really are a saint.”

Ilea just rolled her eyes, she knew she was too nice to the dwarf but somehow she couldn’t help it. *It will be my downfall.* The elf looked at the

steaming food but didn't touch it, "Too high and mighty to accept a gift of food? Or do you only eat human flesh?"

"You won't get information for this." He simply stated, his gray eyes looking at her, a stark contrast to his flaming red hair. Ilea smiled at the comical look, the elf reminding her of a cosplayer's rendition of Dracula, especially with his long black coat and the sharp teeth. His height compared to the dwarf happily eating his food on the small stool made her crack a smile. "What's funny human?" He hissed, claws moving out from his hands a little.

"It's a gift, you should listen. Not that I think your information is worth a lot at this point. I expected more out of a legendary elf." She said, her smile not waning as she ate from her plate.

He sat down as well, the plate floating towards him before he sniffed on it. A beautifully crafted silver fork appeared in his hand before he pierced the fish, eating a piece of it. "Nobody said I was a legendary elf." He stated, Ilea almost disappointed at the lack of bite in his voice, "More of our kind should pick up cooking."

*Still didn't thank me*, Ilea noted. "So you explored the palace?" She asked, looking at the dwarf.

He smiled, "Aye, managed to not alert the Kingsguard. As dangerous as they are, they're not the brightest. Enchantments on the doors are something else. Barely ever seen anything as intricate."

"You can't get in?" Ilea asked but he just waved her off.

Taking another bite, he spoke with a full mouth, "It wouldn't be an issue. A week, two maybe but they're directly powered by the same source that controls the knights. At least the ones sane enough to patrol and walk around."

"Why is that a problem?" She asked, the elf already putting down the plate, a white cloth summoned to clean his mouth. *He really IS Dracula.*

Terok looked at the elf too, chuckling a little at the sight. Ilea was surprised with how little regard he had talked to the ancient being. Perhaps dwarves had a different opinion on the species than most humans she had met.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to explain to him for the past hour. With a direct source as powerful as whatever is hidden within the central door of the palace cellars, we can’t just blow through and overcharge it. I’ll have to actually crack the lock which takes time. Normally I don’t have that but in this scenario I can just go in and work on it for however long I want to. The knights don’t hear me anyway but they don’t react to me putting up noise canceling enchantments either.”

Ilea listened and nodded, “Can’t we blow through by force if you can cancel out the noise?”

“Worth a shot, surely. I’d like to try the conventional and safer way first. With how intricate everything is set up down there I doubt there are no traps and counter measures in place should we go that route. It’s your call of course, you’re the boss.” Terok explained.

Ilea shrugged, “Take your time. I’ve got enough stuff to do. Maybe we don’t want to find out what’s in there either. If it’s some undead necromancer ready to smite us...,”

“Then we run.” Terok said and laughed, “With whatever we can hold under our arms.”

Ilea laughed as well, “True that. Just wait with going in until I’m here. If I return to find empty storerooms I’ll hunt you down and rip your sweet robot to shreds.”

“I’ll wait. But only because your storage item can hold more than my hands.” He grumbled.

Ilea just shook her head and finished her meal. Not sending the dwarf away had been the right decision after all. “He didn’t try to kill you immediately?”

Terok chuckled and looked at the elf, “He certainly made big eyes when I strolled out of there. Got your name out before he could squash me.”

“He didn’t know my name.” Ilea said, the dwarf’s eyebrows rising, an apology already coming up when she stopped him, “It’s fine. Elfie, my name is Ilea.”

“I don’t feel the need to share my name.” He said. Before she could react he summoned a book and held it out towards her, “I will however share this with you. The deciphered and translated recordings of guard captain Reyker, servant of king Invalar of Tremor, capital city of Rhyvor.”

# Chapter 261 History

## Chapter 261 History

“Should I read it to you or do you think your dull mind will be able to handle the letters. There are many.” He grinned and licked his lips, sharp teeth showing.

Ilea matched his expression, “Good job.” Grabbing the book out of his hands, she flipped it open, “I’ll have you know that my mind can withstand a Blue Reaper’s magic assault. I doubt some letters come close to that.” She grumbled, happy with the expression on Terok’s face when he heard the name drop.

“I have not heard of that creature.” The elf stated, looking to Terok when Ilea didn’t react.

“Blue Reapers? Above three hundred at least, strong mind magic and lightning. Wait Ilea did you really fight them? Are you crazy? Wait no I know you are. Why am I surprised.” He said and sat back before awkwardly standing up again and shaking his head, “I need to get back to work.” He said absentmindedly and collected his plans while grumbling about healing magic and thick skulls.

*‘... Tremor is not the only place affected. Cities all over the kingdom report changes in their dungeons, more powerful monsters with unprecedented abilities and levels. If the spy reports are correct we aren’t the only ones*

*dealing with this. The queen has ordered to treat the news delicately, a panic highly possible depending on the nature of beasts...'*

Ilea read through the reports, most of them simply daily activities, reports from one kingdom or the other, places she had never heard of. Comparing the names with her notes from back in the Azarinth temple, she found no matches either. *Different times? The order didn't have the north charted so maybe they just didn't reach so far?*

*'... The king insists on elven perpetrators but I have my doubts. He listened to me at least, agreeing not to start another war on mere whims. I have to find evidence but the dungeons are impenetrable. My own power is not enough to break through, the Soul Rippers too many, too powerful. Even with the whole kingsguard I wonder if it would be possible. They don't wander out of the dark but if we want answers, we have to seek them in the depths.'*

They had been at war, with another human kingdom. Their cities more and more destabilized by the high level monsters suddenly appearing in the dungeons that had initially brought so much people, wealth and power to their kingdom. Adventurers drifted off to other places, safer and more prosperous, mercenaries fought for better paying employees and the army was thinning out more and more, protecting the citizens and walls.

*'... Tremor is all that is left. The flames of war have taken all but the capital. The king has lost his mind, the news of his son's passing summoning a wrath I have never seen in him. His majesty has barricaded himself in his laboratory and the queen is nowhere to be found. I will bring an end to this. We will scourge the beasts that brought this terror upon our*



*lands, human and monster. Should the chroniclers find and decipher this then they shall know the name of Rhyvor. In glory we fight.'*

The pages were blank after that. Ilea sat back and tapped the closed book. It had been hours since she started the read, most of it not very exciting. Knowing that the events had actually happened in the place she now knew to be a ghost town definitely added to the mostly dry reports. "So the king is alive and a necromancer." She exclaimed, putting the book aside.

"Don't be ridiculous. He must have found a source to power everything. The talen machines work and there is nobody controlling them." The elf hissed from the side, looking over what Terok was working on.

The dwarf added another line on the paper before looking up, "I think they use some kind of ambient mana gathering technology. Otherwise it makes no sense how they're still standing. Maybe this king found something similar."

*Interesting approach to renewable energy. If we had mana on Earth...*, Terok's assumption was only a theory of course. Ilea could see it though. The machines had to have some way of staying operational. Batteries only lasted so long. Undead could work without a source but the ones found here were connected in some way to the palace and the enchantments were still active as well.

"Enchantments can stay active for hundreds of years with a single charge." The elf said but Terok snorted.

"Of the intricacy we've seen here? Even the most efficient ones would dry out without a source. Maybe a hundred years with enough mana crystals but after that. You said this place was thousands of years old." The dwarf said.

Ilea rolled her eyes, "Doesn't matter. It's running still so just continue to try and crack it. Do you know of the Soul Rippers? They're mentioned several times."

The elf looked at her but shook his head, “The beast is unknown to me. The dwarf does not know either.”

“Just seems like something we should be on the lookout for. Supposedly stronger than whatever else was in the dungeons around the city before and enough to make the captain think the whole kingsguard can’t handle it...,” Ilea shook her head, “They’re above level five hundred, each of them.”

Terok shook his head, “Not necessarily. Well they are now but who’s to say the actual kingsguard was that high back when they weren’t part of the dungeon.”

“Perhaps they are not part of it still.” The elf suggested.

“Fair enough. We’ll find out at one point or the other.” Terok replied.

Ilea put away the book and stood up, “Terok I’m going to try and lure one of the undead knights out of the dark zone. Make sure not to be close by while I do that.”

The dwarf looked at her with eyebrows raised, his metal eye zooming in on her, “And what makes you think that’s a good idea. They demolished you. And don’t bring up my failure. I’m well aware they’re worlds beyond me.”

“You said they don’t have the connection to the palace. Maybe I can whittle them down more quickly. Plus I’ve killed the Blue Reapers reasonably fast. Since when do you care anyway?”

Terok was silent at that but grinned, “Well let’s just say that working with a crazy human and an outcast elf has brought back some life into these old bones. Be a shame if you died prematurely.”

Ilea snorted, “Why outcast?”

“Well he isn’t eating either of us. I’ve not met any elves but the stories are pretty unanimously the same.” He chuckled and looked at the elf who seemed to be actively ignoring the two.

Ilea shrugged, “Are you an outcast Elfie? Maybe you’d like to come into the dungeon then and help.” Terok’s eyes opened wide at that but the elf just sighed.

“Human. Don’t test me.”

“Oh but I love to test you.”

He grumbled something in what Ilea thought was elvish before turning away and summoning barriers around himself. “Now you made him hide in his box.” Terok said before they both laughed.

Until he thanked her for free food and told her his name, Ilea wouldn’t consider her teasing bullying. Terok was definitely right, any other elf she had met so far would rather rip out her throat at those comments than hide behind defenses and ignore her. Definitely more of a mature reaction but she started to doubt he was simply an old wise elf. *Maybe he’s the teenager and everyone else are the adults. Like a phase of historical and exploration interest instead of eating anything that moved.*

“Be careful out there.” Terok said and continued on his papers, tapping the metal pencil he had made on his bearded cheek.

Ilea nodded before she went in. *Killing something high above my own level would definitely weigh in on possible evolutions.* Next to high level skills, a lot of resistances and possibly unknown dangerous situations, her solo kills of higher beings had certainly helped with previous class changes. If she could lure one of the undead knights out and fight him alone, she thought it a possible match. They didn’t have the power to end her in a single strike and left enough openings for her to deliver damage. All she really needed.

How they were of such high levels was a mystery to her considering the danger levels of the Blue Reapers and the Kingsguard. Maybe they had more up their sleeves as well. *Did I fight the triple mark one for longer?*

She wasn't sure anymore. Fighting any of them might be beneficial for her levels though as without the connection to the palace, they might not be able to recover.

In a mere ten minutes, Ilea landed on a rooftop in what she had marked as the dark zone in her map. Terok probably had a more detailed one of the dungeon already but her own served her purposes just fine. Hovering down to the street, the warrior was shrouded in ash. When she had come here previously, it didn't take long to find one of the undead knights but their ensuing fight brought them through dozens of streets and a second one had only showed up afterwards. The rose knights above had definitely populated the sunlit part of the city more densely.

It took her twenty minutes of silently walking through the dark city to find something. *Finally...*, She saw the leg in her sphere but it wasn't that of an undead knight. Carefully moving a little farther without making any noise, she saw the creature hanging off the side of a building's wall. Two legs and arms, both long and thin with five fingered hands that ended in claws as long as her forearm. It was at least four meters long, its torso thin and elongated just like the arms and legs. A shiver went down her spine. There was something alien about the creature that Ilea couldn't place. Something wrong. Its head looked a little like a blooming flower, tentacle like extensions writhing within.

Other than the opened head, the creature lay entirely motionless and silent. Waiting, preparing. Something deep within her told Ilea to run, to hide and to never come back to this place. A terror she had not felt in quite some time. Not something logical, either born from the beast's magic or something instinctual within her. *Curious...*, She thought and ignored the feeling. Instead she created a projectile of ash and sent it to the wall opposite of the beast, interested in how it would react. The angle didn't allow her to identify it but she was prepared to blink away at any time should it attack her directly.

The ashen spike shot out and slammed against the stone wall. Ilea barely noticed the motion as the beast jumped off and landed, its hands grabbing at the space where the projectile had landed. It was now standing on the ground, its slender form slowly standing up on the thin legs as its hands

again grasped at nothing, her ash already disintegrated. A moment later it went back on all fours, returning to the waiting position it had been in before.

### ***[Sould Ripper – lvl ???]***

*Sounds about right...*, She thought, unable to take her attention off its elongated body, the smooth leathery skin that covered it. *Nope...*, The single word in her mind, Ilea blinked back towards the higher sections of the city. She knew exactly what captain Reyker had meant when he had talked about them. Ilea would definitely face them but she needed a moment to process it. After big insects, knights and talking foxes, its sheer presence, the way it moved, silent and deadly. It unnerved her, more so than anything she had seen before. The demons in their realm seemed like puppies in comparison. Maybe it was the added triple mark it had. The simple display of power was not easily ignored.

*First, undead knight.* She calmed herself down, a little upset at how easily the thing's mere presence had made her freak out. *You need to get a grip. That's hardly the worst you'll face...*, She told herself. At least she knew the knights weren't the only things in the dungeon. It also told her that the captain had likely failed his last quest.

The Soul Ripper didn't have an ability to sense her at least, meaning she got away rather easily. Focusing on her search, Ilea found what she had been looking for a couple minutes later. The roaming form of an undead knight. This one had only two question marks but that fact made it an even better target to test on. It had both its head and both arms, dragging the rusty sword on the stone floor. Positioning herself towards the higher areas of the dungeon, Ilea shot an ashen projectile at the creature. The knight hunched down and screeched towards her before its surprisingly powerful legs propelled it off the ground.

A series of dodges and quick movements, jumps and flying sections followed where Ilea tried to avoid her pursuer's attacks without using blink. She knew they could easily sense her and sometimes threw their weapons to intercept her appearing form. Blinking against them was to dodge when all

else failed, not to reposition or run away. At least not when there was no cover between her destination and the monsters.

Many a house was destroyed on the way, the knight ignoring the walls, fences as well as heaps of rubble between its quickly moving form and the target. Despite stumbling, sometimes falling down completely, it kept up rather well. Ilea would be able to get away if she moved at her full speed but the undead was quicker on his rotten feet clad in rusty armor than its brethren unliving in the noble district. Crashing through solid stone walls as well as smashing face first into the ground didn't seem to dissuade nor damage the creature in the slightest which did give Ilea a little bit of pause.

At least a second knight didn't appear, despite the noise her hunter continuously produced. Ilea had chosen the same route she had taken to come down into the dark district, hoping that none of the knights would stroll into her escape and luring path on the way back. Reaching the wall, she rushed through and turned in the air before she skid to a halt, waiting for the enemy to come charging towards her. A couple seconds later she knew the knight had given up. Running back in, she found him walking off to the lower parts of the dungeon, Ilea hitting him with a projectile of ash.

Again he screamed at her and engaged. This time she dodged closer, taking steps and jumps back towards the wall as the undead pursued. As soon as she reached the wall, most of the section mere rubble, the knight turned and rushed off again. This time he ran at a full sprint. Ilea reached his side a couple seconds later and tackled the heavy form, sending him into the nearby building as the impact ran through her bones. "Alright, your turf then."

A flying sword was her answer, the massive dull piece of metal rushing over her as she crouched, the knight's form following behind, its fist deflected as she used his movement to smash the heavy undead into the ground. The impact dragged her a couple meters towards where he had landed, Ilea letting go of him before he could grab her. Stepping back, she watched in amazement as his sword flung from the wall it was stuck in back to the knight's hand. Something akin to respect showed in his body language as he took a couple steps to circle her. His armor was dented in

various parts, a piece of his side missing entirely, ribs and rotting flesh showing below.

Its eyes were white just like the other knights, one of them looking at her through the cracked helmet. Its armor was more rusty than the knights still connected to the palace, its sword dull and really more of a mace or club. Four quick steps suddenly brought the twometer figure right in front of her, Ilea bracing for a quick attack but he simply studied her, waiting for a reaction before his hand reached out. Ilea stepped out of his reach before the sword slashed at her. Three quick attacks, two of which she deflected and one entirely out of reach as she had continuously walked back.

Her Veil reformed where she had deflected, the ash around her gathering again to form a mist around her. Another screech and this time it was answered. A second knight stood on top of a nearby building before it jumped down, landing with an eerie grace, sword at its side, held by the one arm it still had. Ilea decided the test was a failure then and there. Maybe she would try some more if she had any ranged attacks that could deal reasonable damage to the creatures but as it stood, she had to rip off limbs or incapacitate them quickly enough before their kin arrived, something they seemed to know as well. As much as the knights above seemed more trained and knowing, the ones here had somehow retained more of a tactical knowledge and perhaps less of the honor one would associate with a knight of old.

Ilea gave it up and rushed back to the wall, both knights leaving her alone as soon as she had reached it, their figures returning to the dark. Sighing, she sat down on a nearby roof, legs dangling down as she summoned one of Keyla's meals. A proven alchemical formula against frustration and failure. *Temporary failure...*, She reminded herself. Facing one of the Soul Rippers was put on her list but while undead knights resided in the dark as well, it didn't feel reasonable to try.

# Chapter 262 Discovery

## Chapter 262 Discovery

“Impressive.” The voice of Terok resounded behind her, Ilea smirking as he appeared in her Sphere.

*He already knows the range of my perception magic...*, It spoke for him more than anything else, Ilea continuing her meal as he landed next to her, his machine back in order and with a head to boot.

“And why are you here? Are you making it a habit to follow me around?”

“Kept a safe distance and I didn’t go into the darkness so keep your boots on lassie. They don’t follow you out of there?”

Ilea nodded at his assumption, “Don’t fight one on one for long either. I think killing them will be quite a difficult task. Oh and I met a Soul Ripper... I suggest you don’t venture too deep.”

Terok sat down next to her in his robotic exoskeleton, “You didn’t engage?” He laughed when she shook her head, “Perhaps there is some brain matter in that skull of yours remaining still.”

Something shot out of his suit, Ilea looking at it before he let it fall into her hand, “A key? To the closed off chambers?”

She could practically smell the grin between his beard, “Maybe. It’s a working theory but someone has to try. I thought you should have the



honor. Before you ask, yes it might fail and cause whatever traps are down there to spring to life. Maybe the knights will come for you. Why I think you're the best for the task."

"Didn't you say it'd take weeks to do this?" Ilea asked, looking at the small shiny key.

Terok looked her way and chuckled, "Well the chances of it not working are rather high. It should in theory disconnect the enchantments imbued in the lock from the source of mana that keep them running. To continue working I need to know what happens when you put the key in."

"You need to be there?" Ilea asked but he shook his head.

"Seeing it from a distance is enough. I can hide behind the plants to observe."

Ilea frowned before the key vanished into her necklace, "What if the trap encompasses the whole area and not just the door and a couple meters in front of it? What if the knights from upstairs come down?"

"Then we'll deal with that. I'm willing to take that risk." He said in an excited voice.

Ilea thought about it, "Why don't we test first with some of the plants or literally any other enchantments than the main door?"

Terok gave her a metallic thumbs up, "Good thinking. That's what I did to come to this solution. I didn't expect to be done so quickly but the elf and his barrier magic helped to forge the key a lot quicker than I'd have been able to. Plus something was off with the central door. Almost like the enchantments weren't in place correctly. I might be wrong and trust me I've been wrong before but with all my experience I say that it's the only one that can be cracked like this."

He was silent for a moment before he continued, "Perhaps it's an elaborate way to deceive anybody trying what we're attempting but honestly... the

other doors that remain closed, I doubt I could get in there in months even. Why set up a trap like that?"

"There could be reasons. We don't know who set it all up." Ilea said and sighed.

"I know. Still, there's a chance it's just a coincidence. Or maybe it was damaged at some point, perhaps deactivated and not reactivated correctly. I've seen it happen with plenty of old ruins or people reusing enchanted artifacts they found down under." Terok explained.

Ilea smiled at the mention of down under. "Maybe. Meaning somebody else could've been in there before us?"

The dwarf shrugged, "Only one way to find out."

"Well we can try. I should be able to escape should it go awry. Just make sure to keep as much distance as you can." Ilea said.

The dwarf nodded, "Will do ma'am."

She continued eating in silence, the dwarf standing up and waiting for her, arms crossed. "Give me a couple minutes." Ilea said with a full mouth.

Terok didn't seem happy about it, though he nodded and started pacing behind her. "Do that somewhere else, you're stressing me out." He stopped before teleporting away. *Like a dog waiting for his walk.*

Ilea wanted to know what was in the closed off chambers but her mind was still lingering on the Soul Ripper and the undead knights. While the dwarf was here for riches and perhaps better metal and materials for his suit, Ilea wanted to fight stronger beings. To think she already had several of them to choose from but lacked the ability to engage was more than a little irritating. Terok considered her crazy to even think about it, as did most humans considering the way they thought about the North. Ilea just didn't see a reason why not, even while they were too dangerous now, with the system in place, it was only a matter of time until she smashed them apart like she would an ordinary Drake by now.

She just hoped it wasn't the decades or hundreds of years that her current cooperators suggested. *I'm at two sixty already, just have to find more solo Blue Reapers or something else reasonable in the Descent.* Putting off the thought for now, she finished her meal, savoring every bite. Terok waited a couple buildings over, still pacing and impatient for her to join him. Ilea sighed and blinked over, her wings spreading and taking her the rest of the distance, landing next to him. "Let's see if you're just an extraordinary salesdwarf or if your products actually live up to expectations."

Terok started hovering, moving in his suit as naturally as he would standing on the ground, "Trust me, I'm as interested as you are to find that out."

"Got an opinion on the subject?" Ilea asked as she started flying towards the distant form of the palace.

Terok caught up with her, the two flying a couple meters above the buildings below them, "A mixture of both I guess. Though I assume you have enough experience at least to know that even a high skill can result in failure from time to time."

"Depending on what's standing against you." Ilea suggested, landing a couple hundred meters away from the palace. She jumped down to the street and started walking.

Terok followed her down but kept floating next to her, likely to avoid making any noise. Ilea wasn't overly concerned yet, her sphere alarming her before the knights would hear her steps on the stone. They walked the last part in silence but she could hear his heart beat. The dwarf was scared, excited or nervous. Maybe all three. She grinned under her helmet. Perhaps she would feel similar once the door had been opened. Worst that could happen is them being trapped with a level one thousand necromancer and his ten most loyal guards, each triple marks rushing to dissect the two of them.

Ilea had survived the Praetorians, she had survived the Basilisk and the elves. If she was the kind of person to stop at a what if scenario then she wouldn't have come north. Perhaps she would have rotten away down in the Azarinth temple so long ago. "If we get stuck, you distract them and I

find a way out.” Terok said when they reached the courtyard, not a single knight in sight.

Ilea nodded, the plan simple but with how little information they had it was as good as it got. Holding a finger to her mouth, Ilea checked the inside of the palace. Stepping inside, she made sure to stay hidden in the long hallway. Knowing where the throne room was and where the knights patrolled made it simple to reach the main hall of the palace. The two waited next to the thrones for the patrolling knight that would soon come up the stairs.

She looked at Terok, tapping her armored leg while waiting for the Kingsguard. Finally the knight showed up, walking through the throne room in his beautifully crafted armor, his sword sharp and deadly. Ilea itched to engage but she knew it would end in disaster. Very likely. There was a chance. A tug on her arm took her out of the thought, Terok motioning towards the stairwell leading further down into the structure. Blinking down, the two of them found themselves in the underground hall a couple seconds later. It looked virtually unchanged from the last time she had been there.

Blinking thrice, Ilea appeared behind the two knights guarding the central path that led to a massive closed door. Silver in color and of course a rose embedded in the massive thing. Looking back, she could barely see a glimpse of Terok hiding behind the plant she had just stood by. Giving him a thumbs up, she summoned the key and checked the door. A single opening was visible, energy visible as it washed over the sheet of metal. The entrance was seamlessly set into the white marble. Ilea wondered what it had cost to build such a place. The key looked simple in comparison, made of some of Terok’s spare metal to be sure.

The mold created by Elfie’s barrier magic that held the molten metal Terok had heated up. An interesting way to use his abilities. Ilea wondered who of the two had the idea. Ash formed around her, several walls of it both towards the two knights and the hallway as well as towards the door in front of her. Buffs already active surged to their highest power. Ilea sacrificed five hundred of her health to activate her third tier State of Azarinth as she slid in the key through the small opening in her ash.

A dull humming noise resounded when the key reached the end of the opening, fitting perfectly. *Metal magic must be a nightmare for locksmiths...*, Checking the knights, Ilea found them unmoving as they had been before. Whatever protection their armor granted, it was not the best for their hearing ability. Ilea grinned and turned the key. A dull click could be heard before the key was pushed outwards. A handle slowly extended from the smooth metal sheet. Ilea grabbed it and opened the door.

Checking the inside for movements with her Sphere and waiting for a moment to see if any misshapen experiment lunged at her, she turned back to Terok and let her ash float aside. Bowing a little, she gestured for him to enter. The dwarf appeared next to her a couple seconds later, floating to avoid making any noise. Ilea put the key back into her necklace while Terok set up some enchanted plates of metal in the hallway leading to the two knights standing guard. A sizzling and the magic was in place.

Terok landed on his metal feet, “There you go. Sound canceling activated. Vision should be blurry enough for the one patrolling down not to see us. He doesn’t walk far in to the hall.”

Ilea nodded as he opened the door more widely, checking the inside of it, “Key should work from the other side as well.”

Ilea summoned one of her heavy gauntlets and set it down behind the door, “Let’s just keep it open. Your enchantments will stay active for a while I assume?”

“Couple hours at least. I’ll check on them periodically.” The dwarf reassured, his flood lights streaming into the dark room, illuminating a variety of machines Ilea had no idea where to place. It was a long hall with several doors leading into small rooms.

“Safe to enter from your side?” Ilea asked, the dwarf giving her a thumbs up before she stepped inside. He followed behind closely, his light giving color to the things Ilea saw through her Sphere. The ground and walls were marble, the same as in the hall outside. Metal boxes, bags, books, notes and many other things littered the many work benches, interspersed with

machinery that looked like something out of an eighties science fiction work.

Several glass tubes lined the opposite wall. As soon as she was in range, Ilea lifted her eyebrows and motioned for Terok to stop, “There’s a person in one of those tubes. I think she’s alive.”

“Wanna check it out?” He asked. The dwarf didn’t seem too enthused about finding anything alive down here.

Ilea continued walking. A quiet humming could be made out when they walked further down the hall, at its end a dome like machine with several big cords extending into the walls. A glass casing protected something inside but Ilea couldn’t see through it with her Sphere. “One of the cords on the walls is missing.” Terok spoke, his light illuminating the empty socket. The thing was around twenty centimeter in diameter. His light followed the thick cables growing out of the metal half sphere before he found one connecting to the machine incorporating the glass tubes. “Found the culprit.” He said and laughed.

Clothes were laid out on a beautiful chair next to the machine. Terok’s light flashed into the tube and revealed a female human looking to be in her fifties. Gray long hair, eyes closed and a body marred by three scars that looked nasty enough to have killed her. She was thin, malnourished. Ilea knew her heart was beating. “Should we wake her up?”

“Are you nuts?” Terok quickly said, “Identify her at least... let’s first find out what we can and explore the whole place before we tinker with anything.”

***[Mage – lvl 262]***

“She’s level two sixty two. A mage.” Ilea shared, tapping the glass. The woman didn’t respond in any way, sleeping or frozen. Something swirled in the tube but Ilea was sure it wasn’t water.

Terok chuckled, “Found our energy source. Guess you were right with your necromancer theory.”

Ilea turned to him, the dwarf looking into the glass cover of the dome like machine. Appearing beside him, she looked inside and found a man in his thirties, broad shoulders, long silver beard and hair. His eyes were closed as well, arms folded over his naked chest. Scars marked his body too but he seemed in a much healthier condition than the woman in the glass tube. “His mana is flowing away, somehow the machine gathers it all up and distributes it among the tubes leaving it...,” Terok explained what he was seeing.

Ilea suddenly turned back to the glass tubes, “Something happened. Prepare to fight.” Her perception was diluted near the tubes, something tried to go unnoticed. Terok’s light flashed into the hall, the only thing they found was a thick mist.

“Quite perceptive girl.” A female voice rung out. “Before you attack, I would like to suggest a bargain.”

Ilea looked through the mist and found a portion where it seemed ever so slightly different. Something she would never have noticed without her training with Eve. Looking right at the spot, she replied, “Take down your mist and we’ll talk.” Her own ash started to spread in the room, limbs forming behind her back. Terok took a step away from her, towards the dome like machine.

“Are you enemies of Rhyvor?” The voice ignored Ilea’s request.

Ilea stepped forward, ignoring the burning mist that made its way into her armor. Her healing and resistance took care of it. *Someone to level my Mist Resistance...*, Grinning at the find, she stepped right in front of the differently swirling mist, “Rhyvor is long dead. You and the guy over there might be the only survivor. Now take it down or I’ll make you.”

The mist washed to the side of the room, evaporating slowly. The woman who had resided in the glass tank stood before her, silver eyes staring at her intensely. Her naked body was veiled in mist. “I feared as much...,” The woman said, “... though I cannot believe you without proof.”

“You want proof? Look around the city, the knights are covered in rust and all of it is buried inside a mountain.” Terok said, shaking his head at the ridiculousness.

“She can’t leave.” Ilea said, “She has no way of getting away from the Kingsguard...”

*How long was she trapped down here?*, Ilea thought, the woman still staring into her eyes, unwavering.

“Well then we’re at an advantage. Who are you?” Terok asked.

The woman looked at him with disdain, a grimace forming on her face before she spoke, “I am Elana Invalar, queen and regent of this revered kingdom and you will show me respect dwarf.”

He laughed, “Queen of nothing but undead and ruins.”

The woman’s arm shot out, mist swirling around her arm before Ilea’s hand rushed out to catch it. Mist buried into the marble, leaving behind a deep gash. “He’s here with me. Don’t be stupid. I know the news must be terrible to hear but dying because his idiotic...” Ilea paused and turned to the dwarf, “... insensitive ass offended you won’t help in the slightest.” She finished and turned back to her. “Alright?” Ilea asked, looking into her eyes.

Closing her eyes for a moment, the woman sighed, “Excuse me. It has been a trying and... frustrating time.” Ilea let go of her arm.

“She nearly killed me! Why would you let her go?” Terok asked, appearing behind Ilea to avoid any further attacks.

“Completely justified. Now shut it. You spoke of a bargain? What do you want? And what do you have to offer?” Ilea asked, ignoring Terok rambling about her being a specist, human loving cunt. He really had a mouth about him.

The supposed queen looked at her, “Do you really need to degrade yourself with such company? We can talk about how I will reward you...”



Ilea interrupted her with a finger to her mouth, “Bap bap bap. I said he’s with me alright. Now stop weaving your aristocratic bullshit and tell us what you want. Maybe we’ll help, maybe not. That’s exactly why I like His company....” Ilea sighed the last sentence and shook her head.

# Chapter 263 The Keys

## Chapter 263 The Keys

The woman looked at her for a while and then started laughing, “By the gods.”

“Alright... then I will humor you. The necromancer you see in that machine, he’s powering all of this. All the knights attacking you outside. I need a healer to wake him up safely and I need an army to destroy the knights still binding him to this place. And then we need to cleanse this city of its enemies.”

“Typical old queen of a ruined kingdom.” Terok complained, “Do you have the keys to the treasury and armory?”

Ilea held up a hand to him, “It’s the king isn’t it? The necromancer... he locked himself in his chamber after his son...,” Emotion flashed over the woman’s face as Ilea retold what she had read. “You went in as well. What was the goal with the knights?”

The queen was silent for a while, “To protect Tremor from its enemies... I wanted to be with him. When I heard about our son. Perhaps it was a mistake. The runes and enchantments placed on this chamber were the most intricate, most expensive he could get. They had to be locked for his cursed machine to work. And he needed someone here to look over him.”

Ilea was pretty sure he didn’t but her thoughts weren’t voiced. A hard look at Terok shut him up before he could start. “Why didn’t you leave? Get

help?”

“Nobody came. For half a year I stayed down here, waiting, anxious. Nothing ever happened. I rerouted some of his machine’s energy to one of the life support units and developed mist to keep me inside. When I woke up, however many years later, nothing had changed. I tried getting out but the idiot is the only one who can control the enchantments directly. I had to pry my way out. Took me nearly a decade. At least he had thought about food and water.” She explained, looking at the machine.

“When I finally did get out, the Kingsguard attacked me. They couldn’t pass into the chamber but somehow the city had turned into a dungeon. Either we were abandoned or whatever had happened to the dungeons in Rhyvor had caused this too.”

Terok sat down on a chair, “Do you have the keys though?”

Ilea sighed, “We can’t kill the kingsguard. There are other things lurking in Tremor that I can’t kill either. Nor do we have an army, not that I think it would help against anything. What I can offer though, is a healer.”

Her eyes lit up at the mention, the silver glinting with hope, “Bring him here then.”

“Don’t worry about that. The dwarf has a point though, do you have the keys?”

The queen looked at her and then at the dwarf, channeling her fury. Ilea snapped her fingers in front of the woman’s face before she could lash out again, “No. I don’t have the keys, I wouldn’t have spent ten fucking shit years trying to get out only to be attacked by those who swore to protect us. If you wake him up he might know where they are, maybe he can open the doors for you immediately.”

“I don’t trust her.” Terok said.

Ilea agreed, she was obviously holding something back. She believed the general story though, the queen didn’t seem like someone who would act

this stupidly without the necessary emotional weight she had endured, “Look. Elana? I’m Ilea by the way and I can heal so maybe we can wake him up. We’re not here to torment you but we’re not here to save you either. Your kingdom is lost, it has been for thousands of years probably. Now I’d gladly help if we get anything out of it. Being honest would be a good start.”

The queen shook her head and murmured to herself, “I need... where are my clothes...,” She said to herself, walking to the chair and putting on the dress, silver roses depicted on the white silk. Its tight cut emphasized the malnourished state of her body. Ilea let her walk to the machine where she put a hand on the glass, “Maro darling, we have visitors. Can you not deal with them I’m so terribly tired.” A sob left her, Ilea looking at Terok who twirled a finger near his head.

*Who wouldn’t go crazy being trapped in here.* The story matched up with what she had read in the captain’s log. “Terok check the machine, if we can safely wake him up without Kingsguard rushing in here to slaughter us, we might as well talk to him. Maybe he does know something about the keys.”

The dwarf saluted and went to work, avoiding the sobbing woman hammering her hand on the glass. Ilea carefully walked up to her and took her hand in hers. Sending healing mana through her body, she noted that even from the hard hammering the woman had sustained no injury. *Level two sixty after all.*

“Come, you’ve probably not eaten anything real for a while.” She said and summoned one of her restaurant meals. The queen looked up and smelled at the food. Her eyes remained teary before she shoveled it into her mouth with the provided fork. Ilea put away the plate and led the woman to one of the smaller rooms where a beautiful wooden table and several silver chairs adorned the white marble floor. A painting of a pair of humans clad in royal attire hung on the wall. “Do you have lights in here?”

She had calmed down, wordlessly touching the wall where a small metal plate lit up. Warm magical light flooded the room, Ilea immediately recognizing her as the woman in the painting. Older, without the smile or the beautiful blond hair that reached far below her shoulders. A sparkling

queen with a charming king. His silver hair was shorter, clean shaven with a hard jawline. He was taller than her in the painting, his green eyes almost piercing out of the canvas. “He hated it.”

Ilea turned to the woman who looked at the painting as well, “Hated the formal clothing, the speeches and appearances. Rhyvor would have fallen decades earlier if it weren’t for me.”

“Does it matter now?” Ilea asked.

Elana looked at her and then back to the picture, “I suppose it doesn’t. Thank you for the meal Ilea.”

“Tell me about yourself, about the king and this kingdom.” Ilea wanted to make sure she wouldn’t wake up a necromantic death god of old. Getting some more backstory might help her with a decision.

The king was called Maro Invalar and he was apparently the most charming man Elana had ever met. The stupidest as well apparently. Them with their group of adventurers had ventured into the unknown, only to find several undiscovered dungeons. Building a camp between them, on a mountain that reached high above the surrounding lands was the beginning of their long journey. A journey that led to the foundation of Tremor and the kingdom of Rhyvor. The wealth and power from the dungeons as well as resources found in the area made them influential quickly. Elana and some of her teammates quickly showed they were good at other things than fighting and adventuring, becoming the ministers of trade, housing as well as owners of the local adventurer’s guild and inns.

Everybody loved king Maro, people from far away flocking to the newly formed kingdom and swearing fealty on his name alone. The initial assassination attempts, power struggles with the nearest human and dwarven kingdoms as well as internal conflicts flared up in a fire of politics. The two of them decided to marry, to set an illusion. The king apparently had little interest in ruling and the inherent responsibility but Elana was born for it, born for the cutthroats, the schemers. He was the benevolent king, the one who loved his people, many of them quite literally.

Elana on the other hand lived a life of duality. Acting as the disinterested queen who could be easily influenced by external powers on the one hand and being the iron ruler on the other. It was of course a tale she told and Ilea had no way of getting proof for most of it. There were some things she could verify however. The soul rippers being one of the beasts in the dungeons nearby, the name and nature of the captain of the guard as well as many events Elfie had translated in the log book. Elana even knew about the wines and their history mentioned in the second book Ilea had found initially.

“It’s impressive. I’m inclined to believe your story, queen regent of Rhyvor. However you could’ve written those books yourself and planted them for us to find.” There were of course some things like the Soul Ripper’s actual existence that she couldn’t have made up.

Elana groaned and held her face with both hands, “Ilea please. Why would I do something like that? I told you I can’t go out, the kingsguard attack me just like they attack you and I lack and ability to travel through space. I can travel through earth but Maro the idiot that he is wanted everything in bloody marble.”

“What’s their armor made of?” Ilea asked, thinking about things not mentioned in the log book.

Elana looked at her, “Stonehammer steel if I remember correctly. It was mined not too far from here. The best metal we could source ourselves.” The queen explained.

Ilea tapped her leg. She was putting the woman through quite a lot more scrutiny than she had either Elfie or Terok. Neither of them however asked to wake a necromancer in control of creatures that could wipe her out. That fact somewhat justified the behavior to herself. “You said you need an army to destroy the knights that bind him to this place. What did you mean? Can’t he simply let them fall or make them kill themselves?”

Elana shook her head, brushing away a tear. Ilea didn’t know if it was a fake one or not, “They’re of a higher level than he could have ever raised. I think the dungeon took over, somehow. An unprecedented event but he’d

probably be able to understand. Somehow. As stupid as he was in certain aspects, the country was built on his personal strength and that of our guild. He was the best necromancer we've ever seen."

"The machine is still using his mana and life to fuel them. If you kill enough of them we'd be able to wake him up at least. Perhaps once there are only kingsguard left he'd be able to assert some control. I don't know. Why would I ask of you to kill the very bodies that would be his army just to wake him up?"

Ilea didn't see a reason but she wasn't a necromancer either. It just somehow screamed death to wake up what lay slumbering for so long. Then again most of the people she'd met so far would scream, knowing she was cooperating with an elf. Plus didn't she have necromancer friends already? And they weren't so bad. *Even after all this time. I'm still more inclined to help than not to.* Ilea sighed and then smiled. It surprised her. Perhaps she just didn't care about consequences and wanted to give people a chance? There was little reason not to believe the woman's story. The only thing was not knowing if the king would somehow be evil and kill her, Terok and the elf. The problem was that he was too high a level for her to identify him.

She tapped her finger on the table. It wouldn't cost her anything, to use her healing mana to somehow wake him up. She could check on him before to see how the machine actually influenced him. "Any state secrets you want to share? Nasty cult offerings of virgins and blood sacrifices?" Ilea had her elbows on the table, cupping her helmet and head within.

Elana blinked but kept looking into her eyes, "When we were younger... just adventurers on a journey to explore the west, it never occurred to me that I would have to kill humans, my countrymen and women. That I would have to order traitors to be executed, on evidence that sometimes wasn't quite as convincing or turned out to be planted. I remember them all, even after all this time. We tried to be fair, tried to have laws that would benefit most but once you rule, you know how hard it is to keep everyone satisfied, to keep control and power. Sometimes I had to ignore crimes, had to look away when people vanished. Because we were not in a position to go against the perpetrators, either financially or because of their possible influence."

Every word was spoken with deliberation, pauses between each sentence and a hard gulp in the end, “I do not know your sense for morals. There were certainly diverse views in and around our kingdom, in the very council to me even.”

“Was there slavery?” Ilea asked, the queen lifting an eyebrow at the question.

“No. There was no need. Our country was formed by adventurers, warriors and mages of high renown. To even come here was a dangerous journey, going through dwarven and sometimes elven lands even. We had all the labor and wealth needed for an economy without slavery. I will be honest that if it were needed, I would have implemented it. Instead we slaughtered our enemies, killed whole armies in wars over ridiculous claims or envy. Tell me what is better?” The question wasn’t rhetorical, the queen looked at Ilea as her lip quivered a little. Spending all this time thinking about what could’ve been done differently, what was right and what wasn’t. If she really had been the ruler of a kingdom she definitely had her own hell here in the chambers of the king. If she really cared and this wasn’t just an elaborate act.

Ilea sighed, “Personally? The decision sucks but killing them might be the better thing. If you don’t want them to turn against you again. Bringing them far away and just setting them free might be the nicest option but it doesn’t make sense financially. Idiots might question the strength of a kingdom that does that. Maybe incorporating them into your own armies? You’d need the trust to do so or the iron rule to execute it.” Ilea thought about ancient civilizations on earth. The problem here was controlling groups of mages and warriors capable of superhuman abilities. Even with hostages, money, harsh punishment, it was a higher risk than mere humans. And it would be slavery still.

The queen smiled, “There’s more in your head than I initially expected.” Her tone was cold, a smirk on her face as she studied Ilea, “It’s nice.” She said, “To talk... with someone after all this time. I had nearly forgotten. Ilea, I’ve decided to trust you. If you decide not to wake him for another year or even ten, I understand. Just please... free us from this... prison.” Her hand formed into a fist. “Thoughts like the way you explained plagued



my mind day and night. In the end I prioritized our own people and murdered our enemies.”

Ilea sat back and smiled, “Do you regret it? Being the queen of this land?”

Elana smirked and then laughed, “I would have had you flogged for that question back in the day.”

“I’d like to see you try.” Ilea said and leaned forward, cupping her head again.

“You are not quite as untested as I thought. You are young aren’t you? Peculiar... your set of thought, morals. Perhaps the times have really changed. Not as I had predicted. Perhaps you are not from here at all.” She smiled inquisitively. Ilea might have been intimidated if the woman wasn’t so frail looking. “I do not regret anything. I question my decisions, I question and revise, only to be better the next time. Now perhaps, there simply is no next time.”

Ilea definitely enjoyed talking to her. She believed her story. If it really was all made up to manipulate her then Ilea would be impressed. The emotion, body language, the stories and the way she told them. *Royalty with decades of experience...*, She reminded herself and smirked, “I’m not from this world.” Ilea said. Nobody knew her in the north and at this point even an elf hadn’t reacted in any particularly weird way to hearing it.

Elana nodded once, “Rare. I might have thought as much if your level was higher. Realm travelers are the rarest breed. Perhaps you had not intended to come here?”

“You know of its possibilities? What do you know about people not intending to travel through realms?” Ilea seemed too eager, she knew it.

“I could sell you this information for your help but I think gaining your trust is better. I apologize if this offends you Ilea... it is a way of thinking I have cultivated for so many many years. I think we could have been friends perhaps, long ago. When I wasn’t shouldering the responsibility of a kingdom and its people.” Elana said as she sat back.

“You’re not anymore.” Ilea simply stated and smiled.

“This city remains... my husband remains. And the creatures still bound to this place. Perhaps after all is taken care of, I might be free.” She paused, looking at the painting for a while before she answered Ilea’s questions, “Scipio, a mage from our original party had always been interested in the phenomenon of realm travel. He even aspired to learn it someday.” She shook her head and chuckled, “The man invaded a dwarven city just to talk to a captive of theirs who claimed to be from a different world.”

“Was he?” Ilea asked.

“Perhaps. He was a dwarf still. Scipio returned with economic ideas unheard of as well as agricultural suggestions that led to Rhyvor’s fame for wine. Perhaps the dwarf had simply been extraordinarily smart, a pioneer of his time. Or perhaps he really was from another world. Scipio had collected records on similar people in the past but they were few and rare, most discredited as madmen and women. He wanted to explore the elven lands to the south, claiming they would be the ones to have realm travelers amidst them. Of course he only assumed as much because of their secrecy and their ability to appear and vanish as they pleased.”

Ilea was certainly interested, “What happened to him? Did he find what he looked for?”

“Who is to know? Scipio never returned from his journey. We met someone who claimed to be from another realm around twenty years later, or was it thirty... sadly they came from a desert planet of survivors, not much to be gained for a kingdom the likes of Rhyvor.”

“Did you believe him?”

Elana shrugged, “A level three hundred sand creator is not something easily dismissed.”

Ilea laughed, “And he couldn’t have helped you out with your city’s problems?”

“The man had long been gone. He talked about finding a desert and founding a library of sorts. I don’t know if he ever succeeded. Didn’t hear about it in my lifetime at least.” The queen replied.

“You’re not quite dead yet.” Ilea smirked.

# Chapter 264 The Queen of Rhyvor

## Chapter 264 The Queen of Rhyvor

“That I am not.” Elana said and smiled. Terok knocked on the door frame at that moment, his two meter robot shining light into the room.

“Could’ve said you had lights. I’ve looked at the machine. It’s draining the man inside of both life and mana. Just doesn’t seem like he really has a choice in it.”

Ilea sat back, “What do you mean?”

Terok tapped a finger on the marble door frame, “It’s a trick to allow for better energy efficiency. The enchantments or in this case the undead take from him what they need, otherwise he would distribute mana among them. At least if what I know about enchantments can be applied to necromancy. No idea why he would do such a thing. With mana crystals, sure but as a person?”

“To get more soldiers. Can he still control them?” Ilea asked.

“I mean necromancers can send commands out but he doesn’t exactly see what’s happening out there. At least I don’t think so, never heard of a skill like that. It would have to be a basic command to keep them going on their own. Undead still retain some of their experience, their knowledge and capabilities.” Terok explained.

Elana spoke up, “Guard Tremor against its enemies.” She looked at Ilea, “That was the command given. Apparently it was too general to keep me out of it. Or the Kingsguard simply forgot about me.”

Terok chuckled, “Lassie they’re dungeon monsters. Powered by your late husband or not they’re not going to give you a pass.”

Elana stared at him, a little mist whirling around her, “Dwarf, when you speak of dungen monsters... are you simply insulting me or is there actual reason in your wording?” Ilea was prepared to intervene should it become necessary.

“Ever heard of Taleen dungeons?” Terok asked, leaning in on the woman. Not getting a reaction he continued, “They’re a dwarven lot... made a lot of machines that initially had a purpose... now their cities remain as dungeons, the dwarves long gone or fucked into other races. Maybe an ancestor or two of mine were part of them too, who knows. Point is, the machines are still there... running and they attack whatever comes into their ruins, dwarf or not.”

“You’re suggesting they’re not under his control anymore at all?” Elana asked in turn.

Terok shrugged, “As I said, necromancy isn’t my field. Who knows, maybe he just doesn’t like you.” Ilea’s senses heightened before she intercepted Elana’s hand, the mist again cutting into the wall.

Sitting back, she stared at the two of them, Terok having teleported to the side to avoid the blow, “Okay look you two. Elana as much as I enjoy talking to you, if you kill him I will return the favor. Terok, this is the last time I protect you for a retarded comment on your part.”

The dwarf laughed, “Never asked for your protection lassie. I stand by what I say. I don’t trust her. I trust that the necromancer won’t be a major pain in our asses but I don’t trust her, as a woman, queen or whatever she calls herself.” His stare was focused on Elana who returned the favor.

Ilea stood up and walked out of the room, “Why the fuck did I even come north if it’s just gonna be the same bullshit over and over and over. Elana or whatever your name might be come and show me how to wake him up. Let’s just get this over with so I can go back to fighting and the dwarf has someone else to talk to.”

Terok shook his head but didn’t interfere, Elana quickly got up and followed Ilea out, grinning at the dwarf. “If he’s evil I suggest you leave Terok.” Ilea warned but he just shrugged and followed them out.

“Not everyday you see something like a thousand year old dude waking up. Plus I said I don’t trust her, haven’t made up my mind about him yet.” He grumbled, folding his arms. “If he can open the other rooms it’ll be worth it anyway. Not like I can go back empty handed.”

Ilea didn’t react, watching the woman as she moved some levers and unplugged one of the tubes. “I think he just needs to be at higher health, then a push of mana will do the trick. At least that’s my theory, you’re the healer, you’ll be able to tell probably.” Elana explained as the glass cover opened up, steam rising as it moved downwards. The thing stopped after it opened half way, Elana grabbing it and pulling. Terok chuckled from the side before Ilea lent a hand, careful not to break the glass.

A bit of wiggling and it went down the rest of the way, the liquid inside seeping into containers below. The necromancer was lifted up slowly, his arms and legs connected with tubes to the dome like machine. No curse or anything had been released yet. Ilea sighed and extended a limb of ash, checking his vitals through her Hunter Recovery, arms poised and ash at the ready for any surprises. She kept an ear towards the exit.

The man was fine, no injury that she could notice. He had several scars and his health was low. It neither went up nor down, “Why is his health so low? It’s not draining.”

Elana touched the man’s chest. Ilea focused on the area where she touched but couldn’t find her do anything. She suspected Terok would tell her if his magic sight detected anything. “It is draining, just incredibly slowly. I think he added it in case his knights would all fall and his mana ran dry.”

“Giving his life for the kingdom.” Ilea stated. Terok snorted and Elana shook her head.

“He’s always had a dramatic flair.” The queen said a little subdued, taking her hand back.

Ilea healed the man, supposed king of Rhyvor. It took her a couple minutes to get him back to a reasonable level of health. After reaching half of his maximum, she started pushing healing mana towards his mind in intervals of ten seconds. At first he didn’t react but after another minute he jerked his head to the side. Elana gasped from the side and Terok took a step back. The next pulse made his eyes shoot open.

Ilea was sure Elana had told the truth by now, his eyes green and as intense as they were depicted on the painting in the room they had talked in. The man coughed before he looked around, “Hahahaha, you’ve freed me! Now you are doomed!” Terok teleported back but Ilea just looked at Elana who rolled her eyes.

“I mean it is a little funny.” Ilea said but the queen just shook her head. She still had a smile on her face but the tears rolling down her cheeks suggested it wasn’t because of his joke. Ilea was about ninety percent sure it had been a joke. He looked at Elana with a grin before he turned to Ilea.

“Finally, a strong woman with a sense of humor.” He tried getting out of the machine but found himself unable to move up. His muscles didn’t seem to have degraded as a normal human’s would have but the man was above level two fifty at least, Ilea had no idea how such a body would react to thousands of years of not moving.

He grunted, “I don’t suppose we won the war.” He said in a tired voice, glancing down towards the gray beard. Emotion flashed in his eyes as he looked at Elana, “My dear... how long have you been looking over me?”

She just shook her head again, “It doesn’t matter. You’re back now.”

“Be honest, the beard doesn’t suit me, does it?” The question was directed at Ilea.

She made a wave motion with her hand, Terok walking back to the group, “Maybe if you trim it a little. Definitely have the necromancer dread look you were going for.”

“I suppose I’ll have to destroy the world then for the sake of the joke.”

“You’re stuck.” Ilea said, “But sure, if you feel like trying?” Ashen limbs moved up, forming sharp and dense edges as they hovered towards him.

His grin turned into a smile before he laughed, “Where did you find her Elana? Ash creator and a different route than Kahn took. You’re a melee fighter aren’t you?” Ilea didn’t reply, “Willing to help my beloved wife. You’re young and reckless, I like that. To think she could get an adventurer to help her out.”

A piece of rock slammed into his face, “Dear, you’re embarrassing me.”

Blood slowly rolled down his cheek, Elana with a perfect smile on her face that didn’t reach her eyes, “Tremor is a dungeon then... I have lost control. The knights are above my level.”

*Good to know, if he’s not lying.* Ilea thought.

Terok was the one to speak, “You built this machine not knowing this could happen?”

The necromancer looked at him and checked out the machine, “Interesting design. I’d like to see you fight in that, is that... Steelhammer...wait you’re wearing that too. Nevermind that, no I knew this could happen. It was a small chance, one in a thousand or even less according to my ass, where I pulled those numbers from. Dying was much higher, or succeeding, or all the knights destroyed.”

Another rock slammed into his face, “Bloody fucking idiot. You could have at least gotten a healer in here.”

“Don’t look at me like that, you were never supposed to be in here.” He said, much quieter.



Elana's hand shook a little as she spoke, "And leave you to die? How dare you ask that of me."

He looked away, not answering before she continued, "It was the one thing Maro... the one thing I wouldn't... couldn't do."

Terok chose the most opportune moment to speak up. Ilea couldn't help but smirk at the fabulous timing, "Mr. King, we came here to wake you but your wife didn't have anything to offer. Do you perhaps have any valuables that could pay for this job?"

"She would've had you quartered and burned for that dwarf. Seems like Rhyvor has really fallen. Any survivors?" King Invalar asked.

"We don't know... I couldn't leave Maro, the kingsguard attacked me. I told you not to use marble in the bloody groundwork."

"Only way I felt safe from you my dear." He replied, "Treasury and armory still have some stuff in them, I doubt Reyker ran off with anything. I could open them for you but not from here. There were keys though... I think Gadrian had at least one of them."

Terok sighed, "How do we get you out of there then?"

Maro laughed, "You'd have to kill all the knights... every single one of them."

"Planned to do that anyway...", Ilea shrugged, "... though it'll take a while, the kingsguard are triple marks."

"Triple marks? You mean they're above level five hundred... what the fuck happened here?" He shook his head, "Well I suppose we'll find out at some point."

"Where do you think this Gadrian could be? Or his corpse?" Terok asked, getting a hard stare from Elana.

Maro looked at him and then thought about it for a moment, "Probably Lisburg, it's a city east from here, no idea how much of it remains or if he

stayed there. He had his house there, mansion really. If the war ever reached him I'd assume he waited for them with a glass of wine in hand, a rose in his hair." He laughed after answering. "How much time has passed, do you know?" He added, looking at Ilea.

She shook her head and shrugged, "Thousand years, two or three maybe? I have no idea." The man winced, avoiding to look at his wife.

"I told her not to come...", He said to Ilea in a whisper.

"I can hear you Maro." Elana said, "And I don't regret my decision. I was asleep most of the time anyway. Good that you at least left the pods."

"Not as good as this one. You look just as beautiful, a little bony perhaps for that dress." He said.

"Most charming, really?" Ilea asked, raising an eyebrow at the woman.

She rolled her eyes, "He's not the best under political stress. It's been a couple hours since he thought his kingdom was going to be destroyed, his people slaughtered. Our son died a week ago in his mind."

"How do you know I didn't experience all this time?" Maro asked with a grin.

Elana chuckled and smiled at him, "If only I didn't know you Maro." There was more said in the looks they gave each other, more than Ilea could understand.

"There you go then. He's awake. I'll go back to the Descent later today. Terok can you work on cracking the other doors?" Ilea said, cracking her neck.

The dwarf looked at her and shook his head, "I'd rather we find that key. Lady can you show us on a map where this Lisburg was?"

"It's queen, not lady. I'd be happy to show you. Though I don't know how you wouldn't know it, it's only a couple hours travel by horse from here.

Vineyards as far as the eye can see, even if Rhyvor isn't anymore I doubt anybody would have burnt it down." She explained with a smile.

Terok looked at Ilea and shrugged, "Lady queen, I'm not sure how long you've been down here or what exactly you're talking about but we're in the north. There are arcane storms raging outside that could tear that one a new hole." He pointed at Ilea. The two looked at him with questioning glances, "She's ridiculously tough."

Ilea smiled, "I don't think that's what they're confused about. This is considered no man's land. Human expeditions shatter trying to get here. I nearly died a couple times already and he's right, I'm pretty hard to kill. At least I'd like to think that. He's part of a scavenger town hidden in the cracks of these lands, living off the ruins of old. If there ever was a vineyard here it was very long ago."

"That's impossible. Tremor is the only remarkable mountain for miles, there are no cracks in the land." The queen spoke.

Maro didn't seem as unbelieving, "Perhaps the changes in the dungeons were more widespread than expected. A monumental environmental shift. Perhaps a magical catastrophe or something very powerful meddling with nature."

"Dragons." Ilea suggested which made Maro laugh.

"Here? You're crazy. Well maybe if the changes were that drastic. Even then, why would any one of them do such a thing? They didn't care for our kingdoms for thousands of years."

"It's certainly a possibility. Perhaps they wanted to create more living space for themselves?" Elana said but the king shook his head.

"Why not do that earlier if they were capable of such magic. We don't have anything. Even if there were evidence it's probably gone for a thousand years." Maro said, "Girl if you free me from this place I'll reward you handsomely." He winked at Ilea who just laughed.

He knew what he was doing, grinning like an idiot, “Charming. Guess I’ll throw myself at the kingsguard then.” Terok chuckled.

Elana walked away, going into one of the rooms while the king looked after her, “I’m sorry.” He said quietly, not directed at the two standing near him. “Dwarf! You seem like a mighty explorer. Would you be willing to get me some food and feed me, like a babe. You could also tell me more about the environment, the north as you call it and what the hell is going on in Elos.”

Terok stepped up, “King Maro, I’ll be glad to serve as your mercenary and caretaker.” Implying the king would need to pay.

He just smiled. “I will be rewarding you handsomely, as soon as I can move again.”

Ilea rolled her eyes and summoned a plate of food, handing it to Terok, “I don’t see why you trust him more than her. The doors can be opened just the same, he has nothing to offer you.” Ilea said, looking at the king who just grinned and then winked at her again, his gray beard and long hair making him look more than a little creepy. The only saving grace were his muscly body and the beautiful emerald eyes. *Maybe he swooned Terok with a spell. His mistake.*

Ilea rolled her eyes as the dwarf started feeding the king, “You figure out whatever this is. I’ll leave in a couple hours. Maro, enjoy the food.” She said and walked away.

“Open wide your highness.” She heard Terok say. Checking on Elana with her sphere revealed her sobbing quietly bundled up in a corner of the room. The expression on her face made Ilea smile. Finally after such a long time, she had her husband back. Whatever their relationship might be, it was all she had focused on for all those years. Ilea couldn’t imagine how she felt, leaving her be as she stepped through the noise canceling enchantments Terok had put up. Blinking a couple times brought her out of the palace without alerting any of the undead.

At least she hadn’t woken something old and dangerous, ready to rip them apart. A big part of her was disappointed there had been no fight but there

was plenty here in the north willing to jump at her throat after all.  
*Vineyards... fucking really?*

# Chapter 265 Underground Paradise

## Chapter 265 Underground Paradise

Elfie glanced her way when she walked into the cathedral, the double doors closed by ash floating behind her. “Hey there historian.” She said, the elf rolling his eyes before he looked back to the book he was reading.

“Did the dwarf die?” He asked a moment later, Ilea checking her armor for damage. The undead knights had barely scratched her, courtesy of her ash creation’s third tier. If she could somehow make it more durable the stuff could replace her armor permanently.

*Never worry about steel anymore. Plus I could fight in shorts and a shirt.* Ilea wasn’t convinced of the idea, not without a sports bra. Maybe they had a suitable corset here, Elana’s dress seemed suitably well crafted. “Nah he’s fine, might wind up dead if he keeps being... well himself.”

The elf sat up and looked at her, “Did they key work?”

“Question for question. Why was there an elven armor in a Taleen dungeon? I though you lot don’t go down there?” Ilea sat down, arm resting on the chair’s side, her head cocked to the side.

The elf stared at her with his gray eyes, a color she now deemed rather common among her acquaintances. Elana’s weren’t exactly gray, more a

silver really. “Either someone brought it there or a cursed one died in the dungeon.”

“Cursed one?” Ilea asked, “So there are elves who enter dungeons?”

When he didn’t answer, she smiled, “The key worked.”

“That’s all?” He asked with a grin on his face, his tongue licking over his bottom lip.

Ilea shrugged, “Questions and answers Elfie, you’re being a dick, I am a dick. Isn’t that the bargain you had suggested?”

His claws dug into the chair but his smile remained, a spark of joy or madness reaching his eyes, Ilea couldn’t quite tell. Maybe it was just light reflecting in a weird way. “There are those who seek to destroy the Taleen creations. They enter dungeons and are deemed the cursed ones. I believe they call themselves the Cerithil hunters, named after one of the first and most famous among them.”

Ilea listened, writing some of it down in her notebook, “We found two survivors of Rhyvor. King Maro Invalar and his wife, Elana Invalar. He activated a spell, machine or whatever that is considered to defend the city against its attackers. That was long ago though and it seems the attackers never came or they simply left the capital alone. I woke him up but to get him out of there we’ll have to kill all the knights still connected to him.”

The elf stood up and started pacing, “Alive... after all this time... to speak to the rulers... and you believe them? You think them the true royals?”

Ilea shrugged, “Probably. Might be a fake story but the undead he controls are called kingsguard. Might be a prisoner too but it doesn’t make sense. The captain of the kingsguard... all of that would have been fake otherwise. And why leave them in control of the knights if they weren’t who they say they are. I don’t know Elfie. I don’t dislike them personally, don’t really care if they’re king and queen of this forgotten kingdom.”

A curse spread around him, Ilea's veil cladding her in ash, "I do care. Can you bring them out?"

Ilea shrugged, "He's stuck I said. Can't leave without the knights dead. Maybe you can come in and help take care of them if you really want it? Now that I know there are elves going into dungeons it can't be that bad. Cursed ones... you're already using curses, would be a fitting name for you."

He hissed, a powerful barrier rushed at her, Ilea simply blinking through and ignoring the growing curse around her. "You're right though, with that weak ass magic you're as good as useless. What's your level anyway?"

The elf calmed down again, his magic subsiding before he sat down, "You can't tell yet? Your identify skill is lacking. Did you get to this realm without it?"

Ilea didn't say anything until he spoke, "I'm level two hundred and eighty. Meaning your identify skill is below level eight. Impressive... like a child given such power."

She smiled and actually believed him, "I thought you were super old. Did you just fuck with me?"

"I did not lie to you human. I am simply not as inclined to throw my life away in some unknown cave or against an unreasonably strong animal. What you consider a past time. There's a reason I've grown old." He stated.

"Why do they want to destroy the Taleen machines?" She asked instead, not reacting to his provocation.

The elf tapped his chair with a nail, "Because, human, the dwarves, all dead and gone by now left behind more than ruins to explore for you and your squabbling little species. I still don't know why they would ignore the human cities, the masses of your people, spreading like an infection as they scout through the vast forests to find and kill every elven child, every warrior that stands in their way. Like a curse placed on us by a dead people."



Ilea looked at him, really looked at him for the first time. This was certainly something new, something nobody had ever talked about. “They send out machines to hunt down elves?”

“They do. Or they did. Tens of thousands of them. My people welcome them as a challenge, welcome them as the test to reach maturity.” He spat on the ground, his expression turning to horror immediately after. Ilea watched in amazement as he went on his knees and cleaned up the spit with frantic movements. “The cursed ones go into their homes, destroy what they can find but it doesn’t change anything. The machines still come, unstoppable, in greater numbers every year.”

Ilea leaned forward as he sat down again, his face not revealing any sentiment in regards to what had just happened, “How long has this been going on?”

The elf didn’t answer her, “Can you get the queen out then, if the king is stuck?”

“Perhaps, I’m not sure if she wants to go out. Terok will be back at some point, maybe talk to him about it. I’d have difficulties getting her out, she lacks a teleportation ability to get past the kingsguard apparently.” She explained to which he nodded. “Is that why you’re a historian? You’re trying to figure out why the Taleen are coming after you?”

The elf looked at her, “I am over six hundred years old human and even I was only deemed mature after facing down the sea of Guardians, killing my first Taleen Centurion.”

Ilea chuckled, “Guess I’d be mature too then.”

His eyebrows rose at that but he didn’t mention it, “Why not join the hunters then? Bring an end to their invasions?” Ilea asked.

He hissed, “Betrayal. I cannot. Now begone human, leave. I am tired of your presence.”

Ilea just grabbed one of the bottles they had found in the king's chambers and poured herself a glass. Looking at the elf as she put down the bottle, she took a sip. "No, I don't think I will."

His curse flared up again, her very blood poisoned but she just sat there, ash twirling around her as she stared into his eyes and took another sip. Healing mana flowed through her, taking care of the damage as it was caused. His attack was nuanced, dangerous and lethal but compared to the Blue Reapers he lacked the punch to finish the job. *He really might be at two eighty.*

The elf calmed down after a minute, simply turning away from her as he continued reading. Ilea was at least not annoying him anymore with further questions. *So the Taleen army I've seen wasn't made just to defend whatever Iz was. They build robots to hunt down elves. But why?* She didn't know. At least they didn't target humans, otherwise more people would know about this, or they would all be dead and unable to tell the tale. Perhaps this had something to do with the weird intervals the elves attacked in.

Taking care of their own borders, their own homes would certainly be a higher priority than to fuck with humans, even if they were supposed easy pickings. The comically evil and arrogant elves she had met didn't really give her a picture of sophisticated decision makers. *Is that why most of them use ranged magic? Because Centurions are much harder to destroy up close?* The same was true for plain old Guardians but Ilea could've hardly seen all of the Taleen's creations. *Cerithil hunters...*, She tapped the notebook with her pen.

Terok returned half an hour later, him and the elf quickly forming some sort of agreement. The dwarf's part was to get the queen out and to the cathedral. Information as well as training was what he would get for it. "I'll be out again for a while. If we're ever to clear out this dungeon you two better work on your levels as well." Ilea said after getting up, "Though I'd be happy to do it myself."

Terok gave her a thumbs up, “I hope to reach two hundred before you do so, might be able to distract some of them at least.” She didn’t mention the elf’s inability or unwillingness to enter the dungeon at all.

The suns were setting when she made her way back to Hallowfort. Signs of mist started to appear when she reached the entrance to the Penumra dungeon. She knew there had to be another way or even several to reach the scavenger town but she liked to see the dungeon from time to time, to see another goal, another possible frontier to explore. A place to test and strengthen herself once she was ready to battle the beasts within.

Making her way through the dark tunnels, she quickly reached the town. Ilea went for the Abyss immediately, walking through the bar that seemed to look the same both day and night. The guard was someone else this time but the burly warrior ignored her all the same. Finding herself in the dark hallways of the old city below Hallowfort, Ilea this time didn’t hunt for Blue Reapers. Perhaps the Descent had something in store for her that was both as easy to kill as well as a little less ridiculously dangerous.

Terok had talked a little about the different layers but when Ilea finally found a crack leading farther down, she was still surprised to hear the chirping of birds coming from below. A blink brought her into the open space, her eyes adjusting to the crystal light glowing from the pillars reaching down. Ashen wings spread to stop her free fall as she looked around. A lush forest of dark green pine trees spread a couple hundred meters below her. Rivers ran through like veins, ending in a lake that reflected the pale light from the crystal growing down into the space. Looking around her, she realized the rivers weren’t ending but flowed away from the lake before pouring in wild waterfalls further down into the darkness. The lake itself was formed by streams flowing down the distance cliff like walls that looked like mountain chains stretching high before connecting with the ceiling. Ilea refused to call it a cave.

An underground territory but the light, flora and the lake painted a picture she could only compare to the Haven under Ravenhall. The entirety too even ceiling she was now hovering under reinforced the unnatural feeling she got from the place. A shiver ran down her spine. *This thing has layers...*, She remembered and had to focus not to forget she was in a dungeon, in the north of all places. There was no village near the lake, no houses entirely too expensive for her to consider and no boats enjoying the crystal light or out for fishing.

Ilea spotted what she had been looking for after an hour of flying, taking in the sights and enjoying the serene atmosphere. Compared to the endless lake above, stretching below the statue holding Hallowfort, this place was somehow removed, the dangers of the north almost forgotten when she landed and looked around the dense and wild forest. Taking in her surroundings, listening and smelling for anything that might be a threat, Ilea jumped up and held herself near the top of a pine tree. A couple hundred meters towards the wall, wooden buildings sprouted from the cliffs like mold clinging to an abandoned house's each and every room.

Terok had mentioned there to be a camp of sorts, for those that sought to venture deeper into the dungeon. Even the highest level held danger enough to force such difficult construction. As far as the dwarf was concerned, the city hallways above held more danger than this place but Ilea would judge it on her own. Visiting the little culmination of houses would likely be beneficial. Maybe they sold maps of the areas already explored or at the very least information in regards to the creatures living here and further down.

Someone appeared in her sphere, making Ilea prepare for a fight as her buffs surged. "Lone hunter. What do you seek in the Descent?" A male voice asked, the creature wreathed in shadow that twisted and turned around him. Four arms by his side, two of them crossed. She noted the four short swords, two sheathed on his back and two on his sides. His face was hidden behind a black metal mask with no eyes, two small horns sprouting from his cheeks, a single line of red pain in between. A black hood covered his head, a coat and black somewhat wide clothes covered the form below.

Ilea jumped down from her tree, noting the slight increase in tension in the figure. “I seek to hunt monsters.”

*[Warrior – lvl 252]*

He looked her way for a while. Ilea wasn't quite sure what to make of it but at least he seemed to be alone. “And what is your purpose here, warrior of shadow?”

Relaxing a little, he spoke, “I am the protector of the scavenger camp you see hanging from the cliffs. You are not one I wish to fight but know that should you murder and destroy without reason I will be forced to do so. Tell me know if you seek the death of one among us and we might find a way to prevent unnecessary bloodshed.”

Ilea smirked, “Relax shadow guardian. I'm really just here to kill monsters. If I injure or kill anybody then it's with good reason. Though I'm not on the hunt for anybody as of yet.” She added and crossed her arms.

“Good fortune to you then, warrior of ash.” He said and gave her a nod.

Ilea watched him turn away before she spoke up again, “Wait a second.”

The guardian turned his head, “Do you wield shadow magic?” Ilea asked.

He turned to her fully now and cocked his head to the side, “You seek to learn? Or simply to test your strength?”

Ilea smiled under her helmet. He hadn't dismissed her immediately, “I seek to test Your strength. On my body.”

Two of his arms were held up, “I have no desire nor the physical ability to engage in sexual activities with your kind.”

Ilea shook her head, “Not sexual mate, fighting. I want a resistance against shadow magic. Might benefit you too to face someone close to your level once in a while.”

The guardian considered, “No. I have my duties warrior of ash. I will await the tales of your exploits.” With that he vanished in shadow, darkness remaining before Ilea was alone again.

Wings spread before Ilea soared up, quickly covering the distance between the ground and the camp on the side of the cliffs. Sturdy old wood had been used in the construction of the foundations, placed deep into the stone. Either there were no dangerous birds on the first level, or the residents simply didn't care about the lack of defense. Square and circle platforms interwoven with wooden stairs as well as small elevators operated with chains that reached through the platforms. She noted that one of the biggest elevators had chains long enough to reach the ground floor. Likely the way anybody without a flying ability traversed the camp.

Other than the guardian who had already introduced himself, nobody seemed to care much for her. She got some looks and a couple merchants were already beckoning her towards them, their wares held in boxes around them or distributed on cloth. Any houses built in the camp reminded her more of tree houses built on Earth. They had a magical touch added to them of course, some hovering with dangerously little to hold them up. Not enough to keep up with Earth's gravity but runes and enchantments likely tipped the balance in the structure's favor.

Ilea didn't spot more than twenty buildings but some tunnels leading into the cave suggested more space to be in there. Ilea walked up to the next best vendor, a dwarf with gray hair, leather goggles and a hat that would make Robin Hood proud. His skin was wrinkled and some of his teeth were missing when he smiled at the new customer. “Welcome. Now what will ye be lookin for? Me gots trinkets, potions, poisons, maps, camp gear...,”

Ilea grabbed one of the maps on the ground, it read *'Descent - 1<sup>st</sup> layer'*

“Maps it be. More detail and perfect scaling than anybody else's!” He helpfully supplied.

Ilea sighed, “Is there anything on this layer above level two hundred?” She asked the vendor, he himself being below.

The dwarf looked at her and shook his head, “Only the odd scavenger... further down you’ll have to go. The map shows the points of descent, ladders and elevators to lead you down into the second. I’ll make you a deal, layer one and two maps both for ten gold only!”

Ilea just walked away. Ten gold for two maps of a place likely traveled to death? She’d get a better deal.

# Chapter 266 Scouting the Unknown

## Chapter 266 Scouting the Unknown

“Alright! Six gold.” The merchant said behind her, trying to get out behind his wares but Ilea wasn’t in the mood to haggle with anybody.

*Why isn’t everyone like Earl. Just sell me the stuff with your margin and we don’t have a problem.* Ilea thought about just stealing the maps but she’d rather trade with someone she could somewhat trust. If he valued his products so lowly to try and swindle her into buying it for nearly twice as much, she’d think of them the same. The next merchant she talked to was a little more accommodating. The claws on his long hands as well as the teeth growing even out of his mouth made the reptile like vendor stand out from the others.

Ilea had no idea what species he was but she assumed a dark one of sorts. A dirty cloth covered his eyes. “Greetings traveler. May I interest you in any of my wares?”

Ilea looked at the wooden boxes, some of them remained closed, the merchant himself sitting on one of them. “At what layer are there monsters above level two hundred?”

The merchant moved his reptile like head to face her, “Ah, a newcomer then. For ten silvers I’ll tell you what I know about the monsters and their



levels, though I must warn you. Even after all this time, new things keep creeping up. You might get this information in the tavern from listening alone.”

Ilea summoned the money into her fist and opened it above his palm. The merchant caught the money and continued talking, “On this layer, you will find few even reaching the lower two hundreds. Food and water there is plenty however.”

Ilea frowned, “Why build up here then?”

The merchant cocked his head to the side, apparently confused, “Most of us here are no fighters, nowhere near strong enough nor willing to deal with the beasts that stalk the forest and lake. You may find them mere annoyances but we are forced to be up here. Human, are you not?”

Ilea didn't reply, “You build your towns surrounded by stone walls do you not? Against what? Wolves, bears?” He chuckled.

Ilea saw the point. “You've lived in human lands?”

“That is not information I am willing to sell. In the second layer, mostly treacherous tunnels, filled with traps and nasty insects, you will find most monsters near the two hundred mark. Other than what their corpses might bring you, there is little of value there. The third layer filled with water. You will find valuables there if you can swim and hold your breath for long enough. The beasts are as I hear less hostile but similarly dangerous as the ones in the second layer.”

“The fourth one is the one most want to get to. The Heroes' Descent, the ruins of a city believed to be build by the same people who built the one above this layer. Dangerous, to be sure and if you are looking for beasts to kill, there is plenty there at levels most avoid.”

Ilea waited for him to continue but it seemed the merchant was done, “What about the deeper layers?”

He shook his head, “Few dare travel there and none would share their findings with the likes of me. Rumors about a silent and dark forest in the fifth and strong winds in the sixth are all I can share but it is not reliable.”

*How long have you guys been down here and that's all you know?* Ilea was nearly regretting her decision to come to the camp at all. She was now in territory few humans ever traveled, ever could travel according to all the people she had met so far. Just because other races were around didn't mean they could stroll into level two hundred and higher dungeons with ease. It was a surprise to find camps here with scavengers and people but Ilea somehow expected them to at least be able to fight whatever was around here. *Can humans?* Ilea knew the answer to the question. Of course they couldn't. Most couldn't even fight and kill the odd wolf or drake living in the forests near Riverwatch.

“Do I really need a map going down or can I just orient myself... well downwards?”

The merchant chuckled, “That will work eventually, yes. I suggest any new delver to stock up on food and water, rope, healing potions as well as an actual healer in the team. Antidotes to common poisons as well as maps providing guidance to the established and most safe routes. You however, you don't strike me as a new delver, even though you might not have visited this very dungeon.”

Ilea nodded, all of that completely unnecessary for her. “Thanks.” She said and flung another big piece of silver into his hand, giving his wares a last look. Nothing struck her fancy, Ilea instead just letting herself fall off the side of the platform. She could hear a yelp come from someone who saw the maneuver, a blink close to the bottom bringing her safely into the woods and onto stable ground.

*So it's just a matter of going down.* She thought, spreading her wings and ash around her, intending to work on the last couple skills yet to have reached the pinnacle of the second tier. Quickly finding one of the rivers, Ilea followed it until she got to it's end. A waterfall leading down into darkness. Stepping into the water, Ilea's Sphere already perceived the cracks below, one of them big enough for her to get through.

Jumping down, she blinked through and found herself in a small cave. A part of the water flowing down from the river above pooled in a small basin before it ran down along the tunnel ground, slowly eating itself into the rock. Ilea wasn't sure if this was already the second layer or if it was merely a cave belonging to the first one.

Reaching the end of the tunnel, she found her answer. The smooth surface of the next level could be distinguished even in the dim light still coming in from above, its color a lighter shade than the one of the cave itself. Ilea saw the water seep into a thin crack, likely formed over centuries. Below was the layer of stone and then what Ilea assumed to be earth. Worms made their way through, unaware of the warrior appearing below them in the damp tunnel below.

Ilea immediately reduced her sensitivity to smell. *Bloody dump*. She hoped the information regarding the monsters here was true and they held little value for her. Looking down, she found her boots sinking into the moisture that had collected, brown water dripping down from above. Choosing a direction at random, she started walking.

It didn't take her long to find the first trap. Loose earth with sharpened wooden sticks hidden beneath. *Nasty...*, Ilea reached an ashen limb down into the earth and ripped out one of the sticks. The thing was flimsy but sharp enough to penetrate through cloth, maybe thin leather. Her poison resistance informed her that there was something amiss with the substance on the tip. A low danger level apparently. Storing the armored pieces of her left leg, Ilea smashed the stick into it. The thing broke on impact, only managing to scratch her a little.

*'ding' 'You have been poisoned by dung broth -10 hp/s for one minute'*

"Wow, really?" She exclaimed before getting another one of the spikes, until the trap was effectively dismantled. Ilea had a bunch of scratches on her leg now, her health continuing to drain. The poisons didn't stack when it came to damage but the time went up with each additional wound. She assumed it was because more of the delicious broth made its way into her blood stream. *This would be enough to kill any human on Earth.*

Deciding to test out her third tier healing for the first time, Ilea waited until her health reached three thousand. Activating the skill with the intent to heal to her full health, she gasped as a huge chunk of mana was suddenly transformed into healing power rupturing through her whole being. It took a couple seconds but when she checked again, her health sat at six thousand one hundred. *Fucking damn...*, Her mana on the other hand had gone down by nearly one and a half thousand. It was a better conversion than she had expected. Of course her normal healing magic gradually drained her mana at a much much slower pace while healing rather rapidly but this could be a game changer.

She was rather sure that facing three Blue Reapers at the same time wouldn't be as much of an issue now. Four or five, she still doubted. The high cost would make it incredibly risky. *Wait a minute.* A grin spread on her face as she sacrificed a thousand points of health to activate her third tier State of Azarinth. Red runes glowed as she invested a chunk of mana to heal it back immediately. A couple seconds later her third tier faded but with this she could get a pretty good increase in power without the drawbacks of her third tier State. At least as long as she had mana. *Another reason to invest in Wisdom.*

She sighed and started meditating, down over two thousand points of mana. The fact that her mana recovery was a percentage instead of a fixed number made the whole thing feasible. *If only I could get Meditation to the third tier... maybe I could use it while fighting.* A hopeful thought, one she put to the back of her mind again immediately. With this, Ilea could sacrifice more health without much worry. In a battle of attrition it wasn't worth using but against something like the Blue Reaper, it would certainly be effective.

Leaving the now useless trap and the broken pieces of wood behind, Ilea walked on through the completely dark tunnel. Thinking about the reapers, Ilea decided against trying for now. Most of the groups she had avoided had been of much higher numbers than four or five, making her third tier healing simply another buffer before she would burn up. Let alone the mind magic that would likely knock her unconscious long before her mana was used up. Burst healing her brain wouldn't help either when the damage came in near instantly.

Stepping on the pressure plate after checking out the enchantments, Ilea's chest plate vanished as the barbed arrow penetrated one of her breasts. She winced when she looked down but felt little of the pain, even without activating the second tier ability. The arrow had penetrated about five centimeters and the poison started taking effect. "Dung broth... who the fuck is laying those?" She asked, wincing when she ripped out the arrow, blood spraying on the ground before the wound closed quickly and her chest plate appeared again. *Maybe I should check the next arrow before I just let it penetrate my chest. This is how I'm going to die one day, right after defeating some insane monster. Boob arrow fatality.*

The following traps, Ilea first dismantled them and checked before poisoning herself. Half an hour later, she was pretty sure she was lost. Digging down wasn't really an option with her ash alone but she hadn't even encountered a single monster yet. Perhaps not buying those maps was a bad decision after all. She rolled her eyes at her own stubbornness and continued onward.

### ***[Mud Goblin – lvl 152]***

The little creature had ran away right after it saw her, Ilea blinking to intercept it. The thing screeched before clawing at her with its hands. *Are they the ones building the traps?* She wondered. Checking around the tunnel with her sphere, she found a half dug hole in the middle of it. "You are aren't you..."

The thing continued attacking before a spiked ashen limb smashed into its eye and right through to the brain, killing it instantly. Ilea ignored the notification popping up, the thing too weak to make a dent in her experience anyway. Its blood seeped into the ground while Ilea continued her exploration. *Rather blind stroll in a poison and dung cave.* A couple minutes later, she came upon another creature, this one looking like a literal monster roach.

### ***[Monster Roach – lvl 192]***

"Really?" She asked, looking up towards where the sky would be, somewhere beyond the hundreds of meters of ground. The monster roach

rushed at her, its mouth clicking as it opened and closed, dozens of sharp teeth showing below. Ilea closed her eyes and held up her arms before she sacrificed five hundred points of health, her right foot coming down in a stomp that splattered the half a meter long creature on the tunnel walls. “God fuck that’s disgusting...,” Ilea was hyper aware of any traps after that, hoping she wouldn’t somehow fall into their den. No amount of levels would be worth swimming in a couple hundreds of the black bugs.

Ash had cleaned off all the muck on her armor before she continued. The same tunnel continued on for hundreds of meters but at least it was declining somewhat, the third level getting ever so slightly closer with each step she took.

She blinked her eyes at the distant light she could see. *End of the tunnel?* The thought proved wrong when the light source came closer, identifying itself as a rapidly moving torch held by a running person. *Running for their life...*, Ilea realized, seeing the frantic movements. The screams coming from the two people behind the man were more of an indication. As was the clicking noise of hundreds of roaches crawling on all sides of the tunnel, like a riptide of teeth and ruin. Ilea sighed and started forming ash around her.

“Run for your life!” The male voice shouted before rushing past her, completely ignoring the possible danger in his flight. His brown coat rushed past, flapping as he held his cowboy hat. His face was distinctly human. Ilea was pretty sure he blinked at her before he was past. A dwarven rig limped past her right after, the only noise she heard was hard breathing coming from within. The last member of the group was a cat person in leather armor and a coat, stumbling when she saw Ilea standing in the tunnel. Ilea watched her hit the ground, the harmonica she had held to her mouth now crashing against her teeth.

Wincing at the impact, Ilea slowly walked towards her, more and more ash forming around her as it filled the whole tunnel. A wall of it solidified right in front of her, the rest of the ash loosely floating further down the tunnel. As soon as the first roaches reached it, Ilea pushed reversed healing into their bodies. She kept on adding ash to her wall as the beasts bit and struggled through the solid black barrier she had put up. The dwarf was

resting against the tunnel wall, Ilea slowly walking back towards him as the ash was broken through.

The first roaches started dying, notifications popping up as she pushed more and more mana into her reversed recovery, Meditation working hard to regain her resources. Trying something she hadn't thought about before, Ilea attempted to shove a higher amount of mana into one of the roaches. Her third tier recovery. Sadly nothing happened, her mana staying with her and the roach dying half a minute later against her normal form of attack. *So reversed burst healing is a no.*

Reaching the downed cat person, Ilea lifted her up with one of her ashen limbs. Checking on her, she found her knocked out but otherwise fine. The girl was flung a couple meters further back towards the dwarf who was now looking at her, unmoving. "Get her further back. I don't see an end to the roaches yet." Ilea simply said. The dwarf sprang to action at that, lifting the cat and matching Ilea's steps as he retreated.

"You're a lifesaver. I knew we shouldn't have trusted that idiot." He said in a weird accent Ilea couldn't place. "He'll run right into the next trap if he keeps going..."

Ilea looked back and saw the flickering light of a torch still moving away in the distance. A chuckle left her, "Well worry not, your deus ex machina has arrived."

### ***[Healer – lvl 181]***

Ilea identified the cat. *At least they have a healer with them.*

### ***[Warrior – lvl 203]***

The dwarf was surprisingly not a mage. His suit looked savage in comparison to Terok's. A literal mass of steel, dented and scratched. She was surprised the three meter tall thing could even move, let alone as quickly as it did. It had a thick head without a neck, a single big floodlight burning from its center, the glass cracked on the surface. "There's

hundreds... should I start running or are you as confident as you look?" He asked, the healer held in one hand like a mere kitten.

Ilea was casually walking a little behind him, her back towards the roaches, ash floating and connected to her as if growing from her spine. "I'm fine for another half an hour at least. I'll let you know when we start to run." She replied with a smile on her face. "Scavengers?"

The dwarf grunted, "I guess we are. On the way to the fourth layer. Mr. know it all has a treasure map of sorts."

"And you tell that to the person currently keeping you alive." Ilea said, shaking her head.

The dwarf didn't seem to care much, his voice calm and steady, "I'm not one to ignore my debts, not like a certain human. Telling you about it is the least I can do for a stranger saving my life."

Ilea grinned, "You sound like a dark one. Are you not a dwarf?"

He laughed at that, "Sometimes I feel like one too. I am however born and raised in the mountains of the south. Proud to call myself dwarf."

Ilea nodded, not quite knowing how to react to that. The clicking noises behind her didn't stop.



# Chapter 267 Treasure Hunters

## Chapter 267 Treasure Hunters

Shaking the healer a little, she suddenly gasped and opened her eyes. “Baron...,” Her voice spoke weakly. “The crawlers... I fell... what happened?”

“The stranger intervened. We’d be dead if not for her.” He said, turning to flash his light at Ilea.

Ilea smiled as she looked into the yellow feline pair of eyes, full of wonder. *How young is that one?* She wondered, the roaches now thinning out behind her, heated up and killed by Embered Body Heat and her reversed recovery. The latter of course dealing the majority of the damage. She had at least another ten minutes worth of this in her before she would want to get some distance between them. Ilea wasn’t about to run out of mana with a bunch of strangers standing next to her. The dwarf seemed sincere enough to her but one never knew.

“My harmonica...,” The cat said, Ilea summoning the thing and throwing it toward her. She had picked it up after she had thrown the healer.

She caught it with a swift movement, starting to play a melody immediately. Ilea felt her body relax a little, her mana recovering just a bit more quickly. *A bard?* She cocked her head sideways and looked at the cat who held her stare. *Bard and healer.* They continued through the tunnel, casually walking while the roaches died behind them. With the melody

ringing through the caves one could almost wonder if it wasn't the bard luring the insects into an ashen death.

Five minutes later, Ilea stopped walking. She recovered some more of her mana while the last dozen roaches worked their way through the wall of ash. "Want to get some of the action too? The experience might actually be worth it for you guys."

The dwarf lowered his arm, the healer hopping off to let him through. Smashing his massive two metal fists together, he changed into a more aggressive stance. "It would be. My joy." His massive form stepped past Ilea, the head nearly reaching the ceiling of the large tunnel. Walking to the healer, her form was swiftly wreathed in ash, expecting more than a little gore to come their way.

The wall crumbled when Ilea severed the thin connection she had remained, around ten roaches, more or less injured rushed towards them. Most of them focused on the massive form of the metal machine, the heavy plating groaning against their teeth. One heavy arm came down, the roach splashing against the walls while the others crawled onto the armor, looking for weak spots or ways to enter. The dwarf fell backwards while trying to get one of them, squashing two others in the process.

Three of the beasts suddenly turned and came at Ilea and the healer, the cat immediately moving behind her. Ashen limbs shot out, piercing all three of the beasts. Two of them had lunged at her, now hanging in the air. Blood dripped down, the ashen limbs moving up as the corpses slid away, landing with a wet sound. The healer stumbled a step further back, Ilea noticing the light in the distance had stopped moving.

"Are you alright?" She asked, the dwarf screaming and shouting as his huge mech suit turned in the mud, blood and guts. He slipped but still managed to hit one of the roaches, injuring its jaw in the process. Two of them were still alive but another frantic movement squashed them against the wall. The last injured one was stomped to death by the massive steel foot.

He stomped again and again, blood and intestines covering a big part of his armored suit. He turned towards them, the floodlight turning warmer,

“What?!”

Ilea couldn't help but laugh. Her sphere let her see the grin on the healer behind her. When the dwarf took a step and slipped, barely managing to keep standing, both of them couldn't hold it. “You dumb fucks! I swear if I get to you!” The dwarf shouted but his chuckled were indication enough that he wasn't serious.

The charge that followed made the healer stumble back before she fell on her ass. Ilea just stood there, the massive form of the war machine stopping a meter before her. “Didn't think so.” She said with a grin, a little disappointed that he hadn't at least tried to slam her away.

The dwarf laughed, “No offense stranger.”

Ilea moved her ash to clean away the guts that had landed on her from his charge, “A little offended in your lack of trust in my stability.” She said and covered him in ash before cleaning off the blood and guts. He didn't move throughout, either trying not to anger her or understanding what she was doing. “Your friend stopped or dropped his torch.”

“Not friend, more... dreadful company.” He said after she was done, “Thanks for the cleanup. Not necessary.”

Ilea snorted, “It stinks. Do you guys know how to get to the fourth layer? Might as well help me out after I saved your sorry asses.”

“Aye... we know. At least if his map is to be believed. So far it's led us into that.” The dwarf said and pointed to the gore filled tunnel, some parts still twitching. “Friends call me Baron. I'd be glad to help you to the fourth layer. If his map is junk I know some other more conventional ways but I'd think you want some of the treasure as well.”

Ilea watched the cat look at him and then her, her eyes squinting just a little. Not enough to be noticed without her sphere and heightened senses, “Nice to meet you Baron. I'm Ilea. Depends on the treasure really but I'd be happy to join you for a while.

The healer bowed, “Seath. Thank you for saving our lives.” She said. Ilea wasn’t sure if her fur was brown or if she really needed a shower. Seath was a little smaller than her and definitely thinner. The coat was ripped in parts but still holding up. Ilea checked her notifications while they slowly walked towards the torch. It seemed like nobody was particularly concerned about the man who soon started shouting for help.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Monster Roach – lvl 184]’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Monster Roach – lvl 194]’*

The messages turned to team notifications soon after. Ilea assumed it was considered a team effort as soon as Seath had started her music. She thought about it for a while but came to the conclusion that it was only fair. To decide on becoming a bard and healer without much combat potential was already a dangerous decision. Having an easy time in battles, just standing behind one’s group and playing some tunes certainly sounded nice but when you couldn’t defend yourself against even a single enemy, it didn’t sound just as enticing.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Monster Roach – lvl 178]’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Monster Roach – lvl 183]’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16’*

*‘ding’ ‘Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17’*

Ilea grinned at the level ups. Of course the bugs had been much too weak to give her classes a substantial boost but for Embered Body Heat it had been perfect to shine. Some of the kills might have even come from the burning hot ash. “Oh thank god you survived.” The man said, stuck in one of the small trenches, his left shin pierced by one of the poop sticks.

“You left us to die.” Baron said.

The man smiled, “Nah, I knew the stranger could handle it. Hello by the way, Austin the name, best ranger in town. Your armor looks fierce, Shadow’s Hand perhaps or a dark one?” Ilea was at least impressed by how little the man seemed to care about his injury, blood continuously seeping into the pit.

Two of her ashen limbs moved under his shoulders and gave him a lift, “Wait wait, don’t move me so suddenly the...,” He yelped and cursed when his leg came loose, the wound opening wider in the process. Ilea set him down next to Seath who quickly gathered mana in her hand before his wound started closing. Opening her eyes again, Seath sighed.

Austin leaned back, his head resting on the ground, “Aw man. Thanks Seath. Glad I brought you along.” The woman tensed up a little at the mention, not noticeable to the eye alone. “And you, fierce warrior.” He said and jumped to his feet, dusting off his brown coat and getting back his very inappropriate hat. “Thank you for helping out. We will move along now, back to camp to recover.”

He was obviously lying. Even Ilea knew it. “I’m not exactly a fashion guru but why the hat?”

The man just grinned and walked past her, trying to tap her shoulder. An ashen limb intercepted his move, a second time when he tried again. “I’m coming with you. You’ll lead me to the fourth layer.”

Austin groaned, holding his hands up into the air, “Baron you fucking idiot. Oh well. One more then. Yea alright. Alright. On the condition that you help us fight.”

Ilea shrugged, not having a problem with that. Identifying the man, she was surprised to find him the highest of the group.

***[Ranger – lvl 210]***

“You’re human.” Ilea stated after they had walked in silence for a while, the three of them staring at the dozens of roach corpses on the ground. The sound of Baron stepping on them was so unpleasant, Ilea had started to

walk ahead, moving them out of the way with an ashen wedge hovering in front of her.

Austin looked her way, checking something on his crossbow. The weapon he had picked up from further down the tunnel, before Ilea had even shown up. “Yea, red blood and a single heart pumping in my chest. You’re one as well? Did an expedition actually manage to get this far north?”

Ilea shook her head, “Came here alone. You’re the survivor of one?”

He nodded, “Got slaughtered a week in. Feynor. Probably on an expedition to explore the south. We killed a ton of them but they had the numbers. The blood attracted one of those massive snakes and that was that. I loosed a couple shots and then advanced through the north until I came here.”

Baron snorted but didn’t comment on it. Ilea had an idea about what might have actually happened but she had no desire to get him on the defensive. “Where are you from?”

“Virilya, born and raised.” He said and grinned, “Lovely, the empire.”

Ilea laughed, not quite believing anything coming out of his mouth. His green eyes were sparkling, similar to the king she had met earlier. His jawline was smooth and his grin not unattractive. Still, there was something sleazy about him. The way he spoke, looked at the others. “It can be.” She simply said, the group advancing through the dark tunnel, a torch and Baron's floodlight illuminating the way. “So what's that treasure you have on your map?”

The man nearly stumbled upon the mention, flashing a glare at the dwarf and then the healer, “Alternative way into the warded section of the fourth layer. Nobody has been able to crack it from the outside so now we're going in from the other side.” Austin said with a grin.

Ilea was pretty sure the dungeon had been there for at least a couple decades. To think there was a known section closed off and not yet broken into. “Are you sure nobody's been in there before?”

This time it was the dwarf who spoke, “Of course there might be but the red church was crazy, they enchanted nearly every room and hallway. To even get past a single section you'd have to work for years and whatever was found hadn't really been worth it so most people have stopped. The traps and monsters don't really help with this.”

Ilea wondered if Terok had been there, tried to get in. Maybe working with her allowed him to dedicate himself to the work. “Red church?”

“You're new here. They're the only name we have of whoever ran this city and the Heroes' Descent. Obsessed with the relics found within the deeper levels. You'll find enough writing and left over books and records if you're interested. Most scavengers don't care.” Ilea would at least have a bunch of history to trade with the elf.

Austin held up a hand, “Trap ahead.” Ilea couldn't see it yet through her sphere but she simply kept going, the other three looking at her a little confused, “Hey, I'm a ranger, I can take care of it in a minute.”

Finding the enchanted plate, Ilea checked for the connection and found a spear waiting to be shot out of a dug out section in the wall. She activated the trap, catching the spear that soared towards her a moment later. The others just looked at her, Baron chuckling while Seath just shook her head in disbelief. The thing wasn't even coated in poison, a simple wooden shaft tipped with a sharpened stone. “Were the goblins always here?”

“Yea, bloody plague. No money to be gained in hunting them down either. Especially with how extensively they booby trap their dens.” Austin explained.

Ilea just nodded. She wasn't interested either if the one she had met was an indication of their overall strength. *May the roaches and goblins kill each other in this world of dirt.* Reaching the end of the tunnel, Baron looked at Austin. A dead end. Ilea knew there was something waiting behind the wall but she waited with saying anything.

“Now wait a minute before you smash me to a pulp Baron, I told you I'd pay you back. Show some trust.” Austin said with a grin, taking the bow

from his back before he selected one of the arrows out of his quiver. “Should do the trick...,” he said to nobody in particular. Drawing it back, he loosed it, a whirlwind of air smashing into the earth and mud, digging deep and taking quite a bit of mass with it. The passage was revealed and he bowed. Seath actually clapped at that but Ilea wasn't sure if sarcastically or not.

“And the map says to go down there?” Baron asked, looking up to Austin who didn't seem quite as confident anymore. Ilea stared down the stone shaft, the thing long enough for neither her eyes nor Sphere to reveal anything about the bottom.

“Well I didn't draw the bloody thing. Just didn't seem as big of a deal on paper...,” The ranger said.

The thing was barely big enough to fit the dwarf in his massive armor. Ilea looked at Seath, “You and me go down first.” The cat person looked around but it seemed neither Baron nor Austin were about to offer help. “You can heal, come on, don't be a wuss. Third layer down there?”

Austin got out the map from his pack, “Yea... well not really. It's supposed to pass through the third layer entirely. Only way to get where we need to go.”

Ilea nodded, appearing next to him and grabbing the map, “I'll be taking this with me as collateral should this be a trap in some way.” Ripping it out of his hands, she rolled it and handed it to one of her ashen limbs.

“Hey what the fuck?! Give that back lady, you wouldn't want to anger us, right Baron?”

The dwarf looked at him and then back to Ilea, “I'd rather deal with you Austin, no offense.”



Ilea appeared next to Seath and grabbed her with three ashen limbs around the waist and back, “Just follow a minute or two later.” She said and spread her wings, jumping down before they could delay any further. She wanted to get to the fourth layer, likely the place where monsters in her needed range resided. Whatever treasure it was they were looking for, she couldn’t imagine a lot of things being particularly useful to her. At least here in the north. Gold was always welcome of course. Free falling into the hole, Ilea was surprised Seath didn’t so much as yelp at the dangerous maneuver.

Her sphere would inform her about anything long before it would be too late to react. She could of course not blink due to hanging on to the healer but it seemed like a sure way to know if it was a trap or not. The map was really just to irritate Austin. They fell for quite a while, longer than she had expected. *Should’ve thrown down a pebble.* The thought passed through her mind when the ground suddenly appeared at a very high speed below her. Ilea’s wings spread out, magic surging as they came to an abrupt stop, hovering a meter or two over the stone floor that had carvings etched into it.

Seath groaned, Ilea sending some healing mana through her. The sudden stop had bruised some of her muscles and she was about to puke before a combination of her and Ilea’s healing calmed her down. “Know anything about those?”

“What do you mean?” Seath groaned, still held up by Ilea’s ashen limbs.

“The etchings on the ground. Might be enchantments of some sort.”

Seath looked at her, “I can’t see well in the dark. Austin will have to have a look.”

*I thought cats didn’t have that issue...*, They waited for a while, Ilea trying to make sense of the etchings. A couple minutes later the others joined them, the sound of Baron grinding down the chute unmistakable. Austin was simply sitting on one of the dwarf’s massive shoulders with an annoyed look on his face. “Stop guys!” Seath spoke, grinding growing louder before they came to a stop right above them. “Don’t want to get squashed...,” She said, looking at Ilea with an accusing look.

Ilea was somewhat confident she could've stopped them with a hand but this worked as well. "We've got etchings in the ground. Your passage is closed."

# Chapter 268 Bloody Mess

## Chapter 268 Bloody Mess

The barrier it turned out, was just a layer of stone without any enchantments or further tricks or traps. Just a separation between the apparent third layer they had crossed and the fourth layer beyond. Whoever had built this had just felt the need to decorate the entryway in the dark tunnel. “To think they had an escape route straight to the second layer.” Austin commented while Baron prepared the drill head for one of his arms.

Compared to Terok he needed quite a while to switch it out. At least he had a storage item of sorts to keep the massive thing. The ranger had looked at him a little too long when he had summoned the jagged extension. “Why did you help us?” Seath suddenly asked Ilea, the two of them leaning on the wall to give the dwarf space.

Ilea looked her way and back to the dwarf who seemed to have difficulties screwing on the bit, cursing about roaches and incapable smiths. She shrugged, smiling when the dwarf started to smash the wall, trying to just force it on. “I guess I didn’t want to see people eaten by roaches.”

“We’re more dangerous to you alive...,” Seath added.

Finally getting the extension on, Baron laughed as it whirled to life. Ilea couldn’t help but notice the thing wasn’t exactly fitted evenly but with the size and quickly increasing torque it would hardly be an issue, “I survived worse, even if you suddenly decide to jump me.” Ilea simply said, thinking

it a little bizarre that the woman told her as much. “Are you a danger to me?”

A sly grin, “I doubt it. It’s just rare you know... to find someone willing to help without anything promised in return.”

*Lack of sleepless nights over your screaming as you’re eaten alive by huge insects is return enough.* Ilea thought, not voicing it as the sound of the drill hitting stone started to reverberate around them. Her hearing was reduced to the lowest she could go. She wondered how long her search for a way down would have taken without the help of these three. Probably not much longer but the third layer was supposedly full of water and she’d be thankful for skipping that one any day.

Stone cracked, pieces of debris flying off to the side. One chunk of rock was caught by Ilea before it could smash into the healer next to her. Forming a wall of ash, she heard Austin complain before he jumped on top of the dwarf’s machine, blood dripping down from his forehead where a pebble had hit it. A loud rumble after a couple minutes of boring made Ilea spread her wings, ashen limbs holding on to the healer before the ground collapsed entirely, the dwarf laughing loudly before he smashed his arms into the walls. Austin grinned, holding onto the mech’s head.

“Down we go.” Ilea said, falling past the dwarf before stopping a couple dozen meters farther down. Dim lights illuminated the hallways around them, her wings fading away a moment later before the two stepped a couple meters to the side. Baron landed on the stone, cracks forming where his heavy weight pushed into the floor. Austin hopped off and looked around expectantly. Ilea threw him the map, the thing hitting his shoulder and dropping to the ground. The man whirled around and fumbled for his bow, Ilea squinting at him while Baron literally snickered.

Ilea just shook her head with a smile as the man took the map, looking at Baron with a bit of embarrassment showing on his face. “This is the fourth layer, we should keep as quiet as possible.” Seath said.

“Probably traps all around too.” Baron said, cracking his metal knuckles. There was no crack of course.

*Maybe with another ten thousand points in Strength.* Ilea thought as she took in the surroundings. Compared to the natural look the first layer had, the hallway looked similar to the city below Hallowfort. Of course that was technically the first layer of the Descent, it simply wasn't considered that. Ilea wondered, "Hey, do you guys think the city above the first layer was always a dungeon?"

It was Austin who replied, "Who cares, city, dungeon. Treasure's around and monsters as well."

Ilea rolled her eyes. "Why build a city in a dungeon? Probably turned into one after it was abandoned or its people killed." Baron suggested.

*Just seems kind of similar to Tremor. City turned dungeon. Maybe I'll find another live king and queen here.* She grinned. The light illuminating parts of the hallways was magical, cold and flickering in places. The walls and floor were simple stone, nothing extraordinary like the marble in the palace of Tremor or the white stone Taleen dungeons usually seemed to have. A worn carpet in a dark red color lay in the middle of one of the hallways. Ilea's senses in her sphere were sharpened now instead of reduced. A familiar scent was immediately picked up. "Blood." She said simply.

Austin nodded absentmindedly as he studied the parchment, "Of course there's blood." He murmured, "Fucking rookies, coming to the fourth layer and complaining about blood." The man went on before he walked off.

Baron shrugged, the movement rather spacious with his massive suit but he followed Austin, his flashlight checking through the corridors. Seath checked as well, closing her eyes as she likely tried to hear if anything was nearby. Ilea walked next to her, all senses checking their surroundings, "What's in the fourth layer then?"

"A bunch of nasty things." Seath replied, talking in a whisper, "Pure Blooded, disgusting creatures that look like deformed humans. They're pretty fast and venomous, usually around..." Her voice froze as she stared forward.

Ilea followed her gaze and found Austin with a drawn bow, waiting. Baron's light shined on a creature around fifty meters further down their way. About as tall as Seath but hunched over, a face that looked like it had melted and two arms propping it up, both ending in nasty spiked bone. Ilea appeared a little behind Austin to not get into his line of fire. The beast seemed uninterested so far. Being a little closer up, Ilea could see that its skin was torn, only bits and pieces remaining of what it had to have been at some point. A human, or at least a creature with an anatomy close enough. Blood dripped from its body, primarily comprised of muscle and bone.

*Kinda looks like demon spawn.* Ilea thought. She wondered if it was a coincidence or if someone summoned them here, maybe an experiment with demon magic or the runes Weavy liked to use. Her thought process was interrupted when the beast suddenly opened whatever was left of its mouth, a gurgling noise coming out before it tensed up and rushed towards the four of them. Before the beast could even take two steps, Austin's arrow smashed into its waist, blue light flashing up before the thing smashed down into the ground.

It tried getting up but another pulse of lightning went through it, limbs spasming before a simple steel arrow smashed into its shoulder, cutting deep into its body. Austin held up three fingers, counting down. When his last finger came down, a dull noise resounded, some shrapnel digging into the stone floor. The man winced when one of the pieces cut into his leather coat. Ilea looked at him sideways and raised her eyebrows. *Not bad. A bit like Philipp's arrows. Maybe he's an enchanter as well.* The man's arrows had even gutted her pretty badly. She wondered if Austin could live up to that. Level wise he was a little behind but not by much.

The man sighed, notching another arrow before that one entered near the other shoulder. Another dull sound. Austin gave a thumbs up after that and continued onward. "What was it's level?" Ilea asked.

He had another arrow ready to be fired, "Two eighty. They're powerful but fucking stupid." He added.

"Why don't you farm them then until you reach that level?" Ilea asked. She was also wondering why Austin was the one walking in front and not Baron

who was quite literally the closest to an actual tank she had seen so far in Elos.

Austin smiled, “Because one, I’m not fucking retarded. Two, I just said they’re powerful. Do you want to see what they can do once they reach you? Well I don’t.”

*I kinda do.* Ilea thought, interested how their attacks differed from the demons. Spawn usually had clawed hands and these seemed to just have a single bladed arm. “Maybe we’ll find out soon what they can do.” Ilea said, hearing the noise coming from further down the hallway. Austin seemed to notice a moment later and lost a bit of the color on his face.

“What the hell are they doing? They shouldn’t react to any of that.” He grumbled, turning around and pointing to the back, “We’re leaving. Back to the shaft, wait them out.”

Ilea wasn’t about to leave without at least testing herself against them. If their level was around two eighty she’d at least try. “Ranged variants? Can they see without eyes? Level range?” She asked briefly, ash forming around her as the three others quickly ran towards the hall they had come from. Ilea blinked next to the running form of Austin.

“Gods lady. Usually no ranged, barely, they can smell well but mostly rely on sight, range between two fifty and fuck knows. I suggest you come with us.” He said and jumped up, bow on his back as he jumped from one side of the shaft to the other. Ilea watched in amazement as Baron bent his knees before jumping off, his heavy arms smashing into both walls before he dragged himself upwards.

*Fucker is strong, or his suit is.* She glanced at Seath who looked at her, frantic eyes darting to the hallway before jumping up into the exit with the most graceful movement out of the three. Blinking back towards the corpse, Ilea moved it a little with her ash, checking for possible weaknesses. The tips of its bone blades were poisoned, her resistance informed her about as much. It looked strong, fast and certainly dangerous but somehow Ilea didn’t feel very intimidated. *Let’s see how you fare.*

The noises from ahead definitely came from more of the creatures but after waiting for a minute, they seemed to have passed. *Are you kidding me?* Ilea thought and blinked towards them, her Hunter's Sight immediately picking up the droplets of blood that marked their way. More corridors opened up as she followed, the noises growing again before a blink brought them into her Sphere. Six of them, running as if whips lashed behind them. Their movements were certainly not refined, feral almost. Ilea blinked next to the one closest to her. Identifying all of the creatures, none had a triple mark, some even identifiable. A fist sending destructive mana and physical force into the creature smashed it into the opposite wall, an explosion of ash dimming out the light coming from the magical lamps above. She would have to move away the ash around her whenever she blinked but if it blinded them somewhat, Ilea would still be at an advantage.

The monsters screeched, at least smart enough to quickly notice the intruder among them. Ilea blinked to the opposite side of the group, ignoring the one she had already damaged. Ashen limbs and a fist smashed into the Pure Blooded. It whirled around faster than she had expected, grazing at her Veil as she stepped back. *Panicked.* She thought, appearing again on the other side, continuously adding ash to the cloud blinding their vision. A quick grab and twirl sent one of the creatures crashing into the wall, its weight quite high but manageable for Ilea's enhanced body. A series of screeches as the beasts slashed at an invisible foe, Ilea simply blinking to the wall, ignoring their attacks.

Observing the two she had struck, she found them back on their legs, not looking particularly damaged. Appearing next to one of them, she kicked instead at one of its legs, her ashen limbs attacking the other. Both attacks got through, the joint giving out against the brutal force. *One downed.* Grinning at the result, Ilea decided it was the easiest way to deal with them. The next five minutes were spent on braking legs, the creatures entirely overwhelmed by the ash around them, whatever hearing they had drowned by the cries of their brethren. Ilea didn't even blink anymore, simply letting her ashen limbs cut into the downed monsters, delivering wave upon wave of her destructive mana.



Being in contact with the ash around her allowed her additionally to pump reversed recovery into her enemies. *If only I could use the third tier here, one quick flesh explosion.* She grinned when the first one of them fell to her assault, her magic entirely castrating whatever danger they posed.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Pure Blooded – lvl 269]’***

...

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Pure Blooded – lvl 311] – For defeating an enemy fifty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

The last one had been the only one above three hundred. Ilea knew exactly which one it had been too. It took her considerably longer to finish it but in the end it died all the same, its senses overwhelmed just like the others. It hadn't been enough to level up but if she could hunt these creatures for a while, she'd be golden. *Damage output that can't reach me, fucking blinded by ash and a trillion times faster to kill than Rose Knights.* The thought was interrupted when a sloshing sound came from behind her.

Another one of the creatures came into view, Ilea's ash floating back up right after she identified it.

***[Blood Carrier – lvl ??]***

“Came for them?” She asked, taking in the creature through her sphere. It was bigger than the others, its mass at least five to six times as much. Instead of sharpened bones acting as arms, this one had thick tree trunk like limbs, ending in big chunks of bone. A massive amount of mana suddenly formed around it, Ilea moving the ash a little, preparing to blink. The move was definitely smart as the creature's speed increased, propelling it forward and making her teleport.

Appearing behind where the creature had been, Ilea watched it come to a stop and turn around. *I have a feeling that getting hit by that wouldn't...* Her thought interrupted, she blinked again. The thing was slow to start but definitely one of the quickest beings she had ever encountered. *With all that mass...* The concept was ridiculous but she was seeing it with her own

eyes, or her sphere at least. Quickly thinking how to damage the thing, Ilea appeared behind it before it had turned towards her again, the woman smashing the sharp ends of her ashen limbs into its massive back.

The cuts were shallow but enough to keep her there as she punched it with all her related buffs and offensive spells. A dull crack resounded, Ilea having focused on the spine that jutted out. She doubted the tree trunk like legs would snap quite as easily as those of the weaker variants. A surge of mana and the thing proved her method of attack questionable, instead moving backwards before it smacked into her. Being connected with her limbs prevented her from blinking, the impact pushing out the air in her lungs.

Her bones held, groaning as the force went through her body. The impact sent her flying towards the wall but Ilea still found herself unable to blink, problem being the monster still moving as quickly as she was flying, faster even. Ash spread behind her as she braced for the impact. This time her bones gave, shattering and squashing her whole chest and stomach. The wall behind her was crushed, her form stuck within, armor bent inward. It had taken a part of the force but the hit had been direct, the wall too close for her to do anything about it.

The beast moved away a single meter, mana surging again when Ilea blinked as far away as she could. Storing her broken armor, she sacrificed a thousand points of mana for her third tier recovery. A yelp left her as her bones moved back into the right position, her organs reformed from the mush that was left, the muscles around her lungs healing before air reached them again. Spitting on the ground, she added to the sea of blood that was forming in the small hallway, a fresh set of armor appearing on her.

*Now it's personal.* Sending away all the ash around them, she waited for the beast to move. The mana buildup was noticeable, even without a perception skill. Blinking was the only move she had that was quick enough to avoid it but this time Ilea waited for the last possible moment, blinking just far enough to hit it once. She messed up the first two tries, too far away to reach it with her fists. The third try however, her fist landed with grueling force, the spine further damaged while ashen limbs delivered their payload, further cutting into the already mangled back.

Blinking right after to avoid another hydraulic press experience, she made some distance between the two. The beast wasn't stupid and quickly caught on, starting to delay the charges as well as charging closer or farther away. In the end though, Ilea blinked with reaction and it didn't catch her off guard, its charge up for the attack too slow and noticeable for her to be fooled with any variation. A single mess up could cost her another thousand or more mana or even her life if she was unlucky but now that she knew what the beast could do, it had become prey.

It took the better part of twenty minutes to finally crack its spine, her attacks landing few and far between because of its changing behavior towards the second part of their fight. After that, the thing got slower, weaker, almost sluggish. It was a wonder the monster still stood and moved at all but Ilea could say the same about herself after being squashed against the wall like a bloody fly.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Blood Carrier – lvl 382] – For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 261 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 254 – Five stat points awarded'*

She sank to her knees, panting hard as her helmet came off. Laughing reverberated through the hallway, interrupted when the woman spit another mouthful of blood onto the ground. Ten stat points were immediately put into Wisdom as her meditation picked up.

# Chapter 269 The Inner Circle

## Chapter 269 The Inner Circle

Making her way back, Ilea still didn't know why the creatures had moved where they did. Perhaps they were trying to get away from the Carrier, or they were hunting something. *Maybe just patrolling. Who knows what the fuck is behind these creatures. Battle of necromancers... Descent versus Tremor.* "Come buy tickets now." Ilea spoke aloud as she backtracked through the hallways, quickly finding the exit again and looking up.

The three people were still there, hanging a little higher up but apparently still waiting. "It's safe for now!" Ilea shouted, "None of the fuckers around." She hadn't encountered any more noises or movements other than her own and the flickering lights. Austin was the first one to land next to her.

"They didn't come this way?" He asked, Seath landing next to him before they all moved a couple steps away to allow Baron to jump down.

Ilea looked at his massive form, wondering how he'd take a charge from the Carrier. "Not exactly." She said but didn't elaborate. Nobody asked either, the other human back to looking at his map as they walked over the first corpse he had left behind. Ilea had to give him props for telling her about the monsters and their weaknesses even while fleeing. She might have not had the confidence to go after them so quickly otherwise. Any delay could have brought the Carrier upon her during her battle with the Pure Blooded. A good thing that it hadn't.

Seath gave her a look but didn't mention anything. They had seen her clean off Baron's armor with ash before, her now clean get up not an indicator for a lack of battle. "Where are we headed anyway?" Ilea asked, the group walking through the dimly lit corridors, taking a right where Ilea had taken a left earlier. They wouldn't find what she had left behind. Either way was fine for her.

Austin looked up and pointed forward, "This...this is the inner circle."

Ilea had no idea what that meant but Baron was apparently taken aback by the mention, "What? Austin are you fucking crazy? We shouldn't be here, nobody is supposed to be here." The dwarf kept his voice down, taking a step towards the human.

Austin just put his hands up in a placating gesture, "Look, you really thought this came without risks? I told you it'd be dangerous."

"This is suicide! There's not just Pure Blooded here, you know that. If any of them find us we're history, even with her here." Baron said, pointing at Ilea.

She raised an eyebrow but didn't comment on it. *Are they talking about the Blood Carrier I literally just killed.* "What are you talking about? I've never been here."

Seath informed her while the others tensely stared at each other, "The fourth layer, the Heroes' Descent is a city... well it was at some point, now creatures like the one Austin killed earlier run around here and make it a nightmare to safely navigate it. Compared to the higher layers, you'll find a lot of useful things here though. Problem is, there's a lot of closed off sections, enchantments and traps still in place against anybody that might open it."

"We know the layout of the city, there were plenty of maps and the previous residents had been somewhat open about their beliefs and what they were doing here."

Ilea knew some of this already, "They were still alive?"

“No, well if you don’t count whatever these creatures are as alive. Plenty of statues, notice boards and even books all written in standard remained. Still do. The inner circle is where nobody manage to get into yet, even after all this time. It’s the heart of the red church, at least that is believed.”

Ilea nodded, though the impact of the information on her was much more subdued than how Baron had reacted. If the Carrier was one of the most dangerous creatures here, then it wasn’t quite comparable to Tremor, where Kingdguard and Soul Rippers roamed the place. She wasn’t about to share any of that. “Well we’re here now, where’s the treasure. What is it even?” Ilea asked.

Austin continued down one of the corridors, ignoring her question. *He doesn’t know, does he.* They passed a lot of hallways, Austin occasionally choosing one of them but Ilea was already lost in the maze. The place was pretty big. She’d find her way out eventually but finding this group at least saved her some time.

“That’s not supposed to be here...,” Austin murmured, the group standing before a closed off gate. Ilea could tell there were enchantments in place, feeling the thrum of mana coming from the door. Metal set in stone, the color the same light gray as the rest of the complex.

“Can you crack it?” Baron asked.

“Probably but I need a while.” The ranger replied.

“Why are we walking so far away?” Baron asked. An hour had passed since they had reached the closed off gate.

Ilea saw Seath smirking, Austin taking out an arrow and aiming at the distant door. “Blast radius.” He said and loosed the projectile. Ilea snorted before an explosion racked through the surroundings, screeches of monsters

barely audible from farther away. “We’ll wait for an hour or two until they left again.”

Ilea was already walking towards the metal door, now left in shambles. Fires were blazing all around, some of the carpets lit up entirely. She simply walked through the flames, her Heat Resistance and Veil making the exposure trivial. She ignored the confused noises coming from behind her. None of them actually shouted, likely scared of the monsters that might hear them. The hall beyond the door had dozens of benches lined up and a centered altar at the end of it. On it was a grotesque monster that looked a little like a praying dog. The head however was pretty much unrecognizable, a combination of features Ilea couldn’t quite place.

The room was high, at least ten meters, no windows but paintings on the walls depicting different scenes, mostly centered around fighting or killing. The benches were wooden and in a rather good state, likely neither touched or seen in quite a long time if the others was to be believed. No magical lights illuminated the room, fiery bits and pieces on the floor had instead started setting some of the benches aflame as well as some of the paintings on the walls. Ilea made no move to quench the fire.

Hearing noises coming from behind her, her ashen spheres spread out around her and her buffs activated as she cracked her neck. “Welcome.” Ilea simply stated and observed the creatures rushing through the flames, briefly shrieking as the fire flickered over their bleeding bodies. She identified them as Pure Blooded only, engaging the first one as soon as it had entered the hall. Her ash enveloped them, the fire an additional factor to disorient them.

Taking care of them much the same as the last group, she found it even easier because the hall gave her much more room to navigate. For monsters above level two fifty, they were certainly the easiest for her to kill so far. *Might want to stay here for a while.*

**‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Pure Blooded – lvl 261]’**

...

**‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Pure Blooded – lvl 302] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’**

There had been seven of them but her ash did the same job as before and the beasts weren't smart enough to get distance or even flee when gravely injured. Their bladed arms had cut through the ash but not a single one of them had landed a blow on her. Ilea had fought within a sea of Taleen Guardians. While they had been considerably slower and less powerful, she had been as well. Plus they had six blades each and ranged variants as well. Without a trick up their sleeves, the Pure Blooded would not pose a threat to her.

No level up as most of them had been considerably below three hundred. Ilea condensed her ash again, moving it into spheres behind her back, along the eight limbs that were constantly hovering there. One of the limbs lashed out, the dense and sharpened tip cutting repeatedly into one of the corpses before she finally managed to get through the shoulder joint, severing one of the bladed arms. Taking it, she looked at the bone, blood still dripping off of it before she noticed the glistening and sharp end of the weapon.

***[Pure Blooded Venom – Danger Medium]***

Ilea didn't know what exactly medium entailed but it couldn't be too bad and she was pretty sure the group wouldn't immediately rush towards her, the smoldering flames probably enough to prevent that. Stashing away a part of her armor, Ilea smashed the blade into her thigh. It penetrated easily, her strength combined with the apparent quality of the bone enough to get through her thick skin.

***'ding' 'You have been poisoned by Pure Blooded Venom -50 HP/s for thirty seconds'***

*Reasonable...*, Ilea thought and started healing. The effect would wear off quickly. She made her way around the room, the wound in her leg already healed and covered again by armor. Cutting off a bunch of the creature's arms, she collected all fourteen and stored them in her necklace. For later poison resistance training. All of them combined only took up two storage units, even though they were separate things. Her necklace must have determined them similar enough to somehow stack them.



*Should go back and get the others as well...*, Ilea thought, remembering the Pure Blooded she had killed already. Then again the bones could likely be used several times and this group was hardly the last one she would face. Flicking the statue of the dog like creature, she grinned and looked around. There were some doors leading further in and she chose the one that didn't lead downwards. Austin had the map but she didn't really care about it. The thing had been somewhat vague, neither mentioning monsters or enchantments like the one this hall had, simply stating which corridors to take.

One of the rooms had stairs leading further down in a spiraling manner, further than Ilea's sphere reached. The other was just a small room. The door was metal as well and locked. Kicking at the door, the thing was unhinged and smashed into the opposite wall, coming to a stop in a crash. *Weak fucking locks.* Ilea noted as she walked in, happy to find the door hadn't damaged anything. Not that there was much other than the altar in the middle of the room, a metal square with cuffs to hold a person or whatever the fuck these people put here.

The floor was clean but worn. Ilea had her theories, the most likely one involving a lot of scrubbing of blood. "Fucking nutters." She murmured to herself, checking out some of the saws, blades and drill like tools on the opposite wall. Austin entered the room when she was playing with one of them. She looked him in the eyes and turned it, making the drill bit twirl, "This was used on the male genitals."

The man gulped, looking at her as composed as he could before checking out the room, "I'm joking. No idea what the fuck this is." Ilea added and threw the thing at him, "There's stairs leading down."

He was left standing in what she assumed to be either a torture chamber or an experimentation room. *Fun dungeon for the very extreme masochists with healing abilities.* She wasn't one to judge but somehow it felt more likely that the people here weren't quite that modern and enlightened. Ilea had the necessary abilities but pain didn't summon a sexual response in her, more a violent one. All the creatures she had ripped apart spoke for themselves.

Baron and Seath looked at her in a new light it seemed, seeing the torn apart Pure Blooded scattered around the room, the fire died down and leaving behind scorched benches and ruined paintings. Ilea had her ideas about them when she saw them running from the roaches but even being level two hundred, they were made from a different material than members of the Hand. She remembered them fighting in the outskirts of Ravenhall, each and everyone of them battling for hours, hardened and unwavering. The group here wasn't that. While at the level, except for Seath, they were scavengers, treasure hunters and looters. Not primarily fighters.

Austin returned from the room and motioned for them to follow, "It's the other way then." The others followed in silence, the mood a little subdued having seen the corpses. The mention of the inner circle must have had more of an impact than Ilea initially thought. Or seeing the number of enemies. At least they knew it would be hard to continue without her there. The stairwell was long, winding down into the depths of the fourth layer. Ilea couldn't sense any hallways beyond after a while, the group now already walking for twenty minutes.

When they finally came out, it was onto a viewing platform overlooking a pit around forty meters down. In the middle of it, prowling, was a Pure Blooded. Bigger than any Ilea had seen so far. It didn't seem to spot them up there or there was magic in place that prevented it to see. "Displaying their creation..." Baron commented, Ilea giving him a side glance. The hall was around twenty meters wide and there was an exit at the other end of it, around a hundred meters back. All of it the same light gray stone as the rest of the hallways. Corpses littered the place, both obviously Pure Blooded as well as skeletons that looked human.

"Here lies the path to salvation. The will necessary to break into the depths beyond." Baron said, reading from the plaque added to the big balcony. Ilea rolled her eyes.

"So we fight that thing and go on?" She asked, all three of them staring at her.

"No, we turn around and leave. That's an Old Blooded. It's not even comparable to the Pure Blooded, not that they don't pose any danger.

Austin's map might have brought us to an interesting place but it's simply too dangerous for us to continue." Baron said, his huge metal arms crossed.

Austin held up his hands, "Hey, let's wait a minute here. Ilea was it? They shouldn't be above level four hundred. Maybe if we give you support from up here you can fight it?"

Seath was about to interfere when Ilea shrugged, "I can check it out at least. With her music and your arrows it might be fine, depending on what the thing can do."

Looking at the beast, it had the same two bladed arms and two legs but stood much higher at around four meters. No joints were discernible from the distance. Its head was just a mass of flesh, eyes looking out from in between. *Someone fucked with shit they didn't understand.* Ilea sighed, "Alright. I hope you know that if you try to kill me off here that I will ignore that thing and rip you three apart." She said seriously, giving each of them a quick glance.

Seath gulped and Austin didn't have his smirk on either. "We could also try to bypass it. Do you guys have teleportation magic?"

Austin shook his head, both Seath and Baron answered in the negative as well. Ilea blinked her eyes twice. *Really?* She couldn't fault them of course, skills showed up pretty much at random after all but perhaps they should leave the exploration business to people that could circumvent obstacles like these. Trian and Eve would be in and out of this place without as much as alerting the thing. Terok and Elfie were likely the same. *The dwarf really must have been unlucky if his abilities led him into debt while these guys seem alright.*

"Intervene only when I say so. The thing doesn't seem to see you here. Seath can you heal and buff at that distance?" Ilea asked.

The cat nodded, "I... I can't... only at twenty meters."

Ilea thought about asking her to come down with her but if she had to worry about anybody else it could be a problem, "Then just Austin's arrows.

Again, only when I ask for it and don't try to join in when it looks like the beast is about to die. If it rips me apart completely I'd appreciate you distracting it. Twenty gold for each if you do that instead of running. Again, only if it completely splatters me and I'm not moving anymore."

Before any questions could arise, Ilea jumped down. Wings spread as she slowly advanced on the creature. As soon as she was around thirty meters away, it jerked up and jumped off the ground. It was faster than the Pure Blooded but not quite as quick as the Carrier. Twirling in the air and flying towards the ground, Ilea avoided its bone blades and landed on the stone floor. A bone cracked under her armored boot as she prepared to engage.

*[Old Blooded – lvl ??]*

Smiling at the lack of three question marks, Ilea's ash fanned out right when the creature entered her Sphere again. Her wings taking her silently to the side, she noted the monster kept its focus on her. Ash falling to the ground, Ilea dodged the bladed arm that came at her much faster than Rose knight's blade. The beast was wild, cutting into the ground when she dodged sideways, the second blade too quick for her to avoid as she blinked away. Meditation spread through her, Ilea anticipating this to be a longer fight.

# Chapter 270 Two Monsters

## Chapter 270 Two Monsters

The feint coming too quickly, Ilea was blown backwards. The bone had dented her armor but didn't manage to break through, slowed sufficiently by her Veil and the ash that had fanned out before her. Healing spread through her, the damaged tissue healing quickly as she rolled away from the bone biting down into the stone. A kick sent her flying again, Ilea twirling in the air before she landed on her feet, avoiding the next attack, her fist punching hard into the beast's abdomen. Her ashen limbs targeted its left shoulder, cutting into it without abandon, delivering Wave of Ember whenever making contact.

Its second arm hacked at her from above, Ilea taking a casual step to the right, the blade scratching on her Veil as she delivered another two punches to its chest. She blinked behind it when the creature tried to knee her. A hard punch to its spine was all she managed before it twirled around, Ilea back flipping to avoid the horizontal attack. It was upon her before she even landed, her wings forming and taking her a couple meters further back to avoid another slash before she moved in again, a smile on her face.

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Austin looked on as the woman battled the nightmarish creature, his face blanching while he barely held on to the arrow notched on his bow. She had helped them out, saved them even, without asking for anything in return but them to lead her further down into the Descent. Now he knew she didn't need anything they could even offer. Scavengers were usually the only ones occupying Hallowfort and the Descent, ready to explore and make money but the fighters were few and far in between.

He had heard of them of course, had even seen some of them spar but he wasn't exactly incapable either. Fighting against another man or dark one in a mock battle was one thing though, battling the monstrous creatures lurking down below was something else entirely. He hadn't lied to her, had not dared to. The thing wasn't above level four hundred as far as he knew but even the Pure Blooded were too dangerous to face in groups. She hadn't mentioned taking whatever treasure was at the end for herself and the fact that she helped them out made him think she wouldn't just murder them.

Still, he was afraid. More than he had been in quite a while. Perhaps as much as when the expedition had been slaughtered by Feynor, his ass rescued by a group of dark ones that hunted the dragon worshipers. The north was scary for sure, especially when you knew jack shit about it but with a bit of ingenuity and proper preparation, one could delve to the fourth level of the Descent without much problems. This one had been rushed, he knew as much but there were few options that remained for him after all.

Baron the idiot had of course not been able to resist when he saw the map and Seath was a loyal teammate for a while now. His hand shook a little when Ilea was thrown at the wall, the blow somehow not penetrating her armor. Austin was sure he would be cut through cleanly if a single attack from the beast landed. Baron could withstand for a while but even as a group the thing would most certainly overwhelm them. He breathed out when Ilea disappeared from the cracked wall and punched at the monster's back. It was learning too, not as stupid as the smaller variants that would walk into the same traps over and over again.

Austin knew a couple of people who got quite a bunch of levels just hunting them down. Some died when encountering the thing he was looking at in this very moment. It was becoming more cautious, respecting Ilea as an enemy to be taken seriously. He couldn't read her level but she couldn't be above three hundred. Austin firmly believed that was a threshold humans couldn't cross. While the beast was becoming more and more defensive, Ilea went on the offensive instead, the black limbs coming out of her back slashing at the thing. He was pretty sure they weren't penetrating at all or not very deeply but she still continued.

Perhaps it was a spell or just as a distraction to get in her punches more quickly. Baron and Seath looked on from either side of him, neither making a noise, scared they could alert the thing of their presence. Austin wasn't quite sure if the thing was the Old Blooded or the human warrior appearing and disappearing, matching the monster's step as if she was one herself. He couldn't help but smirk a little. *Shadow*. The single word in his mind. The black armor something that had faded from his memories in his years in the North but he remembered avoiding the mercenaries whenever possible, always fearing they had been hired to apprehend or kill him.

The warriors humanity had to offer, not quite made from the same material as everybody else. Austin had reached the necessary level to join while being in the north but that was not his path. Not when there was so much to be found and gained here. His way of fighting and thinking wasn't quite fitting either. *The pay is shit too*. He watched in awe as Ilea avoided the flurry of attacks with sure steps, neither tripping or inconvenienced by the corpses, bones and rubble in the hall nor by the dim light that shined on from above.

He had no idea how long they had been fighting already but it was definitely too long for anyone to reasonably hold concentration. Austin was pretty sure Ilea hadn't messed up a single time, each hit she took unavoidable and a result of the beast's sheer prowess and high level. They both learned in the fight, each step and attack calculated and executed with near perfection. The only way he could follow were his perception skills that enhanced his eyesight. His arrow was ready in case she needed it. At this point it wasn't a question of betraying her or not, more one of not

angering her. If she managed to bring them to the treasure mentioned in the map and the records he had stolen from Krentin, she was truly a blessing brought in the most desperate of times.

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Ilea finally got through, her ashen limbs cutting enough tissue to damage the integrity of the monster's right arm. Now it was only a matter of time. The thing had grown more apprehensive, more responsive than initiating as the fight had gone on. Now its right arm was sluggish, Ilea immediately focusing on that side while the monster tried to keep her at its center. It was still moving a little faster than her but avoiding the slowed attacks was much easier for her. With each hit the arm took, the beast would slow down.

It didn't seem to feel pain or cared much for its own survival. Ilea's ash cut through and the arm came loose, the joint where the bones had been connected cut through before the thing flew off and joined the graveyard around the two fighters. Ilea breathed out, taking a couple steps back as the beast screeched, anger and irritation showing in some of the eyes on its head, others remained unmoved, some uncaring since the start of their battle.

Blood dripped to the ground, the monster mostly comprised of muscle moved. Bones crushed below its massive deformed feet, now a single bladed arm attacking Ilea. Stepping back and avoiding the slash, Ilea focused her ashen limbs on the open wound on its shoulder, delivering more and more of her mana into the thing. Blinking away from a kick that came just a little too quickly, she breathed out and let meditation flow through her. Cocking her head to the side, she watched the beast slowly turn and fall



down. Blood continued to seep onto the floor from the massive wound. She waited for a minute and then two, mana continuously recovering before finally she heard the notification in her mind.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Old Blooded – lvl 362] – For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 262 – Five Stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 255 – Five Stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5’*

Ilea put her points into Wisdom again, bringing it to six forty. The group of treasure hunters jumped down then, Ilea walking to the arm she had cut off from the beast. The thing hadn’t managed to get through to her skin even once, mostly just bludgeoning with its massive bone blades.

***[Old Blooded Venom – High Danger]***

She put it into her necklace and went back to the corpse. Ashen limbs started to cut into it while she checked her armor. There were dents to be sure but she didn’t feel like replacing it already. Ilea was down to four usable sets of rose hunter armor and this one still had a helmet that was fine so she stuck with it for now. “That was very impressive.” Baron said as he stepped up and summoned a bladed extension to one of his arms, adding it to the massive thing, “May I?”

Ilea stepped away from the corpse and nodded, the huge thing coming down and cutting into the arm. She grinned when he didn't manage to get through with a single hit, not a second and third either. "You were ridiculous, do you need healing?" Seath asked but Ilea waved her off.

"I'm alright. Thanks." She said, Baron cursing as he continued to smash his bladed arm into the corpse, blood spraying around as Ilea lifted an ashen barrier to stop it. Austin rolled his map and started checking through the hall, looking at the bones and corpses.

"There's like fifty of them here...", He commented, kicking one of the Pure Blooded.

Ilea turned to him when Baron finally managed to cut through, "Do they fight each other?"

"Who else would've taken all of these out... I always ran when I encountered any of the bigger ones. Some people say they fight each other, others say they don't. Never seen it myself." Austin answered her question.

Ilea nodded to Baron and made the arm vanish into her necklace. It had the same '*High Danger*' warning as the other one and she wasn't about to test the effects while the group was close by.

"Want the rest of the corpse too?" Baron asked. Ilea thought about it for a moment, maybe for the necromancers or Elfie. Looking at the assortment of eyes, she decided against it.

"I'd rather burn it all. Can you do that Austin?"

The man snorted, "Nah, I can splatter them more if you like."

Ilea didn't have Elfie's fire cube, otherwise she would've built a pyre quickly. As it stood, they would leave the hall full of corpses. "Can we move on, the smell is fucking disgusting." Seath commented.

Austin shrugged and motioned to the exit on the other side of the hall, a metal double door set in stone. Ilea let Baron take care of it, the dwarf

smashing the thing open with a punch when he had found it was locked. His floodlight flickered on and illuminated the dark corridor beyond. “Wait.” Austin said and threw in a piece of stone.

The thing rolled before it was set aflame. The group watched the fire die out a moment later, Seath looking sideways at Ilea, “Can we not burn the corpses? The scent is already killing me.”

Ilea looked over and smiled, taking a step into the hallway. “We can deactivate them one after the other.”

Ilea just shrugged, knowing that if anything managed to kill her outright her perception would slow down. Poisons would likely not manage to finish the job either with her healing and high resistance. Checking the mechanisms and plates connected to the walls, Ilea found all of them the same fire breathing ones they had set off with the stone. There were darts and smooth spears set in the last couple meters of the hallway, beyond another set of doors. Stepping in, fire enveloped her, her Heat Resistance, armor, Veil and healing easily powering through the flames that didn’t even come close to the green ones she had encountered in her first Taleen Dungeon.

“Are you alright!?” Baron shouted down the hallway.

Ilea turned slightly and gave a thumbs up. “She’s alright.” Austin said, likely having seen it through the flames.

*Why always fire?* Ilea wondered as she walked through, her mana rising thanks to meditation, even while walking through the traps. The last set of spears and darts she avoided, smashing the walls with a couple punches and taking out the projectiles before checking them with her Poison Resistance.

### ***[Blood Poison – High Danger]***

*Blood blood blood blood, what is it with this place.* The spears were simple steel without any poison on them. The mechanisms to fire them were somewhat complicated though, likely creating enough force to punch through quite a formidable defense. Ilea didn’t test it out, instead just smashing the walls. Some of the spears fired anyway, the things constructed

in a way to loose them in case of damage or tremors. The things rushed past, one down the hallway but the angle would prevent it from hitting anybody. Ilea couldn't see through the doors at the end with her sphere so instead walked back again, smashing all the fire creating traps in the process. Most of them were just steel tubes set in the walls with small mana crystals at the end, powering the enchantment placed on a metal plate. The lack of a powerful mana source would make these traps work maybe five to ten times, depending on how long they fired. Ilea remembered the Taleen traps never had a source of mana crystals. *The crafty fuckers.*

Destroying the last trap, she walked out and found the spear that had shot down the hallway stuck on the side of it, just a meter away from the waiting Austin. "Was that on purpose?" He asked, smirking at her.

Ilea rolled her eyes, "Doors have enchantments on them." She simply said and led the group down the corridor. Seath looked at the destroyed walls, cracks and whole sections broken in. The cat lady gulped as she looked at Ilea's back who observed it all through her sphere.

Austin checked for a while before sighing, "Seems like a hardening, perception barrier and some triggers for something. No idea what."

"Can you disable single ones? I can check behind if you disable the perception barrier." Ilea suggested.

He held up a finger and smiled, "Awesome. Sure I can try. That will take a while though."

"How long?" Ilea asked and he held up five fingers. "Five hours?"

"Minutes." He said and smiled.

Ilea looked at Baron who was filling nearly the whole corridor. They were lucky the dwarf hadn't gotten stuck so far. "And why exactly is this place so unreachable if he can crack an enchantment in five minutes?"

"You did battle that monster right? And walked through the traps as if you didn't even notice them." Baron replied, "Not all enchantments are made

the same. No idea why he can crack these so easily.”

“Because they’re old as fuck. The ones outside of the inner circle are powered by bigger assortments of mana crystals. Maybe they didn’t expect anybody to reach this far.” Austin commented, cursing right after while fiddling with the runes scratched into the door.

“There you go.” He said when Ilea felt something in the mana shift. Her sphere suddenly revealed what was in the room behind.

*Nice work mate.* She thought, seeing the packets below the door, “Something is placed below the door. I’d assume it’s explosive. Or filled with chemicals or something.”

Austin nodded at her suggestion, “Any way we can go around? I don’t think I can disable the triggers without setting them off.”

“The room is pretty wide. I can see cages with skeletons inside, some violently broken open so we might have company inside. We should be able to drill into the wall here.” She said and pointed to the left wall of the hallway. “My punches didn’t set off the triggers so I doubt some drilling will.”

“They’re likely triggered as well if we enter the proximity of the room.” Austin said, “Let’s drill as far as we can then. You tell the big man when to stop.”

Baron was already screwing on the drill bit, “On it, let get that treasure.”

Ilea grinned, “If there is anything else but more monsters trying to kill us.” She waited while Baron prepared. *One good necromancer means there’s a bad one in here. Equivalent exchange, yin and yang and all that jazz.* She didn’t interfere with the dwarf when he started to drill, the three of them waiting a little to the side. Ilea summoned a meal and made her helmet vanish. They had already seen her use her necklace but also knew what she could do. She doubted the group would try to kill and rob her.

Seath looked at her with big eyes. Ilea sighed and summoned another meal, both of them not prepared by Keyla. “Care to share another one?” Austin asked as he sat down and grinned at her.

Ilea stared at him but didn't move, the man sighing and getting something out of his small pack. He too started eating. “What's your story? Joined an expedition as well?” He asked.

She chewed and swallowed, the dish noddles with meatballs and a dark creamy sauce with a note of wine, “I am the expedition.”

# Chapter 271 Poison

## Chapter 271 Poison

Austin laughed, “I can see that. You’re a Shadow though aren’t you? Or is the black coating there for another reason?”

Parts of her armor had been damaged in the fight, revealing that her Rose Hunter set was coated in a layer of black steel. “I am a Shadow. Was I guess. Not on a mission currently.”

He nodded, their voices barely carrying over the drilling. Baron was progressing well, already a meter into the wall. He would have to remove quite a bit of the stone because of his massive form. “Ever been to Virilya? City still exist?”

Ilea stuffed a meatball into her mouth and started chewing, swallowing a moment later, “Yea. Baralia is at war with the empire currently. City was under siege a couple months ago when I left.”

The man made a hissing sound with his mouth, drawing in air, “It’s been years but that doesn’t sound like a smart move for Baralia.”

“Why not?” Ilea asked. The capital at least had been pushed to the central district already. She had no idea about their general forces, defenses and funding.

He just shrugged, taking another bite from his jerky, “The empire is old, one of the oldest places among the human territories. I just don’t think it’ll

fall. Call it a feeling.”

Ilea shrugged, “I don’t really care. If it means Ravenhall will continue to do well and slavery stays out of that territory then I call that a win.” She didn’t mention the thousands upon thousands that would suffer and die in the war.

“True Shadow then.” He said and laughed, “You think they’d let me join?”

Ilea took another bite, the drilling stopping for a moment as Baron retracted his arm to continue on another section, “Of course, you’re above two hundred. It’s a hundred gold but maybe the payment has changed after the demon fiasco.”

“Now that’s a story I’d like to hear.” Austin sat up a little, a big smile on his face as he looked at her with anticipation figuratively written on his face.

Ilea waved him off with her fork, “Not that big of a deal. One of the elders summoned a couple thousand into the city and vanished into the demon realm. Wiped out the population of Ravenhall and many surrounding cities. The Hand lost a bunch of people but we managed to clean up in the end, as well as we possibly could.”

“You’re not one for storytelling are you? Makes sense that Baralia attacks then, the empire dealing with runaway demons and the Hand occupied with their own fuck up. Oh well, not that it matters here.” He concluded.

Ilea was alright with the topic ending there. She didn’t feel responsible for either the demons or the war but thinking about the chaos and all the dying people, the absolute slaughter the demons caused and the ensuing war. The murders of the Birminghames and Redleafs she had been a part of. “Doesn’t matter here.” She mirrored.

Seath listened to them but didn’t comment, their topics of discussion of places and people far away. “How far in do I have to go?” Baron asked then, a couple meters deep already.

“You have around another three meters big man.” Ilea said, her sphere perceiving the end of the room beyond the closed off door.



“Big dwarf little lady.” He grumbled and continued his work.

*I thought political correctness wasn't a thing yet in medieval times.* She sighed at his comment and finished her meal, helmet appearing a moment later.

“You have gorgeous eyes.” Austin commented suddenly, grinning at her.

“Thanks.” Ilea said, “Yours are pretty unique as well. Now if only you had an interesting character.”

Seath snickered at that while Austin laughed out loud, “You on the other hand are pretty interesting. I must admit though, I wouldn't want to get too close to that. Lest you smash my dick off.”

Ilea grinned under her helmet, “I can heal so you'd survive. Very painful though, I suggest getting a high resistance first.”

“There's no resistance to getting crushed.” Seath suggested with a purr.

“I think I'm done guys. What did I miss?” Baron asked, his metal head looking out from the new section of hallway he had dug out.

“He might be able to handle you.” Seath suggested, Ilea answering with a wave of her hand.

Ilea and Austin went to check the wall again. They could break through now quite a bit farther away from the packets below the doors. “You still have no idea what they are?”

“No, could be anything from poison to fire.” The man admitted, Ilea nodding.

She knocked her knuckles against the stone wall, “They will activate no matter what? How long to deactivate the enchantments?”

Austin frowned, “Not sure I could even do that. Honestly I'd just put down a couple arrows and let them explode in here.”

“Then let’s do that.” Ilea confirmed, eager to continue into whatever hellhole this inner circle was.

The group was standing outside the hallway, in the room Ilea had fought the Old blooded previously. “Three, two, one.” Austin called out before a dull rumbling sound reverberated through the room. A hissing sound followed before a red gas filled the hallway and rushed towards them.

“Ah fuck, retreat guys.” Austin said, the three of them rushing back and working their way up the walls to reach the balcony above.

Ilea wasn’t reacting immediately, waiting instead as her ash spread to block out the gas and redirect it to the side. She let some of it through on purpose and identified it with her Poison Resistance.

***[Blood Vapor – Medium Danger]***

*Medium.* Taking a step towards the gas, she breathed it in.

***‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Blood Vapor -30 HP/s for two minutes. Paralysis resisted’***

*Meaning there’s an additional paralysis added to the poison?* Ilea walked into the poison, the only thing changing was the notification refreshing. The damage wasn’t stacking, the duration likely just going back to two minutes every time she breathed in. Moving around her ash, she created a sphere around her before heating it up to the highest she could. Waiting for a couple minutes, she breathed in again and found the poison not reactivating.

She continued to walk around and burn the gas with her ash, or at least heat it up enough to damage the molecules enough for it to become ineffective.

“Are you alright in there?!” Baron shouted.

Ilea formed a thumbs up with ash that she sent hovering a little over the red gas before it disintegrated. *Just to be cool.*

***‘ding’ ‘Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’***

Her cleanup continued for another five minutes, taking care of each section before moving into the hallway. The poison apparently had spread towards them and little of it had spread into the room beyond the still closed door. She noted that the section Baron had freed now contained an entrance at least. The plan had worked and the poison was thoroughly ineffective against her.

Mentioning to the others that the poison was dealt with, Baron jumped down pretty much immediately. Either he trusted her more or had some confidence in his own survivability. “Good job. You must have a high poison resistance. That was Blood Vapor right?”

Ilea nodded. *Makes sense that they’d know about it. The place is supposedly trapped all over.* “Yea... been wondering. Does it reduce the effects of the poison or does it just make lower ones ineffective?”

“You have the skill and never cared to test that?” The dwarf asked, more surprised than judging, “Well the effects are reduced. Though Blood Vapor is insanely powerful even with a high level of resistance. If you don’t have a healer nearby most are proper fucked.”

Seath jumped down and Baron motioned her to come, “Take care of her.”

The cat woman just smiled, waving him off, “She can heal well enough.” Ilea winked at her after the comment.

“I just heated it all up, the poison seems dealt with. Just don’t stray too far from the center of the room.” She said and started making her way towards the hallway, Austin now deciding to join them as well, ever cautious. They walked through the entryway created by the explosion, Ilea noting the cages scattered in the room. The steel was rusty in places, some holding skeletons of monsters she couldn’t place. Others held what looked like people of various species.

“Stumbled upon a happy place here.” She grumbled, swinging one of the cage doors around, the hinges creaking from old age and wear. The room continued further in, creating a rather large hall filled with cages separated by several meters in each direction. Ilea listened but couldn’t hear anything moving. The residents of the open cages must have either died or had found some way to escape. Some skeletons were lying around freely too.

Austin checked some of them and looked around, “Something’s still alive here. Be careful.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows. Magic lights built into the ceiling around five meters above them lit up most of the place, some having their circular glass casings broken in. She wondered if someone deliberately tried to destroy them. “Any idea what it could be?” She asked, glancing at the ranger.

He checked the ground several times, blood stains as well as discolorations on the stone. Lifting a small piece of bone he shook his head, “No idea. I’m just sure something’s been walking around here, disturbing the place in the past week.”

They walked through the hall, the three staying close together while Ilea moved a little ahead. Movement suddenly showed in her sphere, Ilea catching a thin leg going by at the corner of the room, moving behind them. “We’ve got company.” She said and blinked towards where she had seen the movement. Her sphere picked up something that looked like a spider. The thing definitely looked similar to the monsters they had encountered in the inner circle so far, something dripping down from its body, the legs mere bones and its body disfigured. The chunk of congregated muscle forming the center, eyes peeking out from random places and eight bony legs jutting out.

The thing was around a meter tall and long, more if the legs were outstretched. Ilea rushed towards it, the thing now turning to her.

### ***[Blood Tainted – lvl 128]***

The low level was a little confusing but it jumped at her a moment later, Ilea’s ashen limbs intercepting it. The pointed tips pierced through the

center and kept the thing floating in the air, more and more blood seeping to the ground. “Careful, explosion!” Someone shouted but Ilea just watched as the core expanded in a flash of red, blood and guts smashing against her Veil before a now familiar poison entered her system.

***‘ding’ ‘You have been poisoned by Blood Vapor -30 HP/s for two minutes. Paralysis resisted’***

She started heating up the localized cloud. Her defenses had held, none of the blast getting through. “And she saved us again.” Baron commented, “Does your map say anything about how long it is from here to whatever treasure there is? Otherwise I’m out. That thing could’ve ended us three immediately.”

Ilea moved the thing a little closer before cutting herself with one of its legs. It wasn’t venomous. Dropping it, she joined the group again, “Well Seath could heal everyone. I doubt the blast would’ve taken out any of you so they’re alright. If there aren’t hundreds of them waiting behind that door.” Ilea said, pointing to the metal gate at the end of the hall.

Crossing the distance, Austin checked it. “No enchantments on this one.” He moved the handle, “Locked.”

Ilea motioned him aside and kicked against the door. The metal bent inwards but it didn’t open. A second kick broke the lock entirely, Ilea reaching in a hand before she pulled it open. “Get the fuck out of here.” She said, seeing the spiders move into her sphere from the distance. Ash spread out as she closed the door again. The sound of dozens of them moving in filled the air, Austin the first to react as he rushed back, quickly followed by the other two.

Ilea formed thick walls of ash behind the metal door, waiting for them to get away. Some of her ash seeped in and started delivering her destructive mana into the monsters that started to pile up. *I’ve become a quite effective exterminator...*, The same tactic as applied against the roaches and these were even of a much lower level. The things died like flies, the poison blocked by her ash, slowly filling the room beyond. There had been no light

coming from within but Ilea knew it was just filled with machines, tubes and crates. *They'll be sad to find this at the end of their treasure map.*

The last of the spiders died, Ilea ignoring the notifications about dozens of them dying. The low level did little for her experience. Stepping inside, the poison was reactivated. Spreading out ash, she waited with burning it all and checked out the room instead. A big chair was situated in the center, cuffs attached for feet and hands as well as a bunch of detachable additions that would allow for less humanoid or perhaps winged creatures to be fastened to it.

Most of the vials were broken, the ones that weren't contained a red substance. Ilea assumed it was blood. Checking the crates, she found mostly trash or instruments she had no idea what to do with. There was a book she quickly stashed into her necklace before she continued on. Her ashen limbs moved the spider corpses into the least cluttered corner and she started to clean out the poison gas, figuring there wasn't anything of real value down here.

"Hey is it safe in there?!" She heard Austin's voice, the need for looting audible in his voice.

She removed her helmet to get some light from her Form of Ash and Ember, turning around the golden key she had found near a skeleton, the only non spider one in the room. *Looks important. Even has a ruby or something in it.* She thought, putting it into her necklace as well, "Taking care of the poison now. Couple minutes." She commented offhandedly.

Turning a vial in her hand, she identified it.

### ***[Vial of blood]***

*Useful.* The key had identified as just that, a key. Maybe her identify skill just wasn't high enough or it simply wasn't that kind of skill.

Not finding anything else that might be of interest to her after looking through all the crates with her sphere, she started fucking with the chair in

the middle. Tubes connected it to the big glass containers on the walls, most of them shattered and broken.

*‘ding’ ‘Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’*

Baron’s floodlight broke into the room at that point, most of the gas burnt up by her ash. “Should be safe enough now.” She said, clicking one of the cuffs shut and trying to open it again with strength alone.

Austin looked around as he entered, frowning as he put up a portable magic light. Ilea glanced his way and then to the light source, “Why not use that instead of the torch?”

He didn’t reply, instead looking around and focusing on the glass containers on the walls. “Because monsters sometimes fear fire.” Baron supplied, coming into the room crouched and sideways.

Austin unhooked some of the tubes and started unscrewing the containers from the walls, “That’s the treasure?” Ilea asked, looking at him and then Baron.

“This is blood they used in their experiments. The right buyer will pay quite a bit for it.” The ranger explained.

“So you’re dooming all of life to become Pure Blooded?”

Baron intervened, “I don’t think you understand. This substance was and is still apparently found on lower levels. The red church simply brought it here and experimented with it. Drinking it on its own is a high quality health potion but it’s a versatile substance, allegedly.”

“You’ve never seen it... none of you have?” Ilea asked.

Austin carefully took down the tank and looked at her, “Who cares, it sells and you get your share.”

Ilea smiled, “And it was used to create the Pure Blooded and the other variants?”

He looked at her and then at Baron, “That’s a theory.” The dwarf supplied.

She tapped the armor on her thigh, “I get the thing then and you get a share of how much it would sell for. As far as I’m concerned the only thing you supplied was the map.”

“You what?” Austin asked. She felt his heart rate accelerate.

“How much would all of it in this room sell for?” She asked when someone shouted from outside of the room.

“Austin you sleazy fucking dimwit!” Ilea noted that Seath was nowhere to be seen.

Austin’s eyes darted towards the voice. “Fuck.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “You stole the map, didn’t you. Give me the stuff, I’ll store it safely at least.” He hesitated but ultimately handed it over. Grabbing onto the two tanks still hanging on the walls, Ilea simply ripped them off and stored them as well. “What are you looking at me for, this is your problem.”

Austin’s trademark smirk was back on his face before he dusted off his cloak, “Baron move out of the way would you.”

The dwarf obliged, stepping out of the room before the others followed. Ilea looked at the group moving closer, now in range of her sphere. The one in the middle looked humanoid other than the bug like head on his shoulders. A lizard person was standing at his side, massive sword dragging behind it on the ground as its tail twitched from time to time. Both were around two meters tall. The next one was a human, a woman Ilea thought she recognized. A black mist floated next to her, only recognizable as a person due to the two arms holding onto the long halberd.

The last one in their group was a serious looking Seath, the healer bard standing with arms crossed to the bug person’s side. “You owe me a map and whatever you already found.” The bug person said, likely the leader of



their group. Ilea looked over them, meeting the eyes of the lizard warrior who grinned and slithered her snake like tongue towards her.

# Chapter 272 Overconfidence is a quick and direct Killer

Chapter 272 Overconfidence is a quick and direct Killer

Austin stepped forward, “Krentin... what a joy to find you here. You played me Seath, impressive. I’m sure we’ll find an arrangement. You can have the map back and whatever is in there. We didn’t find anything useful since getting in which wasn’t long ago. We did however clear out all the monsters on the way here.” He smiled and gestured for them to go look in the small room.

“He didn’t clear out anything. The human in black armor did all of the work.” Seath said, “And she has a storage item so if there was anything in there I assume it’s already gone.”

Krentin made a clicking noise, making a fist with his armored hand before he removed the silver chain holding his hood. “I don’t want this to end bloody. Young lady, are you working for that man?”

Ilea carefully identified all of them, Krentin himself being the highest at two twenty eight and a mage, the mana coming from him felt powerful and the dark wisps licking at the air reminded her of Walter. The lizard person she identified as a female warrior was at two twenty one, wearing heavy plated armor. Her sword was curved and nearly as long as Ilea was tall, a red sheen visible near the blade. Her eyes were reptile like and nearly red,

staring at her with high intensity. Ilea noted that she was breathing hard, either because of some injury or because of incredibly excitement.

“I work for myself.” She simply stated, looking at the rest of his group.

The woman was at two ten and a healer but the way she held herself and was geared, Ilea knew there was more to it. A thin set of steel armor with a brown hooded cloak. A scarf prevented her from seeing anything but her blue eyes. The black shadow like being that reminded her of Goliath was a mage at one eighty five, either using the halberd for show or in combination with spells, Ilea wasn't sure.

Krentin scratched his head, “You're complicating things considerably.”

Ilea didn't disagree. Evaluating the group, she was pretty sure the lizardperson and perhaps the healer were the only real fighters of the group. Just based on how aware they were, how tense and prepared their bodies were. They reminded her of Shadows. Austin seemed glad the attention had shifted to her instead of him. “She's dangerous Krentin.” Seath said, the bug person looking at her and considering.

Ilea thought about just sending out some ash and getting out of there but she kind of wanted to fight the lizard woman. See what she could do with that sword. *Let's wait a couple more minutes.*

“Dangerous... I invested too much to stop here. Are you willing to part with what you found in there, I'll pay you five gold as well. Just leave it here and vanish, no repercussions.” The mage explained.

Ilea grinned at that. *No repercussions... how very generous.* “I don't have business with anybody here. I cleared out the way and I'll keep what I found, how does that sound mister important?”

Krentin sighed, “Knock them out.”

Ilea stood there when she felt magic surge from the black wisp person. A moment later a blast of mind magic went through her mind, both Baron and

Austin tumbling before they fell to the floor. She looked at the mage who wobbled a little in the air, one arm touching its head.

“That’s your last chance. Do you really want to do this?” Ilea asked, her eyes locked with the lizard whose sword was already poised and ready to fight.

“Boss... she’s a tough one.” The wisp said in an ethereal voice, respect evident.

“Are you fucking kidding me. We’re five against one. Move!” He said, dark magic forming between his hands. An explosion of movement happened in the group, each fanning out and readying their attacks.

Ilea didn’t give them time. They did have the number advantage but they were in a somewhat small hall and knew only limited things about her abilities. *The difference between us*, Ilea thought as she appeared in their midst, an explosion of ash darkening the room before projectiles shot out from within the cloud, destroying the five magic lights still working. The healer had already rushed past her and the lizard had teleported to her old position, now looking around as the room fell into darkness. Ilea blinked next to Seath who was playing her music, avoiding the dark magic burning into the stone floor and the cages where she had just stood.

*Is that you feel pain.* She thought, grabbing Seath’s arm and breaking it in a swift motion. A kick to the struggling cat woman’s leg snapped the bone, her defenses laughable against her empowered body. A scream left her as she collapsed, Ilea appearing instead next to the other healer who was disoriented in the dark but had closed her eyes. Ilea’s fist was blocked by an armored arm but the ashen limbs behind her cut into her shoulders and back, making her wince as blood splattered on the ground. Not an armor, Ilea noted but solid stone covering her arms. A hard kick against the blockade sent the woman flying, landing hard against one of the secured steel cages, bending the metal with her impact.

Crouching, Ilea felt the air as a huge blade rushed over her head. A kick followed that she avoided with a short roll, getting up to see the red eyes staring at her in the dark. A red mist was visible around the lizard, the

warrior advancing on her with high speed, her sword smashing the cages and the ground while Ilea dodged black lightning coming from their boss. Deflecting one of the slashes, she hit the lizard's arm, denting the armor slightly. Destructive mana rushed into her but Ilea didn't stop, stomping on the stumbling warrior's tail before her foe vanished.

Ash formed around her when black lightning crashed against it, burning through layer after layer before reaching her Veil. Ilea blinked next to the mage who was floating at the other end of the room, the lightning burning into the ground where she had just stood. Seath was still crying out from the pain and it seemed the mind mage didn't attack her anymore because of the feedback he got from her resistance. The human healer didn't make a sound, likely taking care of her wounds before attacking her again.

Krentin turned towards her in the air, letting her get close. Ashen limbs crashed into his armor, sliding off the sleek metal, two finding purchase as they cut into his shoulder and a part of his face. Her fist landed, Ilea knowing quite well he wanted her to touch him. She however had confidence in outlasting a mage of his level. *I survived the Blue Reaper...*, She thought, dark magic in the form of black lightning coursing through her as she hit and hit again, his armor denting and Destruction continuously burning down his health in conjunction with her reversed healing.

He started blasting her with dark magic orbs that she couldn't dodge at the close distance, simply delivering more damage as he started to retreat through the air. When he reached the wall and her hits pushed him onto and then into the stone, all he could do was block with his arms as well as he could. A barrier came up but she blasted through it with a combination of her fists and her ashen limbs. The lizard appearing next to her made Ilea blink away again. Checking her resources, she found her health sitting below four thousand, her mana still at over five. Sacrificing nearly a thousand mana, she was back at full health. Mana and stamina were recovering as she stood there, meditation flowing through her.

She heard a cough, coming from the wall where she had just attacked Krentin, "Wait...you can have what you found... just leave."

Ilea looked his way and cocked her head to the side, “That would be convenient, now wouldn’t it.” The lizard appeared a couple meters in front of her, sword poised, her maw showing a wicked grin. Blood stained the floor from where Ilea had injured her tail. The healer stepped up behind her, eyes still closed, stone now covering her whole body. Seath wasn’t playing music but she was standing to the side. The black wisp looked around but didn’t make a move. At least it wasn’t just a cheap way to distract her.

*They’re obviously much weaker.* “How much gold do you have on you? Don’t lie.” She asked, her question directed at Krentin.

“A little above a hundred.” Came the short reply.

“How much does one of the blood canisters go for usually?” She asked, her mana recovering quickly. She knew the others were preparing as well but their abilities were horribly mismatched against her, their magic lacking impact on her defenses.

“Ten, twenty gold. Depends how far you’re willing to travel.” Krentin croaked, holding his side as he got out of the wall and hovered down to sit down and rest on one of the cages.

“I’m not in the north to kill people and you’re hardly worth the trouble. Just leave thirty gold and get the fuck out of here. Consider it a fee for your lives. Lizard girl, you stay.” Ilea stated, crossing her arms. Krentin nodded in the dark, getting a pouch out of a steel compartment on his belt. Counting out the coins with shaking hands, he placed them on the floor before bowing to her.

“We won’t come after you, I swear it on my name. You won’t regret this decision noble warrior.” Taking a step back, he limped towards the exit. Seath hissed at the pain from her mangled leg, her healing ability not working quite as quickly as Ilea’s third tier.

She looked at the cat woman. Austin or Baron would make her life a nightmare if they survived, “You’re free to try, I welcome a challenge.”

She saw Krentin's smile fighting through the pained expression, blood still dripping down from his wounds. The dark wisp looked her way, stopping for a moment before it joined Krentin's side. It would surely reevaluate its class and focus on mind magic after this encounter. The human healer circled around Ilea and made her way to the exit, "Human. What's your name?" Ilea asked.

She stopped and turned slightly, "Jonna."

Ilea smiled, "Jonna. That's a good combination of classes." The woman nodded and left, the wounds on her back and shoulders healed completely.

Ilea walked to Baron and checked him through his massive armor. *Breathing.* Sending a pulse of healing mana into his mind, he was startled awake. She did the same with Austin who wasn't dead either. Ilea barely knew them but seeing how Krentin hadn't ordered them killed immediately made her think she had made the right decision. The bug person didn't come off as a complete asshole at least. A little overconfident perhaps. Having their corpses splattered here just because Austin had stole a map and they wanted to get their stuff back wasn't really, desirable.

Of course they had attacked her but she saw it more as a challenge. Had they attacked any of her friends however, there would be nobody standing.

"That look in your eyes. I am glad we did not invoke your wrath." The lizard woman said, "Only a little." She added and snickered. "Why keep me here?"

Ilea relaxed and looked her way, Austin hitting invisible enemies with his fists, "I want to see if I can take hits from your sword. I want to face you, no teleporting and no ash...."

The lizard woman looked at her with excitement, "I am Hana, it is an honor to face you, warrior of ash." She said and bowed a little.

Ilea mirrored the gesture. "Hana, let us move to the lighted hall further out. I am Ilea."

“What the fuck happened?! My head hurts... Ilea what did you do? Where are the lights?” Austin grumbled but she just ignored him. Baron was looking around, his flashlight activating before he started following Ilea.

“Did you give them what they wanted?” He asked.

Ilea grabbed the thirty gold from the ground and counted them in her hand, “Nah, I broke some bones and we renegotiated.”

“You won... why didn't you kill them, you have no idea what angering Krentin will do for you. He won't stop until he has your head!” Austin yelled.

Ilea turned to him, “Dangerous enough for you to steal from him?”

He snorted, “He attacked you too didn't he. You could've taken all they had.”

“And kill another five powerful sentient people. For what? Gold? Another storage item or some armor?” She paused, finding the money to equal forty gold coins. *He gave more than I asked.* “There's enough monsters around to hunt and kill, I try not to become one too often.” *Not for something petty like gold.*

“You save us after all, strangers. I commend your admittedly strange thinking.” Baron said when he reached her.

Ilea handed him ten of the gold coins she had gotten from Krentin, “You're alright. Krentin's gold and I think plenty for the risks you took to come here.”

“Are you sure Ilea? There really is no need.” Baron said, surprising her a little.

*Guess not all dwarfs are made of the same metal,* “Just take it.” She opened his massive hand and put the gold within, storing the other thirty in her necklace. *99 gold and 60 silver. Nearly enough to pay another Shadow's Hand badge.*



“Thank you.” Baron said and bowed.

“What about me?” Austin asked from the side.

“You?” Ilea asked, leaving the hall and joining Hana outside who was already moving the corpses to a corner of the hall. She smirked, “You should be glad to be alive. Typical human.”

“You’re human too.” He said and smirked. The man knew exactly how well he came out of this situation. His stupidity not paid with death, at least not yet. If Krentin really was the way Austin had described, it would be a dangerous couple months and years to come for the man.

“You still owe me four gold and twenty silver Austin.” Baron said, “And I can’t see a treasure map anymore.”

The man winced before quickly crushing one of his arrowheads, creating a big cloud of smoke. Ilea watched him jump up the walls and run out of the hall, shaking her head in the process. “I don’t think you’re getting your money back.” Ilea commented.

Baron shrugged, “You know, after traveling with him for a couple days I didn’t really consider it.” He hesitated, looking at Ilea and Hana, “I don’t suppose you’re looking for someone in your team?”

“Not really. I’ll visit the camp or Hallowfort if I need anything though. See you around Baron.” Ilea said, winking to the dwarf.

“I thought as much. Good luck on your reckless adventure. I’m in your debt.” Bowing to her again and nodding to Hana, he too slowly made his way up the wall, massive fists crashing into the stone before a powerful pull got him onto the balcony.

*Finally, some goddamned peace and quiet.* Ilea sighed and changed into comfortable clothes. She cracked her neck and nodded at Hana.

The woman prepared her sword, checking her armor before a thin red mist formed around her, “I might not be able to stop....”

“Don’t worry, I’ve fought a berserker before.” Ilea replied with a smile, ashen limbs at the ready. This time she didn’t avoid the strike, a quick overhead slash after a dash Hana made towards her. The blade cut into her Veil, the force of the strike traveling through her, damaging parts of her forearms that she quickly healed. Hana shouted as more of the red mist formed, the sword pushing down harder and harder, Ilea forced to push it aside, the thing digging into the floor with ease. Fists lashed out, one hard punch landing on her side before Hana let go of her sword and jumped away.

Ilea smirked, the other woman ignoring the injury as she held out her hands in a battle stance. Ilea grabbed the sword and ripped it out of the stone, feeling a sudden pull on it that dragged the thing towards Hana.

“Interesting. An enchantment?” She asked, ashen limbs crashing into the ground behind her to prevent further sliding. The weapon suddenly jerked upwards, out of her grip and then curved towards the lizard who just smirked, showing sharp teeth and a reptile tongue. Her red eyes glowed as she caught the heavy weapon with ease, moving it to the side and going into a crouch.

“An enchantment. I like to throw it.” She said as Ilea rushed at her. This time the blade moved much more quickly, with less force to allow for more strikes and better maneuverability. Ilea dodged most of the blows, deflecting a last one with three of her ashen limbs before she stepped into melee range. Hana kicked at her but Ilea simply caught her massive leg and held onto it, twirling before she smashed the woman into the floor. A loud crash resounded, cracks in the stone floor forming. Hana kicked off the ground and twirled in the air, landing before she spit out some blood.

“You are quite strong for a mage.”

“Am I not a warrior?” Ilea asked, smirking at the lizard, slowly taking steps towards her.

Hana prepared her blade, “Of course that’s what it says but I saw what you did with your ash and those arms coming out of your back... that’s no way to fight for a warrior.”

Ilea shrugged and rushed at her again.

# Chapter 273 Regeneration

## Chapter 273 Regeneration

For the first time Ilea shared one of Keyla's meals. She had thoroughly enjoyed the hours of battle against Hana, the lizard warrior working for Krentin. Carefully opening one of the two barrels of ale she still had from Walter, she poured two cups and handed one to the lizard. "So you met him a couple years ago?"

The lizard took the cup with her good arm, the other one broken and bleeding. She had refused healing from Ilea, her berserker skills keeping her injuries in check right until she ran out of mana. They had paused a couple times to meditate. Often they did not rush at each other immediately again and again, leaving ample time for recovery even during their bout. Ilea had only used her strength and physical attacks, neither Wave of Ember nor Destruction delivered through her blows.

"Six... seven years ago. Something like that. He asked for me to show him my power. So I attacked him and we fought." Hana explained, "We were below two hundred then, the both of us."

"I can't see him winning it."

"Well I didn't have a healing skill then and trust me, he's stronger outside and at long distances. You caught him at an advantage." Hana said.

Ilea grinned and put away her helmet, taking a sip of Walter's ale. She savored the taste for a moment before speaking, "You think I couldn't have

won without?”

Hana took a sip as well and looked first at the cup and then at Ilea, “This is fantastic... not from Hallowfort, that’s for sure.” She took another sip, “It’d be a fight to see but with your healing and defenses... no I think you would win nine out of ten.”

“That’s not good enough.” Ilea grumbled. Of course Hana didn’t know about all her abilities but neither did Ilea know about all of Krentin’s abilities. She knew that at least the lizard warrior was outmatched by her, mostly due to her versatile ash. Without her added limbs and mana intrusion abilities, it would be more even. She had forty levels on the lizard but that meant little if she couldn’t get in any hits.

Hana chuckled, the sound having an added hiss that Ilea just attributed to her biology, “You will stay here then? Train against the blood monsters?”

Ilea thought about it. She had plenty of poison now to work with and some people to train resistances, “While I’m here. I don’t think I’ll stay for a long time at least. Do you think Krentin will stay true to his word?”

Hana thought, finishing her food and ale before she spoke, “He is crafty. Smart and he can be deceptive. All reasons I decided to work for him. The way he looked at you. I believe he has taken a liking. Perhaps you will find him trying to woo you instead of sending assassins or coming to kill you himself.” She laughed, Ilea smiling in response before she put on her helmet again.

“Well, the dungeon is dangerous enough. No need for fighting among the conscious. At least not with the intent to kill.”

Hana grabbed her massive curved sword, the blade reflecting some of the light coming from the magic lamps above on its cool steel. “I have been fighting with the intent to kill.” She said with a smirk.

“Oh I know.” Ilea answered with a smirk, closing the barrel and storing it in her necklace.

Hana twirled her sword and went into a stance, “Perhaps I should explore on my own too, otherwise I’ll never be able to smack that smirk off your face.”

“How did you know I was smirking?” Ilea asked, activating her buffs and preparing to fight.

Hana just shook her head, “And you can heal yourself too. Lucky find, your class.”

Ilea shrugged in response, “I suppose it was.”

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Walking through the corridors as quietly as possible, Hana listened carefully for any monsters that might creep up on her. The exit was rather distant and she was glad the thing led back to the second layer directly. She winced at the pain, rubbing on the dent in her armored arm. A smile was on her face, her scales shimmering a dark green in the light of the magic devices built into the ceiling throughout the Heroes’ Descent. *I will have to have it repaired again.* Her scales would normally not show as much, the dents and splinters the warrior had caused making them visible. It would cost at least two gold coins, the smiths in Hallowfort charging ridiculous prices for mundane work.

In her tribe this would be done free of charge, to protect a life of their own. Ilea had offered to heal her wounds, the pain of her failed battles weighing heavy on her shoulders. Hana reminded herself that the woman was human, their sense of pride and honor not quite like her own. The healer Krentin

had gotten a year ago constantly offered to heal her too, sometimes doing so without asking. The only reason she didn't crush her so far was Krentin asking her to accept it. She knew it was logical, to be ready to fight always and to not die in battle for no reason.

Wincing again as her broken leg came down in a bad angle, she listened around the corner. Her mana was full again but she didn't think it safe enough to meditate her and take care of her wounds. Getting back to the first layer would be the safest bet, meeting back up with Krentin and the others. *What a glorious warrior.* The pain was bad but not a new feeling for her.

***'ding' 'Pain Tolerance reaches lvl 17'***

Krentin had offered to torture her to get the second stage but Hana had little interest in deactivating her sense of pain. It was necessary, to learn, to grow. To ignore one's own failures was to lie and stagnate. Finding the path clear, she limped towards the exit. It was another three or four corridors, she was sure of it. Pretending to be healthy cost her but she wanted to fight until she couldn't anymore, wanted to test that woman with all her power. *I couldn't even scratch her...*, Damaging her armor didn't count, at least that's how Hana thought.

The ashen defenses were strong, as powerful as some of the monsters found in the Descent. Together with Ilea's mobility, quick teleport and ashen limbs, Hana considered her at least as dangerous as an Old Blooded. Maybe more so because of her healing. She knew the woman had held back some offensive skills, the first clash when Krentin had ordered her knocked out or dead had proven as much. It had felt like fire invading her every cell, as well as something else, something she had never experienced. As if corruption spread through her body, changing what was normal. Ilea was strong but not stronger than her. When the red glow showed from the cracks of her armor it was close.

Hearing the familiar noise of a Pure Blooded, Hana stopped in her tracks and waited. The thing didn't come her way. A couple minutes later, it left. Sighing at her inability to fight, she swore to train harder. Maybe using the healer to train more efficiently as Krentin had suggested would be

necessary. *Ilea can heal herself... maybe I should take advantage.* She questioned it immediately. Sometimes Hana wished she had been born in a different place. Training her health steal ability would be the way to go. *Through your own power you shall prevail.* It was a stretch already to work in a group. *Maybe I should listen to my practical side a little more. Even Hogath says so and he's just a rookie.* The mind mage had joined them a couple months ago.

Hana smiled at the thought, nearly cackling when she reached the corridor leading up. Seeing his mind magic fail so spectacularly against the warrior had shut him up finally. The woman must have had someone to train a resistance as well. *Strong enough to damage him even. At least Krentin confirmed his theories about the second stage. He was close enough as well, working on it often. A simple task with a healer and his second stage pain tolerance.*

Putting her sword on her back, she jumped up and grabbed onto one of the cracks created by what she assumed to be the massive dwarf. This way to the inner circle would probably be widely known soon, now that the human ranger got away. *Not that we would have faced the Old Blooded guarding the treasure.* She thought, annoyed at Krentin's cautiousness. They would've been back with the price weeks ago if it weren't for his preparations and overthinking. *In, bash heads and out.* It seemed easy to her. Laughter brought some sound into the corridor as she ascended, knowing exactly why she wasn't the leader of their group.

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Ilea relaxed for a while, waiting until Hana was likely quite a while away. She had shown obvious signs of injury, her movements slowing down as she more and more favored her left leg. Ilea didn't get why she refused her healing. *Misplaced pride probably.* She was glad none of her teammates in the Hand had acted like that. Even the noble Trian. *Is he still noble now?* She supposed losing most of his family's influence, the name alone meant little.

If the empire really fell it would mean even less. She sighed and summoned one of the bones she had gotten from the Old Blooded. Checking it again, she slammed it into her leg.

***'ding' 'You have been poisoned by Blood Poison -50 HP/s for five minutes. Light paralysis'***

*Fuck that's potent.* She quickly crunched the numbers. *Three thousand health in a minute. Fifteen thousand until it's done.* Storing the blade again, she activated her healing, her recovery canceling out the damage but not by much. Reconstruction alone wasn't that potent, she knew as much. Her testing with either skill had been minimal but Hunter Recovery had nearly doubled her own healing speed, now sitting at more or less sixty health per second. Her health would be back to full after around a hundred seconds of healing. Of course it wasn't that simple, some injuries requiring more time and mana. With her quick recovery from the third tier it was even weirder.

Healing others behaved differently too of course, her Hunter Recovery quite a lot better with her own body. She hadn't asked anybody to test and just checking them with her skill only gave a general impression on their health, not an actual number.

The five minutes passed before Ilea again stabbed herself, her mana recovery boosted by Meditation easily keeping up with what she used. Her combat skills weren't draining her after all. Except for her Sphere that was always on as well as her main buffs, State of Azarinth and Form of Ash and Ember, the former free of charge since reaching the third tier. Thirty minutes later and four additional uses of the one venomous arm, the venom was gone. In her body and taken care of by her healing.

***‘ding’ ‘Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4’***

***‘ding’ ‘Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5’***

*Two levels for a single one.* She smiled and got the other arm, continuing her solitary training. Half an hour passed and she sighed, getting up from boredom.

***‘ding’ ‘Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6’***

***‘ding’ ‘Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’***

*Need to heal a ridiculous ton of damage just to get that up.* Thinking on it for a second, she thought of training by sacrificing her health and then healing it quickly with her third tier recovery. *Hey wait, that’s illegal!* A small voice of her conscience shouted but it was worth a try. If she had ways to damage herself and heal again, why not? *If it doesn’t work I can just cut off my legs or something.* Perhaps thinking of those things inside the inner circle, a place that had proved to be able to kill her wasn’t the best of ideas but Ilea wasn’t overly concerned, sacrificing two thousand health to activate her third tier State of Azarinth. *Now to look for that hidden secret in the treasure room nobody seemed to notice.*

Her healing recovered the lost health without use of the third tier, preserving some of the mana as she meditated and walked back to the room filled with cages. It was dark now, the lights previously protected by a layer of glass shattered by her ash. Krentin and his group were gone as was Austin and Baron. She glanced back towards the corridor, the two doors still remaining. *Nobody stayed behind to see if there was more?* The answer was apparently a simple no. At least according to all her senses.

Back in the room, she continued to search through the left behind boxes but there was nothing else of value. At least she was somewhat sure. Many of the metal tools looked cruel, more than anything else. Torture devices surely. Ilea continued to look through everything, taking her time as her health ticked back up. As soon as she hit her full health, she sacrificed another two thousand. With around sixty health per second recovered, she was back to full in a little over thirty seconds. Ilea repeated the process for a

couple minutes. Adding her buffs together with the healing, her mana was slowly dwindling, even with meditation active.

She didn't get a level up for either of the skills but both were in the third tier, likely just needing a shit ton more experience than previously. *Good way to work on both though.* She wasn't quite sure how much being in danger would add to the equation but it probably was a lot. Waiting a couple minutes for her mana to recover again, she turned to the wall from which she had gotten a weird feeling. Either it was another trap or just a hidden wall.

She could still sense the stone behind it but something was off. Ilea searched for a hidden switch for a couple minutes but couldn't find anything, instead she ripped off the machines clinging to the wall and started working her way into the stone. She wasn't quite as quick and efficient as Baron but her fists were getting the job done nonetheless.

Ripping out a chunk of stone, her next punch hit something that caused a reaction. An explosion ripped through the room, most of it smashing into Ilea's Veil and sending her to the opposite wall, machines denting and glass shattering when the armored woman impacted it. The trap had burnt through her Veil, her skin a little smoky below her armor but she only lost around a hundred health. Two seconds of healing was enough to be back. Her skin would need a moment to cool off but she quickly walked back to the opening. Her sphere could now see the hallway beyond, Ilea blinking into it immediately.

It was dark, no magic lights on the ceiling. Carefully stepping on the stone floor, Ilea surveyed everything. There were a couple more cages in here, smaller than the ones in the previous hall. There were notes sitting on a wooden table, a candle at half capacity sitting next to it. Grabbing what looked like an enchanted stick, she willed magic into it and found a small flame coming out of the top. *Magic match.* Lighting the candle, she stored the match in her necklace and held up the small bowl in which the candle was sitting.

Movement in one of the small cages made her look up. Her sphere hadn't been able to penetrate the shimmering enchantment that moved through the

thin mesh of metal. Getting closer with her candlelight, Ilea found a familiar creature staring back at her with white eyes. Smiling at it, she waved with a hand and crouched down. “Well look at you, how long have you been stuck down here?”

*[Fae – lvl 71]*

“I can get you out you know.” Ilea said in a calm voice, remembering how defensive the fae was she had met previously. Back then she healed it after it let down its defenses, allowing her mana to pass. Feeling a prodding in her head, she just smiled. “I can’t communicate with you that way.” she said and let healing mana flow towards the cage, not sure if the magic around it came from the fae or something else.

The creature looked similar to the one she had met before. Its whole body was black, as if swallowing the light coming from the candle, white eyes sparkling with curiosity the only thing setting it apart as a conscious being. It could also just be that the fae were peaceful animals but the way it looked at her with the elongated and curved white eyes, Ilea felt like there was more. The head of this one was shaped more dragon like, two black horns jutting from its skull. She couldn’t discern if anything was actually solid matter or just some kind of floating shadow.

Ilea sat down and checked out the lock on the cage. It wasn’t big, enchanted for sure but she doubted it was there to keep someone from opening it. Taking it into her armored hand, she squeezed. A crack resounded, the magic around the cage vanishing before she opened her hand to find the broken and crumbled lock lying within. The fae twirled around, its wings not moving enough to keep it in the air on its own. Ilea spread her ashen wings, sitting on the ground and smiled at the creature, feeling more comfortable with a living thing than she had in a while. The fact that it didn’t talk much to taint this feeling was certainly helpful, after all it could be a warmongering noble.

# Chapter 274 Blood and Bones

## Chapter 274 Blood and Bones

Big white eyes looked at her as she flapped her wings slowly. A tendril of ash went out towards the fae before it stopped, blocked by a barrier in the air. Sending healing mana through the ash, Ilea rested her head on one of her knees, sitting as she watched the little creature about the size of her hand. It had little legs but no arms or feet, the black mist just ending. Turning its head to the side, it deactivated the barrier, allowing Ilea's ash to pass.

Raising her eyebrows, Ilea was again startled at the physiology she found. As if its mana flowed out into the air, its physical body ended but its magical one did not. Humans had their mana inside their bodies, flowing similar to how blood flowed through it. Ilea's ash for example expanded the flow because it was considered a part of her body. *Is it an Air Creator or something?* The creature at least wasn't hurt but Ilea still sent some of her mana into it. She knew it felt pleasant to humans at least. Again, the fae twirled in the air, Ilea stopping a moment later as she smiled.

"You can go now if you like." She said and stood up, checking the rest of the room. One of the cells held a skeleton of something that looked a little like a snake. *Could a necromancer raise that again?* She wasn't sure but stored it in her necklace anyway. The blood monsters she wouldn't take, raising them again seemed like a bad idea all around. The fae was hovering behind her while she looked through the rest, not finding anything else of interest.

Turning around, Ilea faced the curious creature. *I'm glad it's not another Aki.* While she considered the dagger a friend, he wasn't exactly the nicest when she first met him. "You don't want to go?" It just looked at her, floating closer before it bumped into the ash of her Veil, recoiling a little before it flapped its wings once. The white eyes didn't blink, likely couldn't. Extending one of her ashen limbs towards the creature, she watched as it circled around it. Finally it landed, standing on the ash while looking down at it, the two black horns facing straight up.

Ilea chuckled when it carefully stepped on her ash, looking up again. "You want to stay with me then?" She asked, the little thing not giving her the slightest hint of understanding. She didn't mind either way. It wasn't her task to take care of it but neither would she refuse its company. "You're free to join." Standing up, she checked the room once more before walking out through the opening she and the trap had created.

When she reached the first hall again where Hana had fought her, she sat down on the ground and looked through the notes she had found, the fae still floating behind her, sometimes bumping into her ashen limbs. Ilea was happy to find the text was written in Standard.

#### *'Experiment 428*

*The goal was to combine the blood or how later defined life essence of the being designated by the unknown as 'Fae' and the pure blood. Properties such as high affinities for mind and space magic were hoped to be found in resulting specimen.*

*Mixture was applied with the layer four Tuner to human and dwarven specimens. Lizardman and Feynor specimen requests have been rejected.*

*Results include deformation, mutation and spontaneous vanishing. All specimens have perished or teleported to unknown location within the span of two months.*

*Due to results not meeting expectations, funding has ceased. Specimen 'Fae' will be kept in hidden containment room, enchanted cage infused with space magic blockade III. Permission to connect cage to layer four Tuner has been granted. Potential buyers for specimen 'Fae' to be contacted.'*

The page was somewhat conclusive. *Didn't find a buyer then. Or they just forgot about the Fae being in there.* Ilea put the page into her necklace, reading the next one.

*'Experiment 452*

*General goal: Combination of specimen 'Life Serpent' with various successful previous mixtures and pure blood. Healing and regeneration properties expected to show in specimens.*

*Mixture was applied with fourth layer Tuner. Specimens subjected to substance include human, dwarven and Feynor heritage. Permission for rare specimens granted should results meet expectation.*

*Results were mixed, some rare specimens showing enhanced regeneration as well as added healing abilities. No extraordinary classes or traits discovered. Mixture will be applied to specimen V.'*

Ilea put the page into her necklace and studied the last one she had found on the table. The red church or whoever had conducted the experiments certainly held little regard for morality, injecting humans and other sentient lifeforms with their certainly creative blood cocktails. Whatever results the pages showed weren't impressive either and if Ilea's theory about the Pure Blooded was true, the end result wasn't pretty either. Contrary to the first two pages, the last one held very little information, most of it scratched through. By a knife, not more ink.

*'Experiment 632*

*The goal was to combine with including pure blood mixed with Specimen VI*

*Mixture was applied with fourth level Tuner, permission for lower level Tuner granted regardless of success. Due to , further testing is necessary.'*

The last part with the possible results had been removed completely, leaving Ilea at least a little intrigued what the fuck they were doing down here. The cages, lots of mentions of blood and the monsters she had fought didn't paint a good picture. A bloody one certainly. "What do you think little fae? You must've heard and seen a bunch of what was going on in these cursed halls..." The little creature looked at her with big white eyes, giving her little answer to her questions. "To be honest, as long as there's stuff to kill I don't really care much. Seems like whatever shit they did, they're gone now."

*Just like Rhyvor. Maybe Maro knows something about this church or the city that once was here.* Ilea got up and put the last page away as well, continuing her recovery training. Jumping up to the balcony overlooking the hall, Ilea found the fae suddenly appearing next to her. "Teleporter hmm?" She asked and looked at the fae. "I'll be exploring a little more. If there are any monsters you should stay back and let me handle it." Ilea wasn't sure the fae understood but if the thing had any of the intelligence that shined in its eyes, it would react accordingly in a dangerous situation.

Ilea spent the next twenty minutes trying to fine tune her recovery training, sacrificing around three hundred health and healing it back in five seconds. Moving too fast for her meditation, she needed around thirty seconds to get



the used mana back, mostly because her Veil and other buffs were active at all times. The corridors were rather sprawling, Ilea already mapping down the area in her notebook. “This place is bloody massive, eh little fae?”

There was no answer but the little guy floated around her head, flapping its wings twice. Ilea held up her hand, looking towards one of the dark corridors, more lights broken now that she was further in. The fae moved away from the noise, Ilea spreading her ash behind her as she carefully listened and prepared.

Around the corner ahead came a single Pure Blooded. Ilea waited and looked around, none of her senses noticing anything else but the single enemy. “Hey there.” she said, waving at the monster that immediately screeched at her, a throaty gurgling noise coming from somewhere below its deformed head. Blood dripped down as it rushed at her, one of its legs looked injured, making it a little slower than the beasts she had faced before.

Appearing behind it, she kicked at the injured leg, something snapping in the process. Ilea spread ash around the monster, blinding it as it slashed its bladed arms at her. A step back let her avoid the slash. The beast attacked quickly, that much she had to admit. The ash blinded it but she didn’t want to risk going into the meat grinder the thing was creating in front of it, instead blinking to its side and punching it a couple times. Teleporting again when it turned, she continued her assault until another bone cracked. A minute later, the thing was dead, slumping down as Ilea shook the blood off her armored hands.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Pure Blooded – lvl 305] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

*No levels this time.* The fae joined her again, flying around a corner before it hovered over the dead Pure Blooded. Landing on it, the thing stomped down a couple times before moving its head closer. Ilea wasn’t sure if it was sniffing or just trying to see better. It hovered upwards again a moment later, Ilea shrugging and ripping off the two bladed arms before she stored them in her necklace. *More poison training time.*

Moving on, the two of them didn't encounter any of the monsters for a good hour of walking through the corridors. Ilea decided to slow the pace a little because of her ever growing map and the possibility to focus a little more on her recovery and poison training, using the Pure Blooded arms instead of her State's third tier to get her health down. It drained her faster but with the slower pace, Meditation added to her mana recovery, which somewhat balanced it out again.

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

The lack of enemies wasn't entirely unpleasant. Chucking away the last of the bones she had, Ilea started to sacrifice health again. Most of the rooms and halls she explored held little but skeletons, destroyed furniture and machines as well as rusty tools and deformed armor. It really was a city, even the inner circle as the others had called it having all the necessities for an albeit small society to work. Most of it seemed minimalist but Ilea didn't know if it was merely the age that stripped the rooms of valuables, colors and light or if it was intended by design. The only place with ornaments and what looked like more expensive handiwork was still where she had found the so called Tuner. The chair connected to the containers she now held in her necklace, mentioned in each of the experiment notes found within the hidden room.

“Closed door.” Ilea said, hitting the metal gate a couple times to no avail. The shine of magic reflected some of the light from the device built into the ceiling a couple meters away. With each hit, she heard a fizzle, her hand burnt by a bright flame she didn't particularly care about. The fae twirled around, either excited or concerned but didn't do anything about her antics. *Might be worth a try...*, Ilea thought, summoning the golden key she had found. There was after all a keyhole she could try.

A click resounded, the ruby shining slightly before the shimmer on the door ceased to be. *Hey, a problem solved by not hitting something really really hard. I am an intelligent woman of culture after all.* Ilea told herself and put

the key away, the door pushed to the side. It screeched, parts of it rusty and not sitting quite as smoothly in the frame anymore. *Maybe should've put an anti rust enchantment on it as well.*

The two of them stood at the start of a dark hallway, noises coming from skittering movements made Ilea perk up. "Woke up something in there didn't we?" Stepping inside, she started spreading her ash around her. Sections of the room were walled off, all formed with the same boring gray stone. Ilea's sphere didn't pick anything special, just more of the same broken machinery, the odd ripped apart skeleton as well as ruined furniture and moldy tapestry and rugs. The fae followed her in, Ilea listening carefully for the noise she had heard previously. "Hello? Anybody home? Friendly cleaning lady inbound."

The noise returned and a moment later a monster the size of the old blooded moved into her sphere. Not quickly but carefully, its two arms dripping with venom. Contrary to most of the other beasts, this one had the deformed head of a lion. "What were you made of?" Ilea asked when it started retching up something from its massive throat. A glob of liquid splattered against the ash moving to intercept the unknown. Ash started sizzling, the acid burning through quickly as Ilea took a couple steps back.

### ***[Old Blooded - ??]***

Blinking next to it, Ilea's limbs and her fist smashed into its side, finding it just as vulnerable as the other Old Blooded she had fought. *Twenty minutes... let's hope nothing else is waiting down here to join us.* Jumping away from the retaliation, Ilea already knew it had some way to see through her ash, the dark element slashed through as it focused on her shrouded form hidden within a black mist. Blinking and attacking was the way to go, so she continued, focusing on the bones on the creature's legs as well as its spine.

Time passed and Ilea grew more and more bold, finding the thing's acid puke as well as fast slashes simple to evade. It lacked the veracity of the Carrier as well as the other Old Blooded she had faced, usually not pursuing when she stepped back and instead using its ranged attack that was powerful but easy to avoid. Another hit but this time Ilea added another

two, hearing a muted crack before she smiled and was smashed into the wall by the bladed arm. Her bones held up, armor denting a little on her chest which would make the set a little uncomfortable to wear but not unusable yet.

Blood splattered into her helmet, the wall behind her cracking from her weight and the force of the impact, Ilea blinking away to avoid the follow up strike. Taking a moment to recover some health, she noted that the bone she assumed to be the creature's spine moved. When she reached full health, the bone snapped into place and the small gash in its skin closed. The lion head snarled at her as it turned and spat some acid at her.

“Are you healing yourself?” Ilea asked, jumping back to avoid the ranged attack. *No wonder it's not going into a frenzy... I'm not hurting it in the slightest.* If the beast could heal itself then maybe the red church did manage to succeed with the life serpent's blood. *So it's a race of resources.* Assuming monsters had similar mana and endurance numbers to a human at the same level, she was at a disadvantage, not that it was a reasonable assumption at all. *Have I ever faced some monster that ran out of steam?*

Concentrating on the fight, Ilea tuned out everything else and started to use her tried and trusted method of wearing an enemy down. Picturing the Old Blooded as a knight, she weaved and danced around its attacks, using every moment of quiet to meditate and regain some mana. Her attacks focused on dealing damage to its limbs, to cut skin and break bones. More mana would likely be necessary to heal those wounds compared to a simple recovery of health. Ilea wasn't sure how her mana intrusion skills stacked up, how hard it was for the beast to recover from the cellular destruction her Wave of Ember and Destruction skills brought upon it.

*Maybe ask a healer about that.* She noted, a little annoyed she had never investigated further. At least there were several healers around in Hallowfort. Barely dodging a bladed arm slashing over her head, she delivered a hard punch to the monster's gut before blinking away, meditating and preparing for another strike. At some point she noted the fae was still floating near the entrance, watching the whole fight between her and the old blooded. The thing had started to move a little slower, a little more jagged, its attacks more lunging than precise and controlled

movements. It didn't exactly make it easier for her to dodge but she at least knew something changed. Another half an hour later, one of the injuries she inflicted didn't heal immediately but only over a long period of time. She had worn it down and was herself still at around two thirds of her mana, the lack of aggression coming from the monster giving her ample time to use her meditation.

After that point each injury stacked, with every broken bone the beast moved slower and Ilea more confidently, more vicious. A hard stomp broke the second leg, grounding it before she moved on to its head, grappling onto the exposed muscle and smashing it repeatedly with her right fist. The monster tried to get up, pushing its boned claws into the ground but finding them slipping on the bloody floor. Ilea had her Veil of Ash combined with her control to clean off the worst of it, preventing herself from falling. The creature didn't have the luxury, allowing Ilea to get in another eight hits before a loud crack opened its skull and killed the beast.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Old Blooded – lvl 371] – For defeating an enemy one hundred levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 263 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 256 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Meditation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

# Chapter 275 Search and Exploration

## Chapter 275 Search and Exploration

Ilea sighed and stretched, ash whirling around her as it plucked away the dirt and blood clinging to her armor. Removing her helmet with her hands, she moved ash inside to clean out the blood, spitting on the ground to add to the red soup seeping out of the downed enemy. The simple addition of a regeneration ability had turned the fight that would've likely not lasted longer than ten to twenty minutes into a nearly two hour ordeal. *Makes me a major pain in the ass to fight too.* She noted, smirking at the broken deformed lion head.

Keeping the ten stats for now, she planned to talk to the necromancer king first, maybe he was already over three hundred and was willing to share some things. They had been awake for a couple days now and would likely have calmed down by now. Either that or Terok and Elfie were dead with a new plague ready to take over this land. Ilea doubted the two, even with all the kingsguard at their disposal would be capable of much. Not in the north. In the human plains, maybe. Then again a single miststalker would probably take out half of Riverwatch before it would be taken down.

Demon spawn seemed positively non threatening to her now that she was facing these abominations. Ashen limbs started cutting into the beast's shoulders while the fae moved closer again, coming to a stop near Ilea. Putting on her helmet again, the fae sat down on her shoulder when the first

arm of the beast came loose with a loud tear, Ilea storing it in her necklace. *More poison resistance training.* “Ready to move on little one?”

The fae looked towards her head and then forward again. Ilea cracked her neck and her knuckles, meditation increasing her recovery as she waited for her mana to reach acceptable levels again. No magical lights were working anymore in this section of the inner circle but Ilea soon realized the door she had opened didn't lead to another labyrinth of corridors, instead to this room, a single hallway and another room. Smiling, she started opening the various wooden chests standing in the dark room.

“Let me know if you want any of this.” She said and opened some of the pouches, finding gold coins. Not ridiculous amounts like with the Taleen stash she had found but certainly enough that the people previously traveling with her through this forgotten part of the Descent would be more than just a little pissed. Putting them into her necklace, she found the assortment to equal around sixty gold and twenty silver coins. Taking one of the coins, she handed it to the fae who just looked at it and turned its head sideways. A shadowy tendril extended before it wrapped around the coin. Ilea watched in fascination as it moved the coin towards its head and then inside, as if it wasn't solid at all.

A metallic noise resounded before it took out the coin again, what looked like a small bite missing out of it. The coin was tossed back into the chest below them, “Gold isn't tasty eh?” Ilea asked with a chuckle, adding the coin back into her necklace. Some of the chests held old rusty gear, Ilea storing it just in case it was made from some rare metal. They had a golden copper sheen to it, at least near the parts that weren't completely ruined. Opening another chest, Ilea blinked as the fae moved forward immediately, stopping before it looked towards Ilea, flapping its wings excitedly.

“Go ahead, I have little use for them.” Ilea said with a smile, looking at the fae who started eating or storing the mana crystals filling up the chest. They were refined and small, not quite as chunky as the ones she had gotten in the Demon Realm.

***[Mana Crystal 5/5 – Medium Quality]***

They were all the same. While Ilea could sell them, she had just found sixty gold coins and watching the fae eat the little crystals was fascinating enough to pay whatever they were worth to see the spectacle. Ilea noted white veins of what she assumed to be mana flowing through the fae's little body, solidifying it a little more as time went on. "I'll leave you to it." Ilea said a couple minutes later, checking out the last two chests in the room.

One held daggers and short swords made from a gleaming black metal, still holding up after however many years they had been down there.

### ***[Blade of the Moon – Rare Quality]***

The names were varied slightly but the theme definitely revolved around night and celestial bodies. The last chest held another tank of the red substance, still what Ilea believed to be the pure blood.

### ***[Red liquid]***

Her identify skill wasn't helpful with that one but if anything, Ilea was content with herself having the substance rather than Krentin, the Shadow's Hand or someone like the Golden Lily. *Worst thing would be to drink it and gain some weird resistance I guess.* Eyeing the tank, she instead stored it in her necklace. Another day perhaps. Crunching noises still resounded from the old wooden chest in which the fae was having its lunch break. *Or was it dinner?* Ilea had no idea what time of day it was down here. Stepping over to the fae, she found it lying on its back, wings stretched out and white eyes closed. Somehow. It didn't have any eyelids Ilea could see but the glow was gone, a smooth black surface remaining. "Did you eat yourself to death?"

The question was answered when its white eyes opened again, watching her as she looked down. "Ready to move? Kind of want to explore some more before all the idiots gain back some confidence and come down here again."

It floated up slowly and landed on her shoulder again, resting against her head. Ilea moved, slowly at first but then back to the pace she could manage with meditation active. The fae didn't fall, wrapping its wings around her shoulder and helmet to stay stable. Sacrificing three hundred health, Ilea



continued her training, adding the newfound poisoned glands after a couple minutes of walking.

Two hours or more later, the two of them had discovered a high number of rooms, hallways, broken and working magical lights, worn down as well as surprisingly intact red rugs. No more enchanted doors or monsters tried to stop their exploration. Adding flying maneuvers as well as heated ash control in the small corridors made the search more interesting at least, the fae surprisingly sticking to her armor like an extension of the metal. Adding Hunter's Sight to the list of skills on her search for monsters to fight and kill, she made it a challenge to try and shake off the little creature on her shoulder.

Ilea managed it a couple times, the fae simply appearing next to her head again as if nothing had happened. The thing had incredibly precise teleportation magic, something Ilea only managed because of her added spherical perception. Any target outside of the sphere was usually a little less precise. She wondered what kind of skills the little creature had, its level even below one hundred. Still, it had survived for however many hundred or thousands of years down here without sustenance, hadn't been frightened when she had faced down the Pure Blooded or even the Old Blooded.

Jotting down the pathways and corridors, Ilea grinned at all the ways left to go. She wondered if what the people from Hallowfort called the inner circle was just another big part of the city, like what the lighted part of Tremor was compared to the abyss below. Checking her notifications, she was happy to find her training was showing at least some results.

*'ding' 'Poison Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Wings reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*Only two skills remaining.* Ilea thought, checking her stats quickly.

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 10***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0***

***Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 263***

- Active: Destruction – 3rd lvl 4***
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 3rd lvl 3***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 7***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 7***
- 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 17***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 20***

***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 256***

- Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 6***
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 3***
- Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 17***
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3***
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20***

***General Skills:***

- Elos Standard language - lvl 6***
- Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1***
- Heavy Archery – lvl 4***
- Identify - lvl 7***

- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 19*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 15*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 9*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

*Status:*

*Vitality: 611*

*Endurance: 400*

*Strength 270*

***Dexterity 350***  
***Intelligence 600***  
***Wisdom 640***

***Health: 6110/6110***  
***Stamina: 3710/4000***  
***Mana: 5382/6400***

*Bloody novel at this point.* She thought, reminiscing about the simple days of pure terror and survival when her skills leveled from battles against mere level twenty Drakes. Of course the novel was a testament to her growth and she was still progressing, fighting challenging enemies and exploring the unknown. Strength and Dexterity were falling behind, that much was true but Ilea had found that Mana intrusion was a good way to damage beasts, most of them rather resistant against physical damage alone. The knights didn't even wince at her fully powered fist, even though both of her main auras increased her strength by an insane amount. She sighed and tapped her thigh. *Maybe I should ask the king about this as well. At least concerning the likely evolution of classes at level three hundred.*

Finally, after another three hours of traveling and training through the depths of the inner circle, Ilea and the fae came up on another enchanted door, again opened by the golden key she had found. The thing was likely a general one handed out to people with a certain degree in power. The skeleton she had found it on must have been someone rather influential.

Contrary to the previous doors, this one didn't lead to another hall or dark room, instead a rather small one holding a single thing. An elevator. Ilea saw through her sphere that the thing only went up, closing the door behind herself and locking it again. She was ready for a change after exploring so

many of the same looking halls without any fights. *Maybe going a layer down might be another good option.* She thought about the different dungeons she could go to but first she'd visit Goliath and ask it about the fae as well as the metal she had found.

Activating the rune in the elevator, the two of them shot up, the thing screeching as it slid through the metal cage it was placed in, the stone holding, even after the long time it likely hadn't been used. Ilea looked at the fae on her shoulder, the being unconcerned with the velocity they traveled at and the height they covered. Ilea wasn't quite sure how far they had come but stepping out and opening the enchanted gate, the two of them found themselves in a dark corridor again. *Above the first layer?* She was pretty sure, or a hidden part of the dungeon and city perhaps. Stepping out, she closed the door again and flipped her notebook to the page for the city directly under Hallowfort. Marking a random spot, she started moving through the darkness the same way she had previously through the fourth layer.

An hour later she found herself in a familiar location, the hole in the wall too similar to the one she had found upon going after the Blue Reapers to be anything else. *With my third tier recovery?* She wondered how she'd fare but at most she expected to be able to face four or maybe five of them at the same time. The danger of being knocked out immediately was still there of course, making it one of the most dangerous options she had at the moment. Moving on, she sketched down the areas she had traveled through in her notebook before walking into the corridor leading to the Abyss.

“There's gonna be other people up there, I wouldn't trust them too far little fae.” Ilea said, spreading her wings of ash and ascending through the darkness until she came out in the lit guard room. She wasn't sure if the fully plated dark one with wisps of darkness coming out of the cracks in his armor was one she had seen before but she simply nodded lightly.

Contrary to her previous encounters, this one went to one knee and bowed his head, “I greet you, spirit of old.” The greeting was directed almost certainly at the fae and not herself, the dark one only lifting his head when she was ascending the stairs leading to the pub. He went back to his post a moment later, nothing indicating what had just happened.

Ilea waled through the pub, getting more than a couple looks, directed mostly at the fae clinging to her shoulder. The creature didn't stray from her, looking around but nothing apparently striking its fancy. Haiden the barkeeper stopped cleaning his glass and just stared at her, a smirk on his feline face. Stepping out, Ilea turned her head sideways and smiled, "You're quite the attention grabber, aren't you?"

Walking through Hallowfort, she soon stepped down the stairs leading to the smith. Maybe he knew more about the creature, with the apparent old age of the forge master. "There's going to be a curse here, I'm not sure if it affects you. I'll heal you if necessary." Ilea said when they reached the corridor, her shoulder feeding healing mana into the creature as she continued walking, the nausea and health drain starting a couple steps later.

She lifted her eyebrows when her mana influx was cut off, a shimmering barrier of translucent white light forming around the fae that seemed unconcerned. Shrugging it off mentally, Ilea walked on until they passed the sound barrier, loud snoring echoing through the room. The sound stopped immediately when she walked down the stairs, the smith's golden eyes appearing on the black mist laying on top of a workbench. "Thought you couldn't sleep old man."

"Child of... what is? A spirit of old... you are truly. Full of surprises, human, inheritor, no. Friend of ash perhaps." The smith inclined his form a little to show respect, to either her or the creature. Maybe both.

"What is it with this little guy? Found it in a cage in the fourth layer." Ilea said, "You didn't answer my earlier question."

The smith clasped his black stone or metal hands together, creating a rough coarse noise, "I cannot sleep biologically though the thought of it. It has been a romance of mine human, for many hundreds of years. Coupled with Meditation it is... pleasing, to lie down my body. Neither necessary nor logical but... perhaps a feeling, fleeting yet satisfying."

Goliath had a way of explaining things that resonated with her. Perhaps it was just the topic of sleep appreciation that enticed her, she wasn't quite sure. "As to the spirit of old there sitting on your shoulder, I thank you. For

saving it and bringing it to light again. Farther and farther they stray, many of them stuck or worse in places not suitable for them yet it would be against the will of magic to deny their nature.”

“Can it understand me? Why the reverie? Some kind of religion for you dark ones?” Ilea asked, summoning a meal as she hopped onto a workbench.

The smith walked up to her, a hammer appearing in one of its hands before it smashed it into her chest, finding her Veil of Ash impenetrable, “Religion? Hmm... perhaps similarities yet I lack the study in the human ways to say for sure. It is a deep respect, gratitude and perhaps even love. Remove thy ash, the damage on your chest piece is substantial.”

Ilea shrugged and did as it asked, the hammer striking true, heating up the metal immediately and forcing it into shape again. *The smith needed all this preparation and heat treatment to make it and now it's repaired by a couple hammer strikes?* She wondered what exactly the dark one's skills did. Perhaps repairing something it created was simpler than making something anew.

# Chapter 276 Dark Ones

## Chapter 276 Dark Ones

“Gratitude and love? Seems like an interesting story. Any chance you’re willing to tell it to a human?” Ilea asked with a smile, storing her helmet and starting to eat. She offered some to the fae but it just looked at the food curiously, not willing to touch any of it. Ilea made it a game to try and force feed it with several tendrils of ash holding small pieces of rice or vegetables. The fae dodged and teleported around her body to avoid it, the pieces that got through hitting the barrier and lighting up in white flame. Ilea ate them before they disintegrated, the fire not an issue against her Heat Resistance. It reminded her of Viper’s attacks but she had no way to communicate with the fae.

The smith crossed its arms, done with her chest piece that left bruises on her she healed away quickly. “To a human, no. It is not a story lightly shared. You on the other hand, have proven a friend to me, to us. To the darkness, the depths of magic and the arcane itself.”

Taking another bite, she waited for Goliath to get to the point. “Few is recorded, for lack of fingers, tools and ingenuity. Stories told with feelings, emotions transferred through thought, paintings or sound and magic itself. Know that much is lost as I translate into words, spoken in sound. In the time before, before me and most of those alive or dead in this age, many creatures, races, machines and forces too abstract to put into words fought for superiority, for power. It is said that the birth of the dark ones was one accompanied by fear and confusion by many of the knowing creatures.”



“Hunting, killing, destruction. It was only logical to respond to the unknown with fear and aggression. For many so it was. Fae, spirits of old, though some likely not older than you, they were some of the first dark ones, some of the most powerful. Never did they intervene actively, yet shelter they provided to the injured, the broken and the newly born of our kind, be it shadow, wisp, beings of any shape and kind born to conscience through the arcane. The fathers and mothers, protectors to many a kind that would otherwise have been rid off this world.”

Ilea flicked the magical shield of the fae now sitting on her shoulder again, eyes fixated on the smith before it looked at her, “Nice job little one.” Goliath had a confusing look in his eyes at the gesture, “Weren’t dark ones born all the time though? As far as I understand you were once monsters that found conscience. Was there some catalyst that suddenly had you appear or form? And why can’t they talk or communicate if they’re dark ones too?”

Goliath thought about her words for a long moment, “Perhaps there was an event. A question many have sought and I believe many will seek until time is no more. A more appropriate explanation is that the races of blood expanded and dug far enough to find and challenge the dark ones living peacefully. I must admit many of them are not, peaceful that is. Hunters, deceivers, evil beings seeking goals not quite differing from those of many a human, elf or dwarf. History is fickle, even written it is a subjective telling of the past. Young human, you must understand how difficult it becomes when it is mere emotions, a fleeting feeling or a song without words that depict events passed a thousand years ago.”

Ilea nodded, at least sharing some sort of respect now for the little fae. “It’s below level one hundred, do they have abilities that would allow sheltering against hunters of the elves for example?” She asked, thinking of the most powerful race she could.

“They are peculiar. Ashen warrior, I have not the answer you seek though songs of old speak of them in the same reverie as the beasts of the north and the high mountains beyond.”

Ilea blinked, “Beasts of the north? Aren’t we in the north? What are the high mountains you speak of?”

Goliath closed its eyes before looking at her intently, “Perhaps we are. Though you are in the lower regions as far as I am told. I have not traveled the above in... a long time. The farther you travel north the higher and more hostile the mountains grow. Creatures far beyond anything you have likely ever faced occupy those parts of the world. Perhaps they have all died out and some other race has taken over yet it is for you to discover such.”

“You don’t seem to doubt my abilities...,” Ilea commented. She couldn’t wipe out the monsters in this area already, how was she supposed to fight even stronger ones higher up.

Goliath made a guttural noise she was pretty sure to be laughter at this point, “You have rescued a spirit of old, have searched the dungeons and fought the beasts within. It is your ambition I do not doubt Ilea, human blessed by ash. Your capabilities? We will see. If I have learned anything of value about your race, it is that your potential for growth is just as limitless as for anybody else. To start as weak as you do, with no advantages, affinities and with malice among your own people... I believe it forges you into something special.”

Ilea snorted, “We don’t have it harder than anybody else. Most people just don’t want to fight and kill monsters to get to a higher level.”

Goliath shook its head, “To ascend to your strength, struggle and danger are always necessary. The same is not true for a dark one or even perhaps other races. I might be content with my power but what I see in your eyes tells me you will never be. Do return with stories of your exploits, it is all I ask.”

Ilea couldn’t deny it completely. Any member of the Hand had at least a certain amount of combat experience. Of course someone like Austin had reached level two hundred. Others managed to somehow get to the level as well with surprising lack of combat experience or skill levels but at least no human randomly and without killing and fighting got to that point. *Were elves born at other levels? Dark ones apparently were... they struggled as well, just before they became conscious.* That was at least her

understanding. The thing she was sure about, having trained for the past months was that reaching level three hundred was not something anybody could do without sufficient experience and combat.

“When do you think I could face a Dragon?” She asked, smirking at the smith. The fae turned its head to her and cocked its head sideways, the most expressive reaction she had noted from the little fellow since finding it.

Goliath didn't reply with a laugh like Elfie did, “The Feynor are a more likely source for the answer you seek. I believe they revere those terrifying forces of nature in some way. Yet they are secretive and not kind to outsiders. Yet I believe you are not ready.”

Ilea nodded. That much was clear. “I think I saw one in one of the arcane storms. Huge wings but I couldn't identify it or see more of the thing.”

“Perhaps. A monster like that is bound to seek the most powerful magic it can find.”

Ilea tapped the armor on her leg, “They're dark ones too then? You guys like dense magic don't you?”

“Perhaps. I have not met a dragon, only heard songs and stories, neither quite as favorable as those about the spirit sitting on your shoulder.” Goliath explained.

Another set of steps suddenly appeared inside the sound proof area, Ilea's sphere picking up the familiar man. The white dragon like mask didn't give up anything about his face, the black coat and darkness within pointing towards a dark one. “Word travels quickly. Warrior blessed by ash, savior of the spirit.” He greeted and bowed, being quite a bit more respectful than before.

“Great smith, I will be departing in the span of a cycle. Have thee deliberated the offer.” The dark one said, his recruitment apparently not only focused on the Abyss.

Goliath made a noise Ilea interpreted as a sigh, “Mage of Void. I have no desire to join your efforts of war or to meet the Protector you speak of.”

“So be it.” Ilea was surprised at the respectful acceptance of Goliath’s decline. Looking at her, he seemed to be thinking of his words, “The offer stands for thee, warrior of ash. I will be talking of your exploits. The Dark Protector will be sure to repay you in kind for what you have done.”

Ilea rolled her eyes at the name, “Where can I find this dark protector?”

“Northwards. In the City of Dawn. Find a guide. Any cost to hire them will be compensated by me personally.” The dark one answered, bowing to her again. “I will not be intruding in thy business any further. Prevail and ascend.”

Goliath made an angry noise when the mage left again. “Why the dislike?” Ilea asked, summoning the gear she had found in the fourth layer. Rusty armor and the daggers as well as swords that were still in good shape.

The smith immediately hovered over to her and took some of the pieces into his big hands, “Prevail and ascend. I believed once that the dark ones are beyond such primitive philosophies.”

Ilea huffed out some air, smiling to herself, “There’s good and bad. In any species.”

“Perhaps.” Goliath said, moving one of the pieces in his hands, trying to bend it.

“Haven’t met all of them but so far it’s true. Humans, dwarfs, elves, dark ones. I doubt any being capable of thought is purely evil or good.” Ilea suggested, “What is it?”

“Red gold... and... something more rare. May I forge it?” Ilea just nodded, “There are those more strange, not as individualistic or quite as intelligent. I have heard of many a strange being living in this world. May your judgment and understanding grow with time human.”

“Prevail and ascend.” She said, grinning.

“Understand and grow.” The smith replied, having understood her sarcasm. “The red gold will be of little use to you, at least as armor. I have made some progress with the armor you have asked of me, if you would still like me to continue. I will implement it if you would allow it.”

“Sure, whatever makes you happy. Maybe Terok would like some of it too.” She said. *If the dwarf is still alive.* She was curious what the smith would come up with for her armor. Goliath thought her stonehammer steel sets as mundane but she doubted it understood practicality, at least not after the dark one had shown her some of its creations.

“I appreciate your addition to my tasks.” Goliath said seriously, starting to fire up the forge.

“What should I do about the little guy? Will it stay with me now, forever?” Ilea asked, looking at the fae who was hovering near the forge now.

Goliath put in one of the daggers and turned towards her, “It must have gotten lost, their kind one prone to travel and explore. It will wish to return to where they dwell.”

“And I have to bring it there?”

“No. If you wish to help, you may bring it to the surface. Once in the light of the sun or stars, it will find its way.” Goliath explained, Ilea nodding. The one she had found in the cave with her team had stayed with her until they exited as well. *Was that the same?* The thing had flown off and vanished right after.

Taking out the glowing dagger, Goliath hammered on it a couple times before inspecting it. “As I assumed. Dark Silver. A rare metal yet again. May I use it in your armor too?”

Ilea nodded, a tendril of ash intercepting the floating fae coming back to her. “Sure. Hey, is there gear to protect against mind magic? The blue reaper nest is full of them.”

“Perhaps enchantments might lend what you look for. Metals with bad mana pass through combined with mana intrusion will be your best bet, warrior.” Goliath explained.

Ilea sighed, “Enough to ignore five of them attacking at the same time?”

“No.” The answer simple and spoken with confidence, “Not even a single one. They are feared for a reason.”

“Any ideas about the Penumra dungeon then? Or the Mist stalkers? The fourth layer of the Descent is pretty empty and I need something to fight.”

“Prevail and ascend after all.” The smith mocked, “Even the best blade needs to be wielded. Against the savage beasts of these lands I can only lend you a layer of protection, a weapon that may cut through their skin.”

Ilea smiled, “What about the dwarf? He’s wearing a full suit that makes him faster, stronger.”

“And he has the necessary classes for it. Ask him if you seek something of the like but I can tell you already it is not worth your time.” The smith told her.

She frowned, getting up from her sitting position, “Can you add an assortment of interesting weapons as well, maybe I’d like to pick one up at some point.”

“You lack the skills and classes. To kill the monsters you hunt it is paramount that you focus on your strengths.”

“I don’t mean to hunt with them. More use them as a hobby maybe, for fun. I have a general skill for archery.” Ilea said, the smith looking at her with confused eyes.

“Humans... you are truly peculiar. So little time to your life and yet you stray from your given path for... fun? You have reached strength far surpassing mine, as well as likely most of your own kind. Perhaps your peculiarities would benefit them after all. I will prepare some weapons I

have seen, the use of each however, I will not be able to teach.” The smith explained.

Ilea motioned for the fae who latched on to her shoulder again, “Thanks. I’ll be on my way then for now. Anything else you need? Apart from rare metals and stories of my ludicrous adventures?”

Goliath lifted a hand and then looked around, “I have. Heard from a friend. An interesting thing really. They have asked me not to mention it but if you were willing to share a cake with me...,” The smith looked away, a little embarrassed about the question.

“You’re friends with Catelyn?” Ilea asked, walking towards the exit, “Sure. I don’t have any here but when I return to the human plains I’ll bring some for you. Whenever that will be.”

The stars were bright that night, lakes of mist in the distance when she emerged from the caves, passing the Penumra entrance and flying up through the cracks in the stone. Landing on the ground, Ilea looked at the Miststalkers dancing a couple dozen meters away from her, “You’re out. Do you want to return to your home now?” Ilea asked the little fae on her shoulder.

She smiled at it when it released her, floating ahead and twirling in the air. A moment later the creature appeared before her face and bumped her helmet a little. The wind brushed against them when Ilea found herself alone in the desolate land. “Return safely.” She murmured, happy to have shared some time with the silent companion. An uncomplicated being. Ilea hoped she’d meet it again someday, perhaps changed enough to communicate with it. *And find out they’re racist supremacists... who knows.*

Spreading her wings, she sighed and started rushing towards Tremor. She had some questions for the king and she needed some advice on where to go. The Descent hadn't proven to be the gold mine of levels she had expected. There were of course more layers to explore but maybe Terok or Elfie had some better suggestions. *Some Mist magic resistance could make the difference in facing the Miststalkers as well.* Not having entered their melee range, Ilea had only gotten Health and Mana Drain resistances when facing the creatures but if she wanted to kill them, the queen might be of service. With the golden key she had found, Ilea could at least skip to the fourth layer of the Descent whenever she felt like it.

The way back was interrupted by a group of Famine Crows intercepting her, forcing Ilea to move down into one of the crevices in the stone to hide and avoid the dangerous creatures. The things had suddenly crossed a lot of distance, teleporting in short bursts before they had reached her. Ilea had responded with her own blink, getting to safety. She noted her stamina was draining more quickly, the feeling of a curse coursing through her body. The birds at least didn't follow her down into the crack, some smashing into the ground and the walls before they vanished again, the swarm flying away as silently as it had appeared. *Hiding from some bloody birds...*, Ilea sighed and continued through the cracks, making her way towards the dungeon she was familiar with.

In all corners of these lands there were creatures just above her ability to hunt. *Something familiar might be nice at this point.* There was always the option to just blink back to her house near Ravenhall but Ilea refused to go back without having managed a significant increase in power. There was no doubt she'd get involved in the city again, the war, a friend asking for her help or the inevitable search for the Golden Lily. Ilea wanted to make sure she was prepared.



# Chapter 277 Mist and Ash

## Chapter 277 Mist and Ash

She reached the entrance to the Tremor dungeon and refocused on the tasks at hand. Either way, returning to the human plains or staying here in the north, she would want to get strong enough to face her enemies or anything that might pop up. She wanted to be able to face the kingsguard and not have to hide from some leathery shit birds. Having to flee from a bunch of mind magic bugs didn't sit well with her but with time and focus, she'd get there. That was the beauty of this world.

*Maybe I'll find some time to have a bout with Elfie. To get some of that frustration out.* Ilea knew of course that another challenge would always show up but there was a difference between an imposing monster like a Taleen Praetorian and some small birds or weird mist beings, neither particularly intelligent nor dangerous looking. It felt like she was a bug hiding from spiders, not an enhanced powerful human hiding from monsters born from magic itself. Her wings dissolved when she landed in the cathedral, having shot through one of the open windows before she came to a stop, crouching. Standing up, she looked around and found Elfie tapping his table, looking at her with an impatient look.

“Good mood mister Elf?” She asked, staring back at him. The elf didn't reply, just continuing to scratch into the wood with his long claw like nails. “I'll check out what they're doing and update you.” She said, walking towards the dungeon entrance. He was likely fuming, to be so close to talking to ancient royalty and yet so far away. “I could check your health

when you go in, heal you if it really is dangerous for your body.” Ilea commented offhandedly, noticing his scratching stopped but he didn’t call out so she went in.

Several pathways to the palace were cleared of knights, the only dangerous part being the actual building itself and the underground structure still occupied by the Kingsguard. Ilea blinked through the wall and into the throne room, waiting for the patrolling knight before she appeared behind him, down into the underground right after. Terok’s noise canceling and visual disturbance enchantments were still in place, enough apparently to not alert any of the undead knights to the new activity in their vicinity.

Appearing inside, the sound of drilling immediately came to her ears, Ilea finding Terok working while Elana waited next to a sizable hole in the wall. “Welcome back.” The queen said, giving her a quick look.

“Hey. Drilling out under the palace to get out?” Ilea asked, looking inside the hole to find Terok at the end, the drill stopping as he cursed at the marble.

“He has to repair his drill every other minute. It’s going to take a month or longer and Maro says the enchantment reaches around too. The dwarf will hit it soon and then it’s back to deactivating it.” Elana explained.

Ilea looked back to the door and frowned, “It’s open though, is the enchantment still in place?”

Elana shook her head and took a couple steps away from the opening in the wall, “The door itself is special. Neither me nor Terok managed to deactivate the whole enchantment, just make an opening to slip in and out. The door allows it because there is supposed to be an entry.”

Ilea frowned, “We can probably find an easier way.” She thought about it but Elana waved her off.

“Don’t mind. As long as Maro can’t leave there isn’t any big reason to get out anyway. I do want to see what has happened to my kingdom, to the

capital. And I'm interested to meet the elf he has talked about. They're rarely willing to talk to humans, I'm not letting that chance slip by."

Ilea chuckled, "You're already thinking about political advantages the information could bring you."

Elana had an unreadable expression on her face, "Maybe I am." She said after a moment.

Looking at Terok bending back the metal on his drill extension, Ilea crossed her arms, "Why did you never try that?"

"I tried. Lack the punch sadly. This isn't normal marble, of course it isn't." She said and glanced back to where the king resided in his machine, "He wanted it to be noise canceling for his festivities as well as durable enough to stand against high level explosion and light mages. Just in case."

"So he didn't just think about himself after all." Ilea said but Elana just rolled her eyes. "You're a mist mage right?"

Elana looked at her, a whirl of mist forming around her. "Care to train it a little against me?"

Raising an eyebrow, Elana gave her a sly grin, "You're working on your resistances? I assume your pain tolerance is rather high. Maro was never willing to tell me what the second stage does but I'm sure he got it at some point." She looked at Ilea with her silver eyes but she tried to give nothing away in her blue eyes, her black helmet still covering her face. "Good thinking." Elana said eventually, "If you can heal it will be quite efficient training for the both of us, though I have my mist skills at their highest already. Might be good to train these old bones again however. Let's use one of the side rooms. Just in case anything goes sideways."

Ilea waved at Terok who gave her a thumbs up before continuing. Following Elana into the room, she stored away her armor and got on clothes, the shirt's middle section already destroyed from previous training. "Focus on the stomach."

“It’s mist, no need to target anything in particular.” The queen replied, the element forming around her before it spread in the room. Ilea felt it damage her immediately upon touch, as if an acid burning into her skin. It didn’t leave a trace but her health was going down. She watched blades form around the woman before they floated at her and passed through. It felt like a part of her soul was cut out and taken, Ilea gasping at the feeling. Of course only her health had been taken but the sensation was highly unpleasant.

Elana looked at her, silver eyes visible in the mist that swirled around her slightly distorted form, “Not even a scream... have you experienced an attack like that before?”

Ilea didn’t reply, simply healing back her health, “It’s just health or is it damaging something else?”

“Some have speculated the soul itself is reaped but I’ve found that to be sadly just superstition.” She said, her smirk visible through the thin mist.

Ilea nodded slowly. “You’ve certainly got your intimidation down. I don’t want to imagine all the experimentation you did on the subject.” She replied, watching the mist whirl around her arm, like invisible needles plucking away the life in her body.

“You don’t.” The reply short and final.

Ilea left it at that, “Ever heard of the Azarinth Order?” She carefully watched the queen’s body and her face through her sphere, finding no major reaction at the name.

“A healing order? I think I recall the name.” She thought on it for a moment before she continued speaking, “The far south... I think we had one of theirs try and recruit in Tremor. I don’t think they were particularly successful. Something about a high risk initiation but a bunch of orders and organizations had that. Probably linked to blood manipulation or some form of elixir.”

*Been a while since I heard about that, so the order was around whenever Rhyvor was a thing.* “What about the Red church and the Descent dungeon? It’s not too far away from here.” Ilea changed the conversation towards her more recent discoveries. This time there was a visible change on her face.

“The red church? No, though I can see it being a fitting name linked with that dungeon. One of the only established cities in the wilderness near Tremor was the independent city of Eravor. We tried to incorporate it into the Rhyvor empire many times and were it not for the war I’m sure it would’ve taken only another ten to twenty years. Many of their leaders were interested and trade as well as contracts basically made them a part of us already.” Elana explained.

“Why the reaction?” Ilea asked.

She looked at her and smirked, “Dungeons can bring a lot of resources, both materials as well as stronger people living in a city. The Descent was different, a dungeon that led further and further down, never ceasing in discoveries and powerful monsters. An adventurer’s dream. I remember it having dozens of layers, some speculated it went on to the core of the world.”

Ilea tapped her leg, continuously healing the damage she inflicted with her magic. “There are level two hundred monsters in the second layer. Do the layers not increase in powerful monsters?” She quickly checked the message popping up in her mind.

***‘ding’ ‘Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8’***

This time it was Elana who was surprised, “Two hundred? No, the second layer was level twenty at best... that was why it was such a lucrative place to own. Adventurers could train to their hundreds or even two hundreds in that dungeon alone. Maro would know more about it, he went there a couple times to test himself and his group.”

“You weren’t part of his group?” Ilea asked in response, thinking about the implications. Of course Tremor had changed as well. The city above the

Descent was now part of the dungeon and Goliath had spoken of a great change befalling the north. *Maybe it's all connected?*

Elana shook her head, "Not then, not anymore. I had a country to govern. Most of our original party had gone their own ways by that point." She explained and was silent for a while, lost in thought.

"What could've made the monsters so much stronger then? Same with this one, if you say the kingsguard were nowhere near this level when Maro raised them." Ilea asked, getting a hard stare from the woman.

"King Maro... his majesty..." Ilea just stared at her and let the blades of mist flow through her, the sensation now ignored that she knew it to be harmless. The queen apparently calmed down again, "I don't know... higher mana density usually leads to higher leveled monsters... either deeper down underground, higher up in the mountains... other possible extremes like an especially cold or hot climate, experimentation by powerful mages. Perhaps it has something to do with the cities having been big population centers... long ago." The last two words were barely audible.

Ilea nodded, "Maybe. Doesn't explain the change in geography."

"I'll be the judge of that once I'm getting out of here." Elana said, sending another set of mist blades her way. Ilea checked with both her sphere and healing skill to see what exactly happened. The mist didn't pass through but neither did it bounce off and go around.

*Maybe something like a pocket dimension? Like my necklace? But then it could damage something we don't know about.* Ilea was pretty sure it wouldn't suddenly kill her, not after mind magic, curses and more conventional elements and attacks hadn't managed to. The main reason she wasn't concerned was the fact that not all mages were casting mist magic. "You don't want to stay with your king?"

"I will be able to travel through freely. We... we've been married for decades young warrior, this is nothing."

Ilea didn't believe her, didn't believe that her time alone down here hadn't damaged her in one way or the other. Neither was it her concern. Perhaps if she ever became her friend but she wasn't looking for more people to care about right now. Hearing the queen call her a young warrior made it quite clear the woman wasn't exactly open either. "What are you going to do once you can leave?"

Elana looked at her and sent out another set of attacks, not answering her question. Ilea had some ideas. *Maybe she doesn't believe us and thinks we're some sort of spies or enemies of her country.* The woman had been holding out for so long, it was possible she just wanted to drink some of the famous wine her country was known for. "You can hit harder, I barely have to heal." Ilea added.

"You have good healing, coupled with the offensive power. The Azarinth order... I believe they were warrior healers of sorts. Are you part of the order then?" Elana asked.

Ilea let her healing mana flow through her as the mist magic intensified, burning away at her health, "No. Stumbled upon a ruin where I managed to learn their class. Not that I had a choice." She said with a smile. It was definitely lucky. Wolves or a random Drake would've likely killed her without a class. There was a chance she would've gotten something more generic but likely not something with a healing aspect.

Elana looked skeptical. Not something Ilea could fault her for. If she had been the queen of a country, she'd question everything people told her, thrice. "They weren't anything special, otherwise I would've known about them. Must have been a small chance for you to stumble into it."

Ilea smiled, "I appeared nearby when I came to this realm. With what I found I'm not quite sure the Azarinth order was always small and irrelevant but any librarian I've met hasn't heard of it. Some rare people do, you included."

"You seek someone to train you?"

Ilea shrugged, “Might be worth hearing from a more experienced warrior but honestly, I think I’m beyond the point where many could guide me.”

Elana looked her up and down, “Truly. You passed me in level as well since the last time we met.” A smirk on her face, the queen seemed to be considering something but she didn’t add anything. “If you level your skills as high as you can and gain a lot of resistances I’m sure you’ll be just fine once the class evolution takes place. Humans at three hundred are rare as it is. Even Maro only reached it a couple years before the war.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows. *So the king is at three hundred.*

“You will be able to learn some things from him I’m sure. He is definitely closer to your spirit than myself.” Elana said with a smile, mist continuing to whirl around her. “If you ever want to govern a city or country, I’m willing to counsel you.”

Ilea smirked, “If it ever comes up I’ll make sure to seek you out. Or perhaps the wiser thing would be to avoid you entirely, have you assassinated perhaps.”

The queen laughed, her smile turning vicious, “To quote an ash creator I have met not long ago, I would like to see you try.”

Ilea winked at her, thinking that perhaps Claire would benefit from Elana’s experience but as it stood the woman would try to take over and if she was anywhere near as capable as she sold herself as, the empire would be under her control in a matter of years or few decades. *I don’t know the current empress though.* “Don’t cause a war.” Ilea said, leaving out her thought process. Elana looked at her, a flash of understanding in her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” The woman said after a minute, for what exactly Ilea didn’t know. The wars she had caused, the war Ilea had seen and fought in or perhaps the wars she would inevitably cause if she got out of Tremor and seized power somewhere else. The words weren’t meaningless, spoken with intent.



Ilea didn't reply, thinking about what was happening in the empire right now, likely in more countries she didn't even know about. It had been easy to ignore back on Earth, where she would just be another human in a complicated conflict. Here she could already make a difference, at least force people to not murder random citizens. The conflicts of course were still complicated. Until she could walk into the palace and slap the leaders to sanity, there was nothing major she could do to stop the wars at least. Human nature wouldn't budge either way and she couldn't be everywhere at once.

The worst part was that Ilea barely cared. Her human self was aware of the responsibility that came with her growing power. She could hunt down murderers and slavers, influence the very law towards a more modern and educated baseline learned on Earth. Already she had saved dozens if not more people from certain death or at least slavery. Still, it meant little to her, the only emotion she could find when she thought back to Virilya, to the demon hordes in Ravenhall was anger. Distant anger as wherever it had been back then, only a dull numbness was left.

The new side of herself she had discovered in Elos told her to look out for herself, to find stronger and more exciting things to fight, places desolate of people to explore. They should be damned and left alone with their wars and politics, forever circling around their struggles for power and dominance. Elana standing before her seemed like a personification of it all. Perhaps she had tried but what did it lead to? Her country was still ravaged by war, still destroyed and forgotten by time. Lost in ruins somewhere in the north. Ilea sighed, only now noticing the ash around her, swirling and protecting her, her limbs stretched out and cutting into the marble and the wooden table. Elana had stepped back, out of the range of the black whirlwind pushing away the mist in the room.

Looking at her hand, Ilea found the red glow of her Azarinth runes, the fiery lines of her embers. Calming herself down, the ash slowed, her limbs resting near her back. The black mist dissolved, Ilea walking out of the room and past a silent Elana. "We will resume the training later." Ilea said, offhandedly.

# Chapter 278 Royal Advice

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Looking to her left, there was Terok, working his way into the marble as he cursed. To her right was the machine holding Maro, king of Rhyvor. Ilea sighed, finding herself calm despite the rather embarrassing outburst she just had. *It should be embarrassing...*, She thought, caring little about the queen's opinion on the matter. Her emotions had been in a turmoil.

Pragmatically, Ilea knew she had been through a lot of extreme situations in the past years. A lot of situations that could've caused trauma or resulted in some other form of damage or stress on her mind. She was feeling alright, her healing or meditation taking care of the worst.

She had nightmares, although rarely. She was in control of herself, didn't shake or had outbursts. At least other than the one that had happened just now. Sighing, she clenched her fists. "Trying to keep it together?" She heard a voice to her right, looking at the king, his bushy gray beard and hair unkempt. Ilea couldn't help but laugh at the look and her ridiculous situation.

*Could be worse.* She thought, walking towards the king. "A year, two? I was living a peaceful life in a realm devoid of magic and monsters. Now I'm more powerful than most humans. I could influence wars you know?"

He didn't laugh, didn't comment with a joke. Maro looked at her and nodded lightly, "I was made king. Of a country that grew around me, built

by capable friends and the queen. Running away always seemed like a lovely option.”

Ilea grabbed a chair and sat down next to him, “Why didn’t you?”

“I did. Several times. Until Elana took over. I was out on my expeditions, in unknown dungeons or fighting monsters previously unthinkable. The deal was that I had to be in Tremor for a week every two months. That was all.” Maro explained. “Though I still wish I hadn’t been king... or as involved as I was. In the end I was here for a month, then I didn’t leave anymore at all. Too many people I knew, too many lives I dared not lose.”

Ilea smiled, “Could’ve been just a warrior... head of the expedition force or something.”

“I don’t know if you noticed Miss Ilea but I’m terribly good looking. How could I refuse the position of king. The humble, charming and strong king Maro.” He said it all with a mocking tone, winking at her in the end. “Don’t make the mistakes I did. Learn about who you are and don’t entangle yourself in a life that shackles and binds you.”

Ilea looked at the machine clinging to his body, “Fitting metaphor.” The man laughed, nodding in the end.

“Can you trim my beard and shorten my hair a little?” He asked, Ilea’s brows rising.

Ilea checked through her necklace but found her cleanup had left her without any knives, “I’m neither a hairdresser nor do I have the necessary tools.”

The king shook his head lightly, “You’re an ash creator... I think that is sufficient to cut through hair, if your skill is at the necessary level for your two hundred and sixty. Plus you’re a healer and I have a high pain tolerance.”

Ilea nodded, forming something like a blade of ash in her hand, making the element as dense as possible, “You have the second tier?”

“Perhaps.” The man replied.

She chuckled and stood up, taking a couple steps towards him, “Why not tell her what it does?”

The man looked a little hurt before he grinned, “There is enough pain in the world isn’t there Miss Ilea.” Not really an answer but Ilea understood well enough.

Taking the knife to his hair, she started cutting. The blade of ash wasn’t exactly the sharpest tool she had ever used but it did the job with a bit of applied force, “What necessary skill level did you mean?”

His head was bobbing up and down from the forceful hair care, “At least second stage, anybody not human would expect second tier level twenty. Third tier helps, that at the maximum level as well of course.”

“Did you do all that? Heard you’re at three hundred already. Any pointers? Third class?” Ilea asked, checking the symmetry of her work with her sphere. *Definitely not a hidden talent in cutting hair.*

“I am, finally broke through a couple years ago. Getting all second tier skills up to twenty was definitely worth it for the evolutions. I doubt it’s possible with the third tier skills, assuming you don’t want to train for a few hundred years alone and hidden away. The skills need high level enemies to get higher, same as class levels after three hundred.”

“What are you at now?” Ilea asked, accidentally cutting into his flesh and drawing blood. The wound was healed again immediately.

He didn’t even react, “Three ten. Oh, might be interesting, third tier skill points are rewarded at three hundred and three ten. I think it’s every ten levels after three hundred. Haven’t gotten a third class so far but several sources... all unreliable mentioned having gotten one after three hundred. Through one reckless idiocy or another.”

Ilea knew Terok had mentioned something similar. “I can add another unreliable source to that. What did you try already?” She was already

feeling better about not training up her third tier skills to the maximum before advancing to three hundred.

“Not much. There wasn’t enough time and the war had started already. Facing down a Soul Ripper hadn’t done it. Neither had slaughtering a whole company of mercenaries.” Maro talked about it as if neither was worth a mention.

Ilea nodded and cleaned away the loose hair with some ash that formed around his head. “You’ll find something I’m sure.”

Maro laughed, “You’ll be able to tell me about it. I don’t think you’ll be able to clear out the Kingsguard before reaching three hundred. Maybe that will give you another class? I heard they give minor bonuses though. I’m more interested what your evolutions hold. A healer and ash creator. I always thought ash was suited more for medium or close range rather than long range. Is it an extension of your body already?”

Ilea felt no need to keep something like that from him, “It is. The only downside is my inability to teleport if it touches the enemy.”

He nodded, “Once your control gets to the point of perfection that will hardly matter. Trust me.”

Ilea smiled, “I’ve been a little unsure how to spend my stats. All of them seem important.” The man had something about him that made her trust him. *There’s a reason he was made king. A reason Terok trusted him so easily compared to Elana.* “Is it a spell?”

Maro laughed again, his green eyes sparkling. His hair looked much better now. Not well cut but at least not as wild and unkempt as it had been before, “It isn’t if you can believe it. You can trust me however, if that makes it any easier. I believe people have a better intuition than they think. I have no interest in misleading or manipulating you Miss Ilea. You are after all an interesting warrior, one that could free me from this self inflicted predicament.”

Ilea stared at him, trying to discern anything in the mana around her. Without a sight for it it was impossible of course. At least if it was something more subtle. Perhaps it was his smell. *Charm or charisma...*, A hard to define trait but with this man it was almost graspable. Ilea was annoyed, remembering descriptions in romance novels she had tried to read. She wasn't attracted to him but she trusted him, for no reason at all. "Are you sure there isn't anything magical about it? Are you human at all?"

The man smiled again, "Some mages talked about how my mana flows weirdly but I believe its a combination of all my great traits. Handsome looks, peak humor, perfect physique..."

Ilea interrupted him as she started trimming, "Magnificent beard."

"Exactly. What about your stats? Vitality and Wisdom are likely most important. Especially facing monsters of greater level and alone. No matter how much Intelligence or Strength you have, you won't be able to avoid damage or prolonged battles."

Ilea had done as much, the two her highest leveled stats. "Intelligence boosts all my magic, my auras, creation and manipulation as well as Mana Intrusion spells. Still, Strength is specifically boosted by my auras. Would I get more damage out of my stats if I invested in Strength rather than Intelligence?"

Maro thought for a while, "It's a balancing act. How many of your skills are of magical nature? How many of purely physical? If your auras... body enhancement I assume, boost Strength, I suggest not leaving it behind completely. Fighting close combat you shouldn't completely ignore Dexterity either."

"What about you? You're a necromancer. A mage. How is your distribution?" Ilea asked.

"Asking the king of a powerful nation about his stat distribution. You remind me of myself Miss Ilea."

"Just Ilea is fine, Maro?"

He nodded lightly, “I’m at seven hundred Vitality, seven hundred Intelligence, nine hundred Wisdom, four hundred Endurance, three hundred Strength and a little over two hundred Dexterity. I’ve got skills boosting my Intelligence as well as Endurance. Make of it what you will.”

Ilea listened. He was definitely more specialized but not as much as she would’ve expected. Why a necromancer had more than fifty Dexterity was confusing. “Why the Strength and Dexterity then? Wouldn’t fifty or even less be enough?”

“That’s what I did early on. Dodging projectiles when my mana was near empty, shields down and only my body to defend myself against a warrior and his weapons. Let’s just say I found reasons enough to invest in physical stats. Fighting against higher leveled beings, even with the multipliers from my skills, I would never trade one of the few points in Strength that I have for one in Intelligence. The latter is what allows me to kill them in the first place but the rest enables me to survive until then. I do believe my Dexterity is a little higher than necessary but I’ve always been more on the impulsive side.” He laughed, having explained in detail.

“Same here. I found most monsters more susceptible to mana intrusion than pure physical damage. Why I focused on Intelligence more lately. Plus most of my skills are magical in nature.”

Maro laughed again, “You must have had a bad time against my knights then. Stonehammer coupled with the constant healing must’ve made them formidable opponents.”

She just stared at him, “Definitely.” She said, grinning. Ilea wondered how the fights would’ve gone with six hundred Strength instead of Intelligence. With her Auras that value would’ve skyrocketed to over three thousand. Nearly all her other skills as well as Destruction and Wave of Ember would’ve been significantly less powerful. Plus her auras themselves were magical in nature. Wisdom would bring her more mana and mana recovery, more healing and more sustain.

“You’re not entirely wrong by the way. There’s a reason people try to defend against mana intrusion. Same as mind magic or blood magic. I’ve

found destructive healing magic part of that list as well.” He sighed, “You make me want to get out there again and I’ve only been stuck for a couple weeks here.”

Ilea nodded, “Soon enough. I’ll be happy to have a bout against you.”

The man smiled brightly, “Something to look forward to, other than the fact that Rhyvor is no more.”

“She doesn’t seem to be convinced completely.” Ilea whispered.

Maro smiled and looked past her, “Elana always confirmed, wanted to see for herself and make sure there was no stone left unturned. Don’t fault her for it, she has shouldered the fate of hundreds of thousands.”

Ilea was aware, cutting off the last part of his beard she was working on. There was still some left, some sections worse than others but again, it certainly looked better than what it had been before. Dissolving her ashen knife, she sat down again, “You mentioned an ash creator you knew?”

Maro nodded, “Thanks for the shave. Not being able to scratch myself has been driving me mad. A member of my late party, Khan. He was working towards the three hundreds but hadn’t reached it yet when this all started.” He said, gesturing around himself with his head, “He used ranged attacks, spears and clouds of ash mostly. Blood enhancer as his second class. Nasty attacks, that’s for sure. He was always complaining that he couldn’t get his ash creation and manipulation to the third tier. I think he refrained from spending his third tier points because of that.”

“You think that was the right decision?” Ilea asked, not mentioning that she had both in her third tier already. She wondered how a ranged attacker would benefit from the third tier manipulation. *Might be a different third tier for him?*

The king thought about it and then shook his head, “I don’t think it was. Know that this is only one way to look at things but I always thought the reason third tier skills needed certain unknown requirements was necessary to enhance one’s strengths, focus on what you’ve proven to have mastered.



Perhaps his talents never lay with manipulation and creation, maybe he didn't understand the element very well after all. His eyes however were second to none, his ability to spot and utilize enemies' weaknesses. The man just didn't want to waste a point in such a skill he deemed so natural and second nature. The fact that he treated it that way would've been reason enough for me to chose it before all others."

*Eyes of Ash*, Ilea thought. A passive skill she rarely thought about, the second tier usually ignored. To think the man had been so good at it Maro called his eyes second to none. "I always just chose what felt right."

"Exactly how I did it. And look at me, still alive after likely thousands of years." He laughed, "I'm pretty sure Khan died in one dungeon or the other. Maybe he's still trying to get his ash creation to the third tier." He didn't laugh, the realization that his friend had likely died a long time ago likely surreal.

"You've been to the Descent haven't you?" Ilea asked, trying to change the subject to something a little less heavy.

"That one still around?" He laughed, "Was harder to sneak into the city than fighting down into the dungeon. The first twenty levels were trivial but then the first level two hundred creatures showed up. The increase after that was ten or more levels fore each level. Wore us down and after three days we left again. I would've liked to try again but Elana screamed at me for a full four hours because of the diplomatic problems this brought to the kingdom."

Ilea snorted, "They found you?"

"Of course. Not too many people at the twentieth layer, let alone the twenty fifth. Some even recognized me, old friends and rivals." He smiled at the memory.

"There are level two hundred monsters at layer two now. Level three fifty at layer four." She said.

He looked at her, intrigued rather than shocked, “Interesting. A truly dangerous place then. Terok has told me about the north... the arcane storms and the mists at night. I would love to study either. Get on with it Ilea and get more powerful. When will you try again anyway?”

Ilea thought about it, “Three hundred I guess. Not sure if I’ll win. Depends on the evolution I guess. How much power I gain.”

“I got a pretty solid increase but I don’t want my only hope to die because of my impatience.” The king said.

“You’re aware that your wife has been down here, conscious for at least a couple decades.” Ilea teased and he just shook his head.

“She’s made from a different material. Patience and intrigue. Place us both in front of a wild beast and you’ll see who will face it.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “I don’t think she’d run. Only if it’s too strong for her.”

“Exactly.” He brimmed with joy.

This time she laughed, “Yea, you really are an idiot. Once I get you out we’ll go hunt monsters together. You need some creatures to raise after I destroyed all your knights.”

He nodded, his smile waning, “Can I ask you for something Ilea?” She gestured for him to continue, “The kingsguard... once you are able to face them. Please keep their corpses. I would like to... see them off myself. You have a storage item do you not? Otherwise I’m sure there’s one or two left in the treasury. We’ll get it open before you reach the necessary strength.”

Ilea nodded. “I have one and I won’t burn them before you’re free. Even if you just want to raise them and use them against me.”

He laughed, “My evil necromantic plan, exposed! Bring me my scheming wife, she must learn of your incredible foresight.”

Ilea didn’t react, instead summoning the dead life serpent she had found, “Any use for this? Supposed to have been a life serpent.”

“A good find.” He commented, looking at the skeleton in her hand, “The machine doesn’t allow me to add more than the designated corpses but I’d love to experiment with it once I’m free.

Ilea put it on one of the counters next to his machine. “The Descent holds a bunch of monsters inside that I believe were changed by something called a Tuner. Ever heard of anything like that?”

Maro nodded, “I heard of it. Security was too tight in the dungeon back then but it was a closely guarded secret in Eravor. Blood manipulation... I tried to get to one but their enchantments were annoying to say the least. Plus any relations Elana had built would’ve been reduced to ashes.”

# Chapter 279 Survivor?

## Chapter 279 Survivor?

“Blood manipulation? Something the city made?” Ilea asked but he shook his head immediately.

“No. Something unique to the Descent, just as unique as the dungeon itself. I have my theories but nothing founded. Not until I get my hands on one of those machines.”

Ilea chuckled, “I know where one is. Also have the so called pure blood... or at least whatever liquid they used in their experiments.”

The king groaned for ten seconds straight, “Why... Ilea please. Don't tell me things like that while I'm stuck in here... next thing you tell me you know a living demon....”

It was hard for her to keep a straight face but she apparently managed, either her acting having improved or the fact too hard for him to believe. “So the monsters increased in level the deeper you went?”

Maro nodded, “It would be reasonable for you to explore and train in it further. Though after level two hundred monsters grow increasingly unpredictable. Perhaps destroying the knights here first would be a better option.”

“You'd hope for that. If I kill off all the normal knights, do you think you'll get some control back to help me with the kingsguard? They're still

technically connected to you and your magic.”

Maro didn't seem convinced, “I don't know honestly. This machine is something I cooked up in the last months of the war, in cooperation with some of my most trusted mages. Normally I'd say yes but with how they actually took over, how they're ignoring my control completely. I don't know. Only way to find out is to try. Take your time. As said, better freed in a couple decades than never at all.”

Ilea scoffed, “Decades? You don't think I can manage it earlier?”

“Maybe. I don't doubt you'll reach level three hundred in a reasonable time but it's questionable if the boost is enough to take out triple mark monsters. Especially ones as dangerous as the knights. They retain some of their knowledge you know? Some of their magic too if they were proficient enough. The ones chosen by me were the best warriors my kingdom had to offer. I bought or seized the corpse of every one of them, just in case they were needed.”

Ilea raised an eyebrow, “Seized corpses? What the hell did I get myself into.” She sighed as the king laughed.

“How did someone at your power retain such a moral code. Religious perhaps? Or does it have something to do with where your from? Scipio would have been ecstatic to meet you.” He smiled.

“I know I know. Know anything about the Azarinth order? Healer warriors from long ago, your wife mentioned she remembered the name.” Ilea changed the subject.

Maro squinted his eyes at her, “Yea. Yea I think I fought and killed one of them. Decided to side with the enemy I believe. First Hunter or something was the class name.”

She tried not to reveal anything, “You killed them?”

“Him. And no, a good friend of mine did. I just kept him trapped while they battled, aiding occasionally with a magic blast or two. Took us nearly two

days to bring him down.”

Ilea nodded, “Self healing and quick teleportation. Hard to deal with.”

Maro smiled, “So, first huntress... would you like to learn from his mistake?”

“Gladly.” She said with a grin, clapping her hands together.

“He was a blood enhancer in his second class, magic my necromantic spells could easily counter, some of his body enhancements subdued. The effects it would’ve had on my friend I could reduce to nearly nothing. A good thing too that the friend was a pure warrior, his armor and enchantments tremendous against the mana intrusion both of the assassin’s classes favored. How close was my guess with your class?” He asked finally.

Ilea considered, asking a question instead, “He’s one of the kingsguard isn’t he? The friend who protected you.”

“Yes. Man died after taking out a damn near floor of soldiers storming a nearby city. Getting his body out of there was one of the stupider excursions I took part in.” Maro said and laughed.

“Why didn’t you tell her about the assassin?” *Or did she withhold information from me?*

Maro sighed, “Elana had enough on her table, all the assassins, secret missions and hunts. We kind of had a silent agreement you know... I do my things and she does hers. Sometimes information about traitors or dangerous beasts in our territories would magically make it into one of my friends’ hands. I always knew it was her. That’s just how we did things... back then.” He added. “Though I couldn’t tell you more about the man. He didn’t seem to have a motive other than killing the king of Rhyvor and upon contacting the order they assured me he was working independently, only carrying their name through training early in his life.”

She nodded, “Found one of their temples and got the class. Now I’m a First Hunter too. Guess this is it, king of Rhyvor.” Ilea said and spread her ash,

activating her buffs and staring at him as coldly as she could.

“Go for it. Best chance you’ll ever have. Though if you free me first, I promise to make it a good fight.” He said with a smile but Ilea knew he wasn’t quite as sure as he pretended. A good actor but Hunter’s Sight wasn’t as easily fooled.

Deactivating her skills again, she smiled at the mist slowly rolling into the hallway behind her. *Do I really come off as unstable as that? Maybe I should find this world’s equivalent of a psychiatrist.* “I found a map too. Figures standing in what seemed like random alignments. Maybe you know some of them.”

Summoning one, she held it out to the man. He looked at it for a second and spoke, “That’s the banner of the Azarinth order. At least according to the letter I got a couple years ago, as a response to my inquiry.”

“To the near assassination?”

“No, to find out if we’re at war.” He replied. “Only reason I didn’t go and slaughter them all myself was an abundance of enemies close by already.”

Ilea wasn’t sure how much of that was bravado only. It didn’t sound like the first hunter had been taken down easily, even together with a warrior countering most of the hunter’s offensive capabilities. Putting it away, she summoned another one and held it out. He shook his head, “Never seen it. The style points towards a human group, at least that’s my uneducated guess.”

*King of a country... uneducated.* Taking out a third figure, he nodded.

“Taleen dwarves. Can’t forget the symbol of their brutality.” He said.

Ilea nodded and put it away, “You knew them? Guess they’ve been around for a while then. The actual dwarves or just their machines?”

He nodded, “So their creations outlived them... or am I misinterpreting the question?”

Ilea shrugged, “Likely. Whatever is left of them are dungeons now, feared to be some of the most dangerous. If you ask me, the north is worse. Of the dwarves themselves, little is left. Terok might have more to say. Any idea how they stand to elves?”

“Don’t you have an elven historian up there?” Maro asked, chuckling at the look she gave him, “Well I do have to congratulate you on actually talking to an elf. Most of them just attack humans. I learned they just want a good fight. The problem is they always fight to the death. Wasteful creatures they are. You mean Taleen and elves? There were wars I’m sure but I know little about the intricacies. Most of the long ears stayed south of the dwarven mountains too, few traveling these lands but then again the same was true for all other races.”

Ilea smiled, “The frontier then? Rhyvor was founded around a bunch of dungeons found here wasn’t it? Was it simply undiscovered land?” Ilea wondered when the last bits of land on Earth had been discovered.

“There are frontiers everywhere. I’d wager we still have them today. The mountains were treacherous and we had to fight off as well as integrate several local tribes of lizardmen and Feynor. I do not assume city walls have lost their value?”

Ilea shook her head, “City walls as well as guards and enchantments where possible. If you’re asking if humans stood up and rose to the heights of the food chain then the answer is no. On this world at least.”

He looked almost disappointed, “It would have been foolish to assume anything else. It has been the same for millennia and it will stay the same for another. The few outliers like us won’t be able to change that.”

*Not if we keep having wars instead of developing infrastructure and clear out the wilderness.* Ilea pondered but she was quite happy the world here wasn’t overrun and in the clutches of humans. *For the best perhaps.* So far she hadn’t found any other races doing a much better job either. *Perhaps if everyone was like Goliath or the little fae.*

Maro blinked and looked at her, “Your world was different?”



“No monsters. There were of course wild animals but after thousands of years the ingenuity of humans won out. If everything is level ten and no magical abilities exist, spears and swords win out. Plus we didn’t have any other intelligent races.”

He breathed out quickly, “Sounds horribly boring.”

Ilea shrugged. She neither agreed nor disagreed. There was plenty to do, plenty to learn and fill one’s life with on Earth. A fulfilling and safe life or one filled with adventure and danger. Not many got to choose what they really wanted but at least you didn’t get eaten alive by some magical beast in every little patch of forest. Ilea was glad she landed in Elos.

“Would you go back if you could? You are not a world traveler by choice I assume.”

Another shrug, “Maybe. To see how it’s going. To find out how I landed here, not by choice no. Would certainly be confusing if I suddenly appear again.” She also wasn’t sure if she could keep her abilities or if they were somehow tied to this magical realm. There had been no magic she’d known of on Earth, no status or classes. *Would it be fair? After they had mourned me? What if they’re still looking?* She didn’t want to think about it. There was a chance her parents hadn’t even noticed, neither had been especially caring when she had moved out. It was all speculation of course, impossible to tell how people had reacted.

Ilea knew in her gut that at least her parents would have cared. If time moved the same way here as it did on Earth, nearly two years had passed since her disappearance. “It would be. Though what’s to say you were the only one?”

She looked up at Maro, “I met a girl from my realm already. Though she was just walking in a forest when suddenly she appeared in this realm. A wonder she even survived.”

“It is. I assume neither of you had a class.” She shook her head, “Scipio had his theories. If only he’d still be alive, I’m sure he’d love to talk to you. Maybe he is... bastard certainly knew how to avoid conflict.” He laughed.

Ilea smiled, “Was he trying to achieve realm travel magic?”

Maro nodded, “Amongst other things. Scipio was a barrier and space mage. Catching him was near impossible, nor was fighting him. The man could cut people apart with his barriers.” He smirked, “Thought some inherently evil creatures were responsible for all the suffering in the world. A naive idealist, competent at least. Very dangerous if you got on his bad side.”

“Fought a man like that once... when we found the girl from my world actually. Maybe he formed a cult or something?” Ilea chuckled.

Maro stared at her, “How did he look like? Levels? Abilities? Anything you can tell me?”

She had to think for a while. The man had fought her for a little while in the ruins they had found near the shoreline. “In his fifties, black hair, some gray showing. Barrier magic was golden and cut through my legs like they were nothing. Called himself Albert.”

The king stared at her before he laughed, a clean and loud sound. When he calmed down again, Elana was out of the room, staring at the two of them. “What’s so funny?” The queen asked.

Maro looked first at Ilea and then the queen, “Scipio is alive. Ilea here met him.”

“What?!” Elana stepped towards the king, “Are you sure? The chances of him surviving, let alone meet this random woman is almost impossibly low.”

“Or somehow not a coincidence...,” Maro suggested.

“Oh come on? Just because she’s from another realm? He would’ve not let her go if he knew. If it’s true I’m more interested in why he didn’t come and get us out of this situation.” Elana was talking faster with every word.

Ilea thought about it, “He didn’t hold on to the other girl there either and she was from another realm too. Seemed pretty coincidental to me. I’m

pretty sure he would've continued fighting too were it not for the collapsing cave."

Maro shook his head, "Well one way or the other he somehow survived or someone that knew him very well and learned from him. I'd like to find out. He'd have all the answers to our questions and likely some of yours as well my dear finder of very old and forgotten people." He laughed again but Elana just walked away, cursing about the man who didn't come for them.

"I have some of his books but for those I'd want something in return as well. Once we open the other rooms we'll talk. Not like you're going anywhere anyway." She said to the king who nodded.

"Fair enough. I don't think we'd be able to find him anyway. Not without an extensive search. If I somehow got my name out there he would certainly find me. Although he might not want to talk."

Ilea sat down on the chair again, "Why not?" She asked, summoning another one of the figures.

"I suggest you ask your elven friend about that one." The king said and nodded towards the little piece, "To why we might not be on the best of terms... I won't tell you. Maybe if you get me out of here but even then it would depend on my mood."

"They're elvish then." Summoning her notebook, she showed him the map and the positioning of the figures she had quickly sketched down, "Any idea what it could be?"

Maro nodded, "Strategic placement of troops. That is Karth I assume, the only remarkable dungeon to put on a map of the human lands south of the mountains. Interesting are the placements..."

Ilea frowned, "Karth is a massive mountain, not a dungeon. Well there might be dungeons inside but even the Descent isn't close to as big as that would be."

“Then perhaps that dungeon has changed as well... only one way to find out. You have troop constellations of elven, Taleen and Azarinth order units there. Either they all got lost in the woods or they are working together against those black figures.”

Ilea nodded and summoned the black piece, showing it to him. His reaction came a little too late for her to take seriously. “Aaaaah, the forces of the evil god Nesca. Now all of it makes sense, no other great force could unite species such as elves and humans.”

“You have no idea what this is.” Ilea said, wiggling the thing in front of his face before it vanished.

“No clue.” The king said, “Must have been quite the fight to warrant such an alliance. Never heard of anything like it. At least not in such a grand scale.”

“I mean we don’t know how big the units actually were. Might’ve been five guys working together.” Ilea suggested with a smile.

Maro nodded, “True. I’m certainly interested in who it was they were fighting and who won in the end.”

She shrugged and sat back down, thinking on the things she had learned. Most relevant for now were his opinions on stats as well as the fact that a first hunter had fought and lost against his warrior friend. Of course she was an ash creator and not a blood enhancer but still. To have the ability to trap her even with her blink ability? *Maybe strength to five or six hundred as well?* She considered it. There were still around eighty level ups necessary to reach level three hundred, around four hundred stat points all in all.

Focusing on Intelligence for now as well as Wisdom and Vitality had been a good decision. It let her deal with the knights more quickly and now she could heal herself back up almost immediately. Breaking the Reapers’ carapace as well as their legs was already possible. More Strength would make it easier but she’d still get hit by their magic. *If I want class and skill evolutions not only focused on mana intrusion I should keep my physical stats somewhat up to date.*

Putting her ten remaining points into Strength, she got it to two eighty. *Two hundred Strength and maybe another fifty or more into Wisdom. We'll see about the rest.* Ilea mused, still sitting in front of the necromancer king.

“You’re being terribly unproductive.” He commented, Ilea sacrificing two thousand of her health and slowly healing it back right after.

Getting up slowly, she stretched, “Got a couple decades to get you out old man. If you keep talking like that I might just leave a single kingsguard alive, how about that?”

# Chapter 280 Green Memories

## Chapter 280 Green Memories

“Lassie you done with the king?” Terok asked, stepping up to her. Ilea noted the drilling had stopped a while ago, the tunnel looking to be improving ever so slightly.

Looking at Maro, she shrugged, “For now. I hope you’re not unproductive either Maro.”

He snorted, “Don’t worry Ilea, I’m working on world domination plans as we speak. My unrelenting power and necromantic will shall tower over all. Elana reads to me sometimes.”

She nodded and walked off, Terok falling in next to her, “Good enough. What is it? I hope you’re not asking for help with your drilling. Neither my fists nor ash are particularly good at the job.”

“No. I was thinking to explore the Taleen dungeon to the north. Been talking to the elf and he knows some interesting things. Might be able to improve my armor if I go and explore a little there. You being here I assume the Descent isn’t exactly going as well as it could.”

Ilea smiled at him, “It’s going. Not particularly quick to level up there but Taleen machines are probably not the best either.” *Centurions might be reasonable. Would be interesting to see how I handle them now. Maybe face a Praetorian... if there’s a single one there.*

Terok nodded, “Well I can’t make you. Thought I’d ask at least. You there to destroy the machines and walk through traps would certainly make it quite a lot simpler.”

Ilea thought about it. Maybe another possible place to find Kyrian, another working teleportation gate for Claire and Christopher. The dungeon being in the north might’ve added some levels to the machines too. If she could fight hordes of guardians at level three hundred instead of two hundred, she’d advance in no time. “I’ll check it out.” She simply stated, Terok nodding before he fist pumped the air.

“Yesss. I knew you’d come.”

Ilea shrugged, “Maybe we can get you to two hundred too, I’ll leave some guardians alive.”

The dwarf nearly stumbled, “Sure... sure. If you’re around to heal me. Getting those evolutions has been a long time coming anyway.”

*Nobody said anything about healing... ah who am I kidding. At least he’ll be more useful to me then.* “Wanna leave now?”

Terok nodded, “I’ll inform the queen and Maro. Might be they have something interesting to note as well. Though I doubt it, their knowledge of the area is a couple thousand years outdated.”

Ilea exited through the cathedral doors, joining the elf while Terok was left behind to talk to the royals. “Going to explore the Taleen dungeon nearby. Feel like coming?”

He looked at her at the mention of the Taleen, “And why would I want that? I won’t be going into the dungeon itself.”

Ilea shrugged, “To get some air? Destroy escaping machines I missed maybe? Provide a safe retreat should we be overwhelmed? Provide

translations as we go further in? You do know the language I assume.” If he spent decades learning the Rhyvor language then she had no doubt in her mind the elf spoke Taleen. She still had the little notebook from the dwarven skeleton she had found. As well as the Tungsten key, neither things she wanted to reveal as of yet.

Tapping his pen on the open book, the elf finally decided and closed it. “Alright human. I will humor you. When do you intend to leave?”

“As soon as Terok shows up. What’s that book anyway?” She asked, the dwarf flying in through one of the destroyed windows before landing smoothly, black and red armor suit at the ready.

Elfie stood up, straightening his black mantle, “Questions for the king and queen of Rhyvor. If we cannot talk face to face there are other methods.”

“In their language I suppose?” Ilea asked.

She received a nod in response, the elf having the book vanish from his hands, “A good way to build trust. We have made every effort to alienate other races in the past.”

Terok snorted, “And present, if you mean slaughter and hunt down as alienate.” The elf hissed but didn’t deny the dwarf’s accusations either.

“Alright. Ready to find some hobbits then.” Ilea joked, the two looking at her with a bit of confusion.

“A variant of Taleen machines?” Terok asked, “Thought I’d know most of them by now.”

Ilea went with it and spread her wings, “You haven’t been inside one of the dungeons, have you?”

The dwarf chuckled, “Fair enough. To the hobbits then.” Ilea laughed and ascended.



It was nighttime, the moons shining down on the lakes of mist below them as they scanned the sky for any dangers flying towards them. A human, a dwarf and an elf, on their mission to find and explore a dungeon filled with machines built by the Taleen. Hours passed, the three flying in silence.

Terok slowed down after a while, landing on a spot devoid of mist and situated a little higher than the lower regions around them. Ilea slowed down too, the Elf turning with an annoyed look on his face. She didn't comment on it and simply landed near Terok. "I'll be off training, shout for me when you're ready to go again."

With Meditation the dwarf shouldn't need too long but it was time she could use. Elfie looked at her as she drifted down towards the mists, landing nearby. Close enough to grab the attention of some of the miststalkers but not in the mist itself to avoid their bladed arms. *Same magic as the queen.* Ilea wondered if there was a connection at all. Probably not, seeing how the queen was at a lower level than even her. The miststalkers were still unknowns, not triple marks but certainly more dangerous than Elana. At least from a purely magical perspective. Politically, she doubted the stalkers had much to counter the queen.

Sighing, Ilea felt her health and mana begin to drop. With time the mana would start to damage the creatures and her health would become harder to drain. She found it more beneficial to not heal herself at all, the initial drop in health slowing down later on while she needed every bit of mana recovered from her meditation. Choosing a barren space, Ilea sat down, her armor shifting as it adjusted to the new position. She watched the miststalkers twirl, around and around as more of them slowly joined to sap her life and magic from her. To what goal she didn't know. It was likely the beasts just ate it, sustained themselves somehow through the night before they vanished again when the suns were out.

It felt weird, the dull pain of her life leaving her, slowly but surely as more of them connected their magic to her. "Ilea we can continue." The moment passed, Terok's voice resounding over the barren land as she got up and walked out of the range of the monsters, almost a little sad that she couldn't

feed them anymore. Her resistances would level again soon, it had been a while since last time. “Are you sure you’re alright? There were eight of them draining you at the same time...,”

Ilea waved him off without an answer, her wings spreading again as her meditation worked to recover her lost mana, her healing taking care of the health in the meantime. She was at a little over four thousand mana after the ten to fifteen minute break. “Did you go in and fight them at some point?”

Ilea shrugged, “I’d rather level my resistances a little more before. Maybe try to whittle them down from further away.”

Terok nodded, “They’re terribly durable and tend to vanish once damaged enough.”

Ilea hadn’t even reached that point. *Might be different if I’m actually close enough for them to drain me. Animals don’t act rationally when they’re getting food.* She would of course had a similar situation going on as with the knights in Tremor, trying to out damage their health drain ability.

She nodded and followed them, intending to take up the training again the next night. *Depending on how the dungeon goes. Maybe back to the Descent again afterwards.* She would grow steadily until reaching the three hundreds. Higher resistances would certainly help but with what she already had it wasn’t much of a priority right now. Elfie slowed down when they reached an incline leading to a mountain towering over the surrounding hills and crevices. No mist was visible nearby, the three of them descending before landing in a rather large crack that led upwards.

“Should be near the mountain.” Terok said. “It’s not a popular one this one.”

Ilea was a little surprised to hear that, “Why not? Guardians are between one fifty and two hundred aren’t they? Should be right in the range of most scavengers I’ve seen in Hallowfort. Or are they higher leveled here in the north?”

“It’s pretty far away from Hallowfort and not everybody can fly. You’ll find out inside why it’s unpopular.” Terok said, his floodlight shining the way, rocks and a thin creek making its way down towards the lower altitudes. A strong wind brushed past her armor, Ilea noticing how Terok and Elfie had to fight against it more than she did.

Her second stage Wind Resistance was the likely culprit. Or she was simply liked by the wind, “You have no idea what’s in there do you?”

The dwarf didn’t reply which was answer enough. He laughed a minute later when they nonetheless made their way up the mountain, Elfie now moving a couple meters behind the other two. Ilea assumed he didn’t want to accidentally step into a dungeon.

It took them another twenty minutes to climb through the crevice, the last patch in darkness as the stone grew over them. A noticeable entrance crafted not by nature but something else showed in the distance, the angular opening carved into the stone wall. “There it is.” Terok exclaimed. “No mist in here either, nor arcane storms during the day.” The statements directed at Elfie who wouldn’t be joining them in their exploration.

“Build a fire or something.” Ilea said to the elf who stared towards the entrance. “Come on.” She added, directed at the dwarf this time as she walked to the entrance. Skills flaring up, she noted that it wasn’t exactly a forgotten and unused path, some of the rocks and sand suggesting travelers coming through in the past weeks at least. “We might not be alone in there.”

Terok shrugged with his huge two meter metal mech, “Didn’t expect anything else. More corpses to loot for us.”

She didn’t comment on it. *More corpses to loot for me if you’re not being useful.* She thought, walking through the small opening. No dungeon notification popped up immediately, meaning it was either further in or not here at all.

Terok commented on it too, “Further in. This has been dug out by someone. I doubt the Taleen would’ve used such an ugly entrance.”

Ilea hadn't found the dwarven architecture to be particularly extravagant or beautiful but she agreed that this at least didn't seem like them. Mere stone, carved to the barest minimum. When they reached the actual dungeon a couple minutes of climbing down later, the contrast was even more clear.

*'ding' 'You have entered Izna dungeon'*

"There it is." Terok commented with a chuckle, the two of them finding themselves in a dimly lit hallway, the familiar green light bringing up memories for Ilea both good and bad.

Taking a couple steps, she summoned her notebook, "Izna. Meaning it's a fucking huge one. You boasted about your map making skills, want to take over that task?"

The dwarf shrugged, "Already working on it." The metal head looked at her when she didn't reply, "Inside the armor. I just need a couple seconds to react in case something shows up. Plus you're right, it's usually bigger the shorter the name is but it's not a given. Good for us if it's really the case." He said.

"Which way experienced scavenger?" Ilea asked.

Terok looked around, "The ivy is growing a little thicker that way so I assume that's where the mana is thicker. Doesn't mean much in Taleen dungeons but anywhere else you'd find higher leveled monsters there. Your call."

Ilea noted the familiar green ivy growing all over the walls, snaking along the stone just like it had in the other Taleen dungeons she had visited, "Why the ivy? I think we should go towards the less dense area first." She added, starting to walk leftwards.

"Something to do with the metal they use in their machines. I don't know if it's a byproduct of some kind, has a purpose or if it just showed up after the dungeons had been left alone for hundreds of years." Terok said, following her as he checked the walls and floors, his floodlight shining with much

subdued intensity. “You were right, something moved through here. Not a machine as far as I can tell.”

They soon came out into an open room, not exactly a hall but definitely bigger than anything she had in her house. Several stone tables were placed in the midst of it, torn tapestries adorning the walls. Ilea noted the skeletons as well as half decayed bodies of various beings splattered against tables, laying on the ground or sitting near the walls. She knew exactly what had happened to them, the two green eyes she was staring at turning towards her.

### *[Taleen Centurion – lvl ??]*

It looked the same as all the ones she had faced before. Six spindly metal legs that would carry it towards her as quickly as she could comprehend its movements. Two hands, all made of the same greenish metal. It let go of the piece it held onto, its spear appearing in the other hand. The spear that would cut through her defenses and skin as if it was mere paper. The staff end of it braking her bones as if they were cardboard. The core that would explode once damaged enough. She knew about her enemy, about the cold eyes that wouldn't stop until she had ripped its body apart, had burnt every circuit or enchantment that somehow forced the thing to live on, to fight and hunt.

Ilea didn't remember at what level she had been the last time a Centurion stood in her way. Ash spread around her, eight limbs forming on her back, each swaying in a nonexistent wind, poised to attack at any moment. “This is my fight Terok. Wait in the hallway further back. Don't come until after you hear the explosion.”

“Explosion?” He asked, gulping as he watched the Centurion stand up from its previously crouched position, its legs moving over the table like a well oiled imitation of an insect, the head predatory, sleek and at its center two vicious green eyes. Ilea didn't wait for the dwarf as her buffs flared up to their highest potential, three hundred health sacrificed for what she knew was to come. A moment later the Centurion moved, its spear thrown in a motion she was familiar oh so familiar with.

Her senses enhanced, Ilea tensed her muscles, her eyes following the spear as it advanced on her. A quick move of her hand and it impacted with her Veil, glancing off from her armor below as she sent it to the side, the metal cutting into the stone floor before it came to a stop several meters away. She shook her hand, having felt the heavy impact. *Not quite as planned.* She thought, grinning as she healed back the sacrificed mana. The green eyes kept looking at her, focusing on the threat before she was gone, appearing right in front of the machine, her fist lashing out as eight limbs of ash smashed into the metal, Wave of Ember releasing as her fist clashed against the summoned spear, already held in a defensive position.

The Centurion skidded back a couple centimeters, Ilea's ash continuously smashing into its metal, bending its head sideways and nearly cutting into its torso. Its sudden retreating movement was easily predicted, Ilea following as she continued her assault, deflecting the spear attacks with her arms, the metal ringing against her armor, her Veil alone not quite enough to block the powerful blows. She knew it had no way to repair itself, her mana intrusion getting through without much of a problem, its attacks not even dodged but outright deflected. *Times have changed.*

A particularly obvious move masking its retreat let her try something much more ballsy, Ilea raising her hand, Veil moving out of the way before she clasped the spear, the thing moving through and cutting into her Veil near the chest. Ilea grinned, holding on to the weapon before she twirled, using her whole body, all her buffs and her heavy bones and gear to move the rather light machine around. Before she could smash it into the nearby table, the Centurion let go and landed a couple meters off, its weapon still in the grasp of Ilea smashing into and through the stone table with a loud crash.

“You're no fun.” Ilea commented as the weapon was ripped out of her hands, disappearing in the air before it appeared again in the machine's hands. Ilea stepped over the destroyed table, just now seeing the destroyed Centurion lying a little to her side. *That's where he was standing at the start.* The people coming before them weren't completely useless she surmised. *No explosion...*, She wondered but focused on the task at hand for now, stopping as she watched the machine circle her cautiously. “Come

then, let me rip you apart.” Ilea said, ash forming around her, a savage grin on her face.

# Chapter 281 Helping out Strangers

## Chapter 281 Helping out Strangers

The machine was completely on the defensive already, the fight only having lasted around a minute so far. Ilea was recovering her lost mana, cracking her neck before she blinked right into the Centurion's range. The spear lashed out, Ilea moving to deflect. *Feint*. The thought formed and her body moving in response, her Veil and additional ash intercepting the blow as she turned, mitigating most of the force. The weapon glanced off, Ilea tumbling a little before they were both ready again to attack. Contrary to the Centurion, her ashen limbs had continuously smashed into its body, the thing wholly incapable of dodging all the quickly moving limbs in the small room.

“You’ll be toast soon enough.” She commented, another thrust deflected before her fist smashed into its core. Ilea continued her assault, dodging and deflecting the attacks but never overextending. Her limbs were dishing out damage anyway and she knew the thing could still damage her if it got in a clean hit. It was at a similar level as the knights and they could dent her armor pretty badly if they hit cleanly.

Spear dodged, Ilea stomped down on it, crashing the metal into the floor before the machine tried to punch her. She was a little embarrassed that those attacks had hit her previously. This time she simply sidestepped before delivering a hard punch to its center, another one following right after. Feeling the mana gather, she knew the Centurion was about to detonate, the thing trying to grab her with its arms a moment later. She



blinked behind it and continued her assault, spreading and forming ash around the two of them as she built wall upon wall of the black element. Each hit she focused on the center, where white light started to form.

Blinking away at the last second, she closed the dome of ash she had formed and crossed her arms in front of her. The blast ripped through her ash and into her Veil, scorching the floor and ceiling, pieces of rock and metal flying past, some into her Veil before she relaxed her stance again. *Not even burnt...*, The last time she had been left closer to death than she had likely ever been before. Granted the explosion had happened a lot closer than this time. Moving her Veil, the metal splinters and pieces of stone fell to the ground. Ilea noted the shrapnel that dug into the ceiling and stone benches, one table nearly split by what looked like a part of the Centurion's arm.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 310] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

***'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 257 – Five stat points awarded'***

“Big boom.” Terok commented, appearing next to her in the room as he looked around. “Sounded intense. Taleen Centurion. Heard of them but aren't they super uncommon?”

Ilea shrugged, “Bad luck maybe.” Her main class hadn't leveled. Most of the fight was likely decided by her ashen limbs anyway, neither healing nor her sphere used much. Destruction played a part but the amount of hits she got in with her Wave of Ember was substantially higher. It would happen soon enough. *Another three and I have my next third tier skill point.*

She wondered if new skills would be available and which she'd want to chose. Most of her remaining second tier Azarinth First Hunter skills were Body Enhancement spells and she certainly wanted to focus on those for her future advancements. Same went for her Ashen class. Out of her three third tier skills there, two were ashen magic. *Don't want to end up without reasonable Body Enhancement skills.*

It was impossible to actually lose skills one had as far as she knew but they could change to better suit the new class evolution. If her Body Enhancement skills changed to Ashen magic, she'd lose the multiplier from her first class. She was of course partially bound by what skills were available at all but she could chose not to advance one or more skills for the time being. Like the ash creator Maro once knew. Putting her five points into Strength, she checked the remains of the Centurions.

“Bad luck?” Terok asked as he stood next to her, “There’s two of them right here.”

“Yea but why didn’t this one explode?” She moved some of the pieces with her ash but couldn’t find what would have been the core of the machine.

Terok shrugged, “Plenty of magic could prevent such a reaction. I assume it’s tied to the machine’s health. Maybe if one managed to get it down quickly enough, the explosion wouldn’t happen?”

She grunted, standing up and looking around the room. “That one has the least ivy growth.” Terok said and pointed towards one of the three hallways leading away from the room.

“And how do you know that through closed doors?”

“Checked while you were contemplating life. Or basking in your insurmountable power.” He said in a mocking tone.

Ilea chuckled, faking a serious tone, “You’re living dangerously dwarf.”

This time he outright laughed, “Your elven voice needs some work lassie. I’ll shut it when there are more enemies nearby.”

The door was opened, the lock picked by Terok before Ilea walked through without another word. Some banter was welcome but Centurions were dangerous enough. Not that anybody would've missed the explosion for at least a couple hundred meters, depending on how many doors and enchantments were in the way. The two moved through the corridor, occasionally stumbling upon a skeleton in rotten gear, the dwarf commenting on how long he thought they had been down there and how little the things on them were worth.

Ilea would've likely just taken all of it with her but Terok knew his metals. Not as well as Goliath perhaps but she could save some of her necklace space for actual valuables. *Another stash of gold would be nice. Can't come back to Claire empty handed.*

“We're coming up to the surface...,” Terok commented after walking for a while, a big stairwell leading upwards with a smaller one on each side leading down. No torches, statues or anything else adorned the area, only the green light shining down from above. Ilea felt it too, smelled the fresh air coming in.

Taking a step upwards, Ilea blinked back, spears shooting out from the side walls before they impacted the opposite sides. She just rolled her eyes and continued walking, this time more aware of the mechanical parts beneath the stone. Most of the Taleen dungeon was lined with it, gears, pumps as well as traps. It had been a while since she had walked through one, the traps often disguised between the other machines she knew not the purpose they served. The next trap she saw but not wanting to destroy half the stairwell, Ilea simply activated it again.

The spears smashed together and she kept on walking. “These weren't made for adventurers exploring a dungeon in the north...,” Terok commented, close behind her.

“You're not the one activating them.” She said with a smirk.

He shrugged, “Hey, if I don't have to risk scratches on my gear.”

Rolling her eyes, Ilea emerged at the top of the stairwell, the breath caught in her lungs as she looked at the expanding landscape before her. They were on the other side of the mountain, the dungeon cut off as if a bite had been taken out of the structure. The winds were howling past, Terok shielding himself from the force. A couple hundred meters below Ilea could make out what looked like a crater in the land, in it a serpent like animal with our arms, big enough to walk over the walls of Ravenhall. *Salamander*. She thought but the head didn't fit, instead what looked like a chameleon crowned the creature's neck.

"A Behemoth Kalamon..." Terok commented, the tone in his voice not indicating any concern.

"That thing isn't dangerous?" Ilea asked, pointing down at the creature.

Terok shrugged, "Well if it moves close enough to you you're paste. I don't think they eat living creatures at least. Live and let live. The fact that they don't hide like their smaller kin makes me think there are few out there even capable of hunting them."

It didn't move, just lying there. Ilea doubted she could even scratch the beast. Somehow she was disappointed that it was apparently a peaceful animal. The imposing form and kind of goofy lock to its head made her feel like a small bug in a world of massive creatures. "How can something like that even sustain itself? If it's not eating animals I mean."

"Storms probably." Terok shrugged, "If anything is abundant in the north, it's mana."

"You think I could hunt one?" Ilea couldn't help but ask.

Terok laughed, "Not sure why you'd want that. It's got a level and health like anything else. The size would make it awkward to fight and I hear they have illusion magic just like the normal versions. Practically, of course you could. I would suggest getting a couple more levels before you try though, there's a reason this one doesn't even try to hide. Once you can eliminate the sea of misstalkers as well as the famine crows you could try I guess. Not that you'll listen to my advice anyway."

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’ve been living here for decades, I at least consider your opinion.” Ilea retorted but the dwarf just laughed.

Giving her a short nod, he grunted, “I’d just like to see you try and kill that thing.”

She shook her head and looked out towards the distance, the ever sprawling terrain of rock and stone, mountains growing before they vanished into darkness so high her eyes couldn’t make out the tops even with the moonlight shining down on them. “Beautiful isn’t it.” Terok said as he sat down, his feet dangling from the broken off part of the dungeon.

Ilea didn’t comment, just looking at the endless sea of stars, the unknown spreading before her very eyes, filled with monsters to fight, abilities to learn and secrets to discover. She breathed out and closed her eyes, smiling as she let the wind wash over her. A dull explosion resounded, dulled and coming from inside the dungeon. Her eyes opened again, the moonlight reflecting in a pale blue. “Come, let’s find out who we’re sharing the dungeon with.”

Terok floated up and landed next to her. Blinking back into the stairwell, Ilea quickly moved down and took one of the two ways leading further down. Terok was falling behind when she came out on a balcony overlooking a big hall. Green lights shone on from above as she tried to make out what was going on. There were several Taleen machines, pieces of one burning in one part of the hall. There were massive machines, gears and tubes filling big chunks of the hall, a lot of it dented, destroyed or on fire. Steam was rushing out of several damaged tubes, Ilea spreading her wings before Terok grabbed her.

“What is it?” Ilea asked, watching what looked like three Centurions following three teleporting mages around.

“Those are elves.” Terok said, one of them screaming as a Centurion’s spear punched through his armor. The elf was thrown off, crashing against the nearby wall.

Ilea nodded, “Yea I can see that. Cursed ones or whatever. They’re getting fucked pretty badly.” Another one of them got hit hard but managed to keep upright, skidding back a couple meters.

“Exactly, so let them fight and we clean up the rest. Their gear must be pretty good too.” The dwarf suggested but Ilea just snorted. The third elf holding no weapon, clad in matte golden armor was doing rather well, reappearing around his Centurion time and time again, his claws cutting into the metal with screeching sounds. Problem was, the first machine was just now joining in as well, making it a two versus one. When a glancing blow made him stumble and retreat, Ilea decided.

She removed Terok’s hand from her arm, “Would be a shame for them to be slaughtered by mindless machines.”

“You’re talking about elves woman. They’ll jump you the moment you save them.” Terok argued but Ilea was already floating next to the balcony.

She smirked. Seeing how they were handling the Centurions or rather, being handled by them, she wasn’t worried much. “Let them try. See if they’re irredeemable idiots or just reckless hunters. Run away if you fear them.” Ilea jumped off and blinked towards the group.

Appearing next to the first elf she had seen, she extended an ashen limb to the groaning warrior who was barely conscious. She pushed some healing mana towards the wound. Without it the male would likely bleed out, at least if their biology was anywhere close to a human’s. “Who...,” She heard him whisper, blue eyes looking out from the face distorted by pain. Marred with blood, his armor was in shambles. Leather armor, not a very high quality one Ilea noted.

*[Warrior – lvl 220]*

She didn’t reply, instead watching the other two continue their fights. The golden one, his long white hair flowing behind him as he appeared and vanished time and time again, slowly pushed back by the Centurions that started working together. The last one was the only elf wearing a helmet, the black metal cracked and showing his red hair below. He was deflecting

the spear attacks from the Centurion pushing him back towards the wall. He was either out of mana or gravely injured.

“Don’t move, you’ll bleed out.” She said and blinked, dodging the attack from one of the two Centurions in the center of the hall before she vanished again, hoping to have attracted its attention. The red haired elf failed to completely deflect a blow and was sent sprawling before hitting the wall with his back.

### ***[Warrior – lvl 212]***

*First time meeting warrior elves.* Ilea thought, appearing before him as he struggled to get up and prepare for the Centurion’s next attack. A spear throw, likely enough to cripple him further or even kill him. Ilea moved her hand, deflecting the spear into the wall before she sped up, her ashen limbs smashing into the Taleen machine before her fists followed. Dodging its blows, she continued on the offensive until it summoned back the spear. “Can you move?” Ilea asked, deflecting two thrusts before side stepping a third, ashen limbs continuing to clash into the machine. She smirked at the second machine that was now focusing on her instead of the golden elf.  
*Now we’re talking.*

The elf seemed a little surprised but relaxed on the wall behind him before he nodded, wincing at an injury. “Go help your friend, move him slowly or the wound opens again. If you can fly...,” She said and deflected another three quick attacks, the second machine now attacking as well. Ilea was impressed by the immediate teamwork the Taleen Centurions showed, their silent cooperation and deadly attacks paired with lifeless green eyes glowing in their insect shaped metal heads painting exactly the terrifying picture most people were so afraid of. Ilea noted that she wasn’t on the defensive yet, the two working together making it harder to get in attacks with her arms but her ash moved unhindered, the machines dividing their attention between her body and the ashen limbs.

A mistake she found. Perhaps it would’ve been an actual fight if they just focused on her body with abandon. “... to the balcony, otherwise just get as far away as you can.” The elf behind her moved to the other side of the hall, teleporting between blows before helping up his injured teammate. She

noted fiery wisps whenever he disappeared. “Goldie! Move the Centurion towards me!” She shouted and deflected another three blows before she was forced to blink a couple meters back. The throws came right after but she was prepared, ducking a little as she let one spear pass her shoulder, the other glancing off her arm and slamming into the wall behind her.

The machines closed the distance, allowing her ash to continue dealing damage. Ilea was getting confident enough in deflecting their blows to keep up thin connections for her reversed Hunter Recovery. It would take a short moment for her to sever it to allow her to blink but she knew she could take a hit or two. Goldie wasn’t doing what she had asked, instead trying to fight the machine alone, continuing his teleporting in its range. *They learn to counter that.* She thought, glancing at him as she kept her attention mostly focused on the machines in her sphere. The ash she had spread didn’t seem to bother them in the slightest. A moment later the elf was hit by the Centurion’s elbow, the momentum of his movement combined with the attack knocking him to the ground hard.

She was about to blink, severing the connections when a couple hundred kilos of mechanized dwarf rammed into the Centurion with the force of a couple trucks. *Not all bad that one.* Ilea thought, the impact destabilizing the machine enough for it to miss the attack on the elf, Goldie now back up, obviously injured as blood colored some of his white hair a dark red. Terok got in a couple hard hits before he was thrown off, Ilea kiting the two Centurions towards the third one, intending to finish them together. “Take the elf and get out of here!” She shouted, Terok twirling in the air before he teleported to avoid the thrown spear, appearing near the confused elf.

“Come on lassie.” She heard him say, slapping away the clawed hand he held up in confused opposition before Terok grabbed him and flew off, over the machinery nearby. Ilea smirked and spread more ash around her, three sets of green eyes focusing on her, spears at the ready as they circled her.



# Chapter 282 Decisive Battle

## Chapter 282 Decisive Battle

Ilea crouched on all fours, spears rushing past her before her ashen limbs dashed out, each hit delivering Wave of Ember. Blinking, she appeared behind one of the Centurions, moving her head to the side as it tried to backhand her with a quick blow. She grabbed onto the arm before she kicked at its legs, getting in two clean hits before she had to jump away, her wings taking her over the spear thrown after her. A moment of silence as she hovered over the black mist of ash, a big part of the hall now covered in it, ready to move at her whim.

Blinking back inside, she closed in on the Centurion she deemed most heavily damaged. The ash around her formed walls to slow down the other two machines, her arm deflecting the sharp spear blade it thrust at her before she delivered another hard blow to its torso. She noted her mana had reached nearly half, the eight limbs each attacking taking a toll on her resources coupled with all her other buffs and attacks, no time or breathing room left to use Meditation. Knowing they likely had no way of regenerating, Ilea stopped using her ashen limbs and simply focused on Destruction, the added physical damage from her blows using up only Endurance, of which she still had plenty to spare.

While the three were learning to deal with her better and better, they became increasingly defensive, going so far as to give her time to recover some mana. Of course they were machines but to what extent they could think or make decisions, Ilea didn't know. Were they prioritizing their own

life or the destruction of the enemy? She knew that once they reached a certain level of health, they focused on attacks only. She just had to get one of them to that level and perhaps the blast from its exploding core would damage the others. A quick burst of attacks from her ashen limbs after she had appeared behind the most damaged one brought it sufficiently low. Ilea added a dented leg to its injuries with a hard kick when its core started to crack, white light escaping from within.

The Centurion was about to blow and she wanted to make it count. Stepping under its attempted grab, she twirled to dodge an incoming spear throw and grabbed one of its legs. Ashen limbs swirled around her arm and onto the metal to give her even more stability. The core was brighter now, Ilea turning before she cried out, the body thrown towards the two machines looking on with uncaring green light shining in their eyes. Ash rushed in front of her, the blast partially blinding and deafening her before her healing took care of both.

The explosion happened outside her range of perception, her Veil burnt through but her high Heat and Blast Resistances negating most of what had actually managed to get to her Stonehammer steel armor. The coating was burnt off in the front, showing the silver steel below. Ilea grinned ear to ear when she saw one of the Centurions bent and broken, trying to crawl towards her, one arm holding onto its spear, using it as a crutch to move. She turned her head towards the other machine, slowly starting to advance towards it as her Veil reformed, ashen limbs on her back coming back to life before her wings spread.

Half of the Centurion was scorched, the greenish metal black and smoking when Ilea sped up, her fist blocked by the machine's spear. Its arms worked hard to keep her at bay, the spindly legs moving back when her ash delivered a set of her invasive mana. Ilea turned and caught the spear thrown by the damaged machine, blinking towards it and smashing the weapon down with all the power she could muster. The blade glanced off and dug into the stone, getting stuck before Ilea stomped down onto the machine's head. Three blows she could manage before the other enemy appeared again, the broken one now trying to pull its head out of the floor. Ilea noted with a smile that its core was starting to crack, the part

connecting its slim torso to the six legs lighting up the dim surroundings. The remaining foe circled her carefully, its spear held in the middle, ready to defend against her attacks. She noted it circled away from its damaged counterpart, the machine still trying to pry its head out of the ground, failing with only one arm and two barely working legs.

The explosion rocked through the hall, fire and shrapnel clashing against her walls of ash. Ilea used the moment to blink, advancing on the defensive Centurion that desperately tried to pierce her with its spear, neither speed nor power quite enough to break through her defenses, Ilea's full focus on it alone. Ashen limbs delivered destructive payloads of mana, more and more of its body showing dents and scratches before it suddenly changed its behavior. Moving quickly, the Centurion gave her a lot of openings, attacking more quickly and with wider range. Ilea was anticipating it and dodged under the attacks, one thrust glancing past her side with minimal impact.

*One.* Her fist smashed into the core, all the weight and power of her body and buffs crashing against the metal. Her bones groaned before she blinked, dodging the counter attack coming as a response. *Two.* This time she used her left arm, hitting in an uppercut motion to maximize the strength she could put into it. A full does of Destruction and Wave of Ember crashing into the machine, four of her ashen limbs smashing into its torso in the meantime, the other four cut through by the Centurion. When it tried to grab her, Ilea simply blinked away, her wings flapping and bringing her high above the monster.

Its green eyes focused on her, the thing crouched and jumped, hands outstretched before a blinding light enveloped it. Ilea blinked backwards, ash forming in front of her as she crossed her arms, the blast sending her into the wall behind her. Her Veil held, her back a little injured from the impact, pieces of the wall falling down when she pried herself out of it a moment later. Meditation and Healing magic flowed through her, Terok appearing right next to her.

“Are you ok?” He asked a second time, Ilea's hearing returning healing mana reached the unimportant organs.

She gave him a thumbs up and looked around the room. “Check if more are coming, warn me.” Blinking towards the elves watching from the balcony, she spread her wings and quickly closed the distance.

Ignoring Goldie’s hissing, she extended her ash to the injured brown haired elf with leather armor. Noting that the wound hadn’t reopened, she gave the red haired one a quick nod. One of her ashen limbs extended towards him as well, the warrior not stopping her. Raising her eyebrows, she gave him a quick look and pushed healing magic into him as well. “Impressive that you’re still conscious.” She murmured.

“We didn’t need your help.” Goldie said, stepping a little closer before a quick hit from Ilea’s flat hand sent him back and into the railing. He would’ve fallen were it not for his teleporting ability. Again he hissed, his claws growing in size and thrumming with magic.

Ilea didn’t react further, “I’m healing your friends.” She stated, “You should think very carefully about your next words hunter.” She was honestly surprised to see him actually listen to her, disappearing before he started clawing into the stone walls of the hall, screaming and cursing.

“We appreciate the help.” The red haired one said, sighing as he relaxed and closed his eyes. He still stood, only slightly leaning on the nearby wall. Ilea gave him another nod, quickly checking her messages as she meditated and pumped healing mana into them. Both were nearly dead, meaning it would take a while.

***‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 312] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

***‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 315] – For defeating an enemy fifty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

***‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 264 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2'*

Ilea smirked at the Blast Resistance level up when Terok landed on the balcony. “Clear. I checked a couple dozen meters into the next hallway but it’s quiet. Other than the angry one down in the hall we’re good.”

She nodded, “Thanks for checking.” The elf on the ground was slowly opening his eyes then, coughing a little. He groaned and sat up to see the group. The white haired one was still raging below, at least channeling his anger issues into something productive like tearing down the Taleen dungeon’s walls. The red haired one didn’t so much as move, eyes focused on her. “I’m not attacking you if you don’t do anything stupid.”

To her surprise it was the elf sitting on the ground who spoke, “Define stupid. Thank you for saving us human. Unnecessary but appreciated.”

His blue eyes stared into her own, his long brown hair braided and falling to his back. It was his voice only that outed him as a male, his features delicate and sleek. *You’re staring.* “Like attacking us instead of the dungeon walls.”

“I doubt even he would chose to act that impulsive.” The elf replied, laughing a little nervously.

*He definitely would.* Neither spoke of it. “You’re Cerithil hunters are you not?” Ilea asked, the blue eyes elf looking into her eyes again. *God he’s*

*dreamy. I feel like one of those romance novel protagonists.*

He coughed and looked away, Ilea noticing that the red haired one was smirking, albeit damn near imperceptibly. “We are. None of us expected to find so many Centurions here. The dungeon was rumored to be dangerous, even in the northern territory.”

Goldie appeared again then, brushing off the dust from his thin metal armor, dented in several places. “Thanks for saving his life. Now leave, this dungeon is our burden.”

Ilea just shook her head and smiled, Terok laughing before she could hit the elf again. “You’re living dangerously elf. I’d shut up if I were you.” The dwarf said.

Ilea stepped closer to the elf, “Your burden... what if I claim it then. Let’s have a bout then elf. You against me. If you win I’ll leave you alone and you can go die against the next group of Taleen. I win and I get the dungeon, maybe I’ll let you help out if needed, maybe you’ll get one or two helpful pointers along the way.”

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Heranuur smirked at the suggestion, knowing full well that Seviir would die were he to accept the proposal. The smirk was of course in part because he also knew their leader wouldn’t hesitate to fight the human. The human who had saved them, healed them and took out three Taleen Centurions on her own, surviving not just their combined efforts to kill her but the explosive blasts the group had tried so hard to prevent from even

happening. It had taken him all to stay awake but he didn't want to miss the fight. Neiphato would want him to become the new leader, a bad decision but Heranuur wouldn't deny the responsibility. They would be less efficient with only two hunters remaining. *It was an honor to fight alongside you.* He thought, nodding towards Seviir.

"I accept human. To death." Their leader said. Wasteful of course but it couldn't be anything else, not with him.

Heranuur watched the human, her facial features hidden beneath the silver armor. The black coating had been blasted away, revealing the sturdy steel beneath, at least her front half. An ash creator, the limbs swaying on her back, ready to strike at her whims. *Perhaps a worthy class for myself.*

His thoughts were interrupted when she spoke, "Not to death. Didn't you listen to the terms? Do the others accept as well?" She asked, looking at Neiphato and Heranuur in turn.

He couldn't help but laugh, "I accept. To death."

"Oh fucking hell. Alright, to death then." The human said, both Heranuur and the dwarf laughing at her irritation.

*We will all die today.* He thought, unable to stop himself. He had always known that his mouth would kill him one day or the other. Maybe with all three of them they had a chance. Her mana must be low after all that healing. *Not as low as Seviir who probably forgot to use Meditation again. Fucking idiot.*

"I don't think this will be necessary human. We are grateful for your help. A simple battle to determine the winner will be sufficient." Neiphato tried but Heranuur just put a hand on his head.

Both the human and Seviir were already down in the hall, waiting for the two of them to join. "Don't hold back. She's a tough one." He said to his teammate, his fellow cursed one and hunter of Cerithil. To die against a human and not the Taleen, unexpected but exciting nonetheless. *Few and far are they, of human blood and powerful enough to oppose us.* He wished

to write down his last thoughts but they had left their packs outside of the dungeon.

Jumping down, Heranuur grinned when Neiphato appeared next to him. The elf was stubborn and afraid but he was there when he was needed. Not something he could say about everybody. “Two minutes and we start.” The human said in Standard, the language learned early by every elf. Mostly just to insult their prey but Heranuur had found it to be quite a lot more expressive than their own crude tongue.

To think they had existed and cultivated their culture for millennia but nobody ever bothered to add nicer vocabulary. Sighing, he extended his claws, fire emerging from deep within before he was clad in the element, the elf appearing where he had hit the wall previously, collecting the two daggers lying nearby. *Good, the blasts didn't destroy them.* A lucky occurrence. At least he wouldn't die without showing off his best. The buffs came to life, red lines forming on his skin, the color scheme fitting his hair perfectly. A fact he was proud of. Perhaps a reason he had chosen fire to be his ally from early on. “I am prepared.” He spoke. “Heranuur, cursed hunter of Cerithil. Thrilled to face thee in battle.” He brandished his blades and bowed a little, acknowledging her power.

*[Warrior – lvl ??]*

Seviir rolled his eyes, avoiding to look at him but Heranuur didn't care. He would have his traditions, the young idiot be damned. “Ilea, warrior of ash. Thrilled to face you in battle too, Heranuur.” The human seemed intrigued, her blue eyes sparkling as ash formed around her, a shroud ready to devour them all. He couldn't hold his excitement. The two minutes passed and he disappeared, his blades aimed at the ash when he reemerged. She was gone of course, his magic perception telling him she had chosen Seviir as her first target. Neiphato was moving too, two short swords at his side as they rushed at the human.

*Even now, he's not choosing his strongest weapon.* A decision that might cost them all their lives but one Heranuur could at least respect. Seviir of course had tried to match her, not using his mobility to his advantage. His claws cut through air whilst the human's fists smashed into his armor,



denting the golden metal and cracking bones beneath. His magic flared up, his body turning as he saw blue eyes staring at him, ashen limbs moving towards him before he smirked, exploding in fire. The ash was blown away but the human moved on, ignoring his blades before her fists smashed into him.

The air was blown out of his lungs, his armor dented. She was smoking but the fire hadn't done anything else. He grinned wide, another explosion blasting into her and another fist hitting him. His daggers scratched on her armor but didn't manage to penetrate, her ash quickly reappearing and moving to block the weak points. This time she hit his head, his brain whirling as a part of his helmet dug into skin. Someone intervened, likely Seviir. The human was gone again, his sight turning as he got up again, blades in hand and looking for their foe.

He saw her grabbing onto Seviir's leg before smashing him into the ground, ripping him out of the stone again, she threw him into the closest wall. The elf was out. *So much for fighting injured and exhausted.* He knew they were at a disadvantage but Seviir could do better. Perhaps this was the death he deserved for his arrogance. The human looked up to the ceiling and sighed, her form illuminated in the dull green light of the Taleen. *Marvelous.* He thought, *To fight one such as her to the death.*

Glancing at Neiphato, his eyes opened wide, feeling the magic built up in the hunter. *Finally.*

“We're done here. Or do you wish to be knocked out as well?” The human suddenly spoke.

*No! Why in this instant?!* Heranuur sighed. It was of course the sensible decision. Neither would Neiphato's change of mind would've changed anything.

“You have proven to be the stronger one.” Neiphato said, his magic calming down again. “We admit defeat and adhere to your terms.” The elf looked at him but Heranuur just shrugged.

“Fine with me. Can you tell me about your ashen class warrior? It seems powerful.” He commented, walking to the human while Neiphato went and checked on Seviir.

The woman looked at him and sighed, “Maybe later. You guys are teenagers right? How old are you?”

Heranuur hadn’t heard that term yet but he would add it to his dictionary after she explained the meaning. “I am fifty two years old warrior. A young one for my kind. Your must be very old, with your impressive power.”

The groan that followed from her was not something he could interpret. Humans usually died too quickly for him to learn about their mannerisms.

# Chapter 283 Factory

## Chapter 283 Factory

Ilea cupped her face in both hands, Terok appearing next to her. “You really didn’t want to kill them?” He asked as she groaned again, “Well I won’t blame you, their gear sucks. Well I’ll go collect whatever is left of the Centurions.” He patted her shoulder with a metal arm and walking off, leaving her with the decision on what to do with this group of teenage elves.

*Fifty two year old teenage elves. Do they develop slower? The one called Heranuur was watching her intently, his black plate armor basically falling apart. His red wavy hair flowed out from the cracks in his helmet, black eyes looking at her. Maybe he’s from the same domain as Elfie, with his red hair.*

“What should we do? The dungeon is yours now human.” He spoke, waking Ilea from her daydreaming.

“Yes yes. You can call me Ilea.” She said, ignoring the fact that human was likely a derogatory term anyway, “I’ll think about it. Maybe Elfie can help me out here. I don’t want to murder you idiots. Why did you even go after the Centurions? Neither of you seem capable of fighting one yourself.”

The elf looked a little confused, “To destroy the Taleen of course. Finding more than a single Centurion is great luck. Perhaps we would have won.”

“You were losing, that one was dying already.” Ilea said, pointing to the brown haired one who seemed to try and make himself smaller as he treated

Goldie.

Heranuur huffed, “Perhaps. Though you showed up and we won.”

That was it, as if it perfectly explained their reasoning. “But that doesn’t explain why you...,” Ilea started but gave up on it. She looked at the two meter tall fierce warrior, the two jagged daggers back in their sheaths on his belt. *Maybe all the muscle is using his brain power.*

“You over there, brown haired. What’s your name?” Ilea demanded, pointing at the other elf. He had been the one to try and solve their issues diplomatically, immediately accepting when she had punched some of her frustration into the golden idiot.

The elf scrambled up and stuttered, “My name is Neiphato. What is it you want?”

Ilea mused, looking at the elf. She shook her head and focused, “Why fight the Centurions? You were losing.”

“A Cerithil hunter does not stop. Our cause is to destroy the Taleen.” He answered. At least he wasn’t as dense as the other one.

“But if you flee and come back stronger, you’ll succeed then. If you die... well, you die.” Ilea said, trying to make sense of their reasoning.

This time he seemed to understand, his blue eyes lighting up a little, “You must not know many elves then human. To flee would be... shameful. Of course by becoming cursed hunters we are tainted already. It is... complicated.”

Ilea sighed, “Of course it is. Well I’m going to bring you to an elven friend, decide what to do with you three. I’ll continue to explore the dungeon with Terok here.” She pointed at the dwarf who grunted and waved, still collecting shrapnel, “Taleen will be destroyed one way or the other. Sound alright?” She asked, trying to imagine them as children.

The elf nodded, Heranuur shrugging as he went to pick up Goldie who was still unconscious.

Ilea led the group back out, finding Elfie sitting on a rock reading. He looked up, his eyes growing wide when he spotted the three elves coming out of the dungeon next to her. “A little early.” He commented, putting away his book.

“Need some advice Elfie. So there’s a lot of Centurions in there and guess what we found?”

The elf got up and took a couple casual steps towards them, looking at each of the three, frowning at the one unconscious. Ilea noted that only Heranuur was meeting his eyes. Of course Goldie couldn’t meet anybody’s eyes at the moment. “I believe you have found three terribly inexperienced elven hunters. Would that be a correct assumption?”

Ilea raised her eyebrows, smiling under her helmet. She noted his lack of mockery nor his mention of cursed ones. “That would be close, certainly. Now I’m not too knowledgeable on elven customs but a human I had saved I might send off to the next town, if they’re being particularly nice I might bring them myself.”

Elfie nodded but stayed quiet for a while, closing his eyes before he sighed, “You won’t persuade them to stand down human.”

Ilea nodded towards Goldie, “Managed to convince that one.” She said, getting a laugh from both Terok and Heranuur. “Well I won the bout and can now decide who goes into the dungeon and who doesn’t, when and for how long.” Ilea explained, “Do you think they will honor the deal?”

She didn’t trust any of the people present, the only thing she knew was that each would follow their personal interests. If she could gauge Elfie at all, then she was somewhat sure he had a soft spot. Otherwise their first

meeting would've gone differently. The way he had talked about the machines and their eternal war, she was pretty sure he cared about these younglings more than she did. "I don't know them." He simply said.

*No honor bound agreement or sacred ritual binding them to their word?* Ilea shrugged, "Then make sure they do. Don't let them in, all would have died if it hadn't been for me."

"Hey I helped too." Terok said, waving at the elf.

Elfie looked at her with confusion now, Ilea already turning to go back inside, "What am I supposed to do with them? Trap them until you're done?"

"Whatever. Trap them, kill them, bring them away or teach them. Might be the most beneficial for your war efforts. As it stands they're just a hindrance in there." Ilea said and started making her way back to the entrance, Terok following a moment later. She had done them a favor, had saved them from near certain death. The bout had ended not in death but a new chance. Perhaps too trusting, too nice but she could mop the floor with the lot and Elfie combined, not that he would enter the dungeon anyway.

The responsibility was with Elfie now and their new chance was their own to waste. "You care too much Ilea." Terok said a while later, the two of them returning to the hall now half destroyed by their battle. "You know... the packs they didn't have with them? I saw them badly hidden a couple dozen meters from Elfie. Might be he doesn't want us to see what's inside."

Ilea grinned, "Waste of capable warriors. You came to their rescue too didn't you? And you mention their packs now? Quite unlike what I thought of the greedy dwarf at my side."

"I owe you Ilea, big time. Just the sensible decision." He said, his voice neutral.

*Keep telling yourself that Terok.* She thought, checking the hall but finding no new enemies to fight. *If he really hid their packs then perhaps I was right about the old fucker.*

“Want me to scout ahead?” Terok asked.

If it had been Eve then maybe but his two meter quite visible form wasn't exactly stealthy. “We move together. Stay back if more machines show up. When I tell you to run, you go and don't stop until you're out of the bloody dungeon.” She could think of more than one thing that would cause such a reaction. “Now shut it.”

Terok shrugged, giving her a thumbs up, “I'll be the map guy.”

Several hallways later, the dwarf stopped her and pointed at the walls. “Trap.” His description was rather broad but Ilea found it to be similar to those found in Iztacalum, the dungeon under Dawntree. Fire and spikes, the dwarves were traditional at least, or perhaps it was a budget question. Letting the flames wash over her, Ilea simply walked through the thinning hallway, the spikes bursting out of the walls, the mechanisms holding them weaker than her Veil and armor. Only a few even managed to break through the ash.

“You can move.” She said to the dwarf, walking into the next hall. Smoke was still rising from her form when he joined her side.

“Oh, more of the fuckers.” He commented, the words meant for the two Centurions standing motionless at the end of the long room, what looked like an elevator opening up behind them. “Teleport and activate the lift?”

The dwarf looked at her but probably knew the answer already, “I'll fight them. Wait in the hallway farther back. Try not to intervene. We'll go with your plan if I can't beat them.”

Terok joined her again ten minutes later, two detonations having marked the demise of the Centurions. The smaller hall led to Ilea's armor taking more than just a beating from the explosions. She switched it out with a fresh set of Rose Hunter armor, only three remaining in her necklace. There still were five sets back in Tremor but the flight would take a couple hours out of her fighting time again. "Do you even try to stop the explosions?"

"No idea how to." Ilea said, cracking her neck as she read through the notifications.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 307] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

No level ups but at least she had the satisfaction of destroying Centurions like they were mere foot soldiers for the mechanized dwarven army.

"Maybe could've asked the elves, they probably destroyed the first one we found."

"I assume it's just gonna be hit it enough before it detonates." She suggested, the dwarf waving a hand. His lack of comment let her assume she was right in the assumption. He probably had a better understanding of what was actually happening due to his mana sight. "Thinking of... anything you can tell me about them? Are they connected to something like the knights in Tremor?"

Terok grabbed a metal piece and threw it behind himself, "Trash. No, they're independent as far as I can tell. At least magically speaking. I do believe they somehow gather ambient mana at least. Why these two didn't react immediately when we entered." He gestured at the general vicinity, shrapnel and parts littering the whole broad hallway.

Ilea nodded. *Like solar energy?* The detonations definitely spoke more for a mini nuclear reactor but mana was mana and she was definitely no scientist



of magic. At least she knew the technology was somewhat of a big deal. Otherwise all the runes used in inns or even in her house would be powered by ambient mana, not someone pumping the stuff into it. “The lamps work like that too?” She asked, pointing up at the dim green lights.

“Nope, mana crystals those.”

Ilea frowned, “And they held for a thousand years?”

Terok shrugged, “Maybe they change them. Perhaps you’ll catch one doing it.”

Ilea rolled her eyes. Then again, maintenance robots weren’t that far fetched, with combat ones existing. The latter was probably much harder to produce, program and maintain anyway. She simply hadn’t seen any of them yet. *Or all of them are just maintenance robots. The real enemy is going to be the planet itself, powered by Nihilism itself.* She groaned and walked towards the elevator. Terok appeared next to her and started checking out the small plate on the wall.

“Just one destination. I guess they at least liked their architecture simple.”

“Rooms and hallways yes, all the traps and machinery hidden behind it all? Fucking ridiculous. I don’t want to make a ruckus.” Ilea said and blinked under the elevator and into the shaft leading down. Terok appeared in the air next to her, hovering perfectly still as he looked around, his headlights shining down into the darkness.

“Long way down.” He commented.

She grunted, “Risky teleport there, or did you not tell me about some of your skills?”

Terok chuckled, “Part of the gig lassie. Not everyone has it as easy as miss healer, sphere perception.”

Ignoring the jabs, Ilea spread her wings and let herself fall, her speed accelerating before she reached the highest velocity gravity could provide,

her wings trying to make herself somewhat immune to the air pressure. When the ground appeared in her sphere, she spread them and blinked upwards once before quietly gliding to the stone floor. There was a little space dug out below where the elevator would stop, likely to prevent problems with anything that could get stuck between.

She didn't wait for Terok, instead stepping out of the opening and relaxing on the rusty metal railing that followed along the stone balcony overlooking the busy scenes below. *Found where all those Centurions are coming from.* Ilea thought, an abyss several hundred meters deep opening up before her, the whole thing shaped in a triangle with two sides coming together opposite her, at least two hundred meters away. Every twenty or thirty meters down another floor could be seen, the angles making it unclear how far each reached into the stone but each was open, either to easier deliver things or for ventilation purposes. She could see glowing light that reminded her of forges, steam rising in places as well as pieces of metal being assembled.

“Piss off.” Terok commented, finally appearing next to her as he too looked into the production hell the Taleen had left behind.

Ilea looked over and smiled, “A lot of work to do.”

“You're not joking. This is huge... bigger than anything I've seen. How the fuck did they even do that?” He leaned over the railing, “Machines assembling more machines....”

Ilea nodded, “That's exactly how they did it. How it's still running. Can't see any dwarves around but my eyes aren't exactly good enough to make out any specifics.”

Terok grunted, “You think they continued... after the Taleen stopped or were wiped out... ah and don't worry about the eyes, I can see it all. At least what's exposed.”

“What variants do you see? Of the machines I mean.” Ilea asked, squinting but only making out Centurions on the first couple floors. They didn't seem to take any notice of the two watchers.

Terok scanned over the busy scene, “Centurions right? Six legs and a spear... yea most of them look like that... there’s hundreds of them Ilea. I don’t know if you can handle that. Oh wait, here’s another one. Eight layer... four arms that one. No weapon I can see but it looks black rather than green? Might be the lighting but I’m pretty sure... no wait, another one just walked by, definitely black metal. Tenth floor... six arms, each holding a weapon. Otherwise more Centurions... wait... yea the pieces look the part. I think they’re making them here.”

“Figured as much.” Ilea commented, “I would assume Guardians are the usual Taleen dungeon residents. Centurions aren’t exactly normal machines.”

He grunted his affirmation, “Level three hundred from a machine made by metal? Makes sense. Lucky for you then to stumble upon strong enemies to take out right?” He laughed, Ilea looking at him sharply because of the loud noise. “Don’t shit your pants girl.” He said, pointing to a rune he had placed on the railing. “If they have ears, they’re not hearing it.”

*Sneaky, didn’t even notice it.* She nodded, “Seems like a waste to destroy it all...,”

Terok looked at her and snorted, “Depends how you look at it.” The two remained quiet for a minute or two, the sounds of massive gears and machines the only thing audible. A massive factory making machines of war, if Elfie was to be believed to hunt down his race and possibly others.

Ilea sighed, “What do you think is their goal? Why continue if the Taleen are gone?”

“Maybe they’re not. Might be hiding somewhere, who knows? The machines here alone are probably enough to swamp most of the dwarven cities. If anything I’d sleep much sounder with all of it gone.”

*What if I find the control system. Stop it all or make the machines clear out monsters, protect cities or just help me fight. A bunch of Centurions to fight alongside me would be cool as fuck at least.* Ilea considered.

“You’re thinking to take over?” Terok asked with a smile. “I’m thinking the same. We could clear out whole dungeons with those things.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Ilea asked a moment later, a grin on her face. “Let’s think about it when and more importantly if we find a way. Feel confident about scouting a little? Just make sure not to send them all after me if you find a way to hack into whatever magical system they’re using.”

Terok shook his head, “You still don’t trust me. Well at least you’re not as stupid as I initially thought. No, don’t prove me wrong by throwing me off. You know me, I can’t resist the urge.”

Ilea grinned, “Plenty stupid as well my dwarf. Many would’ve killed you for that comment.”

“Worth it.” He said, snorting before they both laughed.

“I would feel more confident with class evolutions.” His voice was serious now, the dwarf looking towards her.

Ilea smiled, tapping her armor with one finger as she thought on a solution that didn’t involve her time and energy. Terok apparently didn’t like the look in her eyes as he took a couple steps back. “Let’s go back and talk to Elfie again. Might be we can smash four birds with one stone.”

# Chapter 284 Legion of Centurions

## Chapter 284 Legion of Centurions

It had been barely an hour when Ilea and Terok came out of the dungeon again. Goldie was awake now, the veins on his head already trying to rip out as he paced, his glare landing on Ilea as soon as she appeared. *Of course he even has golden eyes.* She smiled. “Sleep well?”

He screamed and rushed at her but a barrier cut him off, the elf sinking to his knees before he started puking, blood seeping out of his nose and mouth. The hate in his eyes was palpable. “Impressive. You didn’t even level up?” Ilea asked Elfie who was looking at the scene with a glint of annoyance.

“I did not expect you so early.” He said, the two other elves standing a little away from him, weapons in hand but relaxed.

Ilea nodded to Terok, “We found something. I assume you’re evaluating them?” She asked, the elf giving her a short nod. “Add him to your training, maybe find some critters to advance their levels. In two weeks they will face a Centurion together, the four of them. We’ll see how it goes and go from there.”

“Oh boy.” Terok commented but surprisingly didn’t complain.

Elfie considered before he shrugged, “What’s in there and why would I care to train the dwarf?”

Rolling her eyes, Ilea put a hand on Terok's shoulder, "He'll tell you all about it. If they can't face at least one or two Centurions on their own, they're useless in there."

"Why... did... you... not... kill us?!" She heard the groaning voice coming from the fuming elf, his claws digging into the barrier. She wondered if he couldn't teleport out or if he wasn't willing to.

Ilea glanced at him, "Good energy. Maybe focus on being alive for now."

She blinked into the entrance and this time chose the right side of the hallway, the way leading deeper in according to Terok's ivy theory. Ten minutes of walking later, Ilea came into a small room with yet another elevator leading down. This one had neither Centurions nor anything else protecting it. Choosing the same way to go down, she let herself fall before spreading her wings to slow down. The elevator shaft was considerably shorter.

Coming out below, Ilea smiled broadly and crossed her arms, "Well. That's something." She whispered and sighed. Not a sigh of another long workday in front of her but one full of anticipation. She was standing on a square, a square carved out from within the mountain or perhaps carved from a naturally formed cave. Around her were buildings that would have once been stores, guilds, inns, shops with machinery still inside. If there had been any color at some point, it was long faded, only the dark stone remained, the ivy so prevalent in Taleen dungeons growing through it all. Some of the buildings were covered by it near completely, the green lights coming from not the ceiling but lampposts placed around the square, more of them bathing the connected streets and alleys in a dim green light.

A once scary atmosphere to Ilea, now full of possibilities. She knew there were Praetorians here, perhaps in this city or the factory but she knew they were there. After so many weird and powerful monsters she had met, it was interesting to think of challenging something that had previously filled her with dread. Something she could not overcome. Not a nest of mind magic animals or knights devoid of consciousness but machines hellbent on ripping her apart. If she grew strong enough here, if there were enough

Centurions to get her to the levels needed, she knew she could fight them, knew she could win.

A shiver went down her back, the thought somehow freeing. Had the loss back then really been so important? Did they represent something in her subconscious? Ilea didn't know. What she knew was that she wanted to face that fear, face that monster from her past. She would prepare, would raise her levels and use every advantage she could work out for herself. The ceiling wasn't visible. It seemed like the whole mountain had been carved out and the city placed within. The streets all ended in more squares or near massive buildings, except one. Ilea couldn't see the end of it, green lights like fireflies forming a path for her to follow.

*You could literally land a plane in here.* The thought made her chuckle. Thinking of the flying machines she had seen in the Iz dungeon made her scan the skies. Well not exactly the skies but the darkness hanging over the ancient city. There was nothing there, no blinking lights or any floodlights looking for her. There would be enemies here, machines ready to defend what was long forgotten. Activating Hunter's Sight, she checked the area. Stepping through the square, she found several signs pointing towards recent movement. Earth was scattered in places, some of the ivy damaged and loose.

Looking up, she saw what looked like a Taleen Guardian walking towards the square, its head moving around as the green eyes scanned the overgrown houses and street. A single one of them only, its bladed six arms at the ready. Ilea wasn't exactly concerned, continuing to look through the square. *Something definitely moved through here and it wasn't a Taleen machine I've seen before.* When the Guardian entered the square, it spotted her immediately, fanning out its blades in challenge. "Really now?"

The answer was of course the machine rushing her, ready to strike. Ilea's ashen limbs fanned out, the six blades stopping mid attack, each crashing into an ashen arm waiting for them. Ilea braced herself against the impact but found herself steady, the force coming from the machine light, trivial to handle even. It tried wrenching its arms free but Ilea's ash extended, twirling around its metal blades and holding them in place. She stepped

towards the helpless machine and looked at it, its glowing green eyes staring at her. *Maybe Terok can take a look at one while I hold it like this.*

### ***[Taleen Guardian – lvl 205]***

To think she could handle a level two hundred creature so easily. With all her buffs deactivated and her ashen Veil down, it was likely still capable of injuring her but against a fully powered Ilea, this one guardian was like a mere ant trying to stand against a human. Her fist lashed out, the sound of the impact reverberating in a dull clang, the machine trying to recoil but held in place by her limbs. Another hit smashed into it, Destruction and Wave of Ember flaring through it before the light in its eyes went out, its legs giving out and the whole thing clattering down as if its strings had been cut.

An idea was growing in her mind as she stepped over the machine, her wings spreading before she ascended. Flying over the nearby streets, she tried to spot the Taleen, finding a bunch of guardians patrolling as well as ranged variants sitting on roofs. Either they weren't looking up or she was simply not visible enough in the darkness above but the machines didn't spot her. Coming down behind one of the ranged guardians, she extended her limbs.

### ***[Taleen Guardian – lvl 150]***

Her ash closed around it, destructive mana pushed into it as it struggled to move in the hardening black mist. A couple seconds later it was over, the machine falling down and Ilea receiving yet another notification. Both of the kills irrelevant to her current level. *Could hunt some of them for Embered Body Heat and Hunter's Sight...*

Seeing that the surrounding streets and nearby squares only held Guardians, Ilea went back to the elevator. This wasn't her place to clear out. Flying up through the shaft, she blinked out and crossed the length of the hallway, coming out on the railings overlooking the much busier production facility dug deep into the ground. *How many places like this are there, hidden away in the North alone?* Ilea wondered. There had to be places where all the



machines Elfie talked about were coming from. This was certainly one of them.

Spreading her wings, Ilea jumped down and glided towards the first floor. At least not every one of them here held a different climate and different enemies. Just what seemed like an endless amount of Taleen Centurions as well as possibly more dangerous machines. The floor was metal, just like the support beams and thick cables holding everything together. Ilea wondered if she got credit for the kills were she to simply collapse the whole thing. *Quick level three hundred for a metal mage like Terok.* The ruckus would certainly gain a lot of attention. A Centurion might also just survive the collapse, stuck between the steel beams for eternity.

Cracking her knuckles, Ilea spread her ash and breathed in. The smell of fire and soot as well as iron filled her nose. Contrary to the city, this place was bathed in red light, not coming from any lamps but molten steel, forges as well as sparks flying off from the various tools in the vicinity. Smashing her ashen limbs into the floor produced little damage, mere scratches from her effort. The same was true for the cables going through to the next floor. *Might consult Terok on that. Just have to make sure he doesn't steal all my experience....,*

It was warm, Ilea noted. Warm enough for her to sweat which meant something. Possibly too hot for someone below level two hundred to traverse. Her heat resistance was at level three of the second tier but she'd find a way to bath in some molten steel to raise it in the next weeks. *The Queen with her Mist resistance is waiting as well.* Now that she had so many enemies to fight and a reasonable way to level three hundred, she was starting to think on Terok's words, to get as much out of her possible evolutions as possible. Strength and Dexterity as well as third tier points into Body Enhancement and close combat abilities to avoid purely mage evolutions.

Trying to cut into the wires apparently was enough for one of the Centurions to come and check, the machine throwing its spear immediately, uncaring of any possible damage to the environment. *Or trusting enough to know it would be irrelevant.* Ilea thought, dodging the spear before she blinked into range, ashen limbs immediately crashing into the warrior as

she checked her surroundings for additional foes. Spreading ash around, she would make sure there was enough on the ground for a quick distraction in case she needed to escape. All the machines, forges and massive robotic arms as well as tanks and supplies would make hiding rather simple.

She was pretty sure the Centurions weren't some kind of trackers, just warriors, made to be efficient killers for the materials used. It was a riddle to her how they could be created at a level above three hundred but she was pretty sure they were considered monsters by the system governing life in Elos. Of course with Demons she had already met somewhat of an exception. Maybe the Taleen had just been that amazing at magical robotics. Her blows accelerated, Ilea pushing hard to make sure the fight didn't last a second longer than needed. The Centurion wasn't comparable to the Guardian she had fought previously. While easier to manage, both her speed and utility massively outclassing it, she didn't exactly want to get hit directly. Neither did she want to fight more of them as it would force her to navigate and fight in the unknown steel forest. The big open hall from earlier was a much preferred arena.

Getting in another two hits, she stepped to the left to avoid the spear thrusting at her head, three of her ashen limbs glancing off the steel armor. It managed to block two more attacks with its free hand, Ilea now behind it as she punched once again. The Centurion brought the spear around, Ilea blinking to keep the offense up. At least the packed and loud environment would make it harder for more of them to hear and come help. *Right until it explodes.* Ilea grinned, perhaps destroying this place wasn't out of the question. All she had to use was the bombs provided by the Taleen themselves.

*Worth testing if the explosions actually damage any of the support structures.* A couple minutes later Ilea's mana was down a thousand points, her offense taxing with all her ashen limbs and excessive blinks as well as health sacrifice. Healing back to full, she finally managed to crack the core, the Centurion throwing its spear before it skidded off, the light shining through the cracks growing brighter while Ilea stood there, ash settling around her as she stared at the running machine with confusion. *Ah... makes*

*sense*. She thought, seeing it reach the opening leading out into the abyss before it jumped off.

The explosion overshadowed the surrounding noise of steam, metal hitting metal and gears turning but only for a second. Ilea was left standing between the machines, nothing other than ash indicating that anything had happened at all.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 310] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

*At least I get the experience. So there is something programmed into them that prevents them from damaging the surroundings.* Meaning the explosion could actually damage it. Ilea thought about it when she picked up the noise of metal legs on steel around her. Smiling, she let Meditation flow through her, breathing in deeply and closing her eyes.

When three Centurions entered her Hunter Sphere, her eyes opened, blue eyes in stark contrast to the fiery glow all around her. Ash spread out with as much force as she could manage, the Centurions expertly navigating around and even over some of the machinery as they engaged the threat they had been looking for.

The ensuing fight was considerably longer than her previous take down of a single Centurion. The machines definitely knew their way around and the crowded environment was more detriment to her than to them. It at least helped to have cover from their ranged attacks whenever needed. They were too quick for her to use her meditation frequently but at least more often than in an open hall.

Blinking past a thrown spear, Ilea landed the last needed fist on the core of a damaged warrior, the light of its soon to explode energy cell or implanted bomb had it turn around and seek the abyss. *Two to go.* A couple minutes later Ilea’s estimation proved to be false, two more Centurions having

joined the fight. Either because she had encroached on their assigned territory during her battle or the one destroyed machine somehow made them come as well. Adding more of them didn't really change the fight, because of their somewhat predictable attacks as well as the cover around her.

Her already limiting damage was now spread among four of them and it was hard to tell which one she had hit already, the five of them moving around so quickly it was difficult to discern. Ilea once again thanked her sphere, without which she would've been pinned down and slaughtered like the invading parasite she was in their sprawling underground facility. A smirk came to her face when another Centurion's core started glowing. The three remaining one ignored the fact, pinning her down before one of them actually managed to land a hit. Ilea hadn't blinked, misjudging the feint for what it was. The spear smashed through her Veil and crashed against her chest piece. Neither armor nor her bones gave in, Ilea stumbling back before she blinked away. Three times this time before she healed the bruises. The explosion from the damaged Centurion quickly came to her ears before her pursuers were upon her again. Checking her mana, she found to be below half.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 310] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

*They eat it up like sponges...*, She wondered if a warrior class would have similar problems. She could of course focus on pure physical damage and whittle them down but it was definitely more efficient to just retreat and recover her mana before going in again. Even if they had some sort of ability to repair themselves. Normally she'd doubt something like that but in a literal Taleen factory, perhaps it was possible. *Why then throw yourself down the abyss when you can get repaired?* If her experience on Earth was anything to go by then that it was probably easier to build a new Centurion than to repair a damaged one.

Spreading ash, she blinked and continued her work with a smile on her face. Each hit she landed powerful enough to create a tiny shock wave of air and heat upon impact, the force nearly enough to lift the machines off the ground, built for speed and dexterity more than anything else. While the

Taleen metal wasn't anything special according to the smiths she had met, she still didn't manage to majorly dent it with each punch. Perhaps it was the way they forged it or something related to the machine itself. If her own body and ash was anything to go by then perhaps the metal was considered their body and only once their Vitality reached a certain threshold, it would get majorly damaged.

The specifics didn't matter much while she dodged their attacks, the three remaining machines more and more working as a team, trying to bait her with their defensive behavior. Ilea welcomed the change, their learning ignoring the fact that their inaction allowed her to recover mana at a quicker rate with Meditation. Still, she had to agree that it was probably their best bet to get actual damage in on her. She too changed to a more defensive way of fighting, every second bringing back a couple points of mana she could use again in a burst of attacks. The movements of yet again more Centurions joining the ongoing battle made her breathe out. Perhaps the defensive approach wouldn't be feasible after all.

# Chapter 285 Training Considerations

## Chapter 285 Training Considerations

Her mana reached five hundred before she could take out another one of the machines, Ilea blinking out into the open as her wings spread, another blink let her dodge the thrown spear before she was back up near the railings. Exiting the production facility, she turned around and meditated, waiting to see if any of them pursued her. A minute passed and then two. Nothing followed, either because the things had no way to fly or climb up or because they weren't supposed to do anything but defend their lair.

Ilea sighed, breathing out as she cracked her neck. She had a bunch of high leveled enemies in there that didn't completely rip her apart in groups as well as a spot up here to recover her mana and health if necessary. *I gave them one week. Now let's see how far I come in that time.*

The answer was mixed. It surprised her that nobody actually bothered her in the full week, allowing her to focus fully on the task at hand. Ilea learned that the Centurions did in fact not have a way to repair themselves. This was counter acted by them not forgetting about her and the tactics they kept developing to fight her. After the first day they only moved in groups of six,

after the second day they started to keep the damaged machines at the center of their formations and after the third day they actively prowled the first floor as soon as she destroyed her first Centurion. She couldn't fight for more than a couple minutes before a second group showed up, making it a ten to twelve Centurions versus her solitary self.

The number itself wouldn't have been an issue in the forest of metal and molten steel, were it not for their increasingly defensive tactics. As if they were a group of hunters trying to exhaust and corner a wild animal. Problem was that she wasn't exactly a wild animal, her mobility simply overwhelming and the damage she put into them stacking up more and more. They couldn't repair it and every day their numbers decreased. Ilea was pretty sure the machines on the floor below never actually joined the battle, either trusting the Centurions above to take care of it or designated to their areas.

Their similar levels let her see exactly how with each level gained, the requirements increased. She didn't know if it was simply because they gave a flat amount of experience upon death and her higher level demanded more or if her knowledge of the enemy, her increasing confidence and traditional experience influenced it. Likely it was both and some other things she didn't even consider. What was sure was that she was increasing in level. The latest two kills had finally brought her ashen class to another threshold. Just in time to go and check on Elfie, Terok and the three young hunters. She hoped all of them were at least still alive. Somehow she trusted Elfie with the task, the mage just like her probably able to take care of the four of them should they act out. She sat down on one of the few benches still intact and summoned one of Keyla's meals, taking off her helmet to eat as she mentally scrolled through all the messages from the past week.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

...

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 310] – For defeating an enemy forty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 265 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 266 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 258 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 259 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 260 – Five stat points awarded - Third tier skill point awarded'*

Ilea had put all thirty points into Strengh to bring it up to three fifteen. Having tested her physical power against the hall's walls, she found that the difference was definitely noticeable. Against the Centurions however it had brought little change. Most of her damage was still coming from her ashen limbs that had the simple advantage of getting through their defenses much more often. That was likely the main factor in her ashen class leveling once more than her Azarinth one. Ilea took a bite of her food and closed her eyes, savoring the fragrance. It was an oily meat and vegetable soup with thin noodles. The spiciness reminded her of some cheap ramen noodles she would've eaten back on Earth but elevated to another level with Keyla's expertise and fresh ingredients. She really had to go and hug the woman again, making her adventurer lifestyle not just bearable but outright luxurious.

Ilea had little need for sleep. When she did she had her bed with her at all times. Keyla's meals were there for food and with her ash, her cleaning needs were mostly taken care of. Water was really the only thing that could be added but a simple water collection rune to go could fix this easily. *Why did I never get one of those.* If she wanted to stay in this dungeon for longer she'd definitely want one. Especially with how hot it was in the production part. Taking another slurp of soup, she checked the possible advancements for the third tier skill point in her ashen class.

***3rd tier skill points available [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1***

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]:***



- *Form of Ash and Ember*
- *Wave of Ember*
- *Body of Ash*
- *Ashen Warrior*

Ilea was surprised to find such a choice. She previously had only her Veil and Ash Creation available for a third tier level up and afterwards her Ash and Ember Manipulation. Going through the skills, she decided against Wave of Ember immediately as it was categorized as ashen magic. Body of Ash was a secondary priority too, one because its bonuses were simply inferior to Form of Ash and Ember as well as Ashen Warrior. Plus it was both Body Enhancement and Ashen Magic. Ashen Warrior was purely categorized as Body Enhancement while Form had the added Aura description.

Ilea read through the two skills again, even though she knew them by heart at this point.

***Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 20:***

***Ember glows within you raising your resilience, speed, strength and dexterity by 55% [275%].***

***2nd stage: The longer you fight while in the Form of Ash and Ember, the deeper it roots. Each minute of fighting adds 15% more power to the skill with a maximum of 150%.***

***Category: Aura – Body Enhancement***

The bonuses were absolutely insane compared to many of her other skills. Especially with both her classes enhancing Body Enhancements by each two hundred percent. Of course that was why she wanted to prevent herself from getting a purely ashen magic class. Ilea wasn't too worried to get at least one or two good choices but it couldn't help to add a couple persuading reasons for the gods, the system or the simulation to give her what she wanted.

***Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20:***

***You are familiar with the fighting style of Ash. Damage inflicted with your own body and while shrouded in Ash is 70% [350%] higher.***

***2nd stage: Shroud your weapons in ash to produce various effects.***

***Shrouded weapons deal additional damage. Affected by Ash and Ember Manipulation.***

***Category: Body Enhancement***

The percentage bonus was higher for Ashen Warrior and it was basically a direct damage buff. Ilea knew it affected her mana intrusion abilities too which made it one of the best skills she had as well. She thought about possible third tier advancements that could be unlocked but finally decided on Form of Ash and Ember. Reason being that her auras were the staple of her power from early on. She would likely chose Ashen Warrior at two eighty, just to get another Body Enhancement ability up there but if she got something similar to State of Azarinth's third tier, the two could stack. Ilea hesitated but then shook her head. Both skills were really good but she felt like the aura was a safer bet for a good third tier.

***'ding' 'Form of Ash and Ember reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1'***

***Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 3rd lvl 1:***

***Ember glows within you raising your resilience, speed, strength and dexterity by 55.5% [277.5%].***

***2nd stage: The longer you fight while in the Form of Ash and Ember, the deeper it roots. Each minute of fighting adds 15% more power to the skill with a maximum of 150%.***

***3rd stage: Familiarity with the skill removes its upkeep. When reaching the maximum second tier bonus you may reset it by amplifying your next attack with ash and ember.***

***Category: Aura – Body Enhancement***

Ilea read through the new third tier and nodded, "Nod bad." It really wasn't, the skill's upkeep being by far the most mana intensive skill she had up at all times. Now her recovery improved considerably, especially when not using Meditation. Of course her attack magic was what drained her during her battles but it would help. *Even more sustain.* She smiled at the thought. *Longest fighting and most durable warrior of all time?* She doubted it. The

second part of the third tier ability was interesting. Giving up the 150% added bonuses for a single empowered attacks.

The second tier bonus wasn't influenced by her class bonuses which would make it less of a dent during a battle to lose. If it were amplified by her classes, she'd never even consider using the new third tier. *Either way, depends on how powerful the attack actually is.* Activating her Form of Ash and Ember, Ilea immediately smiled at the lack of mana usage. Her Veil and Sphere were damn near free at this level too and her passive skills were always up without cost. She smiled at the fact that Embred Body Heat was now the most expensive always active skill she had, her only hope to get something better at her evolution. Otherwise she'd replace it after three hundred.

*Can't exactly test it without somebody to fight.* She thought, finishing her soup before getting up. Spreading her wings, she ascended and made her way out of the room to reach the hallway leading out of the dungeon. Definitely not the official entrance but it was likely the best one, leading to both the production facility and the ancient dwarven city. Terok might argue an entrance directly to the treasury would be better but Ilea had her own priorities.

She heard the sounds of battle when she walked into the dug out entrance leading into the dwarven ruin. Steel against steel before an explosion paused the sound. Stepping out, Ilea saw that the previously rocky environment had been mostly flattened, stones either moved away or pulverized by magic or sheer strength. Goldie was either sleeping or knocked out, same with the brown haired elf called Neiphato. Their bodies were sprawled on the hard ground, cuts and bruises visible as well as dents and damage in whatever armor they were wearing.

Ilea appeared next to Elfie who had one hand on his chin, the elf staring at the two fighting contestants, his eyes focused on every move. "Refrained from killing Terok. Managed to keep the elves back and you're actually training them? Color me surprised." Ilea commented, watching Terok disappear to dodge the fiery explosion extending around Heranuur's body, the tall and muscular elf laughing as his blades clad in flame deflected the

metal spikes shot out from Terok's armor, the thing looking bruised but not dented.

He didn't look at her, "I don't have any colors with me human. You leveled again. Is the facility really full of Centurions?" He asked, his voice disinterested.

Ilea was pretty sure the elf cared more than he let on, "Yep, tons of them. It's going to take a long time to clear it out. I've found something else last week. You guys didn't explore further?"

He scoffed, "The dwarf tried several times. He is lucky to be a metal mage."

She nodded, impressed he had managed to stop the dwarf. *Was he holding back against me?* She wasn't sure. Ilea knew at least that her mana intrusion spells were very effective against barriers, maybe that was it. Coupled with her Curse Resistance and recovery, his abilities were quite ineffective against her. "There's a Taleen city in there as well, Guardians and all. Reminded me of the dungeon I've explored before. I thought maybe they could explore and train a little in there, depending on how they do."

Elfie looked at her then, the silver in his eyes swirling before he again looked at the two fighters who were breathing hard, looking at each other. Ilea felt Elfie use a skill, Terok and Heranuur groaning before they continued their battle, neither very enthusiastically. "Not a bad idea. They have been itching to kill for days now. I however doubt Guardians will be a sufficient challenge for them."

Ilea shrugged, "There's plenty of them in there. If it's anything like the first Taleen dungeon I've explored then there will be Centurions as well as traps. It won't be simple and they don't have a healer."

Elfie chuckled, "You want to have the Centurion facility for yourself don't you human?"

She grinned, looking at the two fighting warriors, back to using more frantic and dangerous moves. "That doesn't change what I told you. They

would be slaughtered in there.”

He didn't deny what she said, “I would still like to talk to the Tremor royals.”

“Tell them to bring out documents and relics from the dungeon.” She gestured to the group, “When Terok reaches level two hundred he might be able to get at least the queen out more quickly. Plus shouldn't destroying this dungeon and the machines within have priority for you?”

Elfie was quiet for a while, “You said they have to fight a Centurion for evaluation. They each have destroyed one previously, it won't be the challenge you think it will be.”

“I know they have, at least together. It's a question of how, not if.” A quick teleport by Heranuur and followup explosion sent terok into the ground, the elf following before he hit an invisible barrier.

“That is enough. If you heal them we will be able to move on to your test today. Otherwise it will take longer.” Elfie said, Ilea nodding as her ashen limbs extended.

“They should really get a healer. Maybe we can find one for hire in Hallowfort. I don't want to bother stopping my own exploration to take care of them.” Ilea commented, Elfie nodding at that.

He watched her as she healed up first Heranuur, then Terok and finally the other two elves. Each had what she considered severe injuries, making the fight she had watched quite impressive. “It will be good for them to learn and fight without a healer, at least for a while. If they can't recover their own health that is. Do you agree?”

Ilea was surprised he would even ask her opinion but she nodded, “However long you think is good. For resistance training they'll need someone though, that's for sure.”

“I have heard of Cerithil hunters able to heal themselves. Perhaps something will reveal itself with time.” He said, Ilea finishing up. The two

elves were waking up when she made her way back to the dungeon.

“Send them in to the room they had fought previously. I’ll drag out a Centurion for them to tackle.” Ilea said, “You’re free to join too of course. Might be good to see them fight it.” Elfie just hissed at her, Ilea blinking into the dungeon and rushing to the abyss. This time she did activate the elevator, finding it working as intended.

*Now, how do I get one of the fuckers up here...*, She considered and dismissed the top floor already. They were moving in groups already. Descending, she spotted a lone Centurion with its back to her on the third floor. It looked to be patrolling, each step taking it further away from the central abyss. Ilea blinked in and grabbed one of its legs, the thing immediately whirling around and trying to attack her. Slamming the spear away, Ilea flapped her wings and used all her strength to drag it out while her ashen limbs tried to destabilize the machine’s legs. A moment later, she was flying over the darkness below her with a Centurion hanging from her arm, the thing turning and twirling as it tried to attack her.

Ilea’s ash smashed down without Wave of Ember, trying to distract the machine as she ascended. When she finally got high enough, she twirled in the air before throwing the machine through the opening. *That was pretty simple.* It had nearly gotten her with its spear several times but perhaps just dropping them down the hole would be enough to kill them. She wondered if she had just figured out an easy mode for clearing out the production facility. A boring one to be sure but she’d take it anyway. The thrown spear rushed past her, Ilea having moved her head to the side. “Hey, I’m not the one you’ll fight.”

Rushing into the elevator, she punched the Centurion a couple times before activating the lift. What followed was definitely one of the busiest elevator rides she had ever been part of. The small room allowed for little room to dodge but she also wanted to stay close, just in case it decided to move back down. She was punched out of the thing when it stopped, her ash reforming in front of her chest as she healed the light damage from the punch. “Come on then.” She said and blinked back and into the doorway leading to the hall the test would take place in.

# Chapter 286 A Test

## Chapter 286 A Test

Ilea blinked to dodge the thrown spear, appearing with her back facing the doorway. She smiled when she saw the four warriors standing together, Terok although hidden inside his steel mech suit radiating anxiety. Facing a Centurion was quite a bit more ridiculous for his level than for the others but she expected less contribution from him as well. “Welcome. You’ve trained for a week and here’s your first challenge. A Taleen Centurion. Likely in the level range of three o five to three ten.” Ilea said, stepping to the side as she lifted her elbow a little, the spear glancing off before it smashed into the wall of the room.

“You will have to be able to handle them as easily as this before I allow you into the production facility.” She said, appearing next to the approaching machine that was now in the hall as well. Ilea didn’t attack, instead dodging as quickly as she could, the punches of the Centurion easily avoided. When its spear reappeared in its arms, the fight changed somewhat but she was still on top. She made it a game of deflecting as many of the blows as she could, only dodging when absolutely necessary. After a week of fighting them she was confident enough to face one of them with her blink reserved for emergencies only.

She started dodging again, moving around the machine to show its range of motion, speed and ability to adjust. “Compared to Guardians, these ones learn. They move in groups and go after your weaknesses. You will have to do the same if you ever hope to win. Use every advantage you can to

prevail.” She finished and blinked up, wings spreading before she rushed behind them and landed. The Centurion stopped. Spear in hand it glanced at the newfound enemies that prepared their blades and magic.

Ilea watched the group quickly move into some sort of formation. Neiphato, the brown haired elf with his curved short swords at the front and left, Goldie and his bone claws at the front right with Heranuur right behind them. They were all close combat warriors. Ilea wondered if not a single tank with several mages flying to the side would be a more efficient constellation. At least they had Terok who could kind of do both. He immediately flew up and sent a metal spike at the centurion, the machine dodging but not anticipating the sudden movement of the projectile.

The fight that followed was as expected not the challenge it had been for the level one fifty Ilea facing a Taleen Centurion. Their tactics consisted of Neiphato and Goldie getting in strikes as well as distracting the machine before Heranuur moved in and used his fire explosion to damage the thing. Terok just sort of flew around and sent in his metal spikes. They did do damage and sometimes even garnered enough attention from the enemy to force a spear throw.

They had to play it somewhat safe, no healer a part of the group. Ilea was pretty sure every single one of them already had a good chance of taking out a Centurion on their own, if they used a similar strategy as she had back in the Iztacalum dungeon. Get in, dodge and deal damage before blinking away. What she was interested in would come in the next couple minutes. How they would deal with the explosion. The centurion was switching to its more aggressive stance, indicated by where it held the spear.

Ilea watched as nobody in the group seemed to change their approach, the elves rushing in just as they had before. Neiphato barely managed to dodge the spear thrust that opened up the machine to Goldie who seemed in a near complete frenzy at this point, slashing into the Centurion with confidence or recklessness. The slap that sent him stumbling to the side before a spear



thrust to his chest nearly killed him made Ilea tend to think it recklessness. Terok had butted in, sending both himself and Goldie sprawling to the ground.

Heranuur picked up the machine's attention by appearing next to it and exploding. Ilea saw the cracks form on its core and sighed, the elf having used his teleportation ability to get in not fast enough to avoid the quick grab by the Centurion. It held onto the grinning elf who continued to explode but Ilea knew it was too late already. Perhaps his damage was high enough to take out the enemy before it exploded but she wasn't about to risk it. Blinking beside it, her ashen limbs smashed into the Centurion's arms, Ilea pulling out the elf before throwing him to the side. Locking eyes with the machine, she shrouded herself in ash before the world went white.

Her sphere informed her about her surroundings and her own state as she sighed, thinking about the destroyed armor set. She had gone a whole week without major damage and now she was down to two just to send a message. Tremor as well as Goliath were just a couple hours away but the constant switching annoyed her. *I want my pre two hundred fighting back with nothing capable of damaging Niameer steel.* She knew she had likely just gotten lucky through it all and she should be grateful to have a capable smith so close by, willing to work for basically free.

The damage was not as substantial as she had expected, the blast being about as close as when she had killed one of them on her own for the first time. The armor was partially melted and cracked, some of it had cut into her body. Her own skin seemed to have withstood at least the heat much better, only having sustained second to third degree burns. Last time she had been basically toast. Her pain shut off, she started peeling the steel out of her body, aware of the eyes on her throughout the process. Ilea's health had only dropped by two thousand points, not even getting her to half health.

*I wonder how much damage no armor would result in.* She thought about it while ripping out another piece, blood dripping to the ground before the wound quickly healed. The burns were taken care of next, Ilea replacing her clothes and armor as soon as the old parts had been removed. Some of the worst damage had come from armor pieces cutting into her but the same

could have happened with shrapnel coming from the centurion's exploding body. *Maybe I'll try it later.* She balled her fist, the last piece appearing to finish off the set.

"I think I could've taken that." Heranuur commented. Upon her eyes reforming from the bloody mess behind her helmet and her questioning look staring at him, the elf seemed to reconsider. "Alright maybe not but we destroyed it either way." He brushed away his wavy red hair.

*Elven hair products...*, Ilea ignored the message in her mind about the group effort, smiling as she saw Terok's level grow by one. "What was the plan there? You knew it would explode." Ilea said after a moment, the three elves and Terok trying to avoid looking at her. *They really are just a bunch of teenagers.* "Come on. I usually don't have a plan either but compared to you I can take a lot more damage and I can heal."

"Should have disengaged and just fucked off as soon as it was going to blow." Terok suggested, shrugging as the others looked at him.

"Would work, yes. Well you know now that they get more aggressive after reaching critical health. Goldie, way too aggressive there. Any way you can stop yourself from getting so zealous?"

The elf hissed at her, "You wouldn't understand human."

Ilea nodded, "Yea that's why I ask mate." She shook her head, "You're going to get killed with that either way. Might be enough to slaughter some level one hundred humans but you're in trouble against anything stronger. Compared to your not cursed brethren, you sadly don't have the luxury to pick easy targets."

"Terok, not bad but I feel like your abilities lie more with close combat as well. Heranuur you did well, other than the last stunt. Be a bit more defensive, you can use your fireballs that way too." The elf nodded at her.

"I'm aware human. The formation should use exactly that. Me at the back would prevent my immediate offensive involvement, letting the enemy get distracted. If Nephito would... well it doesn't matter. Well the obvious

problem is a lack of ranged attacks, leveling up should give us at least some options. The dwarf was a good help but you know, it was never supposed to be like this. Cerithil hunters fight alone against the Taleen. Team formations would slow down growth and with time, people inevitably die.” The elf explained.

Ilea got more than she expected, “Well you’re a better judge of this than me it seems. I don’t think I’ll be able to add much. Regarding the team formations at least... even if people die, you’ll be more efficient in the time you spend fighting together.”

Heranuur nodded, “Perhaps true but it is not our way. We agreed with the teacher because it was his and your requirement.”

“So you’ll be back to basically fighting in a group but alone as soon as you’re allowed into the dungeon?” Ilea asked, the elf shrugging in response.

*Well that’s their problem.* Ilea just wanted them out of the production facility, both to prevent them from dying for no reason and to get out of her way. Terok would benefit from the training as well and maybe they would allow themselves to see the added efficiency of working in a team. Of course she herself wasn’t one to talk. She knew exactly what Heranuur was talking about and she probably understood Goldie’s battle frenzy better than she let on. Alas, they lacked a healer and were simply not as powerful as they needed to be. *Thankfully. Would’ve been a different first meeting that one.*

She didn’t reply, instead shooing them towards the exit. Terok stepped next to her, “So what’d ya find?”

“City, not filled with Centurions but lower leveled Taleen machines.” She said, flying towards the exit with him next to her.

“And you let me fight these lunatics for a whole week? Ilea, the only time I spent sleeping was because I got knocked out. When do I start exploring?”

She snorted, “Might be good. Maybe you’ll get your healer ability if you get injured so often before the evolution. Soon probably. I’ll talk to

Elfie...,”

“Teacher? Let me guess, you always wanted to become one but instead were banished, now looking to gather knowledge for the ages.” Ilea said after she had appeared next to the elf.

He scoffed, standing up as he looked the others over, “Did they pass your test?”

Ilea sat down on a big stone, watching the distant purple lightning, “Destroyed it. Heranuur would have died if I hadn’t interfered. Goldie would have died had Terok not saved him. Not quite as far as they need to be. Until the Cerithil hunters can destroy a centurion alone or accept that working in a team is beneficial, they are not allowed in the facility. The city however... I guess they can start exploring, destroying Guardians is what they apparently live for anyway.” She sighed.

“What?” Elfie asked her. Goldie and Heranuur started fighting after having an argument about the Centurion.

He looked at her, “What is it you are hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything Elfie. The city and the production facility are two completely different things. You know that, I know that and so do they. I don’t think clearing out the city will help with your race’s problem.”

He didn’t say anything for a while, watching the two warriors fight each other. They really didn’t hold back. “Why... do you care human?” Elfie didn’t look at her, eyes focused on the fight before them.

*Why do I?* She wasn’t sure. Thinking about the war likely still raging through the empire and Baralia, Ilea felt little responsibility. Little connection to the people living there. If they wanted to fight, they could. If they wanted to stand up, they could. She did have a nagging feeling about

her power and what she could do with it but a conflict like that wasn't simple. *Perhaps that's why.* "Because they are machines." She finally said, "Because by simply destroying this facility, fewer beings would suffer." The Taleen were gone as far as she knew, left behind only the killing machines apparently hunting for elves.

They were the enemies of humans, as much everybody had told her. She had seen it herself, had seen the population of Salia, slaughtered. Roland's family killed. Still, a part of her yearned to do something, to make sense of all the killing, the hunting and fighting. Her human heart trying to find reason in her self indulgent frenzy, her want for power and freedom. For it to be not just that. It might have been her upbringing, the society she had been a part of, the values and virtues she had learned to be good and right.

A bigger part of her rejected all that, saw little reason to care for anything but herself. She definitely saw the value in that and the past two years had mostly reflected it. To find what she wanted, what made her happy. Most virtues were romanticized, mentioned in stories where good and bad were always easy to discern. Black and white. It would be easy to see all elves as evil, to go out and slaughter them for what they did to the humans of Elos. The fact that there were four of them here made it hard to justify, at least one of them not simply present out of fear.

It would be easy to find and kill the Golden Lily, murder every single last one of them, burn their houses and eat their pets. Perhaps the last part would be a little much but Ilea wanted to know who exactly was responsible for Eve's death, what she did to warrant the reaction and why she did it. She would find out why and then think about what to do. The elves responsible for Salia were already dead, at least those that had been still around. Other than Roland, Ilea held no connection to the city. Other than being human and that wasn't exactly a moral high ground, knowing what her race did back on Earth, what they did here and what she did, had done.

"Because while I'm not a saint, I would release a doe stuck in a bear trap." She added, more to herself than to the elf.

“Even though the doe would kill you... even though it would go and kill other doe or hunt for your loved ones?” Elfie asked, his eyes on her now.

She couldn't help but smile at the thought of a murdering doe. Perhaps the elf didn't know what animal she was talking about. Nevertheless, he understood. “If it tries to kill me I will respond in kind. If it goes and kills others that is its choice. If it hunts for my loved ones, it will face my wrath.”

“And you would blame yourself forever after. Or are you hoping to befriend the doe?”

Ilea shook her head, “Let's leave the metaphors Elfie. I'm not responsible for your people, nor am I for mine. I care for my friends and I will fight for them. I would kill humans and elves to protect or avenge them. I believe so would you. Perhaps helping you out with the Taleen would make your slaughter of humans lessen... I doubt it, nor do I honestly care. Elves, humans, dwarves, dark ones. I don't think anybody cares. We care about ourselves and what's happening around us.”

She took a deep breath, “For whatever reason, probably a war that started because of land or specism, who cares, the Taleen left behind these machines. All they do according to you is invade your lands and kill your people. Perhaps I'm wrong, I certainly don't have the whole picture and you could be misleading me but they are a source to increase my personal power. If I can tack fewer dead people onto it as an additional reason, I'll take it. You're at least here, explaining yourself.”

The elf looked at her and nodded, thinking about her words for a while. Terok and Neiphato were taking care of their damaged gear and wounds as well as they could. Ilea didn't offer to heal them. “I'm not deceiving you human. For your species... I doubt it will be beneficial for the Taleen machines to end. At least like this... it is machines that get destroyed instead of humans.”

Ilea scoffed, “Might be better the other way. Not like we can't slaughter each other. Plus you said there wasn't a war or anything... why would your people even care? Do you want land? Power? Money?”

He chuckled, “A human betraying her own species? I believe more elven eyes would look towards human lands but I do not know what they would do. Most seek out a challenge and slaughtering humans, while perhaps entertaining or delicious, is not a challenge.”

“I’m not betraying anybody. Simply being born into the species I am a part of doesn’t give me an obligation. I can do whatever the fuck I want.” Ilea said, “I believe children shouldn’t be slaughtered, not human or anything else. I believe wars suck, hard. Human or other. People should be free to do whatever they please and wherever they please, as long as they don’t restrict others.”

“In this world I could attain that power, the power of choice. I can see how not every being wants or has the ability to bath in the blood of animals, monsters or other sentients to attain this choice. I might be able to help out some at least.” She said, her voice growing louder with each word.

# Chapter 287 The Freedom of Choice

## Chapter 287 The Freedom of Choice

“Then what will you do with that choice?” Elfie asked, his eyes locked with hers. Ilea felt like it was the first time he actually looked at her, really looked at her.

Perhaps it was the other way around, “I will fight and destroy Centurions, level my classes and skills here in the north. Be free and enjoy myself. In the process I might be able to provide this choice to others, or kill those trying to take it away. No matter the species.” She was calm again, looking at her hand as she formed a fist and opened it again.

“Choice.” Elfie said, more to himself this time, his red hair flowing in the northern wind. “I...,” He started but his mouth closed again.

Ilea didn't press him. She would fight the Centurions one way or the other. If it resulted in elves starting actual wars against humans, she would fight them too. Not because she owed it to any human but because she would have been partially responsible in giving them the opportunity. *I'll be the challenge they seek. The last one.*

She sighed, not satisfied with her reasoning but not completely unhappy either. Elfie had been silent for a couple minutes now, the two elves still fighting each other in the background. “As to why I care? I don't know.



Maybe I don't want to be as miserable a cunt as I think I've been the past year. Why do you care Elfie?"

Ilea didn't wait for an answer, waving to Terok as she got up, "I give you a month to map out the city Terok. You better be at two hundred as well. They should work together or at least advance their levels if they don't." She said the latter part to Elfie, punching his shoulder with an ashen limb when he didn't react.

"Yes. I will try to convince them but don't expect too much. Raising their skills rather than their levels for a while will be beneficial too, especially for Seviir and Heranuur." He replied, the thoughtful look gone from his face.

"Why not for Neiphato? Seems like he's the weakest of them by far. I'd bet on Terok in a one on one." She said, cracking her shoulders, eager to leave.

"Perhaps he will be able to tell you himself." The elf said mysteriously, his tongue licking over his teeth.

She shook her head, "Whatever. Thing you do with your tongue by the way. Weirds me out." To her surprise he didn't hiss, instead nodding lightly. "I'll be back... might be a couple weeks but at latest a month to see Terok's progress."

Appearing back in the top floor of the production facility, Ilea breathed in deeply. "Ahh, steel." She said dryly, her ash spreading out as she prepared for the first encounter. It would take a while to clear out the top floor on its own and she wasn't sure the Centurions would be restocking in the meantime. The machines certainly had the tools to do so. At least in the past week there had been a major change to their numbers, only their approach to hunt her down changing.

She spent her day whittling down the groups of machines fighting her. They definitely didn't have a way or will to repair themselves, making her somewhat cautious approach viable. After over eight hours, she made her way back out of the dungeon, her health constantly regenerating as she sacrificed chunks of it to keep both her healing and third tier aura going. Ilea didn't have the opportunity to test her new third tier Form of Ash and Ember, fighting in the middle of a group of Centurions not a time to lose a noticeable multiplier.

Both Elfie as well as Terok and Cerithil hunters were gone from their camp, only the embers of a nearly burnt out campfire remaining. The suns had set but Ilea didn't know exactly how far along the night already was. She didn't plan to spend more than a couple hours outside either way. Spreading her wings, she flew upwards and out of the somewhat secluded and protected area. Finding some suitably small lakes of mist in the distance, she descended down the mountain slope and landed close by.

The Miststalkers were already twirling towards her, Ilea greeting them with a wave and twirl of her own. Her mana and health started dropping a moment later, the feeling familiar at this point, her regeneration never letting up as her meditation started flowing through her. "Good evening." She said, stepping closer to the corporeal spirits dancing through the mists. This time she went close enough to get into melee range, watching the scythe like arms extend and strike at her.

As expected, the feeling was damn near the same as when Elana had used a mist attack on her. She breathed out at the considerably higher power, finding her health dropping by nearly eight hundred. *That's going to be a while until I can fight these guys.* Ilea had at least decided to train against them again, the Centurions only able to bring her to three hundred. Compared to the kingsguard as well as any of the other monsters she could face in the North, the Miststalkers were at least slow and very easy to escape from. That was if one wasn't caught within the mists. Even then, with her level in Veteran their eerie songs had no impact on her and her resistance levels would require at least a dozen or more of them to drain her at the same time for more than a couple seconds.

Enough time for her to make an escape using her blink ability. The two resistances could also be a reasonable testing ground for a third tier general skill, something she still had to ask the king about. Nothing had shown up so far and somehow she doubted there was anything obvious she was missing. Jumping back again, Ilea healed the damage back up and periodically got closer again to allow one of the miststalkers to hit her. She kept her health above four thousand, just in case she got hit by two or three of them at the same time. A real possibility with how close they tended to get to each other.

Two hours passed, Ilea's Meditation skill making the time fly by, coupled with the excitement of constant danger. Eleven of the spirits had gathered close to her at that point, a little much for her to reasonably keep up with. Her nightly training near Tremor had taught her that the Miststalkers cared little to hunt down prey, mostly dancing around and grateful if something living showed up. Blinking a couple times, Ilea got close to another lake, her mana recovering quickly before the first monster even noticed her.

Day in and day out, Ilea trained, fighting and destroying the increasingly difficult to fight Centurions, her mana and health drain as well as mist resistances trained at night. She didn't see Elfie or anybody else for the first five days. In the night of the sixth day, she was sitting near a lake of mist when she noticed movement in the distance, a couple hundred meters down the slope. A creature completely black, as big as a horse and in the form of a wolf. It moved quickly, occasionally disappearing in the shadows, coming back to life a couple dozen meters away. Ilea realized the movement she had noticed wasn't from the wolf like creature but the birds chasing him, Famine Crows. A whole pack of them. The wolf creature looked to be injured, slowing down before it entered a lake of mist.

The beast slowed down as the Miststalkers gathered around it, the birds rushing down from above, uncaring about the new circumstances. She watched as the wolf entered the very ground, vanishing as a whole flock of famine crows crashed down into the stone surrounded by more and more

Miststalkers. The birds started teleporting around immediately but contrary to what she expected, most of them crashed into the ground again or appeared near it, the mist scythes cutting into them as they were drained.

The first of them started to fall around ten seconds later, some escaping upwards but at least half of the flock had vanished in the mist, absorbed into the spirits that completely surrounded them. *Smart wolf*. She thought, blinking away from the lake she was currently sitting at. It was time to go back to the dungeon, see to the next group of the top layer Centurions.

Two weeks later she had thinned them enough to make it at least uncommon to find a second group of them while fighting a first one. Ilea had tested her theory about just throwing the Centurions down the massive abyss in the middle of the facility, twice and both times unsuccessfully. They were certainly durable but Ilea rather suspected there was a lake or something at the bottom that prevented their demise. Either that or it just didn't count their destruction as her work. She didn't want to think of possible long range Centurion launching as a possible invasion strategy after all.

Having checked out the second layer through one of the many broad stairwells leading down, she had found luring machines from there up and fighting them on the first layer not just possible but probably the best tactic to clear out more of the facility in the coming weeks. Still, she focused on the first layer as the top priority. Once cleared she could think again about possibly just destroying the support beams and cables. Ilea had at least found that the ends of the layer were connected to the mountain itself, making the idea likely impossible. The result of getting a whole level destroyed and maybe more made it at least still something to think about.

Each night, Ilea spent a couple hours with the miststalkers of the north, her resistances growing slowly but steadily. When the sun rose that night, she came back to the entrance of the Taleen dungeon, finding the campsite not devoid as on most days. A smile was on her face when she landed, greeting

Elfie with a wave. He looked up and nodded. He smelled of blood, she noted.

Summoning a restaurant meal, she placed it next to the papers he was reading through before her own appeared in her hands. Sitting down on a nearby rock, her helmet vanished into her necklace. “How was the hunt?”

The elf looked up and sighed, taking the meal and nodding again, “You have a constant need for conversation do you not?”

She chuckled, “Haven’t talked to anybody in what... three weeks? You consider that constant? How often do you elves talk to each other?”

“Human I was only saying that to indicate my lack of interest in a conversation, not show some difference in our species. My people are just as bloody annoying as yours.”

“Sadly you can’t just eat them, right?” She said, pointing towards the blood on his black coat. The color was flowing seamlessly into the red parts of the fabric.

He scoffed, “Few of your kind up here.” Avoiding her stare, he started eating, “... a wild animal.” He added after a while, Ilea nodding at that.

“If you need a fight, I’m around.” She said, “How’s the exploration going? I’d want a full map by the end of next week.”

Elfie laughed, “Then you will be disappointed. I have heard how big the dwarf thinks the production facility is. The city might be similarly expansive. Filled with not just Guardians but Dark Ones as well as more dangerous Taleen machines and traps.”

She smirked, “Good, then there’s plenty of work to do. What kind of dark ones?”

“Do not worry human. The won’t be ready to disturb your solitary time in the production facility for a while. Might be you don’t have to annoy me anymore if they do though. The dark ones call themselves Saurians and

only agree to talk to the dwarf. At least that is what he says but I doubt any of the others would actually like to engage with them in anything but slaughter.” Elfie commented.

Ilea didn't deny his assumption but also didn't correct him about her annoying him. She would do that either way. His aggressive, unyielding yet informative way wasn't exactly unpleasant. At least he seemed to have stopped weighing every bit of information he shared with her. “You want me to get one out to talk to you?”

The elf looked up from the paper and smiled, his teeth showing. “Not for you to eat.”

“I eat whatever I want human.”

*Fair enough.* “If you go in there and get one. If I bring one, you won't eat.”

He shrugged in response, continuing to read. “What are you reading anyway?”

“A surviving stone inscription the dwarf copied.”

Ilea stood up, putting away her empty plate, checking out the paper. “You can read their language?”

The elf snorted, “Of course I can. I know you think my level low for my age but I invested in other things than just my classes power to destroy.”

“Impressive.” She said, “Maybe you can teach some of the hunters. Might be beneficial to find out more about the Taleen's plans. If you're too much of a wuss to go in there yourself. I doubt any of those idiots would ever think about deciphering and learning an ancient language.”

His face went through different emotions before he finally settled on an angry hiss. Ilea shrugged. He would think about the suggestion, maybe even start teaching them if they wanted. Neiphato and maybe Heranuur would be open to the idea. She was pretty sure Goldie wouldn't care.

“Do you have another test planned for the end of the month?” He asked instead, keeping the apparently very annoying conversation going.

Ilea shrugged, “Two Centurions?” She laughed.

“Imaginative.” He commented with a sigh.

“I could fight them myself out here so you can judge as well. I think my skill set is closer to the Taleen machines than yours.” She said.

Ilea didn't miss the small tugging on the edges of his mouth. It must be quite difficult to be so close to an ancient dungeon filled with the secrets of his enemies but unable to actually go in. She wouldn't stop annoying him about it, that much was sure.

“Well I'll be off again then. Let me know if you need anything.” She said and made her way back to the dungeon. Centurions were waiting for her.

The last planned week passed in a flash, Ilea continuously clearing out the first layer. She assumed another month or two would be enough, now somewhat sure they didn't restock the missing machines. Perhaps something would actually happen once she destroyed the last one but she kind of doubted it. The machines kept on working, melting down metal and sending it down to the lower floors. She had decided not to destroy anything as of yet. Perhaps Terok could find a way to reroute it all and maybe use it. Goliath would have a field day if he came in here but Ilea wanted to make sure it was completely safe before she even asked the smith.

Not that she expected the dark one to move away from its home. Fighting the last Centurion for the day, she reached the ten minute mark and checked her surroundings. Finding no other enemy around, she dodged a thrust of its spear to the right and activated her third tier of Form of Ash and Ember, her arm and shoulder clad in flame and swirling ash before her fist landed with

a loud crash on the metal core of the machine. A powerful surge of mana went through it before the Centurion was pushed a couple meters away, its thin steel legs skidding on the metal floor before its core started glowing. Ilea looked after it as it turned and rushed towards the center.

Before the explosion even reached her ears, she made her way back out of the facility and looked through her messages from the past month as she started eating a meal.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 310] – For defeating an enemy forty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

...

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305] – For defeating an enemy thirty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 267 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 268 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 269 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 270 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 271 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 272 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 261 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 262 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 263 – Five stat points awarded'*



*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 264 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 265 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 266 – Five stat points awarded'*

Of the sixty stat points, forty went into Strength and ten each into Vitality and Wisdom.

*'ding' 'Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

Her recovery had leveled three times, the dedicated training showing its marks. Hunter's Sight was close to the current maximum as well.

*'ding' 'Form of Ash and Ember reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 14'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 17'*

Slow and steady. Ilea was growing and she had enough sources to fuel her increases in power. She finished her meal and got up, stretching before she made her way towards the exit. It was high time to explore something else than the construction of Centurions, for a while at least.

# Chapter 288 Lunchtime

## Chapter 288 Lunchtime

Cracking her neck, Ilea appeared outside of the dungeon. The others were already around, two of the elves sleeping on their bedrolls, the fabric looking more luxurious than any sleeping bags she had ever seen, even on earth. Each had chosen a dark color, either because of their status as Cerithil hunters or to be a little camouflaged. Ilea noted it wasn't night, Terok and the brown haired elf called Neiphato adding ingredients to a black metal pot hanging over a small fire. It smelled, like food. Nothing particularly good but she doubted any of them had an assortment of spices with them.

“Thought you guys just eat human meat.” She said, walking towards the two. Elfie wasn't around but she assumed he was somewhat close by. Perhaps he was still exhausted from their conversation a week ago.

Neiphato looked at her, realizing she was talking to him and not the dwarf. He gulped, “Some do like human flesh. Yes. Especially lower leveled ones with little muscle are considered a delicacy. We do eat other things as well. Some have even sworn off meat.”

“Any of them actually go through with that?” Ilea asked, crouching down over the pot and sniffing the broth.

The elf looked at her and nodded, “I believe so. The ones I knew countered their lust for meat with more hunting and killing. I do not think it makes sense.”

She chuckled, “How’s the map Terok?” The dwarf hadn’t talked yet but even in his armor she thought he looked tired and worn. He had risen to level one ninety three at least. Not yet at two hundred but close enough.

“Ilea... that city is bigger than you think. A month was not nearly enough time.”

His voice was soft, careful, “You can have another then or two.” She simply replied.

Terok stumbled backwards, nearly falling on his ass, “What? I thought our partnership ended if I didn’t manage... and you... you just tack on another month... or two? Do you have any idea how stressed I’ve been the past weeks... I tried buying a map of those Saurians but they hadn’t even started working on one, confused at the very concept.”

“And you didn’t think I was joking? I just thought to give you a bit of a push.” She said, honestly confused at his interpretation of her comment from a month ago.

Terok just shook his head and walked off, “I need a little time.”

She didn’t know if she should feel bad for stressing him out that much or if he was apparently too stupid to gauge her interest in the map and his work. *Partnership*. She chuckled, finding the elf looking at her, blue eyes reflecting some of the light coming from the fire. “Neiphato right? Elfie told me you might be stronger than you let on.”

He looked away, “I can see how he thinks so.”

“You’re not going to elaborate?” Ilea looked at him, no answer coming any time soon, “Hidden talent? Can turn into a hideous tentacle monster? You get stronger when you eat people... vampire maybe? Literal big dick energy?”

Looking at her with annoyance, he finally reacted, “How can you be so casual about all this? Haven’t you been fighting Centurions for weeks now? How often have you brushed death?”

Ilea smiled, “Against the Centurions? Not often... they barely get any hits in anymore. The Miststalkers are another story... I’m constantly close to death there.” She sighed, “Not what you wanted to hear I know. I like this, love it even. To fight and challenge myself. I don’t take it all that seriously, otherwise I’d be as dark and gloomy as Elfie.”

Neiphato seemed to have calmed down again, “Elfie? You do not wish to speak his name?”

“I don’t know his name. Why are you out here then? Cerithil hunter, cursed one... why cursed? Because you went into a dungeon? Forbidden by your government or religion?”

Neiphato sighed and checked to see if the two other elves were asleep, or out of earshot, “Cursed because that is the status bestowed upon those ignoring the oracles’ orders. One of their most ancient rules is to steer clear of dungeons. The overwhelming mana density and resulting damage helps painting a convincing picture.”

Ilea nodded, trying not to show her surprise at all the information he was willingly giving away. Perhaps she had found an elf not quite as secretive as Elfie, “Giving me this information... wouldn’t you think the oracles aren’t happy with it?”

Neiphato snorted, a grin revealing the sharp teeth in his mouth, “Human... trust me, they couldn’t care less about me, you or anything but magic itself. That is why I am here. You have saved our lives, spared us when they were yours to take and even found us a wise teacher. Something we sorely needed...,” He was quiet for a moment, “May I ask why? I believe our kind has not been benevolent towards yours, or any creature for that matter.”

“Magic itself. Are they like really high level mages? To answer your question, Elfie was around and I didn’t want to deal with you. As to why I saved you... your sorry asses were getting handled by monsters. I would have done as much for any sapient being.” She said.

Neiphato opened his eyes a little wider, Terok in the meantime joining them again, continuing his cooking in silence, “They are of magic itself. I know

little of it and they are secretive. It is forbidden to even ask such questions, not that I haven't tried. It is their inaction that led us to today after all." He paused for a moment, looking at Terok, "To think you would save a being just for the sake of it. Is that what all humans do?"

Terok laughed at that, answering the question for her, "No. Most of them would sell you to a monster if they could. She's different one that one. Soft and naive or perhaps thinking herself a saint."

"I see you're back Terok. I'm glad." Ilea said, a vicious grin on her face.

The dwarf shook his head, "At this point I won't believe you will murder me for anything less than betrayal. Know that dwarves are similarly greedy, it's just metal we want compared to your gold."

*How terribly cliched.*

"Is gold not a metal dwarf?" Neiphato asked with a smile.

He pointed at the elf with the wooden ladle he had gotten out of nowhere. Ilea wondered if he had carved it himself. "Exactly, it is. Not a very hard one at that. Other than gold mages it's difficult to guide mana through it as well. Now how would you compete in the ring with such a machine?"

*Maybe not that cliched.* Ilea thought, "So you're obsessed with forging because you're all into wrestling?"

"Not wrestling human... such a mundane activity. A battle between two dwarves clad in steel armor, steam rising as the crowds cheer them on to destroy each other. A marvelous sight, one I could only dream of joining."

Ilea's eyebrows rose, "You wanted to become a boxer? I did kick-boxing once. Been a while though, now I'm something else I guess. Is the leader of the dwarves the champion of the biggest tournament or something?" She imagined a tiny Terry Crews.

"Don't be ridiculous Ilea. Being a good warrior doesn't make a good administrator or king. It helps, certainly but only to get rid of competition."

He said and chuckled. "I was more interested in tinkering with my machine than actually fighting in it. Not that I dislike it but I lack a certain... vigor about it. You know what I mean." Getting out of his metal suit, he tasted the soup and coughed.

"I know exactly what you mean." Ilea said with a smile, grabbing the ladle and trying a bit of the stew as well. *Fatty and too much spices. Surprised my poison resistance isn't reacting.* She was pretty sure she would've lost health if her self from two years ago would have tasted it. "Also I'm neither naive nor soft. Power allows for a certain freedom."

He snorted, "Aye, I would still not save an angry child from a dangerous monster."

*Yes you would.* Ilea thought and just smiled at him. She would too. If the monster was weaker than her then why not give the child another chance at life. If the monster was stronger, that was reason enough to face it.

Terok looked at the brown haired elf and huffed, "Don't look at me like that, you would probably kill the beast and eat both."

She couldn't help but laugh, especially how the elf didn't really deny any of it. "Don't eat kids." She said after calming down, "Or I will murder you."

"Noted." Neiphato said, "It is interesting. To learn about humans and dwarves." He commented.

"We're not exactly showpieces." Terok chuckled.

"Neither am I." Neiphato said, his voice silent.

"That food is rank by the way." Ilea commented after a while. "Are you trying to become a poison maker?"

Terok pointed at her, "Young lady... I will not have you talk to the cook that way." He smiled but somehow the joke struck something else in Ilea. She nodded and looked to the ground with a smile on her face.

*I am young am I not?* She wondered, *Feels like I've been here for a decade already.*

“Why do you fight the Taleen machines?” Neiphato asked, steering the conversation back to the initial topic. “Your race has no stake in this battle... or is it the same reason why you saved me and the others?”

Ilea thought about it and then shook her head, “I intervene when something is happening in front of me. I don't think I'll go hunt down every single Taleen machine because they attack a bunch of elves far away. Elves that would attack me on sight.”

“She likes the levels she's getting. Plus they're a challenge. Her mind is simple like that.” Terok whispered to the elf, quite obviously audible to Ilea.

“Maybe try not to offend someone as simple as me dwarf. Especially not because I saved your ass too, and I gave you new steel and places to explore... and an opportunity to evolve to two hundred. Also possible treasure from the Taleen and Rhyvor. Hey is there anything you've done to repay me? How's that map looking?”

The dwarf pointed the ladle her way, metal eye zooming in on her as he squinted his other eye. He opened his mouth but didn't say anything, speaking a moment later, “Alright you basically own me and saved my life a couple times but at least you have my glorious company. Also you can't be left alone... giving away expensive and rare steel for free... to someone you've barely known for a couple days. Ridiculous.”

Ilea chuckled and looked at Neiphato, the elf lost as he tried to make sense of their conversation, “Hey do I have to remind you that that someone is you? Plus I just can't help it... being a saint and all.”

“I bet you've murdered people... and you've stolen things. The very armor you have you ripped from some poor undead just trying to do their jobs.” Terok said, again cutting deeper than he probably intended.

Ilea found herself not caring much either way. “I did murder people. Some arguably innocent too... or at least not more guilty than myself. I've raided



some places yes and the undead... well I'm sure they're happy to have a day off after thousands of years of working." She smiled, locking eyes with the dwarf who didn't seem quite prepared for the answer, "What can I say? Even a saint isn't perfect."

"It is true then? You fight the machines for personal growth?" Neiphato asked, "Aren't there less dangerous enemies out there? Of the beasts I fought the Taleen are fast and efficient for their level. Few weaknesses and a formidable defense. Centurions can learn too, unlike most mindless beasts." He commented but Ilea waved him off.

"Levels aren't the only thing. They're fun to fight... plus if I always try to find the easiest monster to level up, how will I face the strongest?"

Terok laughed out loud, spilling some of the stew before he calmed down, "See... simple minded."

"Thank you." Neiphato said and bowed to her, Ilea looking to Terok for help but the dwarf just smirked, "Your reasons do not matter to me. Every destroyed Centurion will help in the unending tide destroying our people. For every elf not acknowledging this I apologize and thank you instead."

"It's fine. Calm down mate. I didn't actually mean the saint talk. You'll be able to fight them yourself soon enough." Ilea said, her ash moving to stop him from bowing. "Now why are you stronger than you seem? Come on... we shared plenty about ourselves."

He looked around again and then sighed, his eyes closing before he spoke, "My domain... my clan. Some few are born with a gift." He paused and then waved them off, "It does not matter. As soon as I reach the requirements I will change my class."

"What? No what the fuck... what gift? Come on Neiph, show me. Whatever it might be I'll survive it... I'm pretty sure."

He was obviously uncomfortable but she didn't let up. He would be fighting to the death after all, had been already and his choice to go against the so called oracles wouldn't make for an easy life. "I am a wood creator." He

finally said, Ilea literally standing in front of him, her eyes leveled with his before she moved back and sat down again.

“That’s it?” She asked, confused why he would make it such a big deal, “I know a wood creator too. Young human. Fought one too at some point. Pretty powerful. Why not keep it and train the class? Your group could use a more ranged combatant.”

He looked at her, eyes going to Terok and then back to her, “What... my clan... did. With their powers but specifically wood magic. It is a cruel gift. Not one of life and creation, one of torture and death.”

The way he squirmed when he said those words made her think he didn’t just imagine or hear about it, he remembered it. She shrugged, “That is what they did with it. I’m an ash creator... do you think I just torture and kill with it?”

Terok weighed in, “You do kill a lot.”

“Fair enough. Well the point stands. You are you, not your clan or anybody else. Do what the fuck you want and if you have a good class you shouldn’t give a fuck about what they did with it. Shake off the control they still have over you, doesn’t seem like you had the healthiest of relationships to your family. Just my two cents.” Ilea ranted and noted Elfie landing a couple meters behind her.

Terok held up the ladle, “Look who’s back. You look fucked up, fell into a Shredder?”

She laughed at the frown coming from the elf as he walked towards them, “No Shredders so far north. Haven’t seen one at least.”

Ilea extended an ashen limb to check on him but the elf had a barrier around himself to prevent her intrusion. *Suit yourself old man. Old elf... doesn’t have the same ring does it?*

“What is this vile sludge you’re cooking up dwarf?” He asked, stepping next to the pot and taking a sip. Summoning different spices, he added more

and more before finally taking out what looked like a dead rabbit, already skinned and gutted. Barriers appeared and it was sliced into small pieces, all of them lowered and joining the stew. The smell changed immediately, still spicy and strong but interesting now instead of just strong.

“Cooking one of your hobbies too?” Ilea asked.

“I have dabbled with it human. Though I dislike the time it takes...,” He took another sip and handed the ladle back to Terok.

*And he never really commented on the food I gave him.* Ilea thought and looked at Neiphato, the elf apparently not sure what to do with his hands as soon as he realized her stare on him. *You’re not like that, beautiful wood mage, are you? Convinced and open. Curious and smart.* Her arm shot up to block the barrier that suddenly appeared and moved towards her head.

“You’re here for the evaluation, are you not?” Elfie asked, looking at her. Terok appeared increasingly busy stirring the stew.

“A month has passed.” Ilea said, “As Terok says, the city is bigger than expected. Do you still want to do it?”

Elfie nodded, “It will be good to have someone evaluate their growth that hasn’t guided them all this time. The dwarf at least has levels showing his change but for them, the Guardians are not high enough to gain any experience worth to mention. Skill levels however...,”

“Well I’m happy to smash them into the dirt. Food first though and it seems the other two are noticing the change in fragrance.” She said, hearing them stir in their bedrolls. *Elves... just thinking about food. My kind of people.*

“After lunch.” Terok commented, taking a sip of the stew, nodding in approval at the taste. Handing the ladle to Neiphato, he tried as well. Stopping the elf from taking another sip, the dwarf took back the ladle. “Meat’s not through yet.”

“Doesn’t have to be... we talked about this Terok.” Neiphato sighed, “You already demand we drain the blood, at least don’t cook it through all the

time.”

“You drink the blood so nothing is lost. Not like you care, the way you slurp it all up all the time.” Terok said.

Ilea looked at Elfie, the elf sighing before he stepped to the side, “After lunch.” He agreed and sat down, summoning a book Ilea hadn’t seen before.

# Chapter 289 Rules

## Chapter 289 Rules

Ilea stepped over the knocked out Terok, Heranuur bleeding and crawling towards her with two broken legs. The elf didn't understand anything less and she was worried about knocking him out, the force necessary likely enough to crack his thick skull. Goldie was panting, his bone armor had grown out enough to cover nearly his full body now. She could still easily injure him with her ash, the sharp edges she could form small enough to bypass the loose armor.

Of course she chose not to after her first demonstration. The cut had closed at some point, showing that he did have some kind of self healing ability. Slower than hers, that much was sure but at least he wasn't as hopeless anymore. Brushing away the blood from his mouth, the white haired elf prepared for her to come. His yellow eyes were focused on her, his face unreadable. The arrogance and superiority he had met her with wasn't there anymore, at least not on the surface.

Neiph, the brown haired elf with a wood creation class he didn't want to use stood behind the bone mage, short swords in hand. Ilea had learned during their now already hour long evaluation that what he really lacked was bite. Goldie higher leveled, yes. He was using both his classes actively and not just whatever passives Neiphato had from his second class but the real difference came from his tenacity.

He crouched and hissed, his stance suggesting that if she wouldn't come to him, he would come to her. *Good. Not giving me time to meditate should have been your priority from the start.* Ilea had found her third tier of Form of Ash and Ember making this whole thing trivial. Not having to constantly use her attack magic in tandem with ash creation and manipulation let her stay relatively full of mana during the whole battle.

Hearnuur's magic wasn't enough to hurt her and her normal punches were dealing quite a bit of damage already, her improved Strength and his lack of quality armor to thank. Terok was still below two hundred, proving that he could somewhat keep up but ultimately lacking the powerful classes everyone else had. His metal armor and capped skill levels didn't quite manage to close the gap. It didn't help that he was their only ranged combatant, forcing Ilea to focus on him as a first priority.

Of course she had held back, had tested them extensively, had given time to recover and even healed some of their injuries. It was an evaluation after all, not a demonstration. Elfie was watching from the sidelines, standing on a barrier overlooking the space. The stew had been eaten and the pot put away creating ample space to smash a bunch of elves into the hard stone.

*Durable.* She had found. Not using her mana intrusion had again confirmed just how powerful it was. Until she reached five or six hundred stat points in Strength and Dexterity, it was hard to tell how much of it came just from stats. Her physical force was enhanced by her auras though, meaning her fists should be hitting just as hard if not harder than her Destruction and Wave of Ember. Neither spells had a number assigned to them but she assumed their damage was multiplied in some way too. A lot of extensive testing could answer her questions but at this point she trusted her decision to invest some more into her physical stats, get Body Enhancement third tier skills and level more Resistances.

In the end her possible evolutions would be fine. Even if she could have the option to become some powerful ash wielding long ranged mage, she preferred it just the way it had been. Her body enhanced by magic. Her fists and legs delivering the damage, helped now by mid range ashen limbs but she kind of counted them as part of her body anyway. Considering everyone

and their mom was using swords or spears, it was only fair to get at least some range.

Goldie appeared in front of her, his claws cutting into her ash before reaching her Veil, nearly stopping entirely before they scratched on her armor. *Still too focused on attack.* She noted, her hand already grabbing his. *Too reserved.* She noted, seeing Neiphato circling her, unsure when to attack. Turning her torso to the left, she jerked the elf up and over her, smashing his whole body into the hard stone.

Letting go of him, she stepped backwards quickly, her feet finding solid ground as her sphere guided her over the terrain, her hands moving quickly to deflect the two short swords trying to get to her. Neiph wasn't bad with them but he simply didn't have the speed to keep up with her and actually get some hits in. In fact he wasn't even close to Edwin, even with a higher level. "Why not use your magic?" She asked, having caught both blades with her hands, the edges cutting through her Veil but not managing to get through her armor. He looked at the weapons but instead of anger at their uselessness, he seemed to be defeated.

Ilea sighed, pushing the blades aside before punching him straight in his chest. Neiphato had the worst armor out of them. Leather and of a quality she had used back at level fifty. How they had even survived thus far was a mystery, specifically Neiphato. The punch made him stumble back. Normally she would've closed the distance, used his lack of balance to get in another hit and then another, her ash to blind them all and her blink to appear where she pleased. Perception and speed, those coupled with her mana intrusion were her greatest assets. Her healing of course rounded up the whole thing but against these guys, she didn't even need it.

Considering Goldie was at level two thirty, she wondered if her classes were just better than theirs. Experience certainly played in, as did skill levels and stats but they were older than her, much older. Their stats were less balanced than hers, at least she assumed as much. Heranuur should be blasting her away with his magic and Goldie should be stronger and faster but they simply weren't. Even Elfie would probably wipe the floor with the three. Then again the only reason she considered herself stronger than him was because of her ability to counter most of his magic.

Looking at him, she considered a bout. Her level was closing in on his. Two seventy two versus two eighty. Goldie used her distraction to appear behind her but both of them knew it wouldn't work, hadn't worked the last ten times they had tried. Stepping to the side, she avoided his claws and turned to meet him. A wicked smile was on her face. *You have been evaluated enough.* Ignoring his attacks, she simply responded in kind, smashing into his dull golden armor as he tried getting through her defenses. She didn't let up, a punch to his head breaking his jaw and making him stumble back.

Ilea followed quickly, her knee smashing into his crotch and lifting him up a little, another punch sending him back down into the ground. Landing on him, she started smacking his head. *One two three.* Her healing skill gave her a general idea of his well being, the woman stopping when he didn't move anymore, brain sufficiently shaken. While he was faster than Heranuur, his Vitality was noticeably lower. With her ability to heal and the durability of two hundred plus people, she knew there was no lasting damage she could leave behind. Not if she didn't rip out a leg or two.

Heranuur was still groaning but he had specifically asked her to help raise his Pain Tolerance. This was her way to do it. Knowing he wouldn't give up, she thought showing him the reliance on his legs would be helpful. Not that he could just sprout wings or more limbs but at some point he might have the choice to learn it. Ilea was certainly glad she had her ash to move around, even if all her limbs had been ripped off. Not that it was particularly relevant anymore with her third tier recovery but it could still be helpful. Especially when her mana was low.

Neiph had recovered enough to face her again but his blades lay on the ground, "Come on." Ilea said, appearing next to Heranuur and throwing him a couple dozen meters away, behind a big rock. "Nobody's watching anymore. Your teacher wants you to use it too, right Elfie?"

He didn't reply but Neiph seemed unsure at least. In the end he didn't use the magic, Ilea growing impatient after two minutes of waiting. Appearing before him, she smacked his face, teeth withstanding but blood started seeping down. He tried blocking but even if he did get his hands between her fists and his torso or face, she would leave bruised arms and cracked bones anyway. Grabbing his leg after an especially big stumble, she twirled



and sent him flying towards Heranuur, frowning when she apparently didn't manage to hit him. At least she heard the red haired elf laugh before he hissed at the pain again.

Sighing, she stood there and let meditation recover the lost mana. Not much, she noted. Elfie hovered down and landed a couple meters away from her, checking on Goldie as he crouched, "He's fine." Ilea said.

"I know. His defense is lacking... especially with how offensive he is. Had he your recovery and resilience I doubt you could shrug him off as easily." He commented, standing up again.

She shook her head, "They're lacking in everything. Don't get me wrong, they're strong. As strong as elite humans, perhaps stronger than I was a year ago but how old are they? Fifty? A hundred? Terok is nearly able to keep up and he's not even had his two hundred evolutions." She kept her voice down, doubting that either of the two conscious warriors heard her talk.

"Becoming a Cerithil Hunter... it is often coupled with changing one's classes. Elves have different reasons for doing so. You knowing about Neiphato's magic will give you an insight into his. Fighting Taleen or anything out in the open is one thing but invading dungeons is another. Long ranged massive explosions won't help in a tight corridor. Ice magic might delay them but when surrounded it can only do so much."

Ilea chuckled at his explanation, "That's bullshit. I've known mages who could easily fight in dungeons and their defense wasn't bad either. You're telling me they change classes and lose their levels?"

"Not levels but skills... skills honed for decades, trained from youth. Not just skills but habits too. Focusing on magic and mid to long ranged battle and then suddenly having to face down a Centurion in hand to spear combat is not something easily done." He explained.

"I still don't get why they wouldn't just keep their classes. Hire human or dark one mercenaries and fire from behind the lines. I agree that a lot of magic would be awkward in there and against a Centurion but to just switch completely?"

Elfie shrugged, “Ask them if you would like to know their reasons. Though I believe Heranuur was always a close combat fighter. Either he failed to chose the right skills or simply didn’t meet any rare requirements for his class evolutions. Who knows what the fuck he was thinking.”

At least he partially agreed and if they really changed their classes then it made sense why they were so lousy at it, at least compared to Ilea. She had just been in Elos for two years but having kick boxed for several years let her know she was at least somewhat talented at it. Even if Neiphato were to cap his skill levels, she doubted he would win against Goldie, even at his current strength. *Not offensively at least. Maybe if he fought reserved and tried to tire him out.* Forcing oneself into a class or fighting style that wasn’t suited for one’s personality and talents didn’t seem like the best choice.

“They’re better however. Than last time I mean.” She said.

“Still, I’m disappointed at how little they could do against you. To tell the truth, you have gotten stronger too. Both in level and experience. You seem a little less... erratic, if that makes any sense.” Elfie explained.

Ilea didn’t really know what he meant. Since coming north she didn’t really feel like having changed much, other than her levels and skills of course.

“What about you? Where have you been all this time. I barely saw you when I came and went.”

“That is none of your business human. While we’re at it, stay away from them. I saw how you looked at Neiphato. Engaging in a relationship as you humans do will not go over well with elves.”

She was surprised and smirked, “What about just fucking? You have the necessary tools don’t you?” She teased, looking at his crotch.

The elf sighed, “My argument that elves would rip a human apart wouldn’t work with you. Know that it is forbidden to engage with another species in sexual activity.”

Ilea scoffed and chuckled, “As it is to enter dungeons. Your oracles seem pretty authoritarian Elfie. Let me tell you, where I’m from there’s plenty of

governments and religions putting ridiculous rules on people. Everyone here can turn stone to dust with their strength alone, why not just taste a bit of freedom?" She noted how he gulped at her mention of the oracles.

"Maybe it would be good for you too."

"Who told you?"

She shrugged, "What does it matter? It is forbidden to tell of them. It is forbidden to enter dungeons, they all did. They're cursed Elfie. Pick a side." She said, "Enough, I don't want to argue about this. I'll join Terok for a while to see the city and the dark ones living there. I think they should continue to work together and improve their skills and teamwork, if the latter is even possible." Leaving him there, she knew they hadn't really talked about the evaluation but Elfie knew enough to have spotted improvements to be suggested. She had certainly spotted one about him.

Healing Goldie and the others, she refused to stop when Heranuur asked her to leave his legs unattended. "I don't want that to become permanent."

"It's fine for a couple weeks." He said when she noted his flushed expression.

Getting a little closer, she smiled, "Are you turned on?"

"Turned what?"

"Sexually aroused? By pain or by me inflicting it on you?" It wasn't really her cup of tea, especially with his tall and muscly figure. The more lean and feminine look of Neiphato was more up her alley, not that she would deny the elf. Kyrian was muscular too, yet not quite as much as the red haired elf.

He didn't respond as she mended his wounds. When she was done he spoke, "I believe I was. I never thought about it. An interesting thought. Perhaps I subconsciously didn't dodge some attacks because of this?"

"It's possible. Maybe jack off before you fight anything, might help with that." She suggested.

He nodded, “Or I don’t... I will think on this Ilea. Thank you for the new idea.”

“What have I birthed?” She sighed, getting up and looking down on the elf, still lying where he had initially landed from her throw. *Elfie isn’t going to be happy when I fuck all his students.* It had been a while but while training and fighting didn’t scratch a sexual itch, it calmed her in other ways. It let her go out and exert herself, meaning her sexual needs weren’t as prevalent as they might be otherwise.

*Celene will go mad with envy when I tell her about this.* The woman probably reading and writing stories about just this event. *She bloody summoned a demon...*, Ilea shook her head. “Well let me know if you want to try things, I’m open to the idea.” She left Heranuur with that, the elf nodding, still lost in thought.

“I don’t think there’s much I could tell you. Against me it’s difficult to fight anyway. Compared to most other ranged mages I’ve killed you’ve done pretty well.” Ilea said to Terok, the two of them walking towards the elevator leading into the Taleen city. “Just wait for your evolutions and we’ll see how that goes. If they’re good... and after all this time and your maxed skills they should be, you might already be stronger than the others.”

“Stronger than an elf. Fucking nuts. Never thought I’d reach that level.” He commented. Elfie and the others had been left behind to talk, Terok had been the first the elf had chewed out. Ilea knew then that not sharing her thoughts with him wasn’t a loss at all. The elf had analyzed every movement of the four and had plenty to say about just Terok. Ilea was pretty sure the dwarf had done the best, for his level at least which meant they’d be busy talking for another couple hours at least.

“Yea I never thought I’d fly and fight magical beings either.”

“Why not?” He asked surprised.

*Did I never tell him?* She wasn't sure, "I'm not from this world. Was teleported here for some reason two or so years ago."

"Makes sense. Didn't think someone as weird as you would be born and raised here." He commented.

Ilea moved her arm to the side and smashed the dwarf into the wall, the steel suit cracking into the stone as the dwarf groaned. "Says the sixty year old robot nerd scavenger."

"Always getting physical. Maybe you should work on your impulses." A smart thing to say, Ilea found, to bait her into hitting him again and proving him right. Then again she didn't really care. Another hit bent the metal of his suit and made him stumble.

"Got it out of your system?" She asked, the dwarf sighing in response.

"Yep, let's get going." He said and she nodded.

# Chapter 290 Routine

## Chapter 290 Routine

“Found it just yesterday. The Saurians avoid the place.” Terok explained, the two of them standing in front of a massive bridge leading to a gate at least as big as one of Virilya’s. Below was an abyss the dwarves apparently liked to dig for some reason. It did give an imposing vibe but Ilea doubted the work was worth it. Especially because nobody would exactly come down here to see it.

*Maybe they did back then....*, It was possible the cities had been open to other races. Then it made more sense to have something like this. The bridge itself was made of white stone, compared to the gray one used in the parts of the city she had seen otherwise. “Probably the great hall. I’d assume there are more dangerous machines in there. Is it open?”

Terok shook his steel head, “No. The enchantments still hold as well. I miss the days when every door I found was just rotten away.”

“Like the whole literal city behind us?” She said dryly.

“Exactly.” He replied, pointing at her, “I’ll try to crack it but it’s a complex one Ilea. Might be better if we get Maro out first, he can probably help.”

“I’ll visit them soon. I’m not sure Elana can do much herself... and I’m not ready for the Kingsguard.”

“Let me get to two hundred and then we’ll see. I’ll start working on it when I find time in between fighting and mapping everything out.”

Ilea nodded, “We’ll see how much of a change level three hundred brings for me. Just keep on it. What are the dark ones doing in the city by the way? Could they be of any help?”

“I doubt it. They don’t even have maps. Few of them can even talk and they are more interested in the ivy as well as more space to nest than anything else. Don’t have anything worth trading either. Unlike their more aggressive brethren in the Penumra dungeon, these lack the level and numbers to be of much help.” The dwarf explained, Ilea nodding.

“Well then keep at it. I usually come and go a couple times every day. If you find anything worthwhile or if you crack the great hall door, let me know.” She cracked her neck and prepared to leave.

Terok gave her a thumbs up, “Will do Ilea. No more evaluations?”

“I think Elfie has it under control. When he tells me you’re ready for the Centurion part of the dungeon, he’ll let me know.”

The dwarf sighed and shook his head, “Probably easier to convince you.” He murmured which made her chuckle.

“Terok if there’s treasure anywhere in this place then it’s in there.” She said, pointing at the massive gate. “I doubt you see the act of fighting machines as treasure.”

“If the parts are worth selling.” He grumbled, “Not like the taleen built their bloody machines with gold.”

*I’m pretty sure there’s some gold in there.* Ilea mused, her wings spreading, “You’re ok here alone?” She asked and he waved her off.

“Things here are weaker than most dungeons in the area.” He said, “Good luck Ilea.”

*I wonder why.* “Same to you Terok.”

Ilea didn't meet the elves on her way back to the manufacturing part of the dungeon. She made sure to use Hunter's Sight and Embered Body Heat with the goal to get them to the maximum second tier level. Neither skill was far off and she assumed both would reach it by the end of the month. *Back to work.* A smile spread as she let the power of her auras rush through her, blinking past the elevator and down into the vast layers of protected heavy machinery.

Two weeks later Ilea had finally cleared out the top floor. No more Centurions appeared. At this point she could start to safely farm single ones she could pull from the lower floor. Many stairwells led down and though they must have heard her fighting or at the very least the explosions from the destroyed ones, none of them ever came up without actually seeing her. She was glad for the fact, allowing her more breathing room down in the facility and some new possibilities.

In the coming week Ilea formed more of a routine. Previously her training hours had been somewhat dictated by how many Centurions would engage her and if another hunting group came upon their fight, sometimes forcing her out or simply having her fight for hours at a time. The first thing every morning was a relaxing bath in some molten steel. While her perception of pain wasn't present, she certainly had to get used to the feeling of being engulfed in the heat. Contrary to simple fire, the heat produced by the forges was much higher, the liquid metal allowing her to target a bigger area of her body.

Ilea's healing was struggling against the damage done to her, the third tier allowing the hunter to stay a couple seconds in longer before her mana inevitably ran out and she had to blink away. Teleportation wasn't restricted because the molten steel didn't count as an enemy touching her, which too solved the issue of getting the liquid off her. It was an effective training for her healing, her Heat Resistance as well as some of her defensive skills. Ilea's Veil multiplied the time she could stay in the liquid, allowing her to work on that skill as well.



With her incredibly quick mana recovery, she was pretty sure to be pushing the limits of Resistance and recovery training. She didn't fail to keep up her Embered Body Heat and Hunter's Sight either. Of course while doing all this, she wasn't engaging an enemy, likely reducing the skill leveling speed by quite a bit but the consistency and constant availability wasn't even matched by the miststalkers and her training with them.

The bath was usually followed by a big chunk of the day fighting against Centurions. Each and every one of them destroyed gave her a little bit of experience. While they were still a higher level, she noticed the closer she got to them that her leveling speed decreased. It was then that she tried something new. Terok had spotted them before and now she used her Hunter's Sight to find and engage one of the special variants the dwarf had pointed out to her.

The one she found had four arms compared to the normal two and wasn't carrying a spear. The only other difference she could spot was the color. It was black. Sending an ashen projectile its way, the thing whirled around and caught it, looking at her with green shining eyes.

### ***[Centurion Juggernaut – lvl ??]***

*Not over five hundred then.* She thought, the machine advancing on her quickly as she navigated through the forest of forges, supplies and machinery. One Centurion she rushed by nearly dropped the green steel ingots it was carrying. She noted the speed and awareness of the black centurion to be at a higher level already, losing the normal one that had noticed her pretty quickly but not able to shake the new one.

She found a spot on the second layer to test herself against it, not willing to bring it up to the cleaned out floor yet just in case it was too much for her. If it would stay up there, her whole new routine would be fucked.

Even when it finally engaged her, the thing didn't use any weapons. Instead its form arms formed fists and punched her way. Testing the strength, Ilea held up her hands and took the attack straight on, a sudden explosion sending her back a couple meters as her Veil reformed, some smoke rising from the heat that had washed over her armor and body. The armor on her

wrists was a tiny bit dented but nothing to be concerned about yet. With four arms the machine had more going for it than the normal variants.

Ilea learned quickly that what it lacked in range, it more than made up with speed and simple aggression. Using similar tactics as she did against her early Centurions, Ilea kept defensive, using her ashen limbs to get in damage as the two danced around the second layer. Feeling confident enough, she soon led the machine to the first layer to avoid a group of other machines interfering in their fight.

The constant aggression made her glad Form of Ash and Ember didn't use any resources anymore, otherwise the fight would've taken much much longer. Most of her mana usage she concentrated on Wave of Ember, delivered through her ashen limbs. Dodging and avoiding the machine was somewhat simple with her Sphere, matching speed and blink ability. It couldn't just get through all the forges and tools, not for a lack of trying.

Finally, its core got exposed. Surprisingly the thing continued to attack and didn't just run off towards the central opening that would allow it to blow. Smiling at the fact, Ilea continued her defensive dance, the machine already having reached its maximum aggression. She noted that its whole body started to show veins of light, the fists landing on the steel machinery around her creating bigger explosions and getting damaged more heavily. *Using the energy for offense.* Still, the fact that it was too slow and lacked mobility in the steel jungle would ultimately lead to its demise. More powerful punches didn't help there.

She was glad it hadn't suddenly learned about teleportation of some other kind of magic that would make it more of a challenge again. Ten minutes later, the machine collapsed. Unceremoniously. The lack of explosion made Ilea wary to get too close but using her ashen limbs, she moved around the corpse and lifted it up. The light in the veins had died out and she could tell its interior was burnt out entirely.

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Centurion Juggernaut – lvl 350] – For defeating an enemy seventy levels or more above your own, bonus experience is awarded'***

Ilea started laughing, “Really? Three fifty?” The fight had been simple. Even a knight at level three hundred had put up a better fight than this one. The punch she had initially taken had dented her armor a little and burnt her skin but compared to the level she was definitely disappointed in its performance. *Speaks for the undead knights I guess.* She noted, recovering her mana and continuing with her day.

A big part of the nights were spent with the Miststalkers. Contrary to the molten steel baths, this activity trained her mana, health drain as well as mist magic resistances. Healing too of course. The constant relocation because of too many of them showing up as well as often quick drains made it a little less effective were it not for the fact that she was actually fighting enemies. Ilea didn't know how much of a difference it made exactly but the levels after three weeks certainly spoke for the method.

Feeling bad for the king and queen of Rhyvor, Ilea decided to visit them a week later. It wasn't just the fact that she was now on her last armor and needed to restock in Tremor. Terok hadn't shown up to tell her about a new discovery or anything else in that month, meaning he was still busy trying to crack the gate and train with the elves. Elfie wasn't around either most of the time, off on his own adventures, whatever they consisted of. Ilea assumed plenty of hunting.

At this point she was already at level 279, closing in on the next third tier point for her Azarinth class. She would think about the choice as soon as the actual options were visible to her. Flying back to Tremor was uneventful, the dangers of the northern night getting more and more mundane to her. Ilea would still avoid the arcane storms during the day and still hid as soon as famine crows showed up but they weren't stealthy or fast

enough to pose much trouble. Of course the whole picture would be different if they actually pursued into the cracks and crevices of the land.

The dark wolf she had seen showed her how to get rid of the crows in case she needed it. At this point her resistances and recovery were high enough to at least traverse the lakes of mist safely for a couple minutes. Until too many of the miststalkers had gathered.

Bypassing the cathedral entirely, Ilea made her way to the house she had chosen as her residence in the forgotten city. She dumped the damaged and broken armor and put the remaining sets into her necklace, probably enough for the time being.

“Oh look! We thought you guys were dead.” Maro exclaimed, Ilea smiling at the ridiculous suggestion. “Do we have to whisper?”

She shook her head, “Terok left the enchantments, I just activated them again.”

“Are you kidding me?” He asked and looked towards the room in which Elana was writing something, “She told me I had to be quiet because he didn’t...,”

“Yikes.”

“Well let us talk about something else than the state of my marriage. I’m bored Ilea. So bored. I have no idea what Elana is doing but knowing her, she’s probably planning to rebuild our kingdom somehow.” He shook his head, “She can find a new king for that. I’m done with that.”

Ilea laughed at that and sat down on the chair, “I’ve been fighting Taleen machines for the past month. What are your plans for when you get out?”

He looked at her, green eyes sparkling, “Didn’t I tell you? Undead necromancer king Maro... the one to destroy the world.”

“I doubt you have that power.”

“Well with you at my side my dear. You’ve grown again. I like your reckless approach. Then again if you had similar abilities to that assassin, I can see the possibilities. Especially coupled with your personality.” He surmised. “I have no idea what I’d do when I get out. Remember it’s only been a couple months for me. Find out what happened to my old friends. I survived... maybe some of the mad fuckers did too.”

Ilea smiled, wondering if it was true. Maro and Elana had basically been in a protected time capsule. Their entourage might not have had that luxury. “We’ll see. Otherwise I’m sure you’ll do fine. Not many level three hundred people around as far as I can tell. You could join the Shadow’s Hand, become a mercenary and explore the world. They don’t have many rules as far as I can tell.”

He chuckled, “Yes... after two hundred it’s hard to enforce anything anyway. Caused my dearest wife plenty of headaches. I’ll think about it. First I’d like to know how the world has changed, especially this area. If it really is as dangerous as you say then perhaps exploring the dungeons again might be fun. And to explore my newfound power.” He looked at her confused expression and continued, “I hadn’t been at three hundred for long before entering this machine.” Maro gestured widely around himself. “Didn’t have much time to see the evolutions’ effects.”

“Big changes?” Ilea asked.

“Definitely. Main reason I cooked up this whole thing. How it was even a possibility. Well hey, while you’re here. I was wondering if you had some more books, maybe a map from the area. Things like that. I’d appreciate as much. Not that I could offer anything in return.”

“Lonely and desperate.” Came the comment from Elana, the woman joining them with a stack of papers in her hands. “Ilea dear, how have you been?”

“Do you really care? Or do you want to add something for me to bring?”

Elana smirked at her, “The dwarf would be nice. To continue his work. I tried to make the list as comprehensive as possible.” She said and handed Ilea some documents.

Looking through them, she raised her eyebrows, “These are names and places.”

“As well as some descriptions, classes and magic they use. The teams Maro and I have been a part of, government officials, powerful adventurers. Friends and well... family, as close as it gets at least.” She paused and added, “I agree with him. We need maps and we need to learn about the world in its current stage. Getting out is a priority but we can work from here as well.”

Elana left again to continue her work, leaving Ilea confused with the list in her hand, “And what am I supposed to do with this?”

“Can you show it to me?” Maro asked.

“Sure.” She replied, holding out the paper, “Why doesn’t she talk to you more often anyway? I didn’t get the impression that you hate each other.”

“Brilliant... she added places and classes as well.” He said and smiled, “Don’t interpret too much into it. We’ve never spent too much of our time together. In the last years especially... she was engrossed in her work.”

Ilea was sure there was more but she just shot him a glance. “If you get me the map of this area I might be able to add in the places from that list. If you’re interested in finding more ruins you may explore them. Or I will as soon as you’re done with the Kingsguard. It’s possible some of these people could and would help with that but I doubt you would agree to that.”

“I’d like to fight them myself if possible.” Ilea said, the king nodding in understanding. “I’ll go to Hallowfort and see what I can get for the two of you.”

When she left again, Ilea saw a bunch of crumpled up papers littering the floor in what had become essentially Elana’s study. She wondered what the

queen was mulling over. *How to use the necromancer king to take over an empire.*

# Chapter 291 Inquisitive Fox

## Chapter 291 Inquisitive Fox

Ilea found the quick visit to Tremor had lifted her spirits somewhat. Perhaps fighting everyday with absolutely no interaction was too much, even for a hardcore introvert like her. Maybe it was the task she had agreed to take on, finding books and maps about the lands surrounding Tremor. While Ilea quite enjoyed having her life drained repeatedly, taking molten metal baths and fighting unending numbers of Centurions, change was welcome after a certain amount of time.

Landing near Penumra, she made her way towards Hallowfort. The town looked the same as always except for the fact that there were two sentries standing at the end of the bridge instead of the usual one. Ilea waved as she walked up to the dark ones, both in heavy plate armor. One had a massive curved blade on his back and the other a hammer whose head looked to be too heavy to lift. *Is there really anything like that in this world.* “Greetings, strong one.” She said and bowed lightly, the guard turning towards her.

“Warrior of ash.” A voice responded, the big figure bowing a little in response. Her Veil wreathing around her body identifying her as an ash wielder at the very least.

“Hey, can I try to lift your hammer?” She asked, stepping a little closer.

The guard looked at her for solid ten seconds then turned its head towards the other guard who nodded. The hammer was handed over as if it was a mere plaything. Ilea had her auras active and some of the gained stats had



already been invested into Strength. With all the buffs she had a nearly six hundred percent boost to her strength and it showed. “Impressive.” The dark one simply said as she held on to the thing, lifting it up above her head.

*Fuck what is this thing made of.* She was sweating when she handed it back. “What metal is this?”

“Pure obsidian. Several weight enchantments have been placed on it. Your level being higher I assume you have some investments in other status modifiers too.” The dark one said, sounding out a guttural chuckle.

***[Warrior – lvl 223]***

Ilea nodded, “Impressive hammer.” She said and smiled. While she might be able to swing it, the weight definitely made it too unwieldy for her. *I’d like a hammer.* Nodding to the two, she turned around again when the other guardian’s head sunk. “May I check out the sword as well?”

She grinned when his mood immediately improved, the big curved blade immediately handed over. *Fuck, these guys could be disarmed with a simple request to hold their weapons.* Then again their literal arms probably could dish out some damage too. The blade was lighter by far, well balanced at least as far as she could tell. A black sheen was on the blade and she tried swinging it at the air twice. Her dexterity likely allowed for the swings to look impressive, to an amateur swordsman but the dark one laughed when she handed it back.

“You should not use swords any time soon ash wielder.” It wasn’t an insult, she was pretty sure about that.

“I don’t plan to. It’s a well crafted weapon dark one.”

“You honor me.” It said and bowed, Ilea mirroring the gesture. She liked most of the dark ones she had met so far, at least the bulky steel obsessed ones like most of the guards and Goliath.

*Maybe someday I'll end up just like them. Guarding some village I chose to retire in. Not in many years at least.* “Why are there more guards?”

“Feynor on the move.”

She nodded and bowed again, leaving towards the city. *And two guards instead of one would deter them?* She wondered. Neither of them looked terribly fast either, a simple fly or teleportation spell would allow anybody to bypass them entirely. Thinking of the only place she knew to hold books in Hallowfort, Ilea made her way to Catelyn's shop. “The Hunter's Den.” She murmured when she stood outside.

Opening the door, she rung the bell. A minute passed until the fox appeared out of nowhere, standing on her four feet on the big table situated in the center of the shop. “Welcome to... oh it's you. Hey you leveled again! Still hunting knights?”

“Centurions this time.” Ilea replied, still unable to identify the fox.

“I don't buy metal. Ask Goliath.”

“You told him about the cake?” Ilea asked, smiling as she put away her helmet.

“Maybe.”

“You did. Well it's alright, I'll try to find some for you once I go back. At this point it might take a long time.” She said.

Catelyn purred, “Worth waiting a thousand years for that.”

“You know you could just go south and get all the cake you want.” Ilea said and chuckled, “With all the gold you have.”

“Your kind does not do well with ours human. I'd be hunt down, as much is known.”

Ilea snorted. It wasn't a real suggestion anyway. The fox seemed to be intertwined with this town too much anyway. She could certainly get her a

place in Ravenhall or with the necromancers. Both them and Claire would probably agree to have the powerful dark one amongst them. “Wouldn’t take your power to convince them otherwise. Mine is probably enough already.”

“I believe your power will soon match my own. Do not underestimate the hate one species can hold for another, the hate one can hold for the unknown.”

Ilea nodded, “I get it. Hey I didn’t come for a philosophical discussion. Do you have maps of the north on sale, nothing too complicated. Maps as well as perhaps books, history related would be best I think. All about this territory.”

“Have you found a survivor perhaps? Of times long past?” Catelyn asked.

A shrug was her reply, “Perhaps I did. Why would you care?”

She purred again, “Why? Because I care about things awakening near this town.”

“Have you been following me?”

A purr again, “No. I have better things to do than follow you to places long forgotten little human. What I did however is see that you are wearing armor forged with Stonehammer steel.” She hopped off the table and walked towards Ilea, “Word of an ash wielder reaching Vineyard Cave has not reached me so I can only assume you have found another place to get that steel from. You don’t strike me as one to buy it. And the information you seek. It strikes me as odd that you would have waited so long. Helping someone out seems like a possibility.”

Walking around Ilea, Catelyn then appeared on the counter next to the bell, sitting up to be near Ilea’s face. “You are not a deceiver. If you have awoken someone from a time long past I would like to meet them.”

“To evaluate the danger?” Ilea asked in turn and the fox smirked.

“Yes. That as well. First and foremost to establish contact. If they are reasonable they could join our town as another powerful ally. Before they reestablished their long dead empire or join the Dark Protector and his forces.”

“Sounds like this has happened before.” Ilea smirked.

The orange fox sighed, “Words of a young human. Some of the people guarding this place have been kings or warlords before the great change. Others legendary adventurers or champions.”

Ilea crossed her arms, “What’s the great change? Goliath mentioned something similar before.”

“It is confusing... to think a people like yours, to keep records about all and everything. Would not teach their children of the light. Well... your kind does not live long. Thousands of years ago the mana in the north changed, the whole world I speculate. Some have confirmed it, coming from far away, others again denied it. Many theories exist to be sure. Us dark ones profited greatly, finding many new places to dwell, many more of us being born.”

Ilea nodded, “The mana density changed. That’s why the north is the way it is today. It was more like the human plains before this great change happened?”

“When light was no more. The stars aligning differently.” Catelyn added.

*A lunar eclipse maybe? Or a meteor or something.* Ilea theorized but it was an event from long ago. No librarian or scholar she had talked to ever mentioned it but to the dark ones it was apparently an important event.

“You were born before that?” She asked but the fox shook her head.

“No. Few remain who have been there. Goliath... yet he dwelled in his smithy then as he does now I am sure.” She chuckled, “What did you find then, Ilea of ash. Kalin? Rhyvor? The red church? Or perhaps even the Old ones?”

“What would that information be worth to you, one blessed by fire? To meet whom I found.”

Catelyn grinned but shook her head, “It is gold that you want?”

“Information seems worth more, coming from you.” Ilea suggested.

“Good. A trade then. What would you like to know?”

Ilea thought about it, “The names you mentioned, who are they? Kalin and the others.”

“Old powerful empires, kingdoms or organizations. Little is known about them, little matters now. Time has come and gone but secrets still remain, artifacts and perhaps even those powerful enough to survive.”

“What about the old ones? That seems a little too ambiguous to be an actual thing.” Ilea asked.

“Perhaps it is. One of your librarians might know more about them. I believe it is simply a way to describe those of great power that could not be assigned to one place or organization. Others believe them an actual group, a hidden alliance of sorts. Not that we don’t have enough real ones to go around.” Catelyn explained.

Ilea nodded, “Ever heard of the Golden Lily?” She thought it was worth a shot, even so far north.

The fox pondered for a while, “I have, yes. One of theirs has come to look for trade, two maybe three hundred years ago. I remember the name because it was a human. Rare for your kind to be that powerful, to come this far north.”

Ilea nodded, “I’ll tell you who and what I’ve found if you share what you know about them.”

“I have little to share. A female I remember. Above level three hundred... three twenty maybe? Mage... her armor was made of steel I have yet to identify. As if made from wood but I knew it to be steel.”

“What did she want?”

“She sought information on the territory, on dungeons, technology, ruins and monsters.”

*Not so different from me then.* “In what context did she mention the golden lily then? Do you know anything about the order itself?”

Catelyn blinked, “She used the name when introducing herself. A possibly powerful ally to the south I believe she said. Well they never returned. I assume she died somewhere out there. Humans tend to be arrogant, especially at that power. No offense meant to you ash wielder.”

“Oh no I definitely agree. Don’t think it’s a human exclusive though.” Ilea replied. *A powerful ally to the south. So it’s at least big enough to be considered an ally to Hallowfort? Doesn’t really change anything. I myself could be a powerful ally to this town. Human arrogance. I get it.*

“It is not.” Catelyn simply stated. “I will try to find more information but it is long ago and we have little knowledge of humans and their dealings. Too far away to get information.”

“Irrelevant as well.” Ilea commented, the fox shrugging. “I have found the king and queen of Rhyvor. Maro and Elana Invalar.”

Catelyn literally burst into flame for a second before calming down again, “Rhyvor. Good. Not the worst. They are alive... where are they? What are they doing?”

“Stuck in a dungeon until I clear out a bunch of triple mark undead.”

“Triple... I will not risk helping you. I hope you understand.” Catelyn said.

Ilea raised her eyebrows, “Well... I intend to kill them myself anyway.”

“Soon you will be able to meet such a challenge, I’m sure. Even I could try but without help. It would be dangerous. Impossible depending on the nature of those beings. How did you make contact?”

“I can get you in. As long as you have a teleportation ability but I think you just used it before.” Ilea replied.

“I did.”

“Good. I promised maps of the area as well as books. Can you get that before we go?”

The fox smirked, walking around her again, “Ilea child of ash. We rarely write things down. My mind is the best they could hope for. To learn about the north. When would you like to leave?”

“Soon, later today I guess. Thought to meet Goliath quickly. Anything else of note going on? Feynor are apparently on the move, whatever that means.” Ilea said.

The fox made an irritated noise, “Ignorant creatures. Without the Dark Protector they would have attacked long ago I’m sure.”

“What are they exactly and why would they attack Hallowfort?” Ilea asked. Other than Goliath she had little reason to care about the town. Most of the inhabitants were competent fighters, not comparable to a human city.

“Their physiology is similar to lizardmen with some important differences. The problem they pose is their almost fanatic belief of their own purity.”

Ilea sighed, “They attack and kill anybody that isn’t one of them?”

“Basically. Usually they stay further north, keep to their... rituals and worship. I don’t know what roused them but in the past thirty years they have been more and more active in these parts as well as further east and southwards.” The fox explained, “Well it should not be an issue. This town is well defended.”

“By you?” Ilea smirked, the fox doing the same.

“Precisely. Not just me human. Hallowfort is old, many of its inhabitants have lived here for hundreds if not more years. It is an oasis amidst the chaotic and dangerous lands of the north. The only reason they would strike

is for misplaced notions of grandeur and pride. That is why I'm worried. Both sides would lose people. The dungeons take enough already." She sighed and appeared on the table again, stretching and resting her head on her paws.

"Should you come across a war band, the town will pay you for information as well as your help in defending it, should anything come to pass. They will attack you one way or the other. Humans they hate most, next to dwarves and elves."

*Of course they do.* Ilea was pretty sure their ancestors must have done something pretty vile to cause all of this. Or the creatures were just hateful and aggressive by nature or culture. "I'll keep my eyes open." She said, "So the Dark Protector, lord of edge, is forming an army to fight them?"

"That is an interesting title... they do own a lot of sharp swords... perhaps fitting." She replied, "You are mistaken. The Dark Protector formed its army a hundred years ago. The war against the Feynor as well as clearance of dungeons to make living space for us dark ones has been going on for many decades."

"Weird coincidence that the Feynor start looking south as soon as the dark army starts their war." Ilea said.

"Perhaps. It is certainly part of the reason but not all. There are many groups involved, influential beings both dark ones and friends of the Feynor. Dwarves supplying steel and even humans I suspect. A war among other species... it is a profitable endeavor."

Ilea nodded, "Any war is. Good to know I shouldn't get involved. What's your stake in all that?"

"My place is here. Hallowfort is one of the few places not torn apart by this conflict and I intend to keep it that way. Let them have their war. As soon as it ends there will be another. Perhaps the undead rise and fight the Taleen. Hallowfort will stand nonetheless."



“You’re pretty confident in all this. The Taleen are focused on elven lands anyway, as far as I hear.” Ilea said, trying to get another angle on the story both Elfie and Neiphato had told.

The fox looked surprised, “It is true. A gruesome battle. Yet I fear what would happen should one side prevail.”

*No further info but at least she agrees.*

“To speak of more mundane things, an expedition is forming. Application can be done in the Abyss. I believe you have been there before. To delve into the Descent, to the fifth layer and beyond. Perhaps you might be interested.”

She smiled, “Thanks for the tip but I don’t have a good track record with expeditions. I think I’ll pass on this one.”

“Your decision. At least I hope more will return this time.”

“How come there are still people around if so many die up here all the time?” Ilea asked with interest. Hallowfort was by no means deserted but it was a rough environment.

The fox smirked, “That is precisely what makes this town so unique human of ash. A sanctuary if you will. For those sick of wars. Exiles, veterans or simply beings such as yourself. Adventurers I believe you call them. Explorers perhaps, pioneers.”

Ilea could feel the pride in her words. It reminded her of how Sulivhaan and Dagon talked about the Hand. They were the new elders now, at least until the lost ones showed up again. She didn’t dislike the sentiment, nor Hallowfort itself. Perhaps it was to the people of the north what Ravenhall was to the human plains. Sovereignty through power. The ultimate adventurer’s hub with just a little more freedoms and hopefully lack of prejudice than most other places. Ilea was sure Ravenhall wouldn’t fall, not against Baralia nor against the empire. Hallowfort though, she wasn’t so sure but looking into the near red eyes of the fox in front of her, she knew

the battle for it would be vicious. *Not a thing to miss.* She thought, smirking.

# Chapter 292 Forges and Armor

## Chapter 292 Forges and Armor

Ilea juggled the two steel spheres she had bought from Catelyn in her hands as she walked into Goliath's smithy. They were similar constructs as Elfie's fire cube. One for water and one for fire. Neither could really create the element but they could siphon the necessary molecules to form them. The water rune sphere for example wouldn't work in a desert while the fire rune likely wouldn't underwater.

"The friend of ash returns. Welcome. Your power grows... I can feel it." Goliath commented, its yellow eyes sparkling with joy at seeing the woman. "Oh please... do refrain from using those in my smithy. The balance is exquisite." He actually sounded worried, as much as the ethereal whisper allowed.

"Don't worry." Ilea said, putting away the spheres. "Thought I'd pop in. How are you doing?"

The smith recoiled physically, its eyes focusing on her as it mulled over her question, "How am I doing? Do you have no purpose here... but to... care for me?"

Ilea smiled and wondered if hugging the smith would freak him into a coma, "I mean I have some things to talk about I guess but isn't that what friends do sometimes?"

"I had not considered the possibility. Of being a... friend."

“How do you like it?” Ilea asked, genuinely curious about his thinking. She decided to think of him as a man then and there, at least until proven otherwise.

The smith thought about it for a whole minute, Ilea in the meantime sitting down on a workbench and starting to eat a meal from Keyla. Apparently the heat it gave off didn't irritate the oh so particular balance Goliath had talked about moments earlier. Or he simply didn't care.

“I have not decided.” He said, a metal triangle appearing in his hand before a little bit of mist was released into the room.

“Sorry.” She said, looking at the food.

“Do not mind it human. I know those of flesh cannot live without their sustenance.”

Ilea smiled, “Still, I could have waited for later. Let me know if I should put it away. Another thing I just thought about. Are you male or female, or something else?”

“Peculiar. Humans do like to categorize do they not? Sex is what you are describing? It holds no relevance to me. Think of me as you will.”

Ilea swallowed a mouthful of food. A chili, or something close enough she thought. Some of the veggies were unknown to her but it tasted nice, hearty and with just the right amount of spiciness. “I found a Taleen manufacturing plant... they make Centurions there. Level three hundred, some even higher. The facility is massive... spans kilometers in each direction and I have no idea how many floors it has. Thought you might be interested.”

“Indeed. That does sound intriguing. The dungeon to the northwest I suspect. Izna I believe was the name. Too dangerous for me I suppose. One Centurion I might face but their numbers are higher there, are they not?”

Ilea nodded, “Yea... hundreds, thousands probably. Already killed so many I lost count. Well I cleared the first level and it doesn't seem like they come

up there so you could check it out. The way there is dangerous too of course. How fast can you fly? Any teleportation abilities?”

The smith chuckled, “That won’t be necessary. I trust you, wielder of ash.” He floated to the center of the room before a one meter high black obelisk appeared. “Perhaps this will finally have a use. Too long has it been.”

She walked closer and looked at it, “What is it?”

“It is a creation related to a skill of mine. A gateway, a focus perhaps. I may travel through it freely, to any other obelisk of my creation.”

“A long range teleportation network? You know people would kill to have this ability.”

“Little gain would it have for them. It is only usable by me. The range is limited too but if my geographical knowledge does not deceive me it should be possible. Should you wish for me to inspect this... facility, place this inside and I will find my way there.”

Ilea nodded and tried storing it in her necklace, failing at the task. “I am afraid you will have to carry it.”

Scratching her head, she nodded, “Once I go back. Just leave it here for now I guess. Gonna be a day or two alright?”

“Thank you. For such an opportunity. The taleen manufacturing sites are well guarded, well hidden. I would cherish the chance to see one, feel it.”

*Well don't get sexual here. I thought it wasn't a thing for you.* “I’ll let you know. Any way I can warn you before you use it?”

“No. I will wait for seven days. Should you fail to place it safely you may return and warn me or... well... I will have to deal with what is on the other side.”

“You can’t just teleport back?”

The smith shook his head, “Once only per day.”

*Damn, that's much better than my skill. And I can't even place multiple anchors. Well I guess mine isn't restricted by distance. Otherwise we might've been stuck in the demon realm for quite a bit longer.* She nodded.

Goliath held up a hand, “Oh... I forgot. Your armor. You have asked me to craft something of my choice. With some of the metals you have provided. I have finished it.”

“Oh.” Ilea simply said, having forgotten about the suggestion she had made a couple months ago.

“Yes. Well I have thought about it. Functionality is important, speed and practicality. Your mold coupled with a strong metal is the best you can get. Especially with the light weight it provides. At least for now. So I thought... instead of trying to improve on your armor that you will inevitably destroy in a matter of months, I have decided to make armor so cumbersome and limiting that the sheer ability to wear it will be a challenge worth completing.”

Ilea wasn't sure where he was going with this when a massive two and a half meter colossus of steel appeared. Black in color and simple in design, two legs and two arms all smooth and bulky. She couldn't discern any of the parts connecting to each other, instead it was one seamless piece of steel. No holes for eyes and no fingers on the hands. “Impressive... brick.” She said, walking up to it and touching the thing. “How exactly am I supposed to use this without any connecting pieces? I won't be able to walk.” It towered over her as she stood there, higher than even the guardians protecting the bridge.

The smith's eyes glowed and sparkled, “I will let you discover the secrets this creation holds. Enjoyment like this, well I haven't felt it for simple armor in many many cycles.”

*Calling this armor...*, She nodded and smiled, trusting Goliath and his experience. Somehow she felt this armor was a more dangerous foe than the Centurions waiting for her back in the dungeon.

***[Armaments of Trials – Ancient Quality]***

“Holy shit it’s ancient?” She said and put it into her necklace, the thing taking up a solid ten points of storage.

“Many days of labor... a high amount of quality steel and my expertise went into it. I will be interested in your progress.” He said, his eyes dancing to convey joy. Or sadistic malice. She wasn’t sure.

“Thank you.” She said. “I’ll get the Obelisk later then.”

On the way out Ilea thought to check in on the expedition after she had brought Catelyn to Maro and Elana. It was possible she could gain some rare resistances from them. Walking up through the tight alleys of Hallowfort, she quickly checked on the levels she had gained in the past month.

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 273 – Five stat points awarded’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 279 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 267 – Five stat points awarded’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 275 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6’*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Hunter's Sight reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Embered Body Heat reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

The difficulty in leveling up third tier skills really showed, after a full month of fighting Centurions. Granted they weren't the most difficult enemies for her to kill anymore.

*'ding' 'Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 15'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 16'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 17'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1'*



***‘Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1***

***Mist magic is a rare talent, found in students of the arcane adept in both wind and water magic. It is an elusive power, difficult to wield yet ultimately destructive and impossible to avoid. You have faced it and lived. This skill will help you do so again.***

***2nd stage: Through increasing exposure you have learned to stop the elusive mist from passing through you.’***

*Another resistance in the second tier. Of her seventy stat points, she had put forty five into Strength and the rest into Dexterity. Before reaching there hundred, she would have at least Strength at five hundred but while Dexterity was only boosted by Form of Ash and Ember, she felt like it shouldn’t be left behind too far. Ilea smiled at her status and entered Catelyn’s shop.*

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0***

***Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 279***

- Active: Destruction – 3rd lvl 6***
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 3rd lvl 8***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 9***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 8***
- 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 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 20***

***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 275***

- Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 8***
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 3rd lvl 2***

- *Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 4*
- *Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 20*

### **General Skills:**

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Identify - lvl 7*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 19*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 15*
- *Curse Resistance - 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 17*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 1*

- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 9*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 621***  
***Endurance: 400***  
***Strength: 400***  
***Dexterity: 385***  
***Intelligence: 600***  
***Wisdom: 650***

***Health: 6210/6210***  
***Stamina: 3899/4000***  
***Mana: 6500/6500***

“Ready to leave then?” The fox asked.

“Yea. I hope you know that you owe me for this.”

“That depends on who and what exactly you will show me.” Catelyn replied and appeared next to her.

“Can you fly or should I hold you?” Ilea suggested.

The fox looked up to her and started floating, “I dislike the sensation and my speed is greatly diminished. Would you like to hold me human?”

“I would.” Ilea said and grabbed her, putting away her armored gauntlets to feel the soft fur. *Glad it's not steel or something.* She thought with a smile and walked out of the shop, spreading her wings before the two of them were on their way towards Tremor.

Elana stared at Catelyn with cold eyes. “What did you bring this time?” The question directed at Ilea.

She rolled her eyes, “Catelyn, council member of Hallowfort.” Gesturing to the queen, “Elana Invalar. Queen of Rhyvor. Have fun you two.” Walking to Maro, she greeted him with a wave.

“I would wave back but you know.” The king said.

“Funny.” She replied.

“Terribly. Hey you brought a dark one, never seen a fox... and at level three twenty eight. Not bad. Did he force you to bring him?”

“It's a female. No, she was the one I asked for books and a map. Either she's going to suddenly attack and slaughter you or she'll actually provide good info. We'll see.” Ilea replied.

Maro laughed, “Well I hope she doesn't go crazy. Most dark ones I've met in my time were more reasonable than humans.”

“Hey I was wondering. Some of my general skills are getting close to the end of the second tier-”

He interrupted her, “No idea. The ones I had have been at second and twenty for years and years. If you find out anything, do let me know. It's been driving me crazy. Not even now at three hundred...’

“Ah, that sucks. I'll let you know but if you're not even there yet I'll get you out before anyway.” Ilea said.

He raised an eyebrow, “You intend to fight the kingsguard... apparently now triple mark enemies... at three hundred? I like your guts but don’t overdo it ok? I’ve grown to like you and it would be a shame for you to die.”

“You mean it would be a shame if you had to stay down here any longer than necessary.” She suggested with a smirk.

“I mean yes, that too. But now I have a fox to talk to. Hello there.” He said, his gaze moving towards Catelyn who had walked up to him with Elana.

“Greetings, king of Rhyvor.” The fox bowed, “Long has it been since your kingdom ruled in these lands. I am Catelyn, a dark one as you surely know. I have long since been a part of the council of Hallowfort, a town founded long ago, for scavengers and exiles seeking power and adventure in the north. Lands I must add, have changed greatly since you have walked them.”

She looked at Elana and then Ilea before continuing, “I must ask. Have you been down here, conscious of time and waiting to escape?”

Maro chuckled, “Greetings Catelyn, one touched by fire. No, my wife was mostly but not me. Feels like a couple months have passed but not more. I must ask... does your fur feel as nice as it looks?”

Ilea gave him a thumbs up while Catelyn sighed, “It does.” The fox simply confirmed, “The lands you once governed are no more. If you want to build a new kingdom amongst humans I suggest you travel south. You are welcome to join Hallowfort but know that survival, even for one of your strength is not guaranteed anymore in what once was called Rhyvor, later Kalin and later once more part of the Red Church’s territory.”

Maro looked at Elana but the woman had her gaze locked on the fox, “I did what I could for this kingdom. I am done with being a king. Many questions remain as well as the circumstances I find myself in. Perhaps you might be of help in those regards. My wife will have her own questions. I will be in your debt should you help destroy the kingsguard and knights keeping me bound to this place.”

“I will not risk myself for you. I apologize for this. Though I believe you have found a capable warrior to help you along, charming one.” Catelyn replied.

*Charming one, what the fuck.* Ilea thought. So perhaps it really was something graspable, a skill or a hidden stat even. If such a thing existed.

“Certainly. Then I will wait for her to grow in strength.”

Elana spoke up then, “Perhaps with your magic, one with fire, you might be able to help me get out of here already. I will help where I can in Hallowfort should you cooperate with me.”

*Me, not us?* Ilea wasn't sure what Elana's goal was here. She wanted to learn about the current situation but with all that she had heard, confirmed by several random people, she couldn't think to rebuild Rhyvor here?

“I might be able to help with that, one shrouded in mist. I must know however... will you challenge our sovereignty?”

Elana looked at her, “No. These lands are lost to me. I have been trapped in these halls for too long, let me learn what happened to our kingdom, our people. At least what still remains to be learned.”

The woman's voice cracked a little at the mention of Rhyvor and its people, perhaps a glimpse at the real Elana hiding behind her mask. Or a calculated move. Ilea didn't know but she was pretty sure Catelyn knew what she was doing.

“I will aid you, queen Invalar.” The fox replied promptly, to Ilea's surprise.

# Chapter 293 Resistance Dance

## Chapter 293 Resistance Dance

“Why do you think she agreed so easily?” Ilea asked Maro. On the other side of the room a bright red glow could be seen in the hole Terok had started to dig. The white stone was melting quickly, a day or two maybe and a tunnel would be finished. Elana free to explore and do what she wanted here in the north. *Maybe I did unleash something dangerous.*

Maro looked at the glow, his wife standing next to the entrance, “I don’t think she was acting. You know as cold as she got in the end, she cared. She really did. For Rhyvor... for everyone. Perhaps it resonated with the dark one. She is part of a government too, came here to ensure we are no danger to her people. Though Elana would never admit as much, perhaps they’re quite similar... her and the fox.” He said and chuckled.

Ilea smiled, “Well I better get going. Can’t reach three hundred by talking to you.”

“Wait. Something has been bothering me. I know you wouldn’t want to run errands like this but I would have asked Terok on his return. We have talked about Gadrian before... that he was likely in Lisburg when the city came under attack. I just... you know I’ve been thinking about it and wanted to know... if anything was still remaining.” Maro said.

“You think he’s still alive?”

“I doubt it... and if he was he wouldn't be there anymore. Just... you know it was a beautiful town... vineyards on hills as far as the eye could see. Charming buildings and the most intricate and beautiful fountain you could ever imagine. A river flowing through it all.” He continued with a more subdued voice, “You know... Tremor was bustling always, people came together here and the government, the nobles, the parties and everything. It was all here. When I sought some quiet I would go to Lisburg. I simply dared hope that maybe... a part of it remained.”

The man paused before he spoke again, “You could take Terok. If you find the key to either treasury or armory there he could repay the debts he owes in Hallowfort. And you, well I'm sure you would find something to your liking.”

“I'll check it out Maro. Catelyn did mention a vineyard cave, perhaps that's the same place.” Ilea said. It wasn't easy, seeing the usually confident and charming king in such a state. He had lost everything, all the people and his kingdom. The last months, alone with Elana must have not been easy, thinking it all over. All the what ifs, all the possibilities, the unknowns. “I hope she has some answers for you two.” She finally said.

“I hope so too.”

Having gotten the location of Lisburg, at least where it had been for Maro back in his time, Ilea made her way back to Hallowfort. Catelyn didn't join her for the time being, wanting to finish the tunnel as quickly as possible. Ilea didn't know why the fox prioritized getting the queen out but she did. Perhaps the fox already wanted to make a good impression or simply didn't want to get on their bad side. She was probably powerful enough to deal with them alone but a king and queen brought more to the table than just levels.

Back in Hallowfort, Ilea quickly checked the Abyss and found it more packed than the times she had visited before. At least one patron was sitting



at every table, some drinking, others playing cards. Others again showing off their magic or weapons. There were dark ones, humans, dwarves, machines that she assumed had dwarves inside as well as some rare humans. One in particular opened her eyes wide when Ilea spotted her.

She couldn't get a word out before Ilea appeared in front of their table, "Hey." She said with a smile under her helmet.

Krentin stayed calm but Ilea could tell his muscles had tensed a little, his breathing a little quicker. "Warrior!" Loud laughter came from the direction of the bar, Hana the lizardwoman walking towards the table with four beverages. "You survived the fourth layer. No surprise." She added and put the drinks down. "Can I get you something too? On me?"

Ilea smirked, "I think I've gotten enough gold out of you." Krentin made a sound but didn't move.

"Joining the expedition?" She asked.

"If you're looking for a team, we're not interested." The mage said.

"Not exactly. I'm looking for people to train resistances with. How would you like to blast me with some of your magic?" She asked the team leader directly, his features distorting into something Ilea couldn't even begin to guess at.

"Are you mocking us?" He asked.

Hana sat down and started drinking her ale, "I don't think she is Krentin. I trained with her, remember?"

"Why would you trust us then? I could kill you any moment, take back what was ours." The mage asked again. The healer and dark one on the table were silent.

Ilea shrugged, "I'm pretty sure I could escape if you tried anything. Plus you'd get magic training against a real foe. The whole team could join in, maybe this time you'll do better." A challenge but the mage just sighed.

“We have an expedition to plan human. Not interested.” He said.

Ilea nodded and sighed, “Well your loss, I’m sure I’ll find some people to train with. Good luck on your expedition.” She said and meant it, winking at Hana who smiled at her. Ilea noted that the healer girl looked at the lizard woman and then her with a frown on her face.

At the bar, Ilea waited for a moment until Haiden showed up, the cat person nodding to her as he put away some bottles. “Warrior of ash... you return. Stronger yet again I presume?”

“A little. When’s the expedition planned to leave?” She asked.

“Couple days... perhaps a week. It depends on the leaders. They would surely have you join if you are interested.”

Ilea shook her head, “I’m engaged elsewhere at the moment. What I was looking for were new Resistances.”

He nodded, “I see. Well I’m sure some would benefit from the opportunity. Let me inform them. I’m sure you’ll have a queue by the end of the hour.”

Haiden wasn’t kidding. The news spread quickly, Ilea finding herself down in the city with a bunch of unknown level two hundred or close enough people ready to blow her apart. *It’s not what it sounds like.* She thought to herself, looking at the shady, geared and armored people. “Just attack me, focus this area.” She said, her armor vanishing, replaced by casual clothes as she patted her belly.

Ilea spend the next three days training non stop with the expedition. More of them joined as time went on, in the end even Krentin showed up to send some spells her way. A good change to hunting Centurions yet not so different from her Miststalker training. In the very least it showed her that the beasts were ridiculously powerful, many of the adventurers and

scavengers barely able to get past her Veil. Granted most weren't much higher than level two ten, Krentin being one of them. The leaders of the expedition didn't join sadly, both of them at least at two fifty.

It at least allowed for a smooth training experience, Ilea meditation and healing herself while her Veil dealt with a big chunk of the damage. The adventurers attacked in groups until they had found an optimal cycle for all of them. She noted that many didn't sleep through the three days either, attacking nonstop just as she stood there, tanking the abuse. Contrary to humans, it seemed this method of training was albeit rare, not completely unheard of. Many healers had some kind of ability to reduce pain and she was sure some that were mentioned had their Pain Tolerance at the second tier.

On the third day, Ilea healed up and put on her Stonehammer steel armor again, some of the adventurers still remaining before they joined up with the rest of the expedition back in the Abyss. Ilea joined them and got herself a bottle of ale from Haiden. "Heard you've been at it for three days straight?"

She nodded, opening the bottle with her ash before taking a sip. "Did they not ask you to join?" The barkeep asked.

"No. I suppose my level intimidates them." She said, taking another sip.

Haiden chuckled, "Higher than the expedition leads... well you certainly left an impression when you went and killed those Blue Reapers. Didn't think you would advance so quickly. At this point the human ash wielder clad in black is just as much of a legend to this place as some of the better known people around here."

"Any of them still alive?" Ilea asked with a chuckle.

"A few. That I know of."

"Interesting. Hey they're actually leaving. I hope some of them survive." She said and lifted her bottle to cheer them along. Some of them actually looked her way and nodded or gestured back in some way.

Haiden smiled, “These are not similar to your human expeditions. They are well prepared, composed of veterans.”

“Well prepared for what they know. Just like those human expeditions you talk about. Well I’ve dwelt here long enough, see you around Haiden.”

“Good luck on your travels.” She heard him murmur, his attention lying with the departing expedition. He probably knew many of them, some better than others.

Making her way out of the Abyss and out of Hallowfort, she quickly checked the progress she had made in regards to her resistances. Three days was a drop in the bucket compared to her Miststalker and Heat Resistance training but skills below the second tier did level quicker after all.

*‘ding’ ‘Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 14’*

*‘ding’ ‘Crystal Resistance reaches lvl 16’*

*‘ding’ ‘Crystal Resistance reaches lvl 17’*

*‘ding’ ‘Crystal Resistance reaches lvl 18’*

*‘ding’ ‘Dark Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Dark Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ice Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Light Magic Resistance reaches lvl 17’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Death Magic Resistance - lvl 1’*

*‘Common in the deepest and most depraved parts of the world, the magic of death itself seeks nothing but to destroy, to rot and kill. It is difficult to survive but to someone like you, what is death but another challenge?’*

*‘ding’ ‘Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 5’*

Contrary to expectations the magic was very similar to the feeling she got from Health Drain spells. Just that in this case the health didn't go anywhere and was simply destroyed. She noted it to be more potent, actively burning away her life force and body but at such a low level and against her healing, it was just another drop in the bucket. Even the system apparently had noticed her collection of defensive skills.

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Time Magic Resistance - lvl 1’*

*‘The intricacies of time magic are difficult to grasp, its secrets hidden forever to most who attempt the plunge. A rare few have managed to bend the elusive force to their will, making it a dangerous tool both for themselves and for their enemies.’*

*‘ding’ ‘Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3’*

That one was definitely more interesting to her than Death Magic. At least at first. The effects it had on her were weird, hard to grasp but in the end despite the discomforting feeling, all it really did was make her perception worse. As if time moved faster around her. Talking to the mage revealed the limits to his magic, at least if he was being honest. Then again if the magic was as limitless as Ilea thought it could be, then every time mage would be an impossible opponent to defeat. The very existence of it made her want to train her resistance higher, just in case she ran into a dangerous one at some point, or perhaps a monster that could use it.

To suddenly be stuck in a time loop or completely lose her perception of it while some beast feasted on her wasn't on her to do list. If death magic couldn't just wipe her away instantly, she was pretty sure time magic wouldn't be as ridiculous either. At least she had a resistance now and could work on it should she meet more friendly time mages.

Back in the factory, Ilea put down the black Obelisk she had towed here from Goliath's forge. It would be another six days until he teleported but there was plenty to do anyway. *Too many things to level, too many monsters to slay.*

Sighing, Ilea sat down on one of the forges and started eating a meal, the first one she had in three days. Even after all that time she didn't feel sleepy, her mind prepared and active. The constant healing might have helped with that, keeping the sluggishness out of her system. Or her level ups simply increased the time it took for her to actually need any sleep. Either way, it was welcome, as long as she could still sleep when she really wanted. The sweet release of unconsciousness was something she liked back on Earth, now she had a bunch of fun things to do and a meditation skill that could get her through months without human interaction. A skill that refused to level to the last of the second tier.

The next several hours were spent on destroying Centurions, finally after three hours she found a special variant on the second floor.

### *[Centurion Ripper – lvl ??]*

This one looked the same as the usual Centurions, the only differences being its four arms and serrated swords it carried instead of the usual spear. *This should be enough...*, Ilea thought. Dodging its blows, she found this one to be quite a bit faster than the last special variant, more calculative too and not relying purely on aggression. The main difficulty was the fact that it managed to defend against all her ashen limbs with swift cuts from its blades.

It simply refused to engage her real body as long as her limbs were trying to target it. Ilea decided to lay caution aside and engaged. Dodging the blades proved difficult but not impossible, the Centurion still a machine, its movements calculated, the possibilities finite. She had learned against the Guardians that their attacks had patterns, their aggression having a certain style to it. The same was true for this one, although more and more it felt like a living breathing enemy. A particularly good feint made her blink away, avoiding the blade that would have skewered her otherwise.

Its defensive approach at least had the positive effect of her regeneration never slowing down. There were ample opportunities to use Meditation, effectively doubling her mana regeneration. After twenty minutes of her careful approach, not getting in a single hit, Ilea decided on her tried and proven strategy of trading damage.

Blinking close to the thing, she dodged the first two blades and let the third scratch into her Veil and past her armor. Her fist hit, a full dose of Destruction and Wave of Ember smashing into it, her arm wreathed in flame as her third tier Form of Ash and Ember enhanced the punch. The hit left a dent in the machine as it was pushed back, its last blade cut through her Veil and dug into her armor, leaving not just a dent but cuts that continued into her shoulder below.

The attack prevented her from blinking but Ilea continued her offensive momentum, punch after punch landing on the machine while its blades glanced off of her armor, two of them digging into it but stuck for a moment to allow her another attack. One particularly strong hit to her chest sent her stumbling, still unable to blink when two blades rushed at her neck. One of

them was blocked by her arm, the weapon punching through her Veil and steel before the second blade but into her neck, ripping out a big chunk of it.

Ilea used her ash and hands to get the blades away before blinking, bringing her thirty meters away from the machine as she healed the damage. Blood dripped to the ground as a grin formed on her face, a part of her helmet missing. The Centurion was still on the defensive, meaning her damage had been sufficiently high. Otherwise it would have used the opportunity to close the distance and continue its attacks. Neck healed back, Ilea instead of switching out her armor, changed to pants and a shirt instead. The blades could of course still get stuck on her bones but having her blink disabled with each hit was the reason she had nearly just lost her head.

Moving back in, her Veil stopped at least a part of the enemy power before the blades ripped into her flesh, cutting through cleanly as she delivered her own blows. She angled her body in a way that would allow the enemy to hit but not get stuck on her, a maneuver impossible with her armor on. Two quick hits made the machine stumble again, her improved Strength showing before she targeted one of its legs. It dented a little before she was forced to blink away, all four blades rushing at her at the same time.

Several cuts showed on her body, her shoulder was a mess, her stomach bleeding as well as her leg nearly separated. The Centurion watched her with green eyes as her wounds closed, a savage grin on the woman's face as she prepared to finish it off.



# Chapter 294 Powerlevel

## Chapter 294 Powerlevel

When she had again reached the maximum buff from her Form of Ash and Ember, Ilea blinked in, focusing on her target alone while she ignored the blades rushing at her. The machine was damaged already, its core not glowing but two of its legs were merely dragged along. Her mana was slowly dwindling but with it being so defensive, she was still at two thirds.

Screaming, Ilea focused on the previously dented part and delivered a fully powered punch, her arm clad in fire and ash as the machine was sent skidding back, falling down even. She only noticed a moment later that a blade was stuck in her skull and a second one had embedded itself into her neck. She stumbled back, using her arms to rip out the blades, blood quickly seeping out as her vision blurred. Ilea heard the steel hitting the floor when she sacrificed a thousand points of mana to boost her healing. Her mind barely understood just how damaged she was but a thousand felt like a good amount.

Immediately her vision sharpened again, her body moving to dodge the attacks from the damaged Centurion Ripper. One of its blades grazed her but she moved in and delivered yet another punch. This time she heard the cracking and saw the small tears forming near its core. She smiled and waited for it to progress. "Come on lad... time to dive." She commented, waiting from an appropriate distance as the machine turned more and more aggressive, Ilea simply blinking and moving away before finally, the

Centurion turned tail and rushed towards the abyss. Ilea heard the dull explosion in the distance.

Sighing, she sat down on some machine before her hand reached up to her head, feeling the hair and bone below. *It was dented in... my brain was mush...* She couldn't really grasp it. Ilea tried to remember how it had felt but just shuddered at the thought. While pain wasn't an issue, having ones very skull and brain smashed in wasn't pleasant. At all. *Would have ended me without my third tier healing.* It was a wonder her senses hadn't shut down immediately but she assumed it had to do with her Vitality somehow. She didn't know how low her Health had dipped but it was nowhere near fatal, at least if one focused on the points only. Perhaps that kept her alive. *What would happen if I lost my head? Would I somehow still perceive the world through my eyes if I still had health? Or would I be a beheaded body stumbling around with instincts only. Doesn't make sense without a head, does it?*

Ilea decided to wait with testing until an appropriate moment presented itself. For now the Centurion Ripper had proven to be dangerous, dangerous enough to kill her if she wasn't careful. Still, she knew getting rid of the armor was the right decision. Getting stuck on its blades and having her head ripped off would have been a less preferable scenario than how it turned out. *Been a while since my last near death experience.* She smiled at the thought. For the first time in weeks she felt truly alive. A scary thought she found, one that would lead her to death one way or the other. Then again, without a ridiculous challenge, how was she expected to grow? The only thing she could do was prepare and train as well as she could. She couldn't help that she liked it, even if her challenges would grow more and more dangerous the higher their levels grew.

Already the Centurions had few weaknesses, the Ripper immune to her ashen limbs. Yet Ilea had scores to settle with Praetorians, a ridiculously powerful demon, an ex elder of the Shadow's Hand as well as a mysterious order she knew next to nothing about. Let alone the Basilisk hiding somewhere in Karth. If she ever hoped to even challenge one of them, she had to be able to take this kind of abuse and more. *I can already see the*

*headless training coming.* She sighed and smiled, the messages in her mind confirming her thoughts.

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Centurion Ripper – lvl 381] – For defeating an enemy one hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 280 – Five stat points awarded. One third tier skill point awarded’***

***‘ding’ ‘Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 276 – Five stat points awarded’***

*There you go.* Both classes leveled as well as the two skills that provided the highest boon in her battle.

***‘ding’ ‘Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9’***

***‘ding’ ‘Form of Ash and Ember reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’***

Ilea checked out the possible third tier advancements immediately.

***‘3rd tier skill points available [Azarinth First Hunter]: 1’***

***‘Skills available for third tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:’***

- *Azarinth Hunter Sphere*
- *Azarinth Fighting*
- *Azarinth Perception*
- *Azarinth Reversal*

Hunter sphere was out immediately. While it could certainly provide an interesting third tier, the skill was listed as an Aura as well as a Perception Aura. Not what Ilea was going for with her skill advancements. Azarinth Fighting was purely Body Enhancement and provided her with one of the highest buffs she currently had. She couldn't really think of a reasonable third tier but the simple fact that it was such a good skill to begin with made her prefer this one immediately.

Azarinth Perception enhanced, well her perception. It was purely a Body Enhancement skill too but didn't provide an immediate damage bonus. Azarinth Reversal again was interesting but for now she decided on Azarinth Fighting.

*'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1'*

***Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 1:***

***You are familiar with the fighting style of Azarinth. Damage inflicted with your own body and related skills is 95.5% [477.5%] higher.***

***2nd stage: Getting used to fighting in close quarters, your reaction time is increased to accommodate your increasing speed and control.***

***3rd stage: Azarinth Fighting consists of more than offense alone. A true Azarinth Healer knows when to stand and let an enemy strike. You gain knowledge about sustained injuries and damage from incoming attacks as they happen.***

***Category: Body Enhancement***

Ilea read through it twice before she nodded. *So basically what I've been doing anyway... now I just get confirmation somehow. And I guess I know which hits to avoid and which I can take. Well, let's see how it works in practice.*

Against the normal Centurions it wasn't a huge difference, Ilea easily able to avoid their attacks anyway. She did gain a pretty concise idea of how much or how little damage would come in should she choose to take the hit, not that it was ever worth it against normal Centurions. Further interesting was the fact that the closer the weapons or arms came to hit, the clearer her picture got. As if an additional sense in the back of her mind, telling her just how exactly her nose would be fractured, how her denting armor would cut into her flesh.

When she found the next Centurion Ripper two days later, she again ditched her armor and led the thing to the first floor. Again, it was rather defensive, again Ilea had to attack to force it into a fight. This time however, everything was different.

Its swords moved in fluid motions, Ilea dodging two of them while completely ignoring the third and fourth blade, one passing by her as she stepped to the side and one cutting into her arm. She knew the blade wouldn't get stuck, knew the injury would be minor at best while the first two blades could have ripped off her other arm by the shoulder. Her fists hit true, Destruction and Wave of Ember smashing into the creature as her ashen limbs tried to get past its wild swings.

A smirk was on her face as it targeted her directly again, Ilea neither blinking nor dodging widely, simply turning sideways and adjusting little by little as the swords cut through her clothing and into her flesh, blood drawn as they moved past. Another hit before she was forced to blink away, the blades hard to dodge and each likely resulting in a dangerous situation. She wasn't quite sure how she processed all the information, especially as

quickly as the enemy attacked. Too fast to dodge when the swings were good but still she knew, simply knew to let them through or not.

Perhaps the skill worked in tandem with her second tier Body of Ash, the latter sharpening her instincts to avoid damage to her vitals when she dodged. There were likely more of her abilities involved, everything leading to the previously dangerous and chaotic fight turning into a calculated endeavor. While she couldn't match the creature's speed and the patterns of all its blades, neither her body nor equipment able to deflect or take direct hits with ease, she now had a way to let it strike safely.

Of course she was still taking damage, cuts that made her bleed onto the floor, ripped and destroyed muscles and skin but with her healing she could quickly recover what she really needed, with her absent sense of pain she could ignore it entirely. *Marvelous*. She thought, delivering another blow before the blades cut into her legs, Ilea hitting the machine again before she moved her legs inwards, the serrated edges of the blades smoothly exiting the wounds before she blinked away, ready to heal the damage as she meditated. The creature was destroyed without further incident.

In the coming days, Ilea started to actually scout the second floor, going as far as exploring parts of the third. As long as the stairwells were close together, she thought it a manageable risk. Too many of either Centurions or special variants would become a problem quickly but it was worth the additional time. Ilea was on the hunt for Juggernauts and Rippers as well as any other specialists she could find.

When a week had passed, Ilea lazily looked over to the gathering energy near the black obelisk, dark smoke rising as she enjoyed a warm lava bath. One moment later, Goliath appeared next to the steel structure. He opened his eyes and looked around, the two golden things dancing with joy. "Human of ash... you did not lie. A marvelous place, an outstanding smell... the mana too is beautiful, deep and resonating."

She looked at him and smiled, “Well knock yourself out. There are Centurions and worse below so make sure to stay on this layer. Stray at your own risk, I’ll try to have my fights reasonably far away from here.”

“A generous gesture.” He said and bowed, going on to touch one of the forges, “I will need time to study this... an incredible facility... truly, a wonder.” The smith completely ignored her afterwards, floating to one machine or the other, dipping his hands into molten steel as well as adding mana to random enchantments.

Ilea remembered she hadn’t tried out his armor yet, summoning the humongous thing promptly. Around her. The first thing she noticed was that she couldn’t exactly move. Not the arms of the armor but her own arms and legs. The whole thing was a tight fit. She was impressed the smith knew her proportions so well after simply using a mold to create her armors. The next thing she noticed was her lack of sight. Her eyes were obviously unable to penetrate the thick steel but her Sphere as well seemed to have difficulties getting through.

She did have a vague idea about her surroundings but it definitely felt muffled, subdued. Her auras didn’t help her in the slightest, even with her enhanced strength, she was unable to move any part of the thing even an inch. Sacrificing five hundred health, she tried again but found it still impossible. There was no space to create any ash. Blinking, she found herself outside the thing, not moving with it on her. *As if the skill knows I can’t use it... or the fact that it’s just a massive piece of steel.*

Giving up on it for now, she put the armor back into her necklace and decided to try again once she had gotten stronger, or anything else to try. *Wait there is something...*, Summoning the armor, she used her Embered Body Heat to make herself as hot as possible. This time something did happen. Tiny runes lit up within the armor, adding to the light coming from her Form of Ash and Ember. *So heat can do something at least.* Trying to add mana didn’t do anything, the enchantments either rejecting it or simply ignoring her intention. Sighting, she gave up again, still unable to move the thing or find out anything about the runes.

A little annoyed about the immovable chunk of steel, she continued with her daily business of destroying killer machines.

With Goliath around and her new ability to fight the Rippers, her time down in the Taleen dungeon flew by. The week turned into two, then four until finally two months had passed of Ilea following her routine. It was getting more and more difficult to find special variants in the second and third floor, to the point where she questioned if any of them still remained. While she could absolutely wreck normal Centurions now, a couple minutes of fighting at most, the experience they provided was minimal at best.

At this point they were only ten to twenty levels higher than her and apparently the system expected bigger leaps from her. Not that it wasn't possible. In the last two weeks, Ilea felt like most of her leveling came from the Rippers she destroyed. The Miststalkers were still too dangerous but she was starting to think about an alternative.

Three weeks into the training, she had reached level two eighty in her ashen class, giving her another third tier point to spend. The options and final decision were similar to her last Azarinth third tier skill.

***3rd tier skill points available [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 1***

***Skills available for third tier advancement in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]:***

- Wave of Ember***
- Body of Ash***
- Ashen Warrior***
- Embered Body Heat***



The likely good perk for Wave of Ember was desirable but it was after all an ashen magic skill, making her focus on other avenues. Ashen Warrior was the equivalent of her Azarinth Fighting which made her ultimately decide to get it to the third tier.

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1'*

*Passive: Ashen Warrior – 3rd lvl 1:*

*You are familiar with the fighting style of Ash. Damage inflicted with your own body and while shrouded in Ash is 70.5% [352.5%] higher.*

*2nd stage: Shroud your weapons in ash to produce various effects. Shrouded weapons deal additional damage. Affected by Ash and Ember Manipulation.*

*3rd stage: Your mastery of Ashen Warrior allows for more efficient movement. Reduces stamina consumption by a static 25%.*

*Category: Body Enhancement*

The difference was noticeable but Ilea's mana had always been the more important factor when it came to sustainability during battles. Neither did the perk provide for an actual change against any of the machines she was facing like Azarinth Fighting did. *If only I could have gotten reduced mana consumption somewhere along the way.*

Checking the messages again, Ilea thought about how to breach the last ten levels.

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 281 – Five Stat Points awarded'*

...

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 290 – Five Stat Points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 277 – Five Stat Points awarded'*

...

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 288 – Five Stat Points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Hunter Recovery reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'State of Azarinth reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Form of Ash and Ember reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Identify reaches lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Meditation reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

...

*'ding' 'Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 12'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Health Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 18'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 19'*

*'ding' 'Mana Drain Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 20'*

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2'*

...

*'ding' 'Mist Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

Nothing had revealed itself upon reaching the current highest point in some of her General skills. Neither for Meditation nor for her Mana and Health drain resistances. The Miststalkers were out as potential enemies to bridge the remaining gap to three hundred, their numbers simply too high. Centurion variants would be enough with time but Ilea was aching for something else, especially because for each special Centurion, she had to wade through dozens if not hundreds of normal ones.

The Blue Reapers were an option, her newfound third tier abilities would help her survive and deal the necessary damage but she still considered it dangerous, her mind likely not able to tank the collective magic coming from five or ten of them. That left plenty of other options but Terok showing up in the facility looking for her brought an end to her pondering. They decided to move the group to Tremor to train with the knights instead, the low numbers would allow them to work together. Ilea didn't mention that she could pull single Centurions from the lower layers and said she

would come with them. *Kingsguard, Undead Knights, Soul Ripper... well we will see what it will be.* She smiled at the thought of facing any of them with her newfound power. Except for the Soul Ripper, that thing still haunted her dreams.

# Chapter 295 Change of Plans

## Chapter 295 Change of Plans

“The guardians don’t provide enough of a challenge. Plus I need some advice from Maro regarding the great hall’s gate.” Terok said as he looked around the facility, waving to Goliath who was immersed in examining one of the machines.

“He asked me to check out another Rhyvor city, maybe we can go there together after I killed some of the monsters in Tremor.” Ilea replied. “And don’t worry about him, he’s barely been talking for the past two months.” The smith and their rare conversations had been good for her mental health coupled with Meditation.

Looking at the dwarf, Ilea nodded, “I see you’ve come a long way too.”

*[Mage – lvl 205]*

His laugh resounded through the forges, “You bet your ass on it lassie. I assume you’ve made leaps too. Three hundred yet?”

“Not quite but soon.” Ilea replied, “Any cool new shit you can do?”

“Still not? Damn you’re taking ages.”

“Not even a year has passed since I’ve come north Terok.” She said, rolling her eyes. *It’s getting close though.* She wondered if the war was still going on and if Ravenhall was still standing. *Don’t think too much on it Ilea.*

*You'll be roped into ten new things if you show yourself there. Focus on the tasks at hand. On yourself.*

The dwarf shrugged, "Well I'm sure you'll get there. New cool shit you ask? Well you'll have to find out. Maybe we can have a bout later. Did you get new abilities at least?"

"Some." She simply said, checking her status.

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0***

***Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 290***

- Active: Destruction – 3rd lvl 8***
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 3rd lvl 12***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 10***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 9***
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 3***
- Passive: Hunter's Sight – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 20***

***Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 288***

- Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 9***
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 3rd lvl 4***
- Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 5***
- Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4***

- *Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 3rd lvl 1*

**General Skills:**

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Identify - lvl 8*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Curse Resistance - 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Death Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 9*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

- *Time Magic Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 621***

***Endurance: 400***

***Strength: 500***

***Dexterity: 400***

***Intelligence: 600***

***Wisdom: 650***

***Health: 6210/6210***

***Stamina: 3938/4000***

***Mana: 6500/6500***

The improved Strength and Dexterity had made the normal Centurions even more of a joke. Ilea wasn't sure where to put the remaining points she would get to three hundred but Dexterity, Vitality and Wisdom would be her priorities. Strength at five hundred was good enough for now she supposed. The evolutions might change things up again anyway.

“Enough to fuck you up just the same.” She smirked and looked at the dwarf.

He snorted and shook his head, “We’ll see about that young lady.”

“We will.” Ilea said, pretty sure about the outcome, even with his evolution. “How are the elves doing? You said Guardians aren’t enough but weren’t



they lower than them in the first place?”

Terok started walking towards the middle section and the exit above. Ilea looked to Goliath, “I’ll be out for a while. Stay safe old forged one.”

“I am not forged young human. Do not fret. This one has survived more dangerous environments.” The smith replied, continuing his work.

*I’d like to see those very much.* She thought, stepping up to Terok with a smile on her face.

He crossed his arms and started floating, Ilea in turn spreading her wings as they made their way towards the center of the facility, the abyss reaching down farther than the eye could see. “To answer your question, while certainly capable to take down Guardians, higher numbers make it difficult. They’re overconfident, arrogant, lack good healing abilities and gear. Of course they come out on top but if you struggle against enemies below your level as much as they do, you’ve got potential to work on before trying to level up.”

The two of them landed near the guardrails at the top of the facility, walking towards the elevator. “Well they have improved enough that the teacher suggested training against more difficult foes. I suggested Tremor and its knights.”

“You want to see if you can beat one?” Ilea asked, “Didn’t think you’d want a challenge like that.”

“Well for starters.” Terok said and activated the elevator, the thing lighting up in green, “I don’t have to face them in close quarters. Their archery isn’t exactly the best I’ve ever seen.”

“That’s an argument. How’s Elfie doing?”

Terok shrugged, “Not seen him very often. He mostly gives advice and apparently I’m more experienced than the group, even though they’re not much younger. Well I guess that comes from living in a forest all their lives.”

*What's that supposed to mean?* Ilea was a little confused but didn't ask, not in the mood to spark a conversation about dwarven racism.

Elfie nodded when they walked out of the dungeon, the three other elves already waiting. Their levels hadn't changed by much in the past months, Ilea noted. "You will join us in Tremor?" The elf asked.

Ilea nodded, "It's getting tedious... perhaps I can face some of the higher leveled monsters there."

"No way to provide Centurions for them to train against?" He asked.

Ilea shrugged, "I don't feel like baby sitting. They can help Maro out by defeating knights. Harder enemies to face anyway, it'll be worth it."

He shook his head and sighed, "A selfish creature. How very human of you. Very well then. To Tremor."

"You're free to go in and lure Centurions out for them." Ilea countered, the elf ignoring her statement as he started floating. *Didn't think so.* She thought, all of the elves starting to float, Heranuur sprouting fiery wings. The occasional meetups with the fire elf had been rather enjoyable. Nothing groundbreaking but a nice change of pace in the few times it had happened. Ilea thought of the upcoming battles, her wings flapping in the wind as they flew through the night, Tremor the target of the quickly moving group.

Four elves, from the feared and legendary race of ruthless killers, a dwarf in his mech suit, equally as mysterious to most humans she had met so far. And out of all of them she had the highest level. A bizarre thought. Not a situation she had expected to find herself in. *They won't be any help against the Kingsguard... not against the undead rose knights either, let alone the Soul Ripper.* It was difficult to gauge what the best enemy would be to face. Ilea supposed the undead rose knights as they had no known way to regenerate like the kingsguard. Their defense against mana intrusion wasn't comparable either.

“You plan to face a Soul Ripper?” Maro looked thoughtful. “The Kingsguard is still out of reach?”

Ilea smiled, “The elves as well as Terok will face the remaining knights. I’ll give it a shot too Maro but with their defenses and the recovery you so generously provide... I doubt I have the necessary damage output.”

“How very pragmatic... where’s the passion, the lust for battle?” He smirked as he asked the question and Ilea was sure he would have added a theatrical gesture with his arms had they not been trapped inside his little necromancy machine.

“I’m close Maro. And with all my skills and Resistances I’m sure my evolutions will do quite a bit. Plus I think the Soul Ripper is a more dangerous opponent. My gut tells me as much.” Ilea said, sitting down on the nearby chair.

“I never faced them you know.” The king said seriously, “Suddenly these monsters appeared in the closest dungeon to the capital. Right in front of our doors. At night some would come out, murder everyone they came in contact with... consume parts of their bodies. Next to all the other problems and enemies we were facing. It felt like the whole world was turning against us.”

He sighed, “I thought about leaving sometimes, just getting my team back together and moving away from all the politics, the wars. Everything we had built.”

“Why didn’t you?” Ilea asked silently. Her smile was nowhere to be found.

The king laughed, “Well I’m the king. Couldn’t just let my people and friends succumb to chaos.” His green eyes sparkled.

Ilea looked at him then, “Would you have stayed had you not been king? You lived long enough to know one or the other crisis would come to the city and kingdom you were living in.”

“Perhaps. Who knows. In the years where I had been at three hundred? Probably. I don’t believe in any gods Ilea, not in a higher power or anything of the like. I don’t believe there is a greater purpose to us here. I believe we forge our own path, set our own goals and find our own meaning. If there is something out there then fuck them. I have fought... have fought and bled for decades. I have been a part of so much, so many people’s lives. I’m not terribly fond of humans as a species, or any other race for that matter. Yet I can’t deny what I am, who I am.”

“Through the power I bear I can change the world to my liking. More than anything else I have learned that in the year before activating all this.”

Ilea smirked, “That’s pretty cheesy.”

“Cheesy? You mean romantic perhaps? Disillusioned. Mad even. Yes, I have heard many of those things. From nobles in my own court, especially when I had them executed for treason, for holding slaves or murdering citizens they thought below themselves. I didn’t grow up among them, had learned of different values, had lived a different life. Perhaps that is precisely why it was good in the end. That I was king.”

She didn’t reply, instead just looking at the wall behind him. “I would chose different today. Being king is exhausting but perhaps I could find someone suitable to fit the post while I was doing more than sit in a throne and listen to my people.”

“Didn’t sound like you sat there very often.”

He rolled his eyes, “I didn’t say I was a particularly good king. Though in my time I have seen worse, much worse. That was the main reason I didn’t give up the post.”

“What do you plan to do then? Once you’re out? Will you overthrow governments and set up laws adhering to your own code of morals, oh great king?” Ilea asked.

Again the king laughed, his eyes focusing on her, “Is that your plan? Why are you here then warrior of ash? To gain the power to accomplish that? To

change the world to your own liking?” She didn’t reply as he paused, “No. I intend to listen first, see and understand. I have seen revolutions, have seen kingdoms change rapidly because of few influential people. No first, I think I would like to see what has become of this world in my absence.”

Ilea nodded, “I’m here to gain strength but not to topple any governments. I simply wish to have the power to choose.”

“The power to choose. I see. Well I doubt either of us would be very successful taking on the empires and kingdoms of this world. Not yet at least. Not alone.” He paused and smiled, “Know that no matter how strong a person is, there is always a choice. I believe what you wish for is to be free. Yet the freedom you seek might destroy you, take away all that makes you human. I have seen them, people I had called friends. Their unending greed for more power. In the end they fled, scared to lose what they thought they had. Listen to this old king young warrior. Cherish your humanity, your frailty and the connections you have, the people and values you care about. If you give all that up, what different are you to the monsters roaming these lands?”

It took her a minute to think about what he had said but Ilea found she had no answer for him. She had no reason to participate in the empire’s war, had slaughtered people in blind revenge. People she had met along the way used her whenever they could, only her increasing power changing the situation. Would they really have cared had she not been an asset? *That’s not true.* She heard herself think. *Dagon didn’t ask for your help yet Ravenhall has recovered, the demons destroyed. Thanks to you.*

The time she had intervened in Virilya, prevented dozens of people from being raped or murdered. It had meant little in the grand scheme. She shook her head, “Tell me about the Soul Ripper.”

He looked almost disappointed, “Of course. We found they use Void magic, move quickly to pin down their opponents before they rip out parts of them.”

“Of Their soul?” Ilea interrupted.

“What? No, their heads usually. Chests or whatever they could. If a soul exists then perhaps that too but as a Necromancer I don’t believe such a thing exists. They were durable, level estimates were between seven and nine hundred, perhaps higher even.”

“Did your troops ever manage to kill one?” She asked.

He shook his head, “No. We closed the gates at night, avoided the territory altogether but in the past months they grew more aggressive, climbed the walls instead or ate through them. When they were injured, they would flee. None of our mages could hold them long enough.”

“You think someone was responsible?”

He snorted, “Of course. They appeared in that dungeon out of nowhere. As did other dungeons in the area change. Not all of them but a select few. As if testing the surrounding forces, kingdoms and guilds. Elana was hell bent on it being dwarves.”

“What do you think?” She moved a little forward on her chair.

“I don’t know. Nobody did really. We had enough to deal with as it was. The dungeons were just another thing, one that could easily be ignored. At least at first. Now you tell me they reside in the city. I don’t think you should engage them. Not before you reach three hundred... same perhaps with the kingguard. As much as it annoys me.” He chuckled.

“I’ll try anyway... done similarly crazy stuff since coming here.” Ilea said.

He squinted at her, “I doubt it. I haven’t... well not quite. And I’ve done some... stupid shit in my lifetime Ilea.”

“Ever faced down a dragon?” She asked, making him laugh again.

“No... well I have never found one, otherwise perhaps I might have tried. Just to be sure, don’t do that. The few records we had on them were everything else but reassuring. I simply denied their existence.”

“Why? Because you would have wanted to fight them?”

He smiled, “No. Because if it really is as powerful of a creature as the legends tell, there was nothing humans as we were could do to stop it.”

“A lot of time has passed. I’m close to three hundred... after two and a half years, give or take a month. I’m sure there are humans or people of other species out there much more powerful than me.”

Maro smiled, “That is true. Who knows how many powerful necromancer kings are hidden below the surface, just waiting to be dug up. Well more than anything else it makes me excited to see it all. To fight you, see how strong you really are. My wars are over, my people dead and forgotten. Perhaps you’re right. Maybe I would face a dragon if I ever found one.”

She nodded, “First I have to get you out. Haven’t even checked out the city you asked me to find. We were busy.” Ilea said and looked away, “Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it Ilea. You don’t owe me, if anything I owe you. My life and whatever I can give. Elana is free thanks to you and Catelyn. I can’t thank you enough for that.”

# Chapter 296 Azarinth First Hunter

## Chapter 296 Azarinth First Hunter

“Oh right.” Ilea said, “Where is she anyway?”

“Comes and goes. Brings me food as well as books and news from time to time. I believe she is counseling Catelyn as well as trying to find anybody who survived. The Vineyard caves... the place is still there. She however refused to go there, telling me there’s too much to do in Hallowfort.” He laughed, “Can you believe it? One day she was out and already she’s busy with learning about the legislature and ties between the current governing forces. She’s truly great.”

*Doesn't sound too bad,* “I can see it. Just hope it wasn’t a bad decision to help you guys out.”

He shook his head, “Ilea. I’ve known her for a long time. Elana loves to be in power, loves to rule but her heart was never corrupted. She would never admit it but the reason for her tenacity is her people.”

“You don’t have a people anymore.” Ilea simply said.

“There are always people. Those unable or unwilling to stand up, to fight and choose for themselves. Those who want a simple life, unburdened by responsibility.”

“I guess.” *At least Catelyn probably knows what she’s doing.* Ilea mused, frowning. *Why do I even care?* She shook her head in thought.



“I think it’s a good idea. Taking on the undead rose knights. Getting a level five hundred kill should be good for your evolution. I sadly never achieved such alone.” Maro said before he blinked, looking at the wall and then back to her. “I have wondered about something. Something Elana has told me. Maybe you can confirm it.”

Ilea clapped her hands together, “Shoot.”

“Two suns in the sky. That’s what she had said. Arcane storms ravaging the land. Blizzards cold enough to freeze stone itself. Is this really what Rhyvor has turned into?” He asked.

“Pretty much. Why the question though? Terok said as much and I’m sure Catelyn did too.”

He looked at her armor, “I...just. I wanted to hear it from you. Unprecedented... the changes could be... catastrophic.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will think about it. Focus on your hunting Azarinth warrior. I wish to see the sky with my own two eyes again. Could you do that for an old king?” His pleading eyes made her chuckle.

“Maro you look like you are in your thirties. I’ll destroy the kingsguard simply because they took my leg. No need to bring your issues into it.” Ilea stated.

“Don’t flatter me. I might find an interest in you after all.” He whispered with a smirk.

Ilea rolled her eyes and stood up, her gauntlet vanishing as she touched his muscular chest. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.” Taking her hand away, she turned as her helmet appeared. “Plus you’re married old man and I’m sure the mist witch loves you. And you love her.”

He laughed, “I do. It never stopped either of us. Maybe she will agree to let you join. Wouldn’t be the first time.” He murmured, lost in thought.

“See you later Maro.” Ilea said and blinked out of the chamber. *Your relationship is complicated enough. I don't want to get in there.* She thought, blinking again to avoid the kingsguard noticing her. *Fucking a cursed elf against the very rules of their all mighty oracles is exciting enough for me.*

“Alright. Now let's see how this goes.” Ilea said to herself as she stepped into the dark zone of the dungeon. Compared to last time she now had a way to gauge the damage they would deal, had a way to deal a strong blow enhanced by her third tier auras as well as simply more stats and resources to play with. The problem remained that she didn't think it feasible to face two or three of the knights, though she'd give it a shot at least.

Summoning the little flask Terok had given her, she uncorked it and smelled on the yellow liquid inside. It was just color. Something to mark the enemies she would fight. If they couldn't heal, she supposed damaging them sufficiently and fleeing was still a viable option, as long as she could find and fight the same enemy again. The dagger Heranuur had kindly lent her might come in handy as well, though she didn't know how the undead would react to it.

The approach might have worked too back when she had first encountered the undead, she simply hadn't tried. With her Azarinth Fighting in the third tier, the insane damage they dealt would hopefully be somewhat easier to deal with. *As well as my third tier recovery.* Even if she was literally cut in half, now that wasn't much of a problem. As long as she had mana to heal.

The alleys smelled terrible, the stone of both streets and houses more susceptible to growing fungi as well as anything else that liked the temperature. She was pretty far in already, no enemies to fight as of yet. *I wonder if they fight each other... undead knights and Soul Rippers.* If it was true then they somehow were incredibly even or the monsters somehow came back, after such a long time there had to be an explanation. The

missing parts on most undead she had encountered previously suggested they weren't on good terms with... well something.

Perhaps they had their territories and somehow respected them but she doubted such, seeing how at least the undead knights were ravenous beasts. *They don't go into the higher parts of the city.* Perhaps Maro had an explanation for that. Maybe they simply retained some of the commands they once had or they disliked the necromantic energy coming from the palace. Either way it was in her favor, leaving the once city now dungeon with monsters for her to kill.

One such monster appeared a couple minutes later, walking leisurely towards her in the open street. A part of its abdomen was missing, as if removed completely. An undead rose knight. Its armor was dented, bruised, rusted or outright missing in parts, its sword abused and dull as it was dragged along the ground, the noise the only thing audible in the vicinity as if announcing its presence. A challenge of sorts, to anyone that would stand in its way. *Or perhaps a plea.* Ilea thought, her auras going to the max, ash surrounding her as she stood and waited for the monster to notice her.

### ***[Undead Rose Knight – lvl ???]***

Smiling at the information, Ilea uncorked the little bottle and doused her hand in the yellow liquid. *You are what I want.* The screech coming from the creature rattled through her very bones. A challenge yet it didn't paralyze her. Three heavy and quick steps brought the undead upon her, its sword clasped in both hands as its strike came downwards. Ilea felt the danger, felt that the hit would dent her helmet, would crash into her skull and incapacitate her, for a while at least.

She stepped aside, stone exploding next to her as the blade came to an abrupt stop. A kick followed, making her spin before her hand landed on the knight's shoulder. Ilea smirked at the yellow paint that immediately left behind a colored hand, barely visible in her Sphere but it was enough. The sword rushed at her, Ilea blinking away, the attack too quick to dodge. When she appeared the knight had already jumped her way. A thrust, feint, grazing against her arm, the real strike following right after, dodged before she punched his stomach, where his armor was no more.

Her mana intrusion rushed into him, ashen limbs extending behind her as the knight moved to deflect the blows. It had given her enough time to dodge his next attack, avoiding the strike that would have ripped out her legs, armor and all. The knight was on her again, anticipating her dodge. His elbow smashed into her chest, Ilea knowing the damage would be manageable didn't blink, saving the skill for an emergency. The attack left her breathless, her chest plate denting inwards as her bones groaned.

Flying backwards, she spread her wings to stop herself in the air, twirling to the side when the knight's sword came flying towards her. He followed right after, landing next to her. Fists moved quickly, Ilea using her fighting skills and experience to deflect most of the blows but her gauntlets were dented with each strike, muscles below damaged and bones cracking as she healed against it. Seeing the sword come from behind made her blink, immediately healing the injuries.

She watched the knight catch the blade casually, walking towards her with near stumbling steps. *You can do this.* Strike after strike, Ilea weaved around the sword, taking hits where possible as her ashen limbs delivered more and more damage, herself using every opening to get damage in with her fists. Knowing which attacks were feints made the fight possible in the first place, the sheer speed and power of the thing still occasionally overwhelming her.

When the knight suddenly let go of his sword in the middle of a strike, his fist moved too fast for her to even blink, Ilea in the process of dodging the sword. A faint feeling of danger washed through her brain before her head rocked back, nose broken and teeth ripped out. Blinking into a nearby building, Ilea switched out her helmet and used a chunk of mana to heal herself immediately. The sword crashed through the wall a mere second later, Ilea rolling out of the way before the knight landed next to her, a kick sending her through the opposite wall.

She had managed to keep her arms in front of her, her arms breaking but otherwise not causing any major injuries. Healing it back slowly, she spread her wings while in the air and outside the house, looking at the knight that jumped on top of the building. Feeling the attack coming, she moved down, the blade rushing by like a projectile fired from a ballista. *No wonder they*

*don't need bow and arrow.* Ilea rushed down to engage when a second blade made her blink. *Here we go.* She used her momentum to land on the knight with a kick, pushing him backwards as she sent destructive mana through him.

His arms moved quickly, grabbing onto her leg before she could get away. Ilea braced herself as the knight smashed her into the stone roof, her body crashing through a part of it as her leg strained from the force. Another hit followed before a second knight landed on the roof. She saw the blades rushing back to them, frantically kicking with her free leg as ash spread around her. Ilea sacrificed a thousand health to enhance her, kicking twice before she could finally wriggle free.

She blinked, avoiding the swords before appearing thirty meters away. Her eyes opened wide as she noticed the sword coming her way. Her wings spread but before they could even materialize, the sword crashed into her horizontally. The blade cut through her armor and flesh, stopping halfway through her spine.

Ilea's wings flapped, her limbs going numb as her blood and guts streamed out of the nasty wound. Her perception was still there, Ilea dodging the second blade coming her way as she sped towards the higher section. *Can't heal with the blade in...*, She twirled in the air, letting the blade crash into a nearby building. Ilea had disabled her pain, not that it would have mattered with the damage to her spine but when the sword was ripped out of her from the impact, she couldn't help but yelp.

Blood and innards spread out, her wings the only thing still carrying the limp body onward. Ilea's vision was getting blurry but her sphere was crystal clear. Storing her destroyed armor, she used eight hundred mana to heal herself, feeling returning to her arms and legs immediately as her spine reformed, her organs coming back and the two parts of her body nearly separated came together again.

A fresh set of armor appeared right in time to deflect the thrust coming at her. *Relentless bast...*, She couldn't finish the thought, the second knight crashing through the wall next to her before she blinked away, all the buildings giving her a second or two to breathe. *Don't get grabbed.* She

waited inside a house before the monsters came in, quick and silent. The room was in near complete darkness, Ilea's fiery buff the only thing shining through the openings in her helmet and the thin lines connecting her armor.

Healing mana flowed through her as she sacrificed the same amount she recovered per second to her third tier State of Azarinth. Moving towards the wall, Ilea tried getting the knights in an awkward position, their huge statures as well as weapons working in her favor in the close quarters. Ashen limbs continued to deal damage but she didn't know which one of them was marked, no time to check. Their swords cut through the walls and crashed into ceiling and floor, Ilea jumping and rolling through their attacks, ashen limbs delivering damage as she spread her ash and used reversed reconstruction to add to their suffering.

Thanks to her second tier in the skill, she could keep her own healing up. As long as the knights were using their swords, she was semi sure they wouldn't try to grab her. Dodging one of their blades opened her up for the second enemy, its weapon crashing into her head before she could spread the ash to blink. The sword cut through her helmet and got stuck inside her head before the monster simply ripped it off from her very shoulders.

A weird sensation spread through her, her sphere and awareness splitting. She saw her body through her sphere, saw it both as her center and away from her. The one eye that hadn't been crushed looked on as her body was kicked through the nearby wall. Eye closing, she focused on her body and sacrificed a thousand points of mana, her awareness returning to normal as she blinked upwards to avoid another strike. Her armor was there, no helmet. *Fuck.*

It was then that she decided to retreat, for now at least. Ilea made sure to avoid blinking as she flew towards the higher sections of the dungeon, dodging the thrown blades whenever they appeared behind her. She moved higher and higher to give her more time as she murmured to herself, hands grasping her face.

The sun was shining through the crack in the cave, Ilea angrily eating her food, conscious of every movement of her jaw, every gulp. Her movements suddenly stopped, the feeling of her split awareness flashing through her mind. She shook her head, taking another bite and trying to focus on the taste. Ilea didn't notice the tears dripping down from her chin, noting instead the salty taste from the food. *You can do this.* She reminded herself, Meditation flowing through her. *They can take your head but they can't kill you. Never. Don't give in to fear.*

***'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 6'***

*Are you fucking kidding me?* Ilea felt four different things at the same time. What came out was a soft chuckle. *Maybe I'm going mad.* The ridiculousness of it all was overwhelming. Healing back a lost arm was one thing but she had lost her head, her brain, her eyes, her nose. She stopped the train of thought. *And then the system, gods or whatever the fuck it is mocks me with a fucking resistance skill...*

A shudder went through her, healing and meditation flowing through her body and calming her down. She was pretty sure that without them, even with all her experience, she would be sobbing in a corner somewhere. *My perception skill didn't activate... so I had enough health?* A weird notion. Perhaps her ability to heal even fatal injuries made the skill less useful, only activating on high enough health loss alone. "Motherfuckers."

"I will rip off your limbs and heads, stuff those rusty swords up your asses." The words came out hollow but her gaze focused, the slight shaking in her hands calming down with each passing minute. *There will always be a Drake.* She said to herself, over and over. Finally, an unknown amount of time later, the suns having set and the city now clad in darkness, Ilea stood up. She stored the empty box of food in her necklace and put on a fresh helmet. *Retreat when a second one appears. I get it. Don't lose your head.* She didn't smile at her own joke, even though it was terrible.

Both her hands clasped her neck, her mouth opening before a scream ripped out of her, audible in a big part of the silent ruin. Wings spread before she jumped off the roof, her target the marked Undead Rose Knight. Her eyes

were focused, cold, her body poised. Her mouth a thin line below her helmet.

Landing behind the wall, Ilea started her search. She had the scent and her Hunter's Sight would lead her to the target. Not the undead himself but the yellow paint she had used. Noticing her perception focus on her own right hand time and time again, Ilea switched out the gauntlet before continuing her search. *I will find you.*

It took an hour to pick up the scent, a grin blooming on her face. *I will kill you.*



# Chapter 297 Helpful Advice

## Chapter 297 Helpful Advice

The blade cut through her Veil, scratching against her shoulder before it smashed into the floor, Ilea's fist lashing out into the stomach of the undead. It replied in kind, Ilea sent back through the air as she healed her damaged rib cage. The color was still there. The dents and scratches on his armor were still there. When she touched him, even if he resisted, she knew through her healing that the damage had remained.

It wasn't unwinnable. As long as she didn't die and retreated once more of them joined. A matter of time. Still, she moved in, ignoring a more defensive approach as her body slid past the blade, the dull weapon cutting the air with a loud sound. Ilea screamed as her fist smashed into the beast, her third tier auras working together, five hundred health sacrificed. Her arm was wreathed in flame and ash, red runes and fiery lines glowing from the cracks and ripped out pieces of her armor. The strike landed with an ear shattering crash, the knight flying through the wall behind him and into the house. Ilea in the meantime healed the broken bones in her fingers and the light damage her arm sustained.

Breathing out, she took the next seconds to meditate, calm herself down before the battle would once again start. Barely two had passed when the undead came rushing out again from within the rubble. Ilea jumped to the side, rolling before she turned and dodged its quick slashes, slowing him down with her ash as well as she could. She tried to trip him, tried to send ash into his eyes, nose and mouth, tried to rip the blade out of his grasp but

nothing worked. The undead was too powerful, like a force of dark magic itself it moved, untiring, unrelenting. And Ilea stood against it, cold eyes and a grin on her face as she deflected and dodged its attacks, getting in damage wherever she could, healing the wounds every strike of the monster caused.

Ilea fought on, her whole being focusing on the enemy. An opening showed and she sent five hundred health into her third tier aura, the punch sending the knight stumbling back. Eight ashen limbs smashed into his neck, finally smashing through the rotten and rusted steel. The knight screeched and Ilea screamed in turn. It lifted its sword, slashing from above with enough power in the blow to cut her in half. Ilea blinked, just half a meter to the left, the blade passing by as her azarinth aura once again came to life, her fist smashing into the knight's head with eight ashen limbs cutting into its neck.

Ilea blinked away and watched the undead sink to his knees, his neck cut open and head sitting at an unhealthy angle. The knight fell to the ground with a clattering sound, movements ceasing as Ilea too sank to her knees. She was down to five hundred mana and a third of her health, both quickly recovering. "I said I would kill you."

Hearing noises nearby, Ilea spread her wings and ascended, flying away from the knight coming into the square. The notification was bright in her mind, the smile on her face vicious, her eyes speaking of what was to come. She had won. Ilea could kill them.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 512] – For defeating an enemy two hundred twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 291 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 289 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 290 – Five stat points awarded'*

Ilea immediately spent the points on Vitality, her beheading fresh on her mind.

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2'*

Needing a little break, she flew high to try and find the elves, spotting one of Heranuur's explosions in the distance a couple minutes later. There were plenty of normal knights remaining in the dungeon and each had to be defeated before Maro was ultimately freed.

Landing on a roof overlooking the small, already half destroyed square, Ilea watched the battle between two knights and the team of elves as well as Terok. He was still the only one using ranged magic. Goldie was engaging one knight with the dwarf's support while the others were facing the second one. She watched them coordinate their attacks, Neiphato creating openings before moving away to allow Heranuur to use his explosions.

Even Goldie and Terok managed to push the knight onto the defensive, his shield trying to deflect the metal projectiles that flew past Goldie. The elf constantly forced the enemy to change positions while avoiding Terok's attacks. All of them seemed exhausted, sweat on their faces wherever they weren't covered by helmets. The knights had dents and scratches all over their armor, the one Terok was facing even had an entire shoulder piece missing. *Not bad.*

Ilea was more impressed two level three hundred creatures could stand against a team of four in their lower two hundreds. It would be different of course if the two had been conscious but the knights were mere undead. Maro really was a pretty scary guy to face, if this is what he could bring to the table. Even if his resurrected creatures weren't over level three hundred, commandeered by him it would surely close the gap. She sat down and watched them fight for the next half hour, their eyes occasionally flicking towards her, either noting her there or perhaps expecting her to intervene.

*Maybe I should join team knights.* Ilea wondered, the battle terribly one sided even with the undeads' tireless fighting and seemingly unlimited health pool. *That gets constantly refilled.* She wondered how much damage was necessary to overcome Maro's healing. Or was the healing coming from his machine alone? *Well I'll see after he's free. A battle between two level three hundred humans. We should sell tickets.*

Considering she alone had overpowered them below even level two fifty, she was sure the group would manage. Especially with most of them having less defense and healing oriented classes. As much as Terok bragged, he didn't seem to have changed much. Then again all he had to do in the fight was stay back and float around a little. The knights primarily focused their attacks on the melee fighters.

*Maybe we should have the bout now. Before I get my evolutions. I don't want to put him down even harder, as optimistic as he seemed earlier.* Summoning some food, Ilea started eating in silence as she continued watching the battle unfold. Seeing the elves fight up close, against enemies she had initially struggled against showed that they weren't exactly helpless. Finally staying more defensive compared to their reckless behavior definitely improved their sustainability. *Without healing abilities.* Even for Ilea it seemed ridiculous. She couldn't help but admire them a little.

To think they went out to seek unknown dungeons, completely unprepared to face the Taleen machines within. Ilea just hoped not all Cerithil hunters were that brazen, for both the elves relying on the thinned numbers of machines as well as their very lives. Remembering the elves she had fought and at least helped kill, she doubted it. At least with what they considered

young ones. *Fucking racist idiots is what they were. Arrogant racist idiots.* They probably lost as many of their population against ridiculously powerful monsters as they did against the Taleen robots.

A chuckle left her as she chewed on a piece of bread coming with the hearty stew Keyla had prepared. *Maybe that's why I'm willing to work with them. I'm a bloody elf myself.* The fight below had changed, Terok and Goldie's knight having fallen to their constant attacks. She really expected them to wait it out but both immediately helped the other two. At least Goldie she thought would mock and taunt them while they struggled against the foe.

The remaining undead was quickly finished by the four people, none of them suffering more than minor injuries. Heranuur looked up to her and waved, Ilea jumping down as she stored the empty box in her necklace, clapping after she landed. "Good job. It's only going to take another two years for you to clean up the rest of the knights."

Goldie hissed but didn't utter a word, his helmet of much better quality than the last time she had met him. *Who got that for him?*

Heranuur grinned and licked his lips, "I like to take my time."

*Exhibit A why this elf will never be more than a fling.* She snorted.

"Remember, we'll get stronger as we fight them too. Gonna be a week and the time will be down by half, a month and we can each fight one alone." Terok said, arms crossed.

Ilea doubted it. Not because what he said was inherently wrong but she had seen them fight. Most of the damage came from their partners creating openings, most of the enemy hits were avoided because of the partners' interference. They were a good team, or well, teams. "Just make sure someone is around while you try."

"Don't worry lassie. I don't suggest your approach. Can't very well heal if I lost my head." He laughed but Ilea didn't respond, instead looking at him as she gulped, "You ok? Don't worry, I won't do anything stupid. Can't speak for the carnivorous bunch."

“You eat meat too dwarf.” Heranuur said, rolling his eyes under his half broken steel helmet, red hair flowing out.

“Yea from animals. I suggest you don’t try that one, bad on the stomach.” Terok said, pointing at the undead lying on the floor.

Ilea smiled at the exchange. She knew the mouth on her and the stupid jokes occasionally brought trouble but if Terok had made it to his age with that snout of his, she was golden. Heranuur just laughed at his comment, patting his mech suit’s shoulder, the elf quite a bit smaller than Terok in his gear.

“We did it.” Goldie said to nobody in particular, nearly whispering as he knelt down next to the undead.

Neiphato nodded and smiled, “Indeed. If we continue like this, we’ll be able to face the Taleen in less than a year.”

“Nonsense. We can already kill Centurions. What else would they throw at us.” Seviir replied, taking off his golden helmet, revealing the white hair below.

“Praetorians.” Ilea simply stated, all of them glancing at her. Goldie stared at her with his yellow eyes, an intensity within that she couldn’t quite place. “Centurion Rippers and Juggernauts are probably enough to take you out.” Ilea said, not trying to embarrass them, simply stating fact. Without considerable healing power or incredible burst damage like Viper or Philipp could produce, each of them would be ripped apart. Maybe if they had a tank like Bataar but none of them except for Teork had a way to deal ranged damage. It would still be difficult.

“How dare you... human.” Seviir said and hissed at her. Ilea was surprised when Heranuur hissed back at him, the two staring at each other. “You... of course you would defend her. I smell the human whore on you... to defile our ancestors like this.”

“Don’t.” Ilea said to Heranuur who was extending his claws already.

He looked at her, stopping for a moment but she could tell he was ready to strike. Seviir started laughing, “And he even listens to her... if I weren’t cursed I would slice your throat right here.”

Ilea appeared in front of the elf, watching his eyes go wide. She released her defensive Veil and switched her armor to casual clothes. “I don’t need him to defend me. Now go on, strike me with all you have elf. Let’s see if you can back up that shit mouth with more than retarded gibberish.”

Goldie’s smirk vanished but he didn’t hesitate. At least he learned something in the past months. His hand lashed out at her neck, bones extending and sharpening as she felt the mana around him explode in power. A smirk came to her face right before the strike dug into her flesh and stopped at her spine, his lengthened claws unable to get through her own bone. The surprise was apparent on his face, Ilea using the moment to grab his arm. Blood flowed down her neck, several centimeters of it slashed through by Seviir. “The Taleen don’t care if you damage them.” Ilea said, pushing his hand away, her flesh ripping as more and more blood started to drip down.

“They will fight until they drop dead.” She said, the wounds closing in an instant. A mere one hundred mana sacrifice. “Whittling them down is a better option than trying to take their head.” She said and started crushing his arm with her hand, surprised at her inability to break it. The elf was grinding his teeth at the pain of his crushed muscles and tissue. *Not bad. Not surprising from a bone mage.* Still, red runes started to glow on her body before his bone snapped, the elf’s arm facing upwards in a ninety degree angle.

He cried out in pain as he looked at her with hate in his eyes. “They don’t care about your pain. They won’t stop until you’re dead. If they themselves feel pain then I haven’t ever seen it.” She let go of his arm as he stumbled back. “Heal it.” Her armor appeared again as well as her Veil. “One way or another you will get injured. Be prepared to flee and recover. A dead elf won’t help anybody.”

Ash started to form at her feet, flowing on the ground towards and around Seviir as the others watched on, Heranuur with a big grin on his face and

Neiphato with an unreadable expression. Terok of course had his face hidden behind his suit.

“Heal it!” Ilea shouted, taking a step closer as her ash swirled upwards, a whirlwind flowing around the group. She locked eyes with the elven warrior calling himself a Cerithil hunter, his face twisted in pain as he grabbed the broken arm and snapped it downwards, back into place. Mana surged and she watched through her sphere as the bleeding slowly stopped, the tissue reforming. It wouldn’t be quick enough to heal a fatal wound in the midst of battle but it was better than most had. They kept staring at each other. She took a step closer, their eyes mere inches from each other as Ilea spoke with a calm voice, “Now if you ever call me a whore again. I will rip off your head with my bare hands and feed it to the nearest animal.”

“Did you get me?” Ilea insisted.

He broke eye contact and nodded lightly. “I asked if you understood what I said, Seviir.”

He gulped, “I understand human.”

“Good.” She said and smiled, “Now Terok I think you mentioned a bout?”

She heard him swallow, “I’m not so sure about that lassie. You seem a little. Aggravated.”

“Teeny tiny bit.” He added, gesturing with two fingers held close together.

“Come on, don’t be a wuss. Show me what you got.” She said, cracking her fists. “You three go back to hunting, plenty of knights to go. Get out some of that steam Goldie, before you slaughter some weak humans like your worthless southern peers.”

The elf hissed and vanished, appearing on a nearby roof before he went further. Neiphato looked at her with apologetic eyes and then towards Goldie, disappearing as well. “He cares too much.” Heranuur said, “Know that not all of us would kill humans for fun.”



“I’m well aware of that Hera. Now go, before he kills himself against ten of them.”

“Thank you. For letting him live... once again.” The elf said, touching her shoulder before he vanished too.

Terok looked unsure as he looked at the back of the elf, quickly moving over the roofs. “Don’t worry, you’ll get your experience. I doubt they’ll kill one in less than thirty minutes.”

He nodded, “Sure sure. He respects you you know. Seviir that is, the others I don’t know. Heranuur likes you and Neiph is scared shitless.”

“Calling me a whore and challenging me? As well as striking me immediately with intent to kill.” Ilea said, shaking her head while she took a couple steps away from him and towards the center of the square.

The dwarf caught on and positioned himself accordingly. Touching his suit’s neck, he spoke, “What’s with that? Did he actually manage to injure you?”

Ilea noticed then that her hand was resting on her helmet, near her throat. “It’s nothing.” She said, her hand moving down again.

“Of course.” He nodded, “Well he’s been calling everybody names. Whore is probably one of the nicer things he uttered. It’s a respectable profession Ilea. Thought you humans were at least that far as a society.” He chuckled when she rolled her eyes, “He tried to kill Elfie several times you know, was always beaten down but it didn’t stop him. Never even admitted he was wrong or apologized. Certainly was a joy to see this spectacle.” He opened his arms wide.

“Elfie let him do that?” She was surprised. He wasn’t as aggressive as Goldie but he didn’t strike her as a pushover either, certainly more irascible than herself.

The dwarf laughed, “Well let’s say Goldie was quite a bit closer to death than anytime during our dungeon runs or against the knights. Was pretty

sure he was dead at least twice. Those curses are fucking nasty Ilea. You shouldn't mess with those."

"Seen worse." She simply said. "Now show me something cool robot dwarf."

# Chapter 298 Fear and Void

## Chapter 298 Fear and Void

Laughter rolled over the square, “Well...for one thing.” Terok said, the steel in his arm reforming to create a razor sharp blade that started at his fist and ended near his shoulder. Appearing before her, he smashed the blade at Ilea’s torso, the blow cutting into her Veil and breaking through with a bit of a push before it scratched against her armor. He teleported back again, “Not good for piercing steel.”

Ilea gave him a minute, “Well let’s just say I could drain Health from you if I could pierce.”

“Good. Can you do it with projectiles too?”

He shook his head, “No...might be the second tier though. I replaced one of my skills to get this one.”

She nodded, “We can work on it later. Might be difficult to drain against my second tier resistance.”

“Thanks. Wait second tier resistance? Ah... that’s where you sneaked off to every night. And here I thought you had a gambling problem.”

She furrowed her brows, “Gambling problem? What?”

“Hey I ain’t judging. Just thought, you giving away stuff for free you must have plenty of gold lying around. One of my theories on how you got it.”

He said and chuckled.

“Found most of it in a dungeon. Do you have anything else? I would hope you got more from your evolutions.”

“Well the transformation of my arm is one thing. Still working out the details but my armor has gotten more... well flexible might be the closest word I can use to describe it. Plus my mana sight has improved, I’m pretty sure I can enchant your stuff with a higher level too now. No teleporting now, just fists. You’ll see about the rest.”

She smiled and faced him, the dwarf rushing at her with quite impressive speed, his hands changing into fists as big as her head before they smashed into her Veil. The force was distributed well, making him unable to penetrate but she could tell he had gotten stronger by quite a bit, even with her own improved levels. On par with perhaps even Seviir, strength alone. If she assume he had used all he had against her neck earlier and she didn’t think highly enough of him to suspect the elf had held back.

Again his arms changed, this time back into blades before he slashed into her, the steel clashing against her own, leaving scratches wherever they struck. “You’re too durable... damn woman. Attack me instead. Frontal.” He said and jumped back a couple meters. Ilea gave him a second before she advanced, her fist delivering a powerful blow towards his chest. Shields suddenly formed on his arms, the two melting into each other before her blow landed on the metal, a dull sound echoing as the energy flowed through both him and her.

“A tank now too?” She said, her arm moving back again. This time she used all she had. Her fist landed, Terok skidding back a meter. The dent in his shield evened out quickly.

He laughed and released the spell, “You pack one hell of a punch. I guess if I can block you then I might as well participate more as a melee fighter. Use the projectiles to get them from behind or when they’re stuck on my shield.” The dwarf mused.

“It’s an idea. Glad you got your evolutions Terok. You’ll be at least a little useful to have a around.” Ilea commented.

“Don’t you dare thinking about ditching me woman!” He said and chuckled, both of them aware that she hadn’t been a part of his team for the past months at all. It was nice to have someone in the north at least somewhat knowledgeable about enchantments and traps but she couldn’t think of teaming up with him full time.

“I prefer to work alone.” Ilea said simply.

“And yet here you are.” Terok replied. “Don’t hit me.” He held up a finger.

Ilea smiled, “Well it’s the place to be. I killed one of the undead earlier.”

“We did too.” Terok gestured to the corpses.

“The ones in the lower zones, not connected to Maro. Three question marks. Level five hundred.”

“Oh... well I’m sure you’ll show me your own evolutions soon then. Now go and get to it woman, I have some elves and their power to exploit.” She could practically feel his grin as he started floating, on his way towards where the others had left.

Ilea sighed, her wings spreading as she prepared to take on her next undead. This time perhaps without losing her head.

Four days had passed while Ilea focused on finding and fighting the undead rose knights scattered in the lower parts of the city. Marking them with colors turned out to be helpful but also showed how few of them were actually there. It made them even scarier, knowing the distance in which they noticed battle. Of course the extraordinary violence and collateral damage facing them caused didn’t make it that crazy but the normal knights rarely even showed up when a fight was happening a couple streets over.

Forcing herself to abide by the self imposed rule to face one and only one undead at a time, Ilea slowly whittled them down. The damage on their armor as well as lack of connection to Maro made the approach possible. Still, Terok had informed her that if she waited too long, they might recover health as well. Just like any monster or human would. Simply at a rather slow pace. She hadn't asked the king about the specifics of undead health or unhealth regeneration but so far it worked.

*Another one down.* It was the fifth one so far. She smiled brightly, breathing hard as her wounds closed, bones resetting while she waited and listened to the surroundings. It had been a short battle. The undead was marked on her back, meaning she had faced the same one the day before. Twice even. Not much had been needed to finish the job. Still, it had brought her health down by a third and broke most of her rib cage with the handle of her sword. *Fucking ridiculous.*

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 520] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and twenty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

*Highest one so far.* Ilea mused, her health closing in on her max again. She quickly checked through the messages from the past days, the new ones added at the bottom.

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 292 – Five Stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 293 – Five Stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 294 – Five Stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 291 – Five Stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 292 – Five Stat points awarded'***

***'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 293 – Five Stat points awarded'***

*'ding' 'Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Veil of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Ashen Warrior reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3'*

*Back to levels getting more attention than skills again. Well I won't complain. Both is helpful.*

Fourteen stat points she had put into Vitality, bringing her health to 6500. The other sixteen went into Wisdom, giving a round number of 666. There was an argument to be made to keep it there but Ilea would push both of the stats higher before even hitting three hundred. She saw the difference her Strength brought, each hit crashing into her enemies with a devastating force. Dexterity changed her ability to dodge, use openings to her advantage and to simply have her body keep up with her perception. Intelligence boosted the damage from her spells, all three of these stats letting her win against her enemies in the first place.

Vitality and Wisdom on the other hand, they let her survive. Let her get decapitated without her health reaching zero, let her recover the lost head without taking her out of the fight. Arguments could be made for her investments but the experience was fresh on her mind. It felt right.

A sudden appearance in her sphere made her turn her head, eyes going wide as she breathed out slowly. Checking her resources, she found her health full, mana sitting at two thirds, stamina damn near full already. A drop of sweat rolled down her neck as she looked towards the other side of the street. Both the house she was in as well as the one she was looking at were mostly destroyed, piles of rubble as well as an unmoving knight the only things around.

*[Soul Ripper - ???]*

It didn't move, simply looking her way. No eyes adorned its head, no mouth to talk or screech. The beast looked the same as the last one she had seen. Elongated legs and arms, it stood on all fours. The thin frontal two limbs had hands with elongated fingers and claws at the end, its body just as slim.

*'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 7'*

*Way to go, didn't realize I was shitting my pants.* Ilea didn't move a muscle and neither did the beast. The tentacles in its flower like head started writhing a moment later, barely visible in the dim light provided by her buffs. Ilea blinked her eyes. It moved.

Soundless the monster lunged, with a speed surpassing even the undead knights. Perhaps it might have caught her, had it not been for Ilea's sphere. She blinked up and behind the monster, her fist and ashen limbs smashing into its spine. A chunk of mana left her, its destructive force coursing through the monster. It didn't turn towards her when she landed, neither showed any injury or notice of her attack. Ilea watched as it lowered its head, right above the undead rose knight. A surge of mana nearly made her stumble, a force dragging her towards the beast for a mere split second.

The undead's head was gone. With it a little of the floor. As well as the very air that had been near the monster's magic. She had seen it before, Ilea realized. *Void*. The same as Maria, the mage traveling with Edwin. This was more raw, dimensions from the woman who had used the magic against Ilea's body.

"What the hell are you?" She said in a quiet voice, the beast turning quickly towards the noise. Its hand lashed out, nearly grabbing her before she blinked away. The beast held its hand towards its head before it realized nothing was there. "Not the brightest are you?"

She had no way to tell if there was anything beyond instinct. It fed on the undead or removed its head for some reason. Maria never mentioned if the voids she created put the removed tissue and blood anywhere. *Never thought about that. Something dragged me towards it though. Gravity? Or space filling up rapidly?* Ilea knew as much as not to get into its claws. That much was simple to deduce and enough for her.



Ashen limbs lashed out, closing in on the creature as it rushed her again. Ilea only managed to blink away because her limbs hadn't reached the beast yet, otherwise it would have gotten her. "I don't really feel like finding out what happens if you get me. But I won't fuck off without at least trying to kill you." She said, defiantly. *I refuse to be afraid of this thing.*

***'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 8'***

*Fucking damn it.* A grin was on her face when the beast jumped at her again. This time she had waited patiently, blinking and delivering the same blow as before. Her third tier Azarinth Fighting didn't offer her an insight towards the damage she would sustain, Ilea assuming the beast would simply grab her. The real attack would follow afterwards.

The monster's bone was as hard as anything Ilea had met, most of the energy going right back through her arm as she disengaged, at least the physical force of it. *I don't think I'm doing anything here.* She watched the beast turn and jump. Not at her but over the buildings behind her and off, out of her sphere. Left in the darkness, she didn't hear it land, didn't hear or see a single thing with neither eyes nor sphere. *Did I injure it? Maybe it just got bored... or frustrated.* A shiver went down her back. *Stop it body. Get a fucking grip Ilea.*

At least her Fear Resistance didn't level again. First time she was happy about a skill not getting higher. *Not going to chase it.* Her reasons were her own. *I need a break. Again.*

"The undead's head just vanished." Ilea said, shoveling half her portion of fried potatoes into her mouth.

"According to your description. How did I do?" Elfie asked, showing her the sketch he had drawn into a fancy book of his. "Any idea what kind of magic it uses?"

The resemblance was eerie, Ilea just holding up a thumb while she struggled not to suffocate. She coughed and struggled, swallowing twice before she spoke, “Void I think. No idea why it’s called Soul Ripper. Maybe there’s something else there I’m not seeing. Terok you might be helpful with your mana sight.”

Holding up both hands, the dwarf chuckled awkwardly, “Only if you drag me down there Ilea. I’d rather pass. Already nearly died against the crazy knights there, I don’t need more nightmares to keep me awake.”

*Fair enough.*

“I’d like to see it.” Heranuur said, fire dancing around his arms.

“No.” Ilea simply said. “I’ll go down again soon, shouldn’t be more than another ten or twenty of them until I get there.”

Elfie chuckled, “I had thought you needed years, decades even.” His eyes turned hard as he looked towards Heranuur and Neiphato, “Don’t even think about it. Not before you can heal as fast as she can.” Goldie was working on his bone magic at the other end of the cathedral but Ilea was sure he simply didn’t want to join dinner at their fire place.

“You could do the same. Just go in there and fight. Or use your magic against the miststalkers at night.” Ilea suggested.

Elfie shook his head, “My advice to them is true for myself. Curses can heal me, yes but compared to the health drain or danger posed by most of the creatures roaming these lands, the risks far outweigh the rewards.”

“I mean she gets shredded to near death daily.” Terok said, pointing at Ilea with his mug.

“How would you know?” She asked.

“Seeing far and flying high. Might want to think about getting binoculars lassie.”

She chuckled, “Well I might think about it next time I go to Hallowfort.” Looking at Elfie, she noted his silver eyes on her, “Speaking of which. Did you get your talk with the queen?”

His eyes closed and a small sigh left him before he spoke, “I did. As did I talk to the fox.”

“Found what you were looking for?” Ilea asked.

“A human and a dark one. Both showed extensive knowledge yet ultimately nothing of the like I had been hoping for.”

Ilea sighed, “Sucks. Well I’m sure you’ll find something in the next thousand years or two.” A smile, Terok laughed. To her surprise the elf grinned too.

“If that is what it takes.” He said. “Perhaps the king will have something else to offer too.”

“What exactly are you looking for anyway?” Terok asked but the elf shook his head. “You lot and your constant secrets. You’re in the north... nobody cares around here. Your people aren’t here, mine or hers are neither.” He added, pointing at himself and Ilea in turn. Still the elf didn’t speak.

“Aaaah you’re a boring old twat.” The dwarf added, Neiphato snickering at the comment.

Ilea took a sip of ale from her mug, “Thought you wanted to avoid his curses.”

“I can see them coming a mile away now lassie. Don’t have to be able to kill the elf to survive the battle.” He said and pointed to his own head.

*You’re still constantly inside your machine.* She noted. The only time she had glimpsed his real body was when he took the food inside earlier. Perhaps Elfie really was that harsh of a teacher, not even dinner being excluded from possible training. Noting her own sphere and auras

constantly active, Ilea couldn't fault them. In a world where monsters lured around every corner, especially the north.

"Still want to talk to the king?" She asked, finishing her meal.

"Of course. Most human kings would have me hunt down before I even set foot into their cities."

Terok chuckled, "You overestimate their security." Ilea raised her eyebrows but he just shrugged.

*Would actually be interesting to see. If he could enter Ravenhall undetected.*  
"I don't know if he will be help where Elana couldn't. She was the true ruler after all." Ilea said.

"As much I have been told. Though I try not to judge someone by the opinion of another." The elf replied.

Heranuur grinned, drinking from his mug, a red liquid sloshing inside. Blood of an animal or monster mixed with water or wine. Commonplace among elves Ilea had learned, "You really are a lunatic." Elfie looked at the ground but didn't say anything.

*Great mood guys.* "So. Any tips before I go in and level the last stretch?"

# Chapter 299 Terrific Suggestions

## Chapter 299 Terrific Suggestions

“You really think you’re that close?” Terok asked. “How many levels left?”

Elfie was the one to reply, “She’s at two ninety four.”

Terok shook his head, “That would take another year for some.” He paused, “I say you go out and face the arcane storms. Just fly into them, try to get into the clouds above. That will be something worth a note in your evolution I’m sure.”

“Already got hit by that. Don’t plan to do it again anytime soon.” Ilea said, remembering the power of the storms. Traveling during daytime was still restricted because of them. “Would have loved to face a dragon, you guys don’t know where any are?”

Heranuur laughed, “Told you she’s one of us.” He said to Neiphato, the brown haired elf nodding and looking at her shyly.

“Don’t give me that look.” Ilea said before he switched his attention towards the wall behind her. *How the fuck are they all so awkward, being as old as they are.* “Hera you don’t count years differently right?”

“No. Same as you humans.” He said, a little confused.

Elfie sighed but didn’t say anything.

“Did you swim to the bottom of the ocean? Might be something to consider as well. Or fly as high as you can.” Terok continued with his suggestions.

“Both will kill her.” Elfie said, “There are monsters you do not wish to provoke. Not as you are now.”

Ilea didn't disagree. She felt like she had done plenty of crazy things in the past year, adding to the list would simply be a delay. “Most of my tier three skills aren't even above level ten. I could have worked on them more.”

“Took me decades to get some of mine to reach even level five without combat.” Elfie commented, strangely reassuring. Perhaps he had slipped into his teacher role too much, not even realizing who he was talking to.

“You said you had faced a Praetorian before?” Neiphato suddenly asked. Ilea realized all three elves were looking at her, even Goldie slowing down with his training.

Ilea spent the next twenty minutes retelling her adventures in her first Taleen dungeon, leaving out one or the other detail that could identify or endanger someone should it ever be relevant. She didn't talk about all the gold she had found or anything else about the treasury. Terok was suspiciously quiet in the end, perhaps realizing something.

“How could they use the gate?” Heranuur questioned.

“It was linked still, to another dungeon. You don't need to manipulate anything if it is still linked.” Elfie explained.

Ilea smiled, “How would you know?”

He shrugged, “I don't need to enter a dungeon to learn about the technology within. You should also know that not all teleportation gates of the Taleen are within dungeons. Some simply lead to the wilderness or a mine.”

*Makes sense. Meaning there are plenty of linked gates still around.* “Is there a way to manipulate them? Go to somewhere else instead? Change the destination?”

“Of course. Either through careful manipulation or with a key. Though this is simply as much as I have been told. I have not seen it myself, nor have I met someone who has. If a hunter spends hundreds of years inside their cities, studying them and uncovering their secrets... I believe something fundamental like the gates would have been understood long ago.” He added.

Ilea frowned, “Well if that’s the case why don’t they know about it?” She pointed to the two other elves sitting with them.

“You hardly know every secret of all humans. You didn’t even know Rhyvor existed before coming down here.”

*That’s an argument. Cerithil Blog, how to hack the gates and fuck up Taleen, a ten step in depth guide. If only.*

“It doesn’t help that cursed ones are hunted by many of our kind, especially their gatherings and strongholds.” He sighed.

*Lots of sighing today. She knew why he didn’t hunt them, had heard some of his reasons,* “So the oracles don’t support something like that?”

“Neither do they condone it. Elves kill elves all the time, why should this be different?” Heranuur asked.

“Because you’re fighting for your people and not yourself.” Ilea said, taking another sip. Elfie glanced towards her for a moment.

Heranuur looked at her and then nodded, “True. Nobody cares. As far as I hear you humans don’t care either if someone defeats monsters endangering your little settlements.”

“No, they pay those humans to kill the monsters.” Elfie supplied.

“Really? Sounds like a better thing to do than this.” Heranuur said. Neiphato shook his head.

“Neither gold, influence nor acknowledgment should be what you seek.”

Ilea smiled at the elf’s words but didn’t say anything.

“I got it. You catch a Famine Crow, ride it and steer it into the lake of miststalkers, then run off.” Terok helpfully supplied, making at least one of the elves laugh out loud.

Ilea finally dusted herself off and got up, “Well you’ve been terribly helpful. I’ll be out again then for a week, maybe two. Good luck in your battles.” She said, turning and walking to the open gates leading towards the city.

Terok appeared next to her, “Ilea. Something I wanted to talk to you about.” She turned and listened, “The Great Hall. Well I’ve worked down the enchantment enough that a strong mana surge should be enough to get in. Maro confirmed it to me earlier.”

“And you need me for that?”

He shook his head, “No, I can get in whenever. Just thought I’d let you know. We can go whenever you want.”

“A word human.” Goldie had stopped his training, taking the last steps to reach the two of them.

“I’ll let you know Terok. First I want to focus on this.” She said.

“Sure, good luck in there.” She nodded to the dwarf and looked at Seviir who was waiting a couple steps to the side.

He nodded to her when Terok was gone, “I apologize for my behavior human.” He paused and locked eyes with her, “I was out of line.”

She was silent for a moment, processing what he had said. “Seviir, just don’t be such a colossal dick all the time. Otherwise you’ll have your head



smashed in by someone you offend.”

He nodded lightly, “Fortune to you, Ilea.” He gave her a thumbs up and actually smiled, although there were enough teeth showing to make her question the intent. At least had she not spend so much time around elves lately.

*Weirdest conversation in a while.* She thought, walking through the doors and spreading her wings. Maybe Terok was right and the elf respected her more than even Elfie. It probably meant quite something considering they literally eat humans. She didn't care to ponder on it. Focus was needed for what was to come. Focus and mana.

Day in and day out Ilea searched for the undead, marking them as she had before, disengaging as soon as another one appeared due to the loud and destructive battling. The strategy of simply being loud herself did bring them to her but it usually brought more than one of them too. The more of them she killed, the longer she spent on finding them, going deeper and deeper into the dungeon. Avoiding Soul Rippers became normal too but seeing how they rarely pursued significant distances, it was easy to stay focused on the knights.

Her nights she spent in the dungeon too, simply continuing her search. Having to disengage after usually a couple minutes made her progress somewhat slow. At least every kill granted a high amount of experience towards her next levels. Terok and crew in the meantime continued to hunt the lower leveled knights, all still connected to Maro.

Ilea's fist smashed into the chest of the latest undead she had found, sending him through the stone wall behind. The once man now monster was marked on his left leg, meaning it was the one Ilea had already fought four times in the past week. “We're getting there.” Ilea commented as she read through the messages that had accumulated, checking her surroundings constantly.

She was deeper in the dungeon than she had ever been before, more and more Soul Rippers having shown up in these parts.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 510] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

...

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 513] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 295 – Five Stat points awarded'*

...

*'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 299 – Five Stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 294 – Five Stat points awarded'*

...

*'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 299 – Five Stat points awarded'*

The levels resulted in 55 stat points to be assigned. Ilea spent thirty four of those to get her Wisdom to 700, just in case that counted as some sort of achievement for her evolutions too. *Doubt it, considering people could reach two thousand of a single stat if they wanted. Unlimited Strength.* The rest of her stats went into Vitality.

*'ding' 'Blink reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Form of Ash and Ember reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Ash Creation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*Fewer skill levels even though I killed what, three, four times the amount of knights? She was a little annoyed. Of course she became more familiar and confident when facing them but it didn't cut down on the danger level by much. The still had the ability to cut her in half. *And you have the ability to come back from that.* The thought reassured her. She'd get there, that much was sure. Checking her stats, she smiled.*

*Name: Ilea Spears*

*Unspent statpoints: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0*

*Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 0*

*Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 299*

- Active: Destruction – 3rd lvl 9*
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 3rd lvl 12*
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 10*
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 10*
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 4*
- Passive: Hunter's Sight – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 20*

*Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 299*

- *Active: Veil of Ash – 3rd lvl 10*
- *Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 3rd lvl 5*
- *Active: Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 7*
- *Active: Embered Body Heat – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – 3rd lvl 3*

### ***General Skills:***

- *Elos Standard language - lvl 6*
- *Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1*
- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Identify - lvl 8*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Curse Resistance - 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Death Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 8*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*

- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 9*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Time Magic Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 671***

***Endurance: 400***

***Strength: 500***

***Dexterity: 400***

***Intelligence: 600***

***Wisdom: 700***

***Health: 5821/6710***

***Stamina: 3309/4000***

***Mana: 4827/7000***

The culmination of her efforts in Elos. *Let's see how much it will actually change.* She thought, looking around again before she blinked up. Wings spread as she carefully floated over the houses. Her sphere reached the ground and like this she could move without producing much noise. The Soul Rippers had a tendency to stick to walls and stay unmoving until she was in range. In the air, most of them wouldn't even notice the woman.

It was pitch black, night had fallen and even towards the distant higher parts of the city Ilea could see nothing. At least she knew that her fear of the ocean wasn't necessarily connected to darkness. Somehow this experience of flying over the ruins wasn't very difficult.

*Ripper, Ripper, Ripper, Ripper... Undead. There you go.* Walking lonely through a square was a single undead rose knight, exactly what she was looking for. Ilea immediately engaged, not caring about the Soul Rippers somewhat close by. She would try to shoo them away or flee if necessary, as she had done a dozen times before.

*Let's try and keep it contained.* Her wings vanished as she rammed into the knight with all the speed and power she could muster. The blow didn't even make him stumble, her legs bending at the weight of the blow. His sword lashed out, Ilea twisting her body as she jumped off him, allowing the blade to hit ultimately. She knew the damage would be minimal, a slight dent and a barely cracked bone. Already healing while she twirled in the air, Ilea prepared for the attack of the now enraged undead.

She landed on her feet, the knight already upon her, his blade slashing past the dodging warrior, a blow from her fist flaking off some of the rust on his armor before she disengaged, taking several quick steps back while twisting her body minimally. The dull blade rushed by, Ilea counting the attacks, carefully evaluating when to move in. Another two strikes and she stepped forward instead, her knee smashing into his thigh, her ashen limbs cut through by the blade now behind her back. The blow landed nonetheless and she didn't stop, ducking under his fist and to the left before another strike found his back.

When his sword came around again, Ilea was already too far away to be in danger. *Come on.* The thought came in a split second, Ilea grinning when the knight let go of his sword at the end of the slash, the blade flying towards her as she ran at it, blinking through before her fists smashed into the creature, his prowess in hand to hand combat miles behind. Hit after hit she delivered, avoiding his grabs with calculated dodges and blink.

The sword came back, Ilea held back at a distance again, the creature starting to apply more complicated maneuvers and feints. With her ability to

gauge the incoming attacks, his tactics simply delayed the inevitable. She wouldn't stumble, wouldn't fail. Against an enemy working with the rotten remains of a once masterful swordsman, she would prevail. Now that she could negate its incredible strength, could foresee most of its feints.

Still, she was pushed back, the creature smashing through buildings which she jumped over or bypassed using her teleportation magic. Openings were rare and she was already running out of time. *At least I should.* There was no second knight showing up, the one before her crashing through another set of walls when Ilea blinked through a massive wall. *No more around in this area?* She wondered, feeling the earth below her steel boots, no longer the stone with which the city was built.

*Not quite comparable to Virilya.* She thought, hearing the knight smash its blade into the wall before he appeared in her sphere, jumping over the wall. He landed with his blade cutting into the earth where she had stood a moment before, her ashen limbs rushing at him but cut through by a powerful swing of his sword.

Ilea prepared as the undead screeched at her, *I get it angry man.* Dodging the blade several times, she went farther away from the wall, the stone monument soon vanishing from her sphere when she finally found an opening. Again and again, her fists smashed into the knight as he tried to hit or grab her with his free hand. *Not happening.* Blinking behind him, she kicked his back, using the momentum to avoid the slash coming at her right after.

Ilea's head spun to the side but there was nothing. Her sphere showed nothing. *I'm hearing things.* The blade was thrown, Ilea dodging it this time before her ashen limbs crashed into the knight. Twice she hit before finally reaching him, her fist smashing into his stomach before she blinked behind him. *Where's his sword?* Using the circumstances to her advantage, she instead continued her offense. Her limbs crashed into the steel, each blow staggering the undead more and more, one of his legs snapping a moment later and bringing him down.

She ignored his grab this time, knowing the end was near. The steel on her leg groaned as he crushed it, Ilea's reversed healing as well as her ashen

limbs and fist continued to smash his life away bit by bit. This time she was sure, there had been movement around her. *Soul Rippers*.

Not relenting, she felt the bone in her leg break when one of the creatures entered her sphere, jumping at them a moment later. Using her weight and ashen limbs, she pushed herself and the undead knight down, her destructive mana still flowing into him. He grabbed one of her arms now too, both hands now grasping her and trying to crush her. Letting go, he smashed her head. Again and again his fist dented her helmet, the metal cutting into her face.

A couple hits later, the hitting stopped and the knight slumped down, several dinging noises resounding in her mind. A portion of mana was sacrificed to heal her face when she blinked up, wings spreading. Her sphere was crawling with movement, spindly legs moving in and out. *Fucking hell*. She felt something on her leg, one of the Soul Rippers having jumped and grabbing onto her.

*It's dragging me down...*, She felt the weight, its struggle as it tried to grab her with its other arm. Ilea cut into its thin arm with her ash but nothing happened, the skin hard as steel. *I'll go down if this continues*. The wall was coming up and she ascended, dragging the beast up with her before she suddenly snapped to a stop. A yelp left her when the full force of her wings pulled on her leg. The creature had its hind legs dug deep in the wall and was pulling, both hands now wrapped around her shin.

“Hey, know what fuckface. If you really want it, you can have it.” The armor on her leg vanished before her ashen limbs cut through her skin and muscle, separating her leg at the knee, Ilea blinking upwards immediately, again and again as her wings flapped to take her away from the horrifying creatures.



# Chapter 300

## Chapter 300

She didn't let herself relax until she had reached the wall leading to the higher part of Tremor. Blood was flowing down her leg, the wound closing when she finally realized. Ilea continued towards her house and blinked through the wall, armor replaced by comfortable clothes before she landed on her bed. "Fuck that's gonna leave a stain..." She looked at her leg but found the bleeding had already stopped, the shin reforming slowly.

Her vision was blurry and she realized her hands were shaking. Meditation flowed through her immediately, Ilea sitting up and resting her back on the wall behind her. "Fucking hell." She repeated the words three times before her hands had calmed down. The knight had done serious damage to her other leg and her arm, both mostly mush except for her bones. *Another set of armor fucked.* Checking her messages, the first thing she saw made her squint her eyes before she started laughing. *Damn long legged fuckers.*

***'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 9'***

It took her a minute to calm down completely, meditation still helping her out with that. *Close fucking call you damn idiot.* Another part of her shrugged and thought it was worth it. In the end she had survived, as she did before. Maybe she would have survived anyway, even if she hadn't been able to cut off her leg. The wide smile on her face said enough.

Lifting her back, she sat down on the bed cross legged and summoned one of Keyla's meals, the smell of the warm and spicy dish immediately

overshadowing the blood and sweat clinging to her body. *Now, let's fucking mutate.*

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 518] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 300 – Five Stat points awarded. One tier 3 skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 300 – Five Stat points awarded. One tier 3 skill point awarded'***

***'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'***

***'ding' 'Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5'***

*And both classes at the same time, fucking perfect. Trying to spend the third tier skill points first didn't seem to work, both showing no skills to advance. Requirements should be met. Maybe it's tied to the evolutions in some way. On with it then.*

***'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes Azarinth Elder. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -***

*You have pushed yourself to the pinnacle of humanity and thus deserve to carry the name of Elder. Leveled at least five Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Carries the skill Meditation at the end of the second tier. Has an Azarinth class at level 300 or higher.*

*The Elders of the Azarinth Order pave the way to the future. Conquest and expansion are theirs to plan and execute. They have the power to rebuild what was lost. Known to be strategic minds, an elder leading a group of Azarinth Healers might very well be unstoppable.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Azarinth Elder]?’*

*How about absolutely fucking not? Conquest and expansion my ass.*

*‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes Beast of Azarinth. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*Your blood lust permeates all. Leveled at least eight Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Destruction and Azarinth Fighting in the third tier. Has killed at least 1000 higher leveled beings. Has sustained 1000 heavy injuries. Has an Azarinth class at level 300.*

*Far from the path of the once powerful healing order, they have chosen to seek their own power and the destruction of life itself. Fueled by hatred and blood the Beast of Azarinth marches on, unable to find or bring peace. Forbidden magic of Death corrupts the power once destined to heal and mend.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Beast of Azarinth]?’*

“Come on guys... it’s not that bad is it? At least it’s not a thousand kids...,” She at least thought about it thanks to the death magic mention. Maybe an Azarinth and Death magic combination? If she had to chose between Elder and Beast, the choice was clear at least. *Corrupts... does that mean no more healing at all? That would suck.*

***‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes Azarinth Pioneer. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -***

***Adventure is your second name. Leveled ten Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Has traveled where no human dares to go, has survived natural dangers capable of decimating armies. Founded a settlement or discovered a lost city. Has an Azarinth class at level 300.***

***The Pioneer has chosen their own path, discovering the forgotten and perfecting their skills and powers. Be it erupting volcanoes, the waves of the ocean or blizzards cold enough to freeze their very blood, nothing will stop their want for adventure. Powerful regeneration and constitution come with their mantle.***

***Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Azarinth Pioneer]?’***

Ilea was starting to get a little annoyed at how shit these classes seemed, “Surviving natural dangers and not a mention of Resistances? Not even one needed?” *I swear on my enjoyment of food if these aren’t getting better ...,*

***‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes Azarinth Destroyer. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -***

***You have no equal in battle. Leveled ten Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Has Destruction, State of Azarinth and Azarinth Fighting in***

*the third tier. Has killed an enemy above level 500. You have fought hordes of enemies above your own level and prevailed. Has the Azarinth First Hunter class at level 300.*

*The Destroyer is a rare sight to behold. A master of Azarinth Magic, each strike powerful and with intent. They move over the battlefield with grace, leaving nothing behind. The true power of the Azarinth Order or anybody they would choose to join. Their Strength is second to none, cracking even steel with their fists.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Azarinth Destroyer]?’*

“That’s more like it baby. Fighting, level five hundred beast and a focus on fighting with ones fists.”

*‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes The Azarinth Wayfarer. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*The unfathomable. Leveled ten Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Has Blink and State of Azarinth in the third tier. Has killed an enemy above level 600. Has traveled to another realm and returned. Has the Veteran skill at level 5 or higher. Speaks two languages. Has the Azarinth First Hunter class at level 300.*

*The Azarinth Wayfarer has grasped the impossible nature of magic, has crossed the boundaries between realms. True understanding will follow those unwilling to accept the status quo. They are a master of their surroundings, of space itself.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Azarinth Wayfarer]?’*

*Space mage... seems pretty fucking far off what I've been doing all this time. How many have missed this possible evolution because they weren't bilingual?* She chuckled at the thought and continued her bloody reading homework.

***'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes Azarinth Regenerator. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -***

***More monster than man. Leveled eight Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Has Hunter Recovery and State of Azarinth in the third tier. Has killed ten enemies above level 500. Has ten Resistance skills at level 5 or higher. Has Pain Tolerance in the second tier. Has lost either head or all limbs in battle before recovering. Has the Azarinth First Hunter class at level 300.***

***The Azarinth Regenerator fears no enemy. Be it ice or fire, they stand against it unmoving. Bearers of the pain they have suffered, unwilling to accept defeat. Virtually unkillable they are prepared to face whatever may move into their path, their bodies mere weapons, tools to be used.***

**Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Azarinth Regenerator]?'**

Ilea sighed, "Well at least it's not called the Azarinth Masochist. Tools to be used... might as well be." She had a smirk on her face before she moved to the next one.

***'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes Avenger of Azarinth. No current skills or stats will be lost, be***

*aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*A hunter unmatched. Leveled ten Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Has Destruction, Azarinth Fighting and State of Azarinth in the third tier. Has killed ten enemies at full power above level 400 while alone. Has five General skills in the second tier. Has participated in acts of revenge, found and killed those responsible. Has lost limbs in the midst of battle and continued the fight. Has the Azarinth First Hunter class at level 300.*

*An avenger stopping at nothing to bring justice to those deserving. Judge and executioner, powerful and deadly enough to hunt down any target they deem unworthy. Unstoppable and fueled by the magic of Azarinth, healing any injury that might delay them, their bodies mere arbiters of revenge.*

**Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [Avenger of Azarinth]?’**

Flashes of the Birminghames went through her mind, Eve lying dead in her bed and the old man asking her to spare the girls. *What was his name again?* She shook her head, breathing in hard and focusing on the task at hand. *Requirements are pretty high and finally a mention of killing something alone. Healing might be enhanced and there’s at least talk about one’s own body.* She saw there was only one option remaining, the avenger probably her favorite for now.

**‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth First Hunter becomes The Azarinth Sentinel. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -**

*Life and Death. Leveled ten Azarinth skills to the end of the second tier. Has Destruction, Hunter Recovery, Azarinth Fighting and State of Azarinth in the third tier. Has killed ten enemies at full power above level 500 while alone. On their own, has faced hordes of enemies above their*

*own level and prevailed. Has fifteen or more Resistance skills in the second tier, two or more at the highest level. Has helped and healed strangers of various races, unasked for or even meeting hostility. Risked their life for others on multiple occasions. Has the Azarinth First Hunter class at level 300.*

*The Azarinth Sentinel has reached the pinnacle of Azarinth magic, mastering its style while not forgetting their roots. A healer at heart they seek to mend the wounds of those they deem close and strangers alike. True veterans of battle they have chosen a path most peculiar. Savior to one and Destroyer to another. Their bodies forged into weapons, their mana overpowering all. A force of their own, to decide on the fate of beings.*

**Would you like to evolve your class [Azarinth First Hunter] to [The Azarinth Sentinel]?’**

Ilea shifted her attention back to her food, the smell of the spicy orange sauce with potatoes and vegetables making her stomach rumble. She looked at the bowl, the rice still steaming even after all that reading. *Did I really heal so many strangers? Risked my life for others?* None of her actions seemed out of the ordinary. This whole world of course was ridiculous. She had turned into a survivor here, a murderer, hunter. *Savior? Fuck that.* She was quite aware that the same line read Destroyer as well.

Besides the first couple possibilities, the rest seemed exceptional. *Destroyer, Wayfarer, Regenerator, Avenger, Sentinel.* Each with their own specialty, each with increasingly high demands. She asked herself whether there would have been another class if she had ten resistances at the end of the second tier or if the Sentinel description would have simply required ten at that point. Would there have been another class had she killed ten level six hundred beasts alone? Possibly.

Most of the classes required her to be at level 300, making it hardly reasonable to get anything new at this point. She had chosen to reach 300



now and these were her choices. *Sentinel has the hardest achievements listed. Pinnacle of Azarinth magic, bodies forged into weapons...*

“What am I... a fucking paladin?” She chuckled and started eating, savoring every bite as she crushed it with her teeth, the taste and smell making her forget the choice for some blissful seconds. *Regenerator doesn't seem to grant a lot of offensive potential and I can't see how more regeneration would change anything drastically at this point. Wayfarer is cool but with my focus on fighting instead of the study of magic and teleportation, I think I'll pass. Destroyer seems to be a Sentinel Light with a focus on strength.*

She pondered, *And Avenger is pretty vague. How often have I actually needed to be a hunter. I feel like most monsters and people were found easily enough. It could help with the Lily...*

“This is annoying. Sentinel is the best choice if I look at the requirements.” She scribbled into her notebook, comparing the classes with bullet points, ignoring all the blabbering about justice, death and revenge. She had to admit that Sentinel was also the best one with its power descriptions. Other than ‘Healer at heart’, the rest was pretty straightforward. *Well mana overpowers all is a little weird too. But there is a specific mention of one's body. Maybe it's talking about mana intrusion?*

She felt a little queasy, putting away the food as she got up and walked to the hole in the wall, once a window. It was dark outside, the sound of a distant explosion barely audible. *That fucking elf.* She thought, a smile on her face. *Did you level all those resistances for nothing?* She asked herself and sighed. Somehow it just didn't feel right. None of them did. *Hunter unmatched, arbiter of revenge. That's just as fucking stupid.* Closing her eyes, Ilea tapped her lip with her finger. *Life and Death. A force of their own, to decide on the fate of beings.* “Ah fuck it, if that is what a bloody Sentinel does then I will decide on my own fate.” She said to herself and accepted the class evolution.

*'ding' 'Class change: Azarinth First Hunter becomes The Azarinth Sentinel*

*Vitality +30  
Strength +15  
Dexterity +15  
Intelligence +30  
Wisdom +20*

*Body enhancement magic is improved by 300%  
All healing magic skills are improved by 200%  
Natural health regeneration is increased by 1% per minute  
Food, water and sleep needed to sustain yourself are reduced*

Ilea felt the weight of the decision fall off her. This was the road she had taken and she would stand by that. Ignoring the fact that another evolution was yet to come, she instead smiled at the additional 100% improvement to her body enhancements as well as healing skills. The additional stats were welcome as well but a drop in the bucket compared to what she had gained through leveling alone. *Seven levels worth if I'm right.*

*'Skills changed by The Azarinth Sentinel:*

*[Destruction] becomes [Absolute Destruction]*

*Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 9:  
Send a destructive pulse of mana into your enemy with every punch or kick. Your Intelligence stat enhances the damage potential.  
2nd stage: The amount of mana used per strike can be regulated with a*

*maximum of 100 mana per strike. You may charge each strike whilst unmoving with 100 mana per second to a maximum of 3000 mana. 3rd stage: Due to the healing nature of Destruction it partially ignores protection against Mana intrusion.*

*Category: Healing*

*So if I'm reading this right the mana per strike was increased from 20 to 100 plus I can charge it. While unmoving but still. And the 100% increase for healing skills should apply here as well. Quite a power up, costs a bunch more mana too but with my regeneration.... She smiled, already itching to test it out on some unfortunate undead.*

*[Hunter Recovery] becomes [Sentinel Reconstruction]*

*Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 12:*

*Send a healing pulse of mana into yourself or your ally with a touch. This skill can be channeled.*

*2nd stage: Your control is increased greatly, you can now focus your healing on specific parts of the body. As long as mana and health remains, your Sentinel Reconstruction will restore your body. Lose your head and see for yourself! Health loss and critical blows are recalculated due to the nature of your healing.*

*3rd stage: You have healed your body time and time again, knowing every cell and where it belongs. Sacrifice a large amount of mana to rush your healing to unprecedented speeds. Lack of knowledge about your body may result in heavy damage.*

*Category: Healing*

*The mention of healing myself being vastly superior to healing others was removed. She noted, as well as the new line about health loss and critical blow calculation. I hope that doesn't mean it's worse on myself now. She would test it later but with her healing getting another 100% bonus from the*

class change, she assumed it would at least even out. *How many changes did I get last time? This is ridiculous...*, She thought as she scrolled a little further down in her mind, going back to her Sentinel Reconstruction. *Well I'm not going to complain...*,

***[State of Azarinth] becomes [Azarinth Awakening]***

***Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 10:***

***Your body glows with the power of Azarinth, increasing your resilience, speed, Intelligence and Strength by 75% [450%].***

***2nd stage: Your sight, hearing and sense of smell is also affected by Azarinth Awakening***

***3rd stage: You are one with the 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***

“Holy fuck.” Ilea was nearly shedding tears, all the work form over a year's ridiculous efforts had paid off tenfold. “It boosts Intelligence now?” A 450% increase meant her Intelligence should be at above three thousand. *Coupled with Destruction's increases...*, Plus it seemed the base percentage had been increased again, from 35% to 50%, each level in the skill giving a 0.5% added boost. *What else do you have for me, beloved Sentinel.* Ilea was in a rush.

***[Azarinth Hunter Sphere] becomes [Sentinel Sphere]***

***Active: Sentinel Sphere – 2nd lvl 20***

***Perceive everything in a sphere around you while this skill is activated. The higher the level the further the sphere reaches.***

***2nd stage: The Sentinel Sphere opens your senses to the arcane, a***

***paramount skill both on and off the battlefield.  
Category: Aura – Perception Aura***

*Well that's the first one to remove some good stuff. No more senses dialing... and I loved just ignoring all the blood and guts around me. No more trap detection and hidden paths either. For a mana sense? She didn't know how to feel about it at the moment. The sense for hidden things had helped her plenty so far, losing that suddenly wasn't planned. Makes sense though, switching from the Hunter to something else. I'll survive it I guess. Have so far, even without this paramount skill.*

***[Body of the First Hunter] becomes [Sentinel Core]***

***Passive: Sentinel Core – 2nd lvl 20:***

***Your body was changed by magic. All pain is reduced greatly. Your body is 40% [320%] more durable. You heal even fatal injuries without help of healing magic. Your natural Health regeneration is improved by 120% [960%].***

***2nd stage: The magic of Azarinth settles inside your body. Your resistance to magical damage is increased by a static 25% [200%] and your bones are three times as heavy and dense.***

***Category: Healing – Body Enhancement***

*“Well fuck me... what are those numbers??” Ilea started scribbling but it didn't make sense until she realized that the category changed from just healing to healing and body enhancement, giving an additional 500% increase in power to the skill. 320% more durable... what does that even mean. And magic damage resistance above 100%? Is there like a hidden baseline that is now increased two fold instead of a simple 25% increase normally? It had been at 50% before but Ilea was pretty sure the damage she sustained wasn't halved after getting the skill. Or was it? Well further testing is definitely required.*

The ridiculous multiplier to her natural health recovery was just another bonus. She had to test it of course but it should at least equal to a couple free health points every second, instead of the ridiculously slow recovery normal people had.

*[Hunter's Sight] becomes [Sentinel Huntress]*

*Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 2nd lvl 20*

*Huntress turned Sentinel. Your eyes are unmatched and so is your nose. Perceive the smallest irregularities in your surroundings as well as the ambient mana to find clues about your target's whereabouts.*

*2nd stage: You gain a sense for the distress in the people around you.*

*Amplify this by sacrificing mana.*

*Category: Body Enhancement*

*Ambient mana added as a detection source? And that new second tier might actually do something compared to before. Is it like a sixth sense to gauge the mood in a room or something?*

“Well, that’s a bunch of new stuff to play with...,” Ilea commented and continued scribbling into her notebook, deciding to wait with testing until all the changes were through. Already, she felt lighter, stronger, the mana around her body tangible, a blue hue in constant motion, “... now, what kind of classes does my ashen side have in store?”

# Chapter 301 The Ashen side of Things

## Chapter 301 The Ashen side of Things

Ilea started on the messages concerning her ashen class, the Sentinel evolution so distracting, she needed a moment to focus. Her body itched, ready to unleash power she had never felt before. The boost to her Intelligence was perhaps responsible, or perhaps the improvements to all her body enhancement and healing spells, the new sensation and pure arcane flowing through her was incredible. *Focus*. She reminded herself, meditation surging again. The fat grin on her face was a constant by now. *Guess I should set this date as Christmas or maybe my birthday.*

***‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Empress of Eternal Ash. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -***

***The ruler. Leveled at least five ashen magic skills to the end of the second tier. Has Ash Creation and Ash and Ember Manipulation in the third tier. Has trained with the ruler of a nation. Identifies as Female. Has the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class at level 300.***

***The Empress rules over all, her ashen magic an iron fist controlled and used to her advantage. She will conquer and rule, all shall burn and***

*kneel.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Inheritor of Eternal Ash] to [Empress of Eternal Ash]?’*

*Bold of you to assume my gender. Ilea smiled. The flavor text was concise and told her exactly what she needed to know to discard this possibility immediately. Same with the elder one... guess they at least present the shit options at the start.*

*‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Glutton of Cinders. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*Consumption unending. Has ten skills in Inheritor of Eternal Ash at the end of the second tier. Has enough food with them to feed a small town. Owns a restaurant. Has risked breaking the law and considered cold blooded murder to protect a cook. Has the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class at level 300.*

*A glutton of cinders grows in power equal to their weight. Fueled by the lust to eat they ignore injuries and pain. Their jaw strength has enough force to break through steel. With their supportive elemental magic, few may stand in their way. All will be eaten.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Inheritor of Eternal Ash] to [Glutton of Cinders]?’*

*“Fair enough. Guess it’s judging Ilea day.” The jaw strength is a boon for sure and I bet there’s something in there that allows me to digest literally anything. Still a better option than Empress.*



*'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Sharpshooter of Eternal Ash. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*Unseen death. Has ten skills in Inheritor of Eternal Ash at the end of the second tier. Has the Heavy Archery skill as a general skill. Owns a storage item. Has killed ten enemies above their own level without being spotted and while alone. Has the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class at level 300.*

*An unusual combination of magic and the bow. The Sharpshooter of Eternal Ash has extraordinary sight and firepower to unleash death upon groups of enemies without ever being seen. They stalk the night and work alone. Mercenaries or adventurers they seek their prey and slay it silently.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Inheritor of Eternal Ash] to [Sharpshooter of Eternal Ash]?'*

*So we're getting at least somewhat serious now. Didn't think my archery training would come up here but I guess I know now that there are possible evolutions gained from general skills should I ever wish to get something else. Of course it didn't fit her in any way, neither personality wise nor from a skill perspective.*

*'ding' 'Requirements met for class evolution: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Master of Eternal Ash. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*Fire consumed, nothing withstanding. Has ten skills in Inheritor of Eternal Ash at the end of the second tier. Has the Ash Creation and Ash and Ember Manipulation skills at the third tier. Has killed at least 500 beings of a higher level using ashen magic. Has killed members of their own species. Has been betrayed. Has the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class at level 300.*

*True mastery comes with control, effort and time. The Master of Eternal Ash has grasped the true power of ash and ember, wielding them to the fullest of their destructive potential. Widespread and fast spells consume even the toughest enemies in everlasting flame, pierced by lances of ash. The battlefield bows to your power.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Inheritor of Eternal Ash] to [Master of Eternal Ash]?’*

*That’s more like what I’m looking for. No mention of Body Enhancement magic still but at least it seems like a powerful class with its specialties.*

*‘ding’ ‘Requirements met for class evolution: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Berserker of Eternal Flame. No current stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -*

*Forever battling. Has ten skills in Inheritor of Eternal Ash at the end of the second tier. Has the Ashen Warrior skill in the third tier. Has battled and killed thousands of enemies at a higher level than themselves while alone. Has sustained critical wounds in battle and continued the fight. Has Heat Resistance in the second tier. Has at least twenty resistance skills. Has the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class at level 300.*

*The Berserker of Eternal Flame is untiring, unkillable and unforgiving. Their bodies becoming one with the flame, they consume and tear through their enemies, their wounds mere stepping stones on their way to power. Their mind is consumed by fire, their bodies weapons of war.*

*Would you like to evolve your class [Inheritor of Eternal Ash] to [Berserker of Eternal Flame]?’*

Ilea tapped her cheek before she sighed. *Mind consumed by fire.* The line gave her pause. Otherwise the class sounded badass. More of a focus on fire obviously but she wouldn't terribly mind. That's how she had started out anyways, burning herself to get the Fire Mage class back in the Calys mine. *Might need to consult some people in regards to Berserker classes. Roland did kind of lose it sometimes. Wonder if he's doing alright. Probably not with all that happened. I hope he and the girl are at least alive.* There was one more evolution she could choose. Before moving on Ilea also realized there was no mention of no current skills being lost in the previous one. Another issue with the choice.

***'ding' Requirements met for class evolution: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Kin of Ash. No current skills or stats will be lost, be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable -***

***One of Ash. Has ten skills in Inheritor of Eternal Ash at the end of the second tier. Has Veil of Ash, Form of Ash and Ember, Ash Creation, Ash and Ember Manipulation and Ashen Warrior in the third tier. Has Fear Resistance at level five or higher. Has fought beings beyond their comprehension while alone. Has fought and defeated ten or more enemies above level 500 while alone. When faced with certain death, has trusted their body and the ash around them to prevail. Has found beauty in ash beyond destruction. Has the Inheritor of Eternal Ash class at level 300.***

***Kin to Ash itself. Their body clad in armor, unyielding. Their body smoldering with embers, unforgiving.***

***Would you like to evolve your class [Inheritor of Eternal Ash] to [Kin of Ash]?'***

*Alright, I guess that has to be the one.* There were no more options. *The requirements are ridiculous. When did I face certain death and trusted in my ash and body?* Several memories flashed in her mind but none fit. She

remembered playing around with Kyrian, his metal and her ash. That was probably the part where she had found beauty in ash beyond its destructive capabilities. *And my beloved friend Fear Resistance.*

Ilea thought about consulting Maro or Elfie, even Catelyn perhaps but as she thought, she felt ash come to life around her, gently swirling around her. It was her own doing she realized. *Clad in armor, unyielding.* All her third tier skills had been mentioned in the last evolution. Compared to the other good classes it mentioned one's body twice. The Berserker class seemed good too but it was too sketch for her. Her mind was her own and she would chose her own path, neither made for war or any other specific purpose.

The ash around her continued swaying in the air as if carried by a gentle breeze. Compared to her Azarinth evolution, this one just felt, right. *Let's see what you have in store for me.*

***'ding' 'Class change: Inheritor of Eternal Ash becomes Kin of Ash***

***Vitality +30***

***Strength +20***

***Dexterity +20***

***Intelligence +20***

***Wisdom +15***

***Body enhancement magic is improved by 300%***

***All Ashen magic skills are improved by 100%***

***All fighting styles using hand to hand combat are more refined***

***Your will is ash and embers***

*Seems like I made the right choice. Another set of stats as well. Whatever the line about my will means. Another hundred percent... meaning a ton of my Sentinel skills just became what? Fifteen percent stronger? From six hundred percent total to seven hundred. The start was already promising as Ilea moved on to the more interesting stuff.*

*‘Skills changed by Kin of Ash:*

*[Veil of Ash] becomes [Armor of Ash]*

*Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 10*

*A shroud of condensed ash to shield you. Hard as steel and forming to your will. The Armor increases your resilience by 125% [1000%]. Halved effects if armor beyond light category is worn.*

*2nd stage: The strength of your Resistance skills also benefit from the Armor of Ash.*

*3rd stage: Increases the defensive capabilities of all ash and ember you control. Effects additionally apply to your body itself, halved if armor beyond light category is worn.*

*Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic*

*Just continuing with the ridiculous bonuses. What the hell constitutes as light armor? It bummed her out a little. Ilea liked her heavy metal gear. Half would still be good. Guess I’ll have to find out how good this armor actually is. Maybe I can have something good made that is also considered light armor. She had the mold and a smith to help her out. If the ashen armor could replace her current one completely, she wouldn’t have to constantly worry about a nearby smith to repair her other ones or make new sets.*

*One thousand percent. Guess that’s worth an achievement of sorts. Could ask someone to explain resilience to me. Ilea immediately discarded the*

idea, instead planning to just let different monsters attack her to find out more about her new armor. *Plus my body itself gets the bonus? So it's basically two thousand compared to the four hundred before?* The description of the first tier changed significantly as well. *Further testing needed. Again.*

***[Form of Ash and Ember] becomes [Aspect of Ash]***

***Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 5:***

***Ember glows within you raising your resilience, speed, Strength, Intelligence and Dexterity by 57.5% [402.5%].***

***2nd stage: The longer you fight in the Aspect of Ash, the deeper it roots. Each minute of fighting adds 15% more power to the skill with a maximum of 150%.***

***3rd stage: Familiarity with the skill removes its upkeep. When reaching the maximum second tier bonus you may reset it by amplifying your next attack with ash and ember.***

***Category: Aura – Body Enhancement***

*There you go. Exactly what I've been looking for.* Intelligence was now a part of the skill as well. The difference in power from the additional two hundred percent from Body Enhancement bonuses were good enough but with Intelligence affected, her mana intrusion spells would benefit immensely.

***[Ash Creation] becomes [True Ash Creation]***

***Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 7***

***Create ash in a certain radius around you.***

***2nd stage: You can control the density of the ash to an extent.***

***3rd stage: You have proven your dedication. Ash swirls to aid and destroy***

*at your whims.*

**Category: Ashen Magic**

“Well what happened exactly?” Ilea noticed a line was missing now but otherwise everything stayed the same. *Guess I have to find out what the true part means. Maybe it doesn't vanish anymore after a while? Or the properties somehow change.*

***[Embered Body Heat] becomes [Heart of Cinder]***

**Active: Heart of Cinder – 2nd lvl 20**

***Increase the heat in your body and release it in a blast around you.***

***2nd stage: The embers run deep. The heat you may reach is only limited by your very life.***

**Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic**

“No more hiding then with this one... or I guess only from fire beasts.” Ilea was skeptical how much this one would help but with the boost to her body enhancement and ashen magic, the damage could be helpful if she was surrounded. *Just burn a dozen demons to a crisp, doesn't that sound lovely.* At least she wouldn't replace it with any other skills until she tried it.

***[Wave of Ember] becomes [Storm of Cinders]***

**Active: Storm of Cinders – 2nd lvl 20**

***Burn the inside of whatever your body hits with a surge of heat and embers or release the attack in a burst of fire and cinders.***

***2nd stage: The flame burns on. Targets hit will have fire burning through or on them. Time and consecutive attacks will increase the effect.***

**Category: Ashen magic**

*Added utility I guess. Why not. Compared to Destruction, the skill didn't actually get a damage increase. At least it would be boosted a little by the ashen magic buff. I'm getting a damn lot of skill changes. Did I just fuck up my level two hundred evolution or is this normal?*

***[Ash and Ember Manipulation] becomes [Ash and Ember Unity]***

***Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 5:***

***You are one with Ash and Ember. Allies rushing to your aid.***

***2nd stage: Your understanding grows, allowing you to create greater change in ash and ember.***

***3rd stage: The elements themselves become an extension of your body, an extension of your will, for as long as they stay in physical contact with you. Ash not connected benefits from passive abilities enhancing your body.***

***Category: Ashen magic***

*“Well that's just as ambiguous as it was before.” The new passive benefits are nice but active skills would have been a game changer. Damage increases though... maybe. Still not done...*

***[Body of Ash] becomes [Avatar of Ash]***

***Passive: Avatar of Ash – 2nd lvl 20:***

***Increases your reflexes and speed by 50% [400%]. Your ability to avoid damage to your vitals when dodging increases.***

***2nd stage: Your muscles grow more dense. For each Resistance skill your body becomes tougher. First tier Resistances equal a static 5% increase, second tier equal a static 10% increase.***

***Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic***



*Oh man. I guess resistance search and farm is on the menu again. For good reason. Damn with this I could become literally indestructible. Just have to find the rarest magic to fight against. Bummer that it doesn't benefit from the multipliers.*

***[Ashen Warrior] becomes [Keeper of Ash]***

***Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 3:***

***You are one with the fighting style of Ash. Damage inflicted is 71.5% [500.5%] higher.***

***2nd stage: Adds density to your bones, muscles and skin to increase strength, speed and damage. Base body weight is doubled.***

***3rd stage: Reduces stamina consumption by a static 35%.***

***Category: Body Enhancement***

“So much for the three hundred evolution. I feel like I just underwent a supersoldier experiment, already being one in the first place.” Ilea said, forming a fist with her hand as she felt the strength flow through her. Blinking up and onto the house, she sprawled on her back, looking up into the darkness while holding up one hand. Breathing in, she tried to grasp the changes but was overwhelmed by it all. Of course with all her stats and the skills themselves somewhat helping her cope, she didn't feel like she was in the wrong body and neither had difficulties moving herself but she definitely felt the differences, if only by squeezing her arm or by extending her sphere, seeing the wisps of mana around herself, coming from her auras.

*Is this what I wanted to achieve? What I wanted to become? Did I do it then?* Ilea felt a little lost, like having finished a good book, having reached a task that wasn't necessarily about the completion but about the execution itself. *But I do have a result.* She checked her stats while thinking about what to do now.

***Name: Ilea Spears***

***Unspent statpoints: 10***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 1***

***Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Kin of Ash]: 1***

***Class 1: The Azarinth Sentinel – lvl 300***

- Active: Absolute Destruction – 3rd lvl 9***
- Active: Sentinel Reconstruction – 3rd lvl 12***
- Active: Azarinth Awakening – 3rd lvl 10***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 10***
- Active: Sentinel Sphere – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Sentinel Core – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 3rd lvl 5***
- Passive: Sentinel Huntress – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 20***

***Class 2: Kin of Ash – lvl 300***

- Active: Armor of Ash – 3rd lvl 10***
- Active: Aspect of Ash – 3rd lvl 5***
- Active: True Ash Creation – 3rd lvl 7***
- Active: Heart of Cinder – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Storm of Cinders – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Ash and Ember Unity – 3rd lvl 5***
- Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Avatar of Ash – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Keeper of Ash – 3rd lvl 3***

***General Skills:***

- Elos Standard language - lvl 6***
- Harmony of the Drowned – lvl 1***

- *Heavy Archery – lvl 4*
- *Identify - lvl 8*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Veteran – lvl 6*
  
- *Arcane Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Blast Resistance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Blood Magic Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Blood Manipulation Resistance – lvl 4*
- *Corrosion Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Crystal Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Curse Resistance - 2nd lvl 2*
- *Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 12*
- *Death Magic Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Dust Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Earth Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 9*
- *Health Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Heat Resistance – 2nd lvl 12*
- *Ice Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Light Magic Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 13*
- *Mist Magic Resistance – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – 2nd lvl 9*
- *Silver Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Time Magic Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Void Magic Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Water Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wind Resistance – 2nd lvl 1*
- *Wood Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

***Status:***

***Vitality: 686***

***Endurance: 400***

***Strength: 510***

***Dexterity: 415***

***Intelligence: 620***

***Wisdom: 705***

***Health: 6860/6860***

***Stamina: 3997/4000***

***Mana: 7050/7050***

Nearly all of her class skills were carrying different names now, had changed and more powerful aspects. *You can do it now, maybe survive the storms, fight the miststalkers, face the Praetorians.* A part of her thought but Ilea just wanted to sleep for a while. A full night's rest, solid twelve hours even though with this body, she'd barely need one.

# Chapter 302 Testing

## Chapter 302 Testing

Ilea was woken up by light shining through the missing window of her apartment in Tremor. Sadly no birds were chirping and no busy city life could be heard outside. No distractions. Her dreams had been filled with undead and soul rippers, horrible monsters straight out of a fantasy novel, game or film. Not beasts she would want to fight, monsters instead that she would avoid, run from. It took her a couple minutes to shake the feel, turning in her bed to face away from the sunlight as she grumbled.

They were monsters that existed, horrors she had faced, had fought, with her own body, her own fists and skills. She was in a dungeon now, sleeping in the bed she had brought with her storage necklace. *And I evolved my classes yesterday.* Her eyes opened a little wider as she looked at the hand before her. She hadn't slept as long as she had intended, instead woken when the suns reached into the mountain, into the place she had claimed. *A ruin once owned by a noble.*

Sitting up, Ilea realized she wasn't hungry. Of course she wasn't. Most of her eating since reaching the two hundreds had been done because she liked it, not because her body needed it. Blinking outside, she relieved herself onto the royal gardens. At least that's what she thought they were. No officers around to stop her, only the king still stuck in his palace. *Maybe some new silver plants will grow at least.* Pants appearing again, Ilea yawned and stretched, black hair flowing in the wind.

*Maybe not using armor all the time isn't so bad.* She thought, feeling the sun on her skin for the first time in a while. A smile blossomed on her face before she realized the math assignment she had due. *Not the worst place to do some work.* She thought, spreading her black wings that took her onto the roof of her home in Tremor with two beats.

Sitting down on the edge of the flat roof, Ilea summoned her notebook and continued where she had left off, steel pen in hand. The first thing she noted was the additional 100% increase for Body Enhancements her second class provided after the fact. What she had looked at yesterday had been only the bonuses from The Azarinth Sentinel and the previous ashen class Inheritor of Eternal Ash. *I wonder what it means now that it's not eternal anymore but only ash.* The bonuses spoke for themselves, the thought quickly shelved.

### Sentinel:

*Absolute Destruction possible mana used increased from 20 to 100. Healing skill, meaning an increase by 100%? Also chargeable.*

*Hunter Recovery to Sentinel Reconstruction, something with critical damage calculation and the 100% increase from the class.*

*State of Azarinth to Azarinth Awakening. All bonuses increased from around 300% to 525%. Intelligence boost added at 525%.*

*Hunter Sphere to Sentinel Sphere, removed bonuses to senses and secret discovery. Added mana sight.*

*Body of Azarinth to Sentinel Core, 350% resilience, magic resistance from 50% to 225%. Natural health regen from 140% to 1080%.*

*Azarinth Fighting, damage bonus of 487.5% increased to 682.5%.*

*Hunter's Sight to Sentinel Huntress, gauge people's distress. Usefulness?*

### Ash:

*Veil to Armor, Resilience from 402.5% to 1000%. Body Resilience +1000%, same bonus? Doesn't apply to Armor itself?*

*Form of ash and ember to Aspect of Ash, bonuses increased from 287.5% to 402%. Intelligence bonus added at 402% :).*

*Ash Creation to True Ash Creation, no clue. Possible demonic or religious thing? Don't become ash demon.*

*Embered Body Heat to Heart of Cinders, area attack? Usefulness?*

*Wave of Ember to Storm of Cinders, ash magic bonus from 0% to 100%. External attack possibility? Compare to mana intrusion. Test subjects: Terok? Goldie? Maro?*

*Ash and Ember manipulation to Ash and Ember Unity, test density. Passive bonuses? Damage bonuses apply? Test projectiles.*

*Eyes of ash, bonus to perception without weapon from 250% to 400%.*

*Body of Ash to Avatar of Ash, reflexes and speed 250% to 400%. Toughness for Resistance skills. 1<sup>st</sup> tier 11, no 12. Equals 60%. 2<sup>nd</sup> tier 16 equals 160% - 220% toughness. Same as resilience?*

*Warrior of Ash to Keeper of Ash, damage increase from 350% to 500.5%. Weight and density times two to increase speed/strength? Wouldn't I be slower? Test on. Terok.*

Ilea sat the pen down for a while, reading through the bonuses again. A ton for sure but reading it a second time made it less overwhelming than she had felt yesterday. She culminated the bonuses that were more graspable on the next page.

*Stat increases, Vit +15, Str +10, Dex +15, Int +20, Wis +5. 13 levels worth.*

*Healing, should be x2*

*Resilience bonuses, old – ca 1012.5% - new ca 3507%*

*Speed bonuses, old – ca 837.5% – new ca 1327.5%*

*Strength bonuses, old – ca 587.5 – new ca 927%*

*Int bonuses, old – zero – new ca 927%*

*Dex bonuses, old 287.5% - new 402%*

*Magic Resilience old 50%, new 225%*

*Damage bonuses, old ca 845 – new 1183%*

*Weight and density of body, x2.*

“So three point five times more durable. Fifty percent faster and stronger, maybe faster due to the Dex bonus. Biggest one for sure is the intelligence bonus. Should be ten times the damage now for my magic attacks.” Ilea said out loud, “Plus all the utility changes coming with several skills.”

Standing up, she put her notebook away. Three hundred health were sacrificed to activate her third tier State, no Azarinth Awakening aura. First thing she noticed was that the runes starting to glow on her were blue again. *Welcome back.*

Testing her healing, she found her health was back at the maximum after two seconds only. *So it did really double it. And now it's the same if I heal others?* She assumed as much, the mention of herself healing more quickly had been removed after all. Ilea watched it all through her sphere, noticing the blue wisps around her intensify as soon as her third tier had activated.

Her second aura, aspect of ash activated, the lines on her body a deeper red now. Less fiery and flamboyant but she could see them through her sphere, like bright lines of cinder cracking through her skin. Even though her body



was supposedly twice as dense and heavy, she felt lighter on her toes. Shadow boxing on the roof made her chuckle, her fists reaching their intended destination far more quickly than before. At least it felt that way. Her perception had changed too after all.

The thing Ilea was most interested in was her Veil, now Armor of Ash. Activating the skill, she instantly felt it. Not like before where the ash moved on its own and layered itself onto her skin or worn armor. Now she felt as if she had a say in the form it took. Thinking of her armor mold, she tried recreating it and found the ash moving to her will. A solid dark gray, nearly black layer of ash resembling her Rose Hunter set formed on her quickly. The clothes she was wearing ignored, the shroud of ash was completed.

Ilea looked at her arms and grinned. Not a piece missing. Tendrils of ash writhed around the solid armor, giving it an ethereal touch. She could increase the effect if she wished, Ilea noticed. *The grim fucking reaper.* She thought, looking at herself through her sphere, ash moving around her slowly, the single piece armor looking solid as steel. Moving in it wasn't an issue either, the joints simply adjusting. *Likely less durable during movements. Still better than real armor with actual pieces.*

Her eight limbs of ash came to life behind her, the tips sharpening before she carefully cut into the stone of the roof. *Like fucking steel.* Moving to her armor instead, she tried to pierce it with the limbs but found it hard to penetrate even a millimeter. *Moment of truth.* Deactivating her armor, she watched in fascination as it disintegrated quickly, similar to her wings. Putting on a Rose Hunter set, she again tried cutting into it. Feeling the in her arm a moment later, she realized it had already penetrated.

*Through Stonehammer steel.* She noted, activating her armor again. This time she couldn't form it to her wishes, the ash simply layering over her steel armor instead. Again trying to cut into it, she found it harder. Still, after a couple seconds of applying pressure, she cut through the ash and immediately through the steel. *So until I find something substantially better, I'll stick with clothes or light armor. Speaking of which.*

Ilea put on someHand leather armor, one of the two remaining sets she had. Again, she activated her ashen armor and found herself once again able to manipulate its looks freely. *Alright so now it's not about good steel but the best skins I can find. Got it.*

The armor was kept up, not costing more to maintain than it had before. The good thing about her Veil already was that the higher its level, the less mana it cost to maintain. The same was true for her evolved skill, only slightly reducing her regeneration.

The ashen limbs behind her swayed slightly but otherwise Ilea didn't feel anything massively different about them. Creating some ash in front of her, she formed a sphere, adding more and more as she squeezed it together with her magic. More and more mana was transformed into pure ash, the sphere already looking solid. She heard a crunch, then another as she still added ash. When she finally couldn't make it any more dense, she let it float into her hand. A solid black orb. "Doesn't look like ash to me."

Swirling it around herself, she let it fall into her hand again. *I have no idea how heavy this is.* Ilea barely felt the weight but when she let it fall, it didn't even bounce, a rather solid thump resounding. Jumping down from the building, she let the ball float next to her, the thing only around five centimeters in diameter. Using all the magical power she could put into it, she slammed the thing into the ground.

Rock flew past her and a cloud of dust formed in front of her, her sphere letting her know the thing had penetrated several meters into the stone floor. "Damn. Ok that's pretty fucking cool." This time she formed a lance, again adding as much ash towards it until she couldn't make it any denser without making it too big. One meter fifty with around two centimeters diameter. *Fly.*

Fly it did, aimed at the house next to her own, the spear crashed through the wall, the wall opposite that and continued onward. Ilea spread her wings and flew up, just barely seeing the thing vanish into the void after penetrating three houses. *Okay, viable ranged weapon. Acquired.* Creating two more spears, Ilea wondered if throwing them would be better. Turns out, maybe. If she had a throwing skill that was. Her magic allowed for a

straight shot while her throw managed to penetrate the first wall but crashed sideways into the next one.

*Just let me throw things please.* Ilea again added a throwing ability to her training list. “Wait... my body is twice as dense and heavy. The ash around me is my body? Gaining the bonuses from Passive skills.” She smiled, *That’s why they’re so fucking destructive.* Ilea looked at her arm as she walked to the already half destroyed house. *Wave of Ember, Storm of Cinders.* She hit the wall with her fist, using the evolved skill but not as it had been used before.

Embers, magic and fire shot out of her fist when she impacted the wall, breaking through the portion she had hit. *Looks more like a wave of embers than it had before.* She noted. Her sphere had made the hit look even more spectacular, a large amount of mana surging into the air creating an explosion of heat in the process.

“Heat.” She noted, blinking onto the house and activating her newfound Heart of Cinder. Her body immediately grew hotter, as if a fire was lit within her. More and more, she added, wisps of flame forming on her ashen armor, embers floating away. Ten seconds later, the floor was getting scorched, another ten seconds and she started to lose health, her body itself burning up from within. Ilea smirked and counter healed. Soon her health began sinking again, her sphere turned off as the brightness she was giving off nearly blinded her.

When her health was down a thousand points, Ilea released the stored up heat in a blast around her. Fire erupted and when she blinked her eyes, eighty percent of the house had vanished, turned to ash. Even the ground she was standing on had sunken down several meters. Granted it was normal stone but Ilea doubted anyone she had met so far could create something like this. *Viper maybe. Claire with her explosions, possibly. I didn’t just blast it away though.* Ilea noted, the very stone reduced to ash. The roof, now unsupported and partially removed collapsed, the parts still remaining at least.

Bricks fell down, some landing on Ilea, bouncing off her armor and landing on the ground. *Yea I’m going to keep this one.* She hadn’t gotten any

options for new skills anyway but more might come up. Now she was interested in the third tier of this one in particular. Ilea tested again, creating heat for one second, then ten and then as much as she could until her health started going down. One second created a shock wave of heat around her, likely nothing major against a powerful enemy but possible enough to push away lower leveled creatures.

The ten second one was already a fiery sphere, expanding quickly and burning up everything in its path. *Probably still more powerful than anything I could produce before the evolutions.* The blast when going as far as losing health was substantial. Ilea had a hard time grasping the power of it all against stone alone. *I should be able to level my heat resistance like this.* Considering her constitution and healing, the blast was likely much stronger than most similar spells could produce. Others might have a way to simply push in more mana but for her it was a matter of resisting the heat, keeping the skill active for longer didn't cost exponentially more mana. Just the same rate for longer.

“Better than heat camouflage... I'm going to die against a dragon because of this change, right?” Ilea was getting used to the changes now, feeling just as comfortable as before. Having no use for her armor anymore, she quickly blinked into her own house and left the remaining sets there, both damaged and whole. She hesitated for a moment. *Should I keep one?* Ilea wracked her brain but found no good reasons to keep it. Should her mana grow low enough for her ashen armor to disappear, she wouldn't have the mana to summon the steel one either. Should her ash armor be pierced, the 1000% increase to her body's durability was still stronger than what the steel could provide.

*Going to talk to Goliath about light armor then. His creation certainly doesn't count as that.* The armor was left behind, to be found by whomever would discover and search through this dungeon. Blinking to her room, Ilea stored her bed, one of her most prized possessions. Looking out the window, she was happy to see her neighbors apparently planned to renovate. Blinking out, her wings spread before she made her way down towards the part of the upper city that hadn't been cleared yet. She doubted the elves and Terok were already done.

It didn't take her long to find a patrolling knight.

*[Knight of the Rose – lvl 305]*

“Hey what a coincidence.” She said, smiling under her ashen armor. There was actually space left out between the ash and her mouth, making it quite comfortable both to have it active but also to talk. Nearly as much as the armor her mold had produced, though she assumed the ashen one being less comfortable had to do with the leather armor she wore below the ash. *Fighting naked would probably be the nicest.* As careless as she was, Ilea wanted to at least have some clothes on should her corpse be found by some adventurer.

The knight, shield held to the side rushed at her and brought his sword down. The blows had been enough to dent her Stonehammer steel armor, as well as her Niameer one. Enough to cut into her, easily breaking through her Veil when she had been fifty levels lower. She simply watched as the weapon neared, trusting in her third tier Azarinth Fighting.

She smirked when the steel smashed into her armored shoulder with a dull sound. *Nothing.* Ilea noted, feeling the ash on her and how it pushed against the knight's weapon. The attack damaged her about as much as her own ashen limbs had. That was, not at all. “Oh, Mr. knight. How the turn tables.” She grabbed the sword before he could react, dragging him towards her. *Absolute Destruction.* Ilea's fist rushed out, smashing into the knight's chest with a resounding bang as bits of blue smoke and wisps rushed out from the impact, steel caving in from the sheer force of it.

She had used the full 100 mana. Keeping her hand on the blade, Ilea watched in awe as the knight stumbled back. A moment later he slumped to the ground, all strings cut. *Overdid it a bit hmm?* As much of a boost her Destruction had gotten, Ilea didn't expect to kill an undead knight with a single hit. *Maybe he was damaged... no wait they regenerate. I guess having an Intelligence boost of nearly a thousand percent will do that, coupled with all of the other stuff.* Looking at the sword in her hand, she dropped it. “I don't need this.”

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Knight of the Rose – lvl 305] – Bonus experience is granted'***

*For that? Well I won't say no. Considering what Maro had talked about, she'd need quite a bit more to level at this stage. Undead knights perhaps, the real deal this time.* Ilea thought and spread her wings. "Got a head to get back."

# Chapter 303 Missing Pieces

## Chapter 303 Missing Pieces

Ilea found her own head where she had left it. “At least none of those void fuckers found the snack I left behind.” She said, stopping a couple steps off from what was undoubtedly her own head. Feeling her heart rate quicken, she started meditating, forcing herself to blink a moment later. The blood had dried, her eyes lifeless and mouth slightly open. She knelt down, reaching out with her hand but hesitating. The armor on her arm moved back when she touched her own face, closing the eyes a moment later.

*Is it still me? Or did I die here and my healing created a clone?* “That’s not a road to go down on Ilea.” She said to the empty room, sighing a moment later. *When I lost my head, my awareness split. I chose the body. I didn’t die.* Her chest was heating up as she held the head in her hands, looking at it as the ground got scorched, the hair on the head catching fire. Ilea shut down her sphere and closed her eyes, touching the forehead with her own. Half a minute passed before a rush of heat extended from her, the rush of heat and sound the only thing she noticed.

When she opened her eyes again, Ilea was happy to find the head gone. Only ash remaining that fell to the floor. She attributed the lack of resistance to the fact that it was simply cut off tissue and bone, not connected to her mana anymore. *Glad that’s gone.* She reached out with her ash and ember unity, feeling the remaining ash. *Still warm.* She noted and focused on it. Perhaps it was her unity or True Ash Creation but Ilea knew

then that she could banish the ash, turn it back into mana itself. Not for herself to use but simply to give it back to nature.

Her eyes closed again and after a brief moment, there was nothing left of what she had lost here. The sound of steps resounded nearby, the familiar tapping of steel on stone. Ilea knew there had been a knight remaining nearby, had known it even the week before. Still she had avoided the area. Now that she reached her goal, had found new strength, Ilea was confident to return. Knew that she would not be deterred or chased away by the monsters lurking in the dark.

She watched in silence as the monster turned the corner, seeing her in the small black crater, nothing remaining of the rotten and ancient house that once stood where she stood now. Only a woman remained, clad in a writhing armor of ash. Eight limbs grew from her back, as if conjured from the air itself. She prepared herself, cold eyes focused on the white and dead ones of her enemy. The knight jumped. Waiting for the last moment, Ilea stepped a little to the side, letting the blade cut into her shoulder.

The weapon dug into her ash with a dull loud sound, as if it had hit brittle stone. She didn't take her eyes off him, using her hand to push on the blade as it glided out of her armor. Perhaps if he had used a sharpened blade, the knight would have reached her skin. As it was, the armor reformed quickly as her own strength fought that of the knight. Ilea had to admit that the monster was stronger. Still, the blade slid out and her ashen limbs crashed into him. *Storm of Cinders*. Ilea watched as blazing heat rushed over the creature, embers lighting up the darkness, flames burning past. Its skin was singed, armor scratched, two limbs piercing even.

Her fist rushed out, ignoring the knight doing the same. Hers landed first, blue energy erupting from the impact as her mana sought his very core, shattering his insides. The counterattack crashed into her chest but her armor held, her body uninjured. Ilea still held onto the sword, the knight frantically ripping it free after several failed attempts. The blade flashed, Ilea lifting her arm to deflect it over herself, another strike sending both embers and destructive healing mana into the once proud knight of Rhyvor. Her ashen limbs switched to mana intrusion as well while her chest started heating up. Two more hits landed, the knight's sword smashing into her



side. This time she felt some damage but nothing serious, the injury already healed when he prepared for the next attack. The heat from within her was released, coupled with a strike from all eight limbs. The monster staggered and jumped back but Ilea simply appeared right in front of it. Her fist clad in hardened ash smashed into his armored chest, mana flowing into him as he was pushed back.

The blade moved but Ilea was too close, her left hand hitting his forearm to stop the blow before it even came. Her other hand rushed out, fingers grabbing onto his helmet by the sockets for his eyes. She held onto his sword hand, struggling to keep him from attacking as her ashen limbs cut into his neck. Again and again the knight punched her with his free arm, trying to release her hold but failing to do so. Finally he managed to rip away his right hand, slashing at her neck with his sword. Ash formed around her arm as she held it up, intercepting the blows time and time again.

With a wet sound, her ashen limbs cut through, piercing the steel mail and ripping through the chain links below. Ilea whipped her hand to the side, the blade stuck in her ash was flung to the ground, steel clattering on stone as she kicked the knight's body away from under his head. She held on to the helmet, dead eyes below still staring at her. "That's how it feels. Fuck you too."

***'ding' 'You have defeated [Undead Rose Knight – lvl 510] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ten or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'***

Ilea breathed out slowly, feeling the power coursing through her body. The last punches had managed to deal some damage. Her arm had been injured by the sword but with every passing second her healing mended the tissue.

The head was tossed towards the body, Ilea turning around as her wings spread behind her. *Now to get back that leg.*

Her assumption that Terok had found and taken the leg as well as the valuable steel still wrapped around it had been wrong. It was lying there, untouched, a dozen meters away from the Kingsguard guarding the entrance to the palace. Ilea frowned, somehow more annoyed at that fact. The sun felt nice, she noted, taking a moment to appreciate how far she had come. The knight before her had been too much to engage, had cut through her armor with ease. Now she felt like she at least had a shot.

*Still two third tier skill points.* Both were kept for now, to gauge the skill changes and what would be worth to advance. If Maro was to be believed, she would gain another third tier point for every ten levels after three hundred, meaning if she continued to engage ridiculously higher leveled beings, she'd get there in reasonable time. At least if the experience necessary didn't go up by just as ridiculous amounts. Few would be the humans to have reached these levels and Ilea assumed most of them did it over decades or even centuries, not in the span of two or three years.

*Why bother if you're already set for damn near eternal life at two hundred?* There were various reasons of course but extending political power needed time and effort as well. Even an organization like the Golden Lily, shrouded in mystery, Ilea doubted to have more than a handful of people at her level. *Catelyn had confirmed at least that they do have people over three hundred.* She could activate her third tier blink anytime, return to her house, to Ravenhall. She could join the war, help tip the balance for the side she preferred. She could go look for the Lily, find those responsible.

“The Azarinth Sentinel, returning from the ashes to deliver justice.” She said in a mocking tone, “Doesn't that sound fucking stupid.” Ash formed around her, covering her body before it closed around her head, two black horns extending near her temples. *No, there are still things to do here. Things to kill.*

Ilea jumped down, walking casually towards the knight, his armor glistened in the sunlight, sword sharp and brandished. *Let's see how much damage you do this time.* As soon as he spotted her, the blade flashed. A horizontal strike aimed at her chest. Ilea saw the invisible force moving in her sphere, a blade of magic itself. She saw the damage before it hit, a big grin on her face before the force crashed into her. Ilea was pushed back half a meter,

the armor on her chest cut, blood showing for a split second before it closed again, the shallow wound healing in mere seconds.

“Not so easy this time.” She said, four lances of ash forming over her. *Let’s see if it even does anything. Damage buffs apply, toughness and density buffs apply. I don’t see why they shouldn’t pack a punch even against this guy.* The knight seemed to evaluate her as he stepped forward. His blade moved through the air, two quick motions. Ilea saw the attacks coming in her sphere. Very quickly but nothing she couldn’t handle anymore. She appeared several meters to her left, the lances reaching the optimal density and form where they had floated before.

Ilea let her intent be known, the ash following her wishes. Four black sharpened lances rushed towards the knight, coming from an elevated position not to alert more of the kingsguard in the palace itself. She was amazed to see the knight actually dodged three of them, deflecting the last one with his greatsword. Three cut into the stone ground, sending some rubble flying. The deflected one crashed sideways into an extension of the massive structure, getting stuck in the side of it.

“Okay, this is already getting boring. Let’s get close and personal.” Ilea sacrificed three hundred health, feeling the power of her auras rushing through her veins. Two steps and then she vanished, an invisible blade rushing past. She dashed to the side when the knight slashed at her from a couple meters away. Ash started forming around her, her limbs poised and ready to strike just as she was. Ilea started storing heat while continuing to sacrifice mana into her third tier Azarinth Awakening.

Dodging another blade by jumping and twisting her body mid air, Ilea reached the enemy. Her limbs rushed out, two small spikes of ash she had formed flying in from the side. To her surprise, the kingsguard jumped back, starting to run as she followed, his sword slashing her way time and time again as she avoided the blades of mana. Twice they grazed her, the ash quickly reforming, once an attack landed on her leg but her damage foresight told her what she needed to know.

Her armor was cut, a wound on her leg forming that quickly closed again, neither interrupting her pursuit nor stopping her from forming additional

lances as well as smaller projectiles in the air around her, the ash moving with her as well as it could, not profiting from her auras' speed boost but being dragged along by her unity and creation skills. The knight rushed through the streets of Tremor, jumping into houses and through walls to avoid the spears and spikes as well as the woman herself.

Ilea decided to blink, closing the distance immediately. To her surprise, the knight had turned, sword already rushing at her. *Unavoidable*. In the split second she had, her body twisted a little to the side, her limbs and her right arm lashing out to use the undead's strike to her advantage. Activating her Heart of Cinder, the fire swept through the knight and the house, his blade slowed ever so slightly as the heat washed over his armor, singing and crashing through the stone around them before Ilea's attacks hit too.

The sword had cut into her shoulder, had managed to penetrate to her skin before the knight let loose his ranged attack, blade still stuck in her. This time it cut halfway to her bone, Ilea's own attack sending mana into the creature in turn. The remaining projectiles slammed into his face, turning his head to the side. His free hand lashed out at her own head but Ilea stayed unmoving, taking the force before healing her lightly bruised face.

The knight jumped back, sword ripping out of her shoulder as the armor closed, wound quickly thereafter. Blood dripped from his blade as Ilea continued her attack. The knight was a triple mark but neither speed nor skill separated him much from the undead she had faced earlier. It had magic and certainly more brains as well as a complete armor and healing support from Maro. The sharp weapon didn't detract either, Ilea's defenses definitely more durable against the dull blades of the crazy knights.

She could see it too now, the connection the knight had to the palace, to the king and his unholy necromantic machine. It pulsed with power, mana flowing along the thin invisible strand. *I wonder if one could cut it. With a suitable attack*. Ilea slashed one of her ashen limbs through it but found it simply moving aside. After five minutes of the same pursuit and rare hits, she instead grabbed onto his blade once it had cut into her.

Ilea charged up her Absolute Destruction as well as pumping destructive mana into him, surprised to find the knight immediately letting go of his

weapon and jumping back. “Really?” She asked, ripping the blade out of her side before her skin and ash closed quickly. Trying to store the blade in her necklace failed, not that she had suspected a different result. Feeling a strong pull on the weapon, she resisted, instead jumping at the knight blade in hand. Ilea had no intention of using the weapon but as long as it was in her hand, all he had were his fists.

When she reached him, her fist smashed into his chest, her ashen limbs delivering their Storm of Cinders into him. The blade was ripped from her hand, turning in mid air before he clasped it and attacked. This time she had time to dodge and continued her assault, health back to the max as she started again to sacrifice health towards her aura. When she noticed her health dropping from the heat within her, Ilea once again blinked, shifting her body ever so slightly to take the incoming blade into her arm. The blast was released in a dome of fire and cinders, the houses around them vaporized by the damage.

The silver armor on the knight was smoking, the front black in parts as the knight stumbled back with a raised arm to shield himself. His sword came free as Ilea blinked the two meter distance. Charging her Destruction for three full seconds, she released it coupled with the third tier of her Aspect of Ash. The arm covered in ashen armor suddenly exploded with fire, blue mana breakin free even before her fist landed. The impact shattered through her, the punch denting his helmet in before he was sent flying. Two times he hit the ground before skidding to a stop, Ilea landing on him with her knees next to his chest.

He raised his blade but she smashed his arm aside, her other fist crashing into the helmet time and time again, blue wisps and fiery cinders rushing out with each impact. Her limbs focused on his right arm, cutting into the armor and holding down his arm as more and more ash formed to keep him down. When he was secured, Ilea charged her Destruction for ten seconds before delivering one thousand mana directly into whatever was left of his brain. Her mana was down to three thousand at that point, all the attacks eating away at her resources faster than she liked.

The punch squashed his head, killing him and separating the connection to the center of the palace. Removing each piece of armor, she stored both the

corpse and the gear in her necklace and stood up. Her mana was recovering quickly, the only reason she was so aggressive the fact that the Kingsguard had a way to heal themselves. Otherwise a slower approach would definitely be beneficial. *I wonder if the others are so defensive too. Trying to run away from me while regenerating. Who does he think he is, me?*

The sword was in the best shape, not a chip showing and of rare quality. Seeing it only took up a single space in her necklace, she decided to keep it. *Maybe try to put the armor in crates and see if the weight decreases. A viable option to store and carry the gear, not one to quickly getting it on.*

***‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 508] – For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’***

***‘ding’ ‘Absolute Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10’***

***‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6’***

***‘ding’ ‘Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6’***

Ilea grumbled, walking over to her stinking leg and grabbing the thing. Removing the gear itself, she stored it. Heart of Cinders charged up before she blasted the surroundings turning the rotten flesh to ash. *RIP leg. Your service shall not be forgotten.*

# Chapter 304 Approach to Power

## Chapter 304 Approach to Power

“Three hundred and you already took one down? Not bad Ilea.” Maro nodded, “Especially for a healer.” His grin brightened his face, green eyes sparkling.

“Suspected as much. Well I guess I’m going to be underestimated again.” Ilea said, sitting down on the chair and putting away the Kingsguard blade again after showing him. “You’re not fucking with me are you?”

*[Necromancer – lvl 310]*

Maro laughed, shaking his head, “No, for once I’m not. You identify as a healer. Having told me about both classes leveling I assume your first class is the healer one. If your second one gets higher you’ll be a warrior or mage again, depending on what it is.”

“Well, speaking of underestimating I have to give credit where credit is due. I thought I’d be stuck in her for a decade at least. When you talked about the Descent as well as the Taleen dungeon. Seeing your constant growth, I hoped for a couple years. To think it took less than a couple months.” He shook his head.

“And here I thought *I* was crazy.” The king laughed and Ilea smiled, sitting in her Hand leather armor, cuts showing on her shoulder and side. Nothing that would threaten the integrity of the outfit but she would have to change it eventually.

*At least I have regenerating armor now. That fight would have used up like ten sets of my usual one. Might have even cut straight through my limbs again. Even with all those bonuses.* She sighed.

His eyes were focused on her, “What? Not satisfied with your growth? Even though you’re one of the youngest people I’ve met reaching three hundred? With an assortment of abilities that would actually let you advance even further?”

“No I’m definitely happy. Just a bit tired is all.” Ilea replied. She could face and kill Kingsguard that were being healed, a feat she doubted a whole human expedition would manage. Fuckers were at level five hundred after all.

“You don’t really need much sleep anymore do you? Oh... tired of all the fighting. Well I can see that. I appreciate it you know.”

Ilea smirked and leaned her head back, looking at the white marble ceiling, “Didn’t do it for you Maro. You could however have given me some info about the magic abilities they have. The one I faced sent mana waves capable of cutting through steel my way.”

“Sure, you didn’t.” He smiled, looking incredibly handsome. “As to their abilities, when I created them they didn’t have such. Capable swordsmen and women, sure. You’ll have to figure it out by yourself.”

She only watched through her sphere, not giving him the satisfaction. Neither did she react in any way. He wasn’t much of a help regarding the abilities of the Kingsguard either.

“Well we can visit Lisburg when I’m out. Catelyn told me most of the city turned dungeon is now a place where Dark Ones dwell. Fine by me, as long as there’s something to eat and drink. Some of the vineyards still remain I’m told.” He added.

“Can’t imagine a more relaxing dungeon exploration than a team with you and Terok in it.”



He snorted, “Oh stop it, you love us. Even if you hate us.”

*How does that even make sense.* Ilea asked herself but realized she was smiling despite his nonsense.

Sitting up again, she spoke, “You’re not going to visit Elana in Hallowfort? I’m sure she already has plans to implement you in her takeover of the world.”

His lips formed a line, eyes losing some of their joy, “She does. Which is why she’s not here and why I won’t be visiting her. At least not immediately. I declined my help. We were a good team, built a kingdom and governed more or less successfully. Decades of work and dedication. I would fight and die for Rhyvor Ilea, even today. Nearly did in the end. But this is it.”

“And here I thought a necromancer at three hundred wouldn’t need sleep either.” She said, crossing her arms.

Maro snorted, “She blames me I think.” His voice was quiet again, “For being stuck with me all this time.”

“When you were king and queen?”

“No. In here.” He said.

Ilea raised her eyebrows, “Well as far as I recall it was her choice. Or was that a lie?”

“It was her choice.”

Ilea smiled, “Oh I get it. You think she blames you for falling in love with you. Pretty insensitive, she’s been down here for decades you know, conscious at least. Maybe you just fucked up an enchantment or something.”

He laughed in turn, “I can see why you would think that. I’m a king Ilea, there’s hardly a man in a position to think higher of himself than that. Still, you don’t know her. Not like I do.”

“True. Why do you care then? She hasn’t given you much attention since you woke up.”

He smiled, shaking his head, “Now you’re the one being insensitive. Well I can see why you dislike her. She never liked Elana either.”

Ilea cocked her head, “She?”

“Adventurer friend of old. You reminded me of her before. Now you seem quite different but there are some things that fit. A dislike for Elana being one of them. For understandable reasons.”

“You think she’s still around? Might be fun if you think she’s similar.” Ilea commented.

“She was cut apart in an inn, by a bunch of mercenaries she offended. Half drunk I was told.” Maro said.

She pointed at him, “Doesn’t sound like me then. I’m uncuttable. Did you kill the mercenaries?”

“Doubt it. She was pretty tough too. Not expecting an attack can do a number on you. No. The girl had friends all over, someone else reached them before me. Nasty scene.” His voice had turned even more quiet.

“We found him by the way. Terok found him. The knight patrolling the throne room.” Maro said suddenly. Seeing her questioning gaze, he elaborated, “My... son. Well, his body at least.”

Ilea nodded. *I’ll try not to smash his face in.* She didn’t voice the thought, unsure why he had even shared it in the first place. She hadn’t forgotten his plea to keep their corpses. For a funeral or additional resurrection, she didn’t know. Either way, she didn’t fear him. Hadn’t before but now she was even confident in facing him. A bunch of undead wouldn’t stop her from crushing his skull, before they could tear through her defenses. The thought felt weird. Ilea knew him, considered him a friend even. Yet she couldn’t shake the suspicion, her rational mind sure he was too smart for such a stupid move.

Sighing again, she looked through her potential third tier advancements.

“You’re in a terrific mood today.” Maro said.

She stared at him, “Be happy someone came to visit grandpa.”

Confusion was apparent on his face before he started laughing, Ilea focusing back on her skills.

*‘3rd tier skill points available [The Azarinth Sentinel]: 1’*

*‘Skills available for third tier advancement in [The Azarinth Sentinel]:’*

- Sentinel Sphere*
- Azarinth Perception*
- Azarinth Reversal*

*3rd tier skill points available [Kin of Ash]: 1*

*Skills available for third tier advancement in [Kin of Ash]:*

- Storm of Cinders*
- Avatar of Ash*
- Heart of Cinder*

*Well... they’re all fucking amazing. Sphere and Perception would likely give some utility and Reversal might be offensive power. All are interesting. Maybe I’m wrong too. Never know what you’re going to get. Box of bloody chocolates.*

For her second class Ilea too was favoring either Storm of Cinders or Heart of Cinder. Both could enhance her offensive capabilities. “Hey can you help me out? I still have my third tier points from hitting three hundred.”

“Oh? And you would honor this old king by asking his advice. Well bring it.” Maro spoke, smirking all the while.

“One is a sphere of perception around me. One increases my reflexes and perception passively and the last one lets me use my healing offensively as well as changing a mana intrusion attack I have, giving it a mana drain on hit.” She quickly explained what her three Azarinth skills did without going into their second stages.

Maro seemed to actually give it some thought. She had expected him to immediately shoot an answer, likely some kind of joke. She knew based on their previous talks that he was serious quite often but looking at his face and constant smirk, it was hard to believe those memories were real at all.

“I think all those skills sound good. You won’t know what the third tier does until you get it. Maybe you could wait a little longer? It’s not been long since you hit three hundred I assume. Get used to all the changes and then make a decision?” He suggested.

Ilea wasn’t a fan, “And then get used to even more changes? No. Look I don’t intend to stay at three hundred. Soon all of them will be in the third tier anyway. It’s just a matter of choosing best ones for now, this very moment.”

He looked at her and spoke, “Well then it just comes down to what you need. Survivability? Damage? Speed? Maneuverability? Detection? Can your reflexes keep up with all the other gains you have gotten? No? Take that one. Any reason your sphere isn’t up to the task anymore? Take that. Need a boost to your healing and the mana intrusion attack, take that one. If you’re not in need of anything specific, take the one you use the most.”

“I don’t think I’m in need of anything.” Ilea said, “I use my sphere constantly, as well as my healing and the mana intrusion.”

“Well you have eyes still, as well as your other senses. I don’t think reliance on anything like that should come first. There are spells and enchantments that can make perception skills like your a terrible experience. Trust me,

happened to me once.” He said. “If the choice is between that and a boost to your healing and mana intrusion, I’d take the latter.”

Ilea nodded, “Reasonable points. Or a necromancer trying to deceive me right before he takes over the world.”

“Or that. True.” He said. “What about your second class?”

“Defensive skill boosting my body passively as well as speed and perception, mana intrusion skill... well not purely anymore and lastly an area attack that targets a sphere around me.”

Maro didn’t pause for as long this time, “In that case, can you use both mana intrusion spells at the same time?” a nod, “Then for me at least it would be clear. If you’re not in need of anything else then take the two skills possibly boosting your mana intrusion. You’ll get the combined boost of both.”

“Hey that actually makes sense. Why not. I’ll get two more again at three ten anyway.” Ilea said and used the points on the respective skills.

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Reversal reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1’*

***Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 3rd lvl 1:***

***You have learned of Absolute Destruction and Sentinel Reconstruction. Now you will learn of their Reversal.***

***Upon activation, Absolute Destruction will send a part of the struck enemy’s mana into yourself. No mana will be released on impact, rendering Absolute Destruction’s offensive potential to zero.***

***Upon activation, Sentinel Reconstruction will send a destructive force of channeled mana into yourself or an enemy you touch, the healing aspects are reduced to zero.***

***2nd stage: You may have both the original and reversed aspects activated at the same time.***

***3rd stage: Healing, power, resilience and speed. An Azarinth Healer requires balance. Your respective Destruction and Reconstruction spells***

***have their potency increased by a static 25% of your lowest stat. [100%]  
Category: Body Enhancement***

*So I should invest in Endurance is what you're telling me.* Ilea looked at her ten stat points remaining and put them into Wisdom. Getting more mana she could use for anything would be the most beneficial at the moment. Especially now that she felt both her defense and offense were covered. *For a while at least.*

***'ding' 'Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1'***

***Active: Storm of Cinders – 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 1***

***Burn the inside of whatever your body hits with a surge of heat and embers or release the attack in a burst of fire and cinders.***

***2<sup>nd</sup> stage: The flame burns on. Targets hit will have fire burning through or on them. Time and consecutive attacks will increase the effect.***

***3<sup>rd</sup> stage: Storm of Cinders burns away all that stands against it, damaging mana intrusion capabilities of defensive enchantments, natural- as well as manufactured armor.***

***Category: Ashen magic***

“Not bad.” She commented.

“What did you get?” Maro asked, having watched her throughout the whole process.

Ilea smiled, “I’m not telling. One was really good though.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Says the guy stuck in his bloody necromancer machine, forcing me to take care of his undead.” She said, cracking her neck.

“Nobody is forcing you Ilea. I would understand anybody unwilling to face creatures two hundred levels higher than themselves. I simply know you well enough by now to know that you welcome such a challenge.”

“Wouldn’t you?” She asked, the king giving her a somewhat complicated expression. “Oh don’t disappoint me now? With all the stories of your reckless adventures?”

“With a team of experts and friends. Prepared and knowledgeable about the foes. I don’t intend to lose limbs Ilea, even if I could recover in mere days. I know you’re powerful but don’t overestimate yourself just because you can avoid getting hit.”

Ilea walked a little closer and stared into his eyes, “Last week...,” she started but stopped. The part of her that was suspicious reminded her that sharing something like her loss of head wasn’t in her best interest. “... I can take care of myself, king.” She simply said and blinked out of the room.

Ilea decided to lure the knights out into the courtyard of the palace, as few of them as possible. Some patrolled or stood in twos, making it nearly impossible to face them one on one. The two kingsguard patrolling the halls upstairs were the first she targeted. One carrying two short broad swords, guards on his hands. The other one had a nasty halberd. Creating a tiny nail of ash, she sent it flying at the swordsman.

Right before it hit, the knight vanished, appearing instead a couple meters in front of her. She saw a pulse of mana in her sphere before his movements suddenly sped up, Ilea blinking back to avoid the attack. *Something’s fucky.* The other knight had of course turned as well, looking at her before the halberd was swung downwards. Ilea’s eyes widened at the storm of magic coming her way, noticeable by the destroyed tiles and ceiling even before it had reached her sphere’s range.

Blink used up, she braced herself as the full force of the attack hit her. Not just her but the swords knight too, both of them flung out through the newly created entrance. Her armor had held up, the damage quickly taken care of. Her actual body was fine, she noted. As was the knight's apparently, the man getting up a couple meters next to her. Blinking next to him, she punched towards his head. He suddenly lit up in her sphere and rolled away, faster than he had moved before. Rushing after him, she punched again. This time she was met with a counterattack, blades moving towards her neck. Ilea ducked but the blades suddenly sped up, too quickly to blink as they crashed into her ashen helmet.

Two shallow wounds had formed on her cheeks as she jumped back. *I see.* This time he rushed at her and she simply focused on his torso, her chest heating up in the meantime. Ashen limbs rushed out to his sides when he reached her, Ilea's fist going for his stomach. She ignored the blades moving in piercing motions towards her heart and belly. The knight was apparently confident enough to take the trade, Ilea moving her body slightly as the blades cut into her veil, more shallow wounds added. Her own fist landed, all her mana intrusion skills rushing into him before her ashen limbs closed around his back.

The knight removed his blades with movements far quicker than she could react, vanishing a split second later. She watched as another wave of force came her way, a cone of energy ripping open the ground. Ilea simply let it wash over her, bracing against it as she was pushed a couple meters back. *Weaker the further away I am. Deal with the time mage first.*

At least they didn't work together especially well, the halberd user moving slowly and attacking from a range while the swordsman constantly pestered her. The fact that she could defend against his attacks, easily healing whatever damage he got in made the fight simple. Whenever the halberd user attacked, she actually had an opportunity to meditate. That was, if he wasn't too close to her. She could tell the damage would be a hassle to deal with should she get hit from a couple meters away instead of the twenty so far.

Ashen limbs allowed her to force the time mage warrior to trade blows with her instead of dodging her attacks before he slashed her. When her Heart of



Cinder created a heat capable of damaging her body from within, Ilea waited for the next Halberd attack. Seeing the time warrior teleport away, she found the disturbance in her sphere where he would appear and blinked. Ilea released her Heart of Cinder, the knight accelerating his movements but unable to escape the expanding sphere. The blast sent him tumbling, Ilea close behind before she grappled him.

The two crashed down as she started charging up her Absolute Destruction, unmoving as he hacked into her armor with one sword. Each strike was accelerated, hitting the same spot again and again. He was going for her heart, digging a centimeter deeper with each hit. A wave of force was on its way when Ilea's fist smashed into his helmet, through it and through his rotten skull. A ding resounded in her mind before she blinked away, avoiding the blast.

# Chapter 305 Power Cleaning Montage

## Chapter 305 Power Cleaning Montage

The sword was still stuck in her chest, ash growing around the wound before she grabbed the handle and ripped it out, a spray of blood coloring the ground. *Actually did manage to pierce my heart. Fascinating.* What the knight didn't know of course, was that such an injury was a nuisance at best for the healer. Her heart was rebuilt, as was the armor the knight had pierced before. *Now about you.*

Lances of ash formed around her, five of them in total as she walked slowly towards the halberd wielding member of the Kingsguard. The weapon held in his hands was steady as he too slowly advanced. Ilea shot her spears at him and he swung his weapon. Starting to run right before the two attacks collided, Ilea blinked to the side and kept her focus on the knight, watching her lances stopped in the air and flung aside.

She reached him, her fist crashing into his back. Another hit landed when the butt of his weapon hit the ground, releasing a spherical force attack. Ilea could blink but saved it up, knowing it wasn't life threatening. She braced herself and was pushed back, her armor slowly stripped away millimeter by millimeter before her leather armor was ripped apart. And then it ended, a couple meters pushed back, she reformed her armor, a little annoyed at the destroyed leather one. Her skin hadn't been pierced at least.

He swung his halberd, releasing another attack from point-blank range. This time she blinked, behind him before she started charging up her destruction. Ashen limbs delivered their Storm of Cinders, focused on his smaller back to strip away whatever mana intrusion defenses his armor held. Right before he repeated the spherical attack, Ilea's fist crashed into him, sending around three hundred mana of her own through his system. Blinking right after let her avoid the sphere that expanded right after. The ground shook, cracking and splitting in parts.

Her own area attack had reached the safe limits again as she rushed back at him, "Let's see how you brush it off." Blinking past his attack directed at her, she released Heart of Cinder. Fire rushed over him, powerful enough to turn the very stone below her to ash. He was pushed forward and stumbled, Ilea closing the distance in an instant. Ashen limbs again focused on the spot on his back, Ilea surprised when they pierced, pushing the knight down into the ground. Before she could press on, a noise resounded in her mind, letting her know she had won.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 500] – For defeating an enemy two hundred levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*  
*'ding' 'You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 503] – For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 301 – Five stat points awarded'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Keeper of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 4'*

“There you go.” Ilea whispered, storing the knights in her necklace. *Don't know why Maro thinks leveling up after three hundred is difficult.* She meditated to recover her mana. Absolute Destruction was a ridiculous drain at 100 per strike. Even Storm of Cinders with eight limbs only used forty if all connected. At least her regeneration was great but with this newfound power she couldn't fight at her strongest for unlimited time periods anymore. Seventy hits with Absolute Destruction at full power alone would nearly drain her.

*Then again how many people have regeneration I have to overcome? How many monsters don't feel pain and are uncaring about injuries?* The undead were a near perfect counter to her abilities and still, she killed those two hundred levels higher. They didn't have good ways to injure her, that much was true. A Blue Reaper at five hundred might still pose a threat. Or a Regenerator with a better healing skill. Her damage was high but she couldn't overcome everything.

Ilea still wasn't sure how monsters worked exactly. A level one hundred wolf should be about as strong as a level one hundred human, both classes at that level at least. Knowing that, there were still plenty of irregularities. Even just being able to match the strength of the knights was unthinkable. With her stats so evenly distributed. Of course she had her auras but monsters must have skills like that as well. *Maybe my classes are just ridiculously good for my level. Should I ask Maro about specific numbers?* She wasn't sure. He would surely want to know about hers too and Ilea would rather have them both unknowing.

*Could squeeze Terok. The dude owes me his life after all. I could compare Azarinth First Hunter to whatever he got at two hundred.* There was of course so much more to a fight than levels and Ilea wouldn't shy away from facing even a level one thousand creature as she was now. The chance of getting such an achievement would convince her to at least try, if nothing else. She had her perception boost if something was close to one hitting her plus her regular gauge of damage dealt to her. Little could truly surprise her. At least knowing how her evolution stacked up to others would be interesting.

*Could just take Maro on in that bout. Maybe ask Catelyn if she's up for something like that.* Cracking her neck, she moved on. Two Kingsguard were down and a bunch more waited for her inside.

The second set of patrolling knights were easier to deal with, another halberd and time magic duo. Fighting especially the halberd one in an enclosed space would be a nightmare but being able to lure them out made it a simple encounter. Simple as in, she lost both her eyes to the time warrior as well as a bunch of fingers to be able to pin him down long enough to kill him. All injuries she could easily heal, the temporary loss of her sight not an issue with her sphere.

The halberd knight put up a better fight than the first one she had faced, only using his attacks to react, focusing on the area attack around himself after she had hit him a couple times. Ilea was forced to take a couple of his attacks point-blank but other than damaged skin and muscles below, her body held up pretty well. *Level five hundred.* She mused, knowing she could take quite a bit more damage until it would become really dangerous. Neither was she averse to a more defensive approach. A tactic that likely wouldn't work against the regenerating knights, quick overwhelming damage necessary to take them down.

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 505] – For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 510] – For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted'*

*'ding' 'Kin of Ash has reached lvl 301 – Five stat points awarded'*

*‘ding’ ‘Absolute Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11’*

*‘ding’ ‘Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5’*

*‘ding’ ‘Time Magic Resistance reaches lvl 4’*

The ten stat points Ilea distributed among Vitality, Wisdom and Intelligence. She had planned to focus on the first two but the new nearly ten fold boost she received for her Intelligence damn near forced her to level it alongside the rest. She put six into Int and two each into the others. While Strength had similar bonuses, she saw fewer reasons to focus on it at the moment.

*Nearly at the throne room already.* Ilea remembered her first venture into the palace, seeing the kingguard as this at the time insurmountable barrier. “Come on lassie... just a couple more.” She said to herself as she entered through the destroyed wall the first halberd carrier had produced, emulating her inner Terok.

“Now let’s see what the shield guys can do.” She said as she turned the corner, immediately focusing on the two Kingguard standing next to the throne room gates. She waved and walked closer but they didn’t show a reaction. *Are they just statues?* The question was answered when they turned their heads a little towards her. Still they didn’t do anything, just watching her movements. “Guard the throne room, that’s all you do?”

Ilea decided to initiate, forming an ashen projectile and sending it towards one of the two. Shield raised, the ash was stopped without leaving more than a scratch. Sword at the ready, it seemed the knights were finally ready to engage. Ilea saw the magic in her sphere when their shields started to emanate mana. The spells taking effect, Ilea felt herself being dragged towards them. *Wind magic... no, gravity?* Ashen limbs spread behind her but Ilea didn’t stop her movement. On the contrary, she welcomed this approach.

Getting in close, their swords slashed at her, Ilea blinking to avoid the two strikes before she unleashed her attacks on one of the two. Fist crashing into his back, her ashen limbs weakening his plate as they delivered Storm of Cinders. The knight turned with a shield bash that Ilea didn't avoid, instead getting in more strikes with her ash. Unsurprisingly the bash was enhanced by magic, sending her into the opposite wall with enough force to crack the marble and get slightly stuck. The other knight helpfully provided some gravity magic to pry her out again, towards his blade.

She simply smashed the weapon away when she was close enough, the steel scratching past her armor before she landed on his shield with her feet forward. Ashen limbs attacked as they rushed around the defensive measures before she was pulled away again by the other foe. *Trying to disorient me with all that spinning?* Due to her sphere it had little impact on her, blinking again to deliver the same attacks as she had before. This time she avoided the shield bash with an upwards jump, her Heart of Cinders reaching noticeable power. *I don't want to have the one from the throne room coming in too.* The thought flashed by before she blinked further out.

The two knights followed her this time, already engaged in battle it seemed their proximity rules didn't apply. Ilea's ashen limbs smashed into the ground to stop them from moving her with gravity magic, her body in the air other than the ash. Adding her wings to counter the force of both knights, she managed to stay still. Their battle moved out into the hallway and then into the courtyard.

More space would mean more maneuverability for her. With her limbs and wings able to counteract the gravity magic, Ilea had little to fear even without walls and other rooms to flee to. Blinking back towards the knight she had damaged more heavily, she was hit by the blade coming in horizontally. It cut into the armor on her arm, biting through and stopped by her skin. Blinking again when the weapon was removed, she appeared behind him and unleashed her area attack as well as a simultaneous punch and Storm of Cinders from all her ashen limbs.

The knight was staggered, moving a step forward as she followed up, unrelenting. Another three punches and a continuous assault through her ashen limbs, one connected to deliver her reversed healing smashed into

him. The mana flowed in more freely now that her third tier Storm of cinders had weakened the metal and possible enchantments that had been placed on it. For that her new Sentinel Sphere was certainly nice to have. At least she wouldn't waste too much mana anymore if the enemy could resist her mana intrusion too well.

Ilea was pulled away again but simply blinked back to the injured knight, using the pulling force to deliver a flying kick straight at his face. His head cracked to the side and she watched the body collapse behind her as she approached the second knight. Checking her mana, she was confident to be able to finish him without bigger time outs due to Meditation. *Come on.* His sword slashed at her but now that the second one was out, she simply stopped it with her armored arm. Ilea felt no pain, just like the undead.

She created ash around herself and simply pumped mana into him while her limbs tried to distract him, forcing the shield and sword to move anywhere but her actual body. The remaining slashes that actually came through, she dodged or deflected. Even those that were simply too fast, she simply let through. Whatever damage was done to her was healed quickly thereafter. *Not so scary once you can tank them and realize they're fucking stupid.*

With this she could even Meditate in between, even though her ashen limbs were definitely moving too fast to allow for the second tier of the skill to apply. A couple minutes later, helped by some punches of Absolute Destruction and her new Heart of Cinder, the knight collapsed.

Ilea didn't waste any time, moving on to the knight in the throne room. Apparently the body of Maro's son. Using the same tactics she had applied from her previous fights, she took care of him, at least trying not to damage his head any further. The last three remaining Kingsguard were down below and taken care of in the next half hour. Most of the time had been spent by Ilea meditating back her used mana. Her theory that the two standing near Maro's entrance would react similarly to the ones in front of the throne room was correct, meaning she could deal with the one in the side hall first before giving them her full attention.

The last hit sent the knight's corpse straight through the small hallway and into Maro's little vault.



*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 510] – For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Kingsguard – lvl 505] – For defeating an enemy two hundred or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 302 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Awakening reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8’*

*‘ding’ ‘Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 6’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Gravity Magic Resistance – lvl 1*

*A force of nature, bound and warped my magic itself. Perhaps not noticing the damage dealt to your body, you have developed a way to resist this magic.’*

*‘ding’ ‘Gravity Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2’*

Meditation started flowing through her, increasing her mana regeneration considerably as she made her way inside. Maro was staring at the body when she entered. “Last one of them.” She said, appearing next to the king.

“Good work.” He said and nodded, “Now it’s only a matter of time until Terok and the elves clear out the rest.”

“I’ll go help. Shouldn’t be many of them left.”

Ilea found the four quickly upon reaching the surface, Heranuur’s explosions audible from quite a distance. *I wonder how they don’t attract dozens of them with all that noise.* The answer was that they did. Not a dozen perhaps but when she landed near the street they were fighting in, Ilea spotted at least six knights. *Either they want a challenge or they’re idiots.* She thought, blinking down and catching a knight’s sword mid swing. A punch to his chest sent him flying, the noise in her mind informing her about the damage she had dealt. She shook off the steel stuck on her hand and moved on to the next one.

Neiphato was doing a good job at defending when Ilea appeared, a kick breaking the undead’s leg before her ashen limbs smashed into his neck. The body flopped to the ground, head rolling off before she winked at the elf.

Creating several ashen lances, Ilea sent them flying through the small alley, piercing three of the knights to create openings for the others as well as simply damaging them. Terok immediately finished his off and the others seemed in the process as well so she decided to move on instead, rushing through the streets with her sphere active to find any remaining undead. The crew had continued her work of cleaning out the knights but Ilea had already taken care of a big part of the city.

Blinking through a house, Ilea surprised two knights patrolling their designated area. She appeared between them, Heard of Cinder exploding to envelop them as well as the houses around her. Each was pierced by a couple ashen limbs to finish the job, the corpses still in the process of falling when she had already vanished, her legs taking her through the streets with increasing speed.

Heart of Cinder turned out to be a pretty good skill to clear out the knights in the coming hours, not needing a ton of mana to keep up but delivering a massive blow whenever she did find enemies. The stunning power it had, even against undead provided her with whatever opening she needed to finish the job. It saved a lot of time and by nightfall she they had progressed considerably, the others meticulously searching wherever she had rushed through to finish off one or the other knight Ilea had missed.

Neither Ilea nor the group of Terok and the elves stopped for the night. She assumed by daybreak, the last of the knights of the rose would be taken care of. The dungeon cleared out except for the Soul Rippers that Ilea was absolutely not in the mood to meet at the moment. Perhaps the undead knights would resurrect but at least they wouldn't be powered by Maro and his magic device, the only thing really that kept her in Tremor. *Until the Soul Rippers become the only thing to advance my levels.* She grinned, quite happy that for quite a while that wouldn't be necessary. There were plenty of less nightmare inducing monsters out there. She didn't even feel like testing herself against one with her newfound power.

# Chapter 306 King Invalar of Rhyvor

## Chapter 306 King Invalar of Rhyvor

Ilea was sitting next to a downed knight, sunlight already filtering through from above. *So that doesn't work.* She summoned the second attempt at storing her ash lances from her necklace but found it again as an assortment of loose ash. The form was right for a split second but she had to take over again immediately to reform and harden it again. At least it was possible now to store her created ash but if it lost its properties it wouldn't be a big help. The mana she used to store and summon it was about the same as simply creating new ash.

The elves appeared nearby, Goldie landing next to her a moment later. "We believe the town is cleared human. The part the light touches."

She nodded in turn, "Good. Collect the bodies and bring them to the field in front of the cathedral. I'm sure the king will want them there too."

Seviir nodded and vanished, as did the other elves. Terok walked over, looking over his shoulder, "No argument or sass. I guess he was more impressed with your changes that I had assumed. Healer." He joked but she could tell the dwarf wasn't exactly at ease around her.

"Relax mate. I'm the same person." Ilea said, forming an ashen sphere in her hand.

He shrugged, “From what I’ve seen, and those were only brief glimpses of carnage, no you’re not. I still feel good about my two hundred evolution but now I’m looking forward to the next one.” Terok laughed, “You want to check if Maro is out yet? Maybe we’re still missing a couple but I doubt it. Been pretty thorough.”

Ilea nodded, spreading her wings. Terok ascended next to her, speeding up in silence. The two covered the distance over the dead city towards the palace in the span of a couple minutes. Landing in the courtyard, Terok stopped for a second as he looked around. “That fire thing you have now. I’m not sure what Hera thinks but he looked at you with something I couldn’t interpret.”

Ilea snorted, “I can think of several things that probably went through his head.” Walking through the opened wall, the dwarf followed quickly after her.

“How was it? Fighting the Kingsguard?”

Ilea looked over, “Well they have magic abilities that make them different to fight than the normal variants. As long as you can take their blows, they’re manageable. Taking them on without getting hit though, I don’t think I could do that for a long while. One variant even had time magic.”

“Time magic? Fucking necromancers. Good thing we dissuaded Hera and Seviir.”

Ilea nodded, the elves had likely wanted to face off against the stronger knights. “You could have suggested the undead knights in the dark section too. They’re a little easier to deal with.” She said, smiling to herself at the thought of losing her head. *Easier than the kingsguard at least. Maybe with four people to distract and fight them they could even take one of the undead down.* Ilea doubted they could handle one of the Kingsguard however, with what little she had seen of them fighting in the alley.

They had improved, that much was true but compared to the boost she had gotten it was negligible. If her level of power was needed against the undead rose knights and the kingsguard, then perhaps they needed to work a

little longer. “That was your territory. Neither wanted to offend you I suppose.” Terok said and chuckled when they reached the throne room.

She smirked when she saw the robed man sitting casually in the big throne. His attire looked heavy, different sections of silver steel interwoven with the dark red fabric as well as dozens of intricate designs depicting mostly roses. Steel boots as well as gauntlets, the latter with sections for each part of his fingers. The helmet didn't show his eyes, two rounded silver steel pieces separated by a vertical line going through where his nose would be. The steel reached around, other than the two pieces placed where his face was hidden below the only thing distinct about it were the silver antlers reaching up from each side.

Coupled with the two pieces on his face, there were four protrusions going up and over the full plate helmet. All of it screamed wealth as well as countless hours invested by a capable craftsman or woman. *Wholly unpractical.* Ilea noted, not in the mood to justify her own horns. *Enemy weapons get entangled. Plus it's intimidating.* She still did.

The man clasped his hands together and got up, not moving a muscle but floating. Ilea was impressed by the magical wings she saw in her sphere, none of it visible to her eyes. “Welcome. To Tremor, subjects. I, the Red Necromancer King of old will be the doom you unleashed on this world. Cower before me.” Maro was being an idiot, spreading his arms as well as some kind of intimidating aura in the hall. Terok actually took a step back but Ilea just rolled her eyes.

“Welcome back, king. I can see you already found some gear to pay us for all that work.” She said, her armor of ash forming around her before she walked towards him. “Or do you intend to pay with your body?” Ashen limbs as well as lances formed behind and above her as she started heating up from the inside.

Maro's helmet vanished before he clapped, a big grin on his face, “I'm kidding dear friends. No need to beat up an old man.” Jumping down from the plateau where the thrones were located, he met Ilea and hugged her. “Thank you.” He said in a much more sincere tone before he moved on to Terok, hugging his huge steel machine. “Thank you.”

“Now as to the gear. I’ve had my storage ring on me when I activated the whole thing of course. Not that I could have activated anything with my mana constantly drawn. There are some things I can give you of course.”

Terok looked at Ilea, “Why not open the armory then as well as the treasury?”

Maro smiled apologetically, “About that. Well let’s just say that I might have focused a little too much on the unbreakable part of those enchantments.”

The dwarf sighed, throwing his arms to the sky, “You fucking idiot.”

“Hey at least it held.” Maro countered.

Ilea didn’t really get it, “You can’t open it? Even though you made the enchantments yourself?”

“Precisely. The keys can open it. Or we just spend a couple weeks down there trying to crack it. We do have an idea where one key might be at least.” He smiled brightly before Ilea just started laughing. Terok shook his head but joined in a moment later. “See... the real treasure are the friends...”

One of Ilea’s lances smashed into the ground next to him, burying itself in the marble with a loud crash, “Empty that fucking ring.” She said, still smiling, “Terok, we’re going on a trip after we’re done here.”

Maro nodded, things appearing in quick succession around him. Some swords, armor, three more of his robes and helmets, wine in bottles entirely too expensive to consider anything else but treasure. A bunch of crates with books and documents in them. Food as well as maps, weird looking magical devices as well as skulls, furs and ingots. *Why even have a treasury when the guy has it all in his ring.*

Ilea walked past all the invaluable objects and grabbed some of the plates with food on them. Her ash brought them towards her hands before her armor receded and she started eating. Terok in the meantime carefully

looked through the things, mostly interested in the ingots of course. “No gold on you?” Ilea asked and Maro pointed at a pouch on his belt.

“Couple gold if you want it. Enough to survive a couple weeks or months wherever I might find myself, that is if the worth of it hasn’t changed too much in the past thousands of years. Never cared to carry too much of it. I’m glad you found the food to your liking at least.” He said with sincerity, bowing lightly. “To think my hospitality has declined so much that guests have to face hundreds of dangerous rogue undead just to meet me. These halls have fallen for sure.”

“Well you’re out now.” Ilea said, finishing her first plate and moving on to the next one. It looked like chicken or duck in some kind of honey sauce, definitely nice looking and prepared with care. *Dude was a king, probably had an entire army of cooks.* Ilea mused, looking through some of the books and documents. Most of it she found was related to Rhyvor, lists of adventurers and citizens, plans and laws as well as reforms and maps of the cities, farmland, dungeons and monsters. She wasn’t sure if he kept anything back. If he knew her at all, he had nothing to hide, except if he was some kind of sadist torturer and lied to her through it all. Unlikely at this point but Ilea still watched her back, around both of them.

“Exactly. Terok, take whatever you want and can carry. I can store it for you if you don’t have an item for that. There should be some rings and necklaces in the treasury but well... not until we open it up.”

“Why not give him your ring?” Ilea suggested with a mouth full of duck. *Delicious.*

“That’s a good idea actually. Here, push your mana inside and check if I’m keeping anything from you two. I ask to keep the ring itself as well as my armors for now. Terok will get his storage item in time and it considerably enhances my survivability.” Maro said, holding out his hand to Ilea who promptly pushed her mana inside and checked it.

The only thing he had kept there were some letters that she summoned and skimmed through, putting them back in as he watched her with a serious



expression and hard eyes. She nodded and stored them again in his ring, "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. You have all the right to be suspicious. I might have hidden more things down below or anywhere really. Plenty of time. I hope you can believe me that this is all I own at the moment." He opened his arms wide. Ilea noted that his beard was looking better than before, as well as his gray hair. The man definitely didn't look a couple thousand years old. His face might have intimidated her a couple years ago but now he was just another man. The smile that spread a moment later took away all the hardness that was present before.

"Fine with me. She did most of the work anyway." Terok said, pointing at Ilea. "Would you think it sad if I tried to pay you back with stuff I get from him?" He asked, looking at Ilea while pointing at Maro.

Ilea chuckled, nearly choking on her food, "It's fine. Pay back your debts in Hallowfort first. I won't send assassins after you. I'd love a couple more storage items though as well as some good light armor if there is anything."

"Depends on how much was actually left behind. Can't imagine anybody raiding the chambers but you never know with people." Maro said and sighed. "Did you... collect the bodies?" He asked, a sad note in his voice.

"No assassins but you coming after me is quite a bit more scary..." Terok grumbled to himself.

Ilea nodded to Maro, putting the rest of the dishes into her own necklace. In turn, she blinked to the center of the hall and laid out the corpses and their armor, lastly placing down the body of his son. *Moment of truth.*

Maro walked over, leaving his things behind as Terok continued looking through it all, "Thank you." He said and knelt down next to the last knight in the line, touching the young man's face carefully. Ilea stood close by with arms crossed in front of her.

"I'm sorry." The words were quiet, not meant for her. One by one he looked at the corpses before they vanished into his ring.

Ilea cleared her throat when he was done and looked up at the murals on the ceiling Ilea noticed for the first time. “Are you going to reanimate them again?”

Maro turned, a smile on his face and none of the sadness present Ilea had seen through her sphere just moments prior, “No. I will collect wood and burn them. Before we leave if that is agreeable to you.”

“I have some left. Did the same with the knights I killed previously. The elves are collecting the remaining bodies and will bring them to the small field near the upper most cathedral.” Ilea explained.

“Ha!” Terok exclaimed, moving an ingot around in his hands, “Marvelous.”

Both Maro and Ilea looked at him before the king nodded towards her, “I am forever in your debt Ilea. I know you had your reasons and would like to keep it that way but know that you did this old king a service he shall never forget. I won’t speak of this again, other than to annoy you of course.” The king said before he actually went to one knee and bowed his head.

Ilea stepped towards him and grabbed his shoulder, hard enough to grab on and move him up, “You know the consequences of annoying me.” She was smiling of course and Maro started laughing as he was made to stand up.

“Pretty strong for a healer! Ah we will have that bout. As soon as I have some corpses again that don’t remind me of old friends that died thousands of years ago.” Maro said, clapping her back and nearly making her stumble.

*Speaking of strength. Guess I’m not the only one with boosts.* “Any plans for Tremor? The Soul Rippers still roam the lower regions.”

“Did you face them? Now that you were downgraded to a healer?”

Ilea didn’t react to the comment, “No. I don’t feel like it at the moment.”

“They still creep you out? Well I don’t blame you. Read enough reports on them.” Maro replied.

Ilea didn't deny his statement. "I'm sure Elana has plans already. For now I honestly want to get the fuck out of here. Ah to be free to speak however the fuck I want to. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck the court, fuck the nobles, fuck the king." Maro was outright bursting with joy it seemed.

*The guy surely swings in mood quickly.* Ilea noted but couldn't help but be affected by him. *Damn hidden charisma stat.*

"I'd take most of the metals if you two don't object. The rest I would sell but you decide on that." Terok said as they came back.

"You can keep it in your ring Maro." Ilea said. "I don't really care for anything here. We can talk about whatever is remaining in the treasury later."

The king nodded, "Thank you." He bowed again and vanished when Ilea tried hitting him.

"So very aggressive. That could have killed a lesser man." He said, dusting off his robe as he appeared in a twirl.

"I'm not gonna say it." Ilea said and retracted her fist.

Ilea handed Maro the fire sphere she had gotten in Hallowfort before stepping back to join the three elves and Terok. Looking towards the cathedral, she saw Elfie leaning in one of the window frames, crossed arms and an unreadable expression on his face.

"Warriors of Rhyvor. You have served your duty, a hundred fold. May you all rest in peace." Maro spoke, activating the rune to set the massive pyre on fire.

"Humans and their weird traditions." Seviir commented, wincing when Ilea turned towards him with a stare.

Maro stepped back as the fire spread, looking up to the sunlight shining into the cave before he lifted his arm. Ilea immediately turned when she felt the mana coming from him. A beam of purple energy shot up and evaporated shortly after before hitting the ceiling. She actually saw Neiphato shiver next to her, the sight of the rather mundane looking spell enough to garner such a reaction. *What was that about?* Of course the spell had seemed powerful, a purity in her sphere she hadn't seen before but it was a simple beam after all.

Heranuur just grinned. Terok lifted his hand too and shot out a metal spike that exploded in shrapnel when it reached a certain height. Ilea formed tendrils of ash she sent upwards before they dispersed in a thin mist sent over the city. *These rituals are that old?* Ilea smiled, seeing Maro stand a couple steps away from the pyre, the flames brushing over his robes and face. *Men and their misplaced pride.* Ilea shook her head, seeing the tears that formed and evaporated instantly thanks to the heat.

They stood there until only ash remained, surprisingly even the elves including Elfie in his window. Ilea stepped up to the king afterwards, "I can make the ash disappear too if you wish."

He turned to her, tears still on his face as he nodded. *Guess I was wrong about him.* Lifting her arm to emphasize, the ash started rising, twirling upwards before she made it vanish. The king looked up, a smile tugging on his mouth. When it was all done, the elves moved past and walked to the cathedral. Maro sighed hard before his helmet reappeared. Ilea put a hand on his shoulder before walking towards the cathedral too.

# Chapter 307 The Vineyard Caves

## Chapter 307 The Vineyard Caves

“King Invalar. My condolences.” Elfie said when they exited, bowing lightly.

“Thank you. Elf, I have heard of you and am willing to answer any question you might have. But not now. I will return in a couple weeks and then we can talk.” Maro immediately shut down the elf but to Ilea’s surprise, Elfie simply nodded.

“Then we shall wait here and train until your return. There are still monsters remaining in this dungeon?”

Ilea waved her hand, “Too dangerous for you lot. I suggest fighting something outside.”

Elfie nodded, “Well there is plenty for them to learn still. I will do my best. Will you be joining us?” His question directed at Ilea and Terok.

“No, we will return with the king.” Ilea answered for both of them.

“Hey why can’t we go too? Aren’t you visiting another dungeon?” Heranuur asked but something smashed into him from above before he convulsed in pain.

“No.” Elfie simply said with a wicked smile. “Until you can remove yourselves from my grasp, there is nothing for you but training.”

Heranuur coughed before standing up slowly, “Terok can’t do it either, why is he allowed to go?”

Elfie sighed and looked at Ilea with pleading eyes before shifting his attention back to the other elf, “He is not behaving like a human child, for one thing. It was a request by the human to have him included in the training. She is the one to decide. For you three, not so much.”

Ilea didn’t disagree, just smiling at Hera as he stared at her. “No fun.” The elf said before vanishing and dusting himself off. “I’ll find other interesting things to do.”

“Don’t fuck the monsters.” Terok said and laughed.

“He already did that.” Seviir commented, vanishing immediately after he had said it.

*Cheeky bastard.* Ilea chuckled.

“I’ll take care of him.” Heranuur said and vanished too while Elfie just shook his head.

Neiphato bowed lightly to both Maro and Ilea, “Good fortune on your travels. I apologize for the young hunters.”

Ilea smiled at him before Elfie stepped in front of him, “One is enough.” She shrugged in response and spread her wings.

“I trust you know where the go?” She looked at Terok who started floating as well. Maro did the same.

“I do.” The dwarf replied.

Elfie looked their way as they ascended, locking eyes with Ilea before she turned. When they reached the top of the cave, Ilea grabbed onto Maro’s shoulder. “The arcane storms are dangerous. Let’s check first.”

She moved ahead and looked around, seeing some clouds in the distance but nothing immediately around them. “See that crack there?” She pointed,

Maro looking up to the sky before she tapped his chest, “The crack.”

“Yes.” He said, focusing in on the distant crevice.

“Move as fast as you can.” Ilea said, her auras spreading through her before she shot off, blinking time and time again, crossing the distance over the barren land before appearing inside the opening. Maro appeared a couple seconds later and Terok later yet again. He moved downwards immediately, Ilea waiting with Maro at the top. “We should move down too. Trust me, you don’t want to get caught up in them. Nearly killed me with a single bolt of lightning hitting dozens of meters ahead, granted before I reached three hundred.”

“Yea! Ilea go, jump into the lightning!” Terok shouted from below, scouting the crevice.

Ilea rolled her eyes, “Are you coming? You can look at the suns from below as well.”

Maro turned to her and nodded, appearing on the ground below. Ilea followed before he spoke, “There are two suns. It’s true then.”

“What do you mean?” Ilea asked.

“Well. When I was still out and about, there were three suns.”

Ilea nearly tripped, staring at him. “You guys coming?!” Terok shouted from a distance.

“I know... I considered that Tremor was moved to another realm or something but it doesn’t make any sense.” He said.

“Neither does the disappearance of a sun. Well I guess there might be some astronomic explanation but...,”

He interrupted her, “It fits with the changes in the north, the event the dark ones talk about. Catelyn and Elana talked about it quite excessively when she was down in the palace.”

“And you didn’t mean to inform me?” Ilea asked.

“Well I did now. I wanted to see it with my own eyes. How would such a fact be relevant to you anyway?”

Ilea shrugged, “No idea. So your city was moved or a sun vanished? What if it was some kind of illusion before?”

“There are several possibilities. Come, Terok’s head is exploding.” He said and started walking, “Moving a whole city like that doesn’t make sense. Maybe something did happen to the sun.”

“But such an event would be talked about for hundreds of years and every scholar would write about it for another thousand years. I haven’t heard of it. Other than the dark ones talking about their event.”

“Catelyn mentioned some versions of the story involving the sun or light being no more. Many of the creatures would have dwelt in caves or underground anyway, not putting as much importance to the stars as we humans do.” Maro rationalized.

Ilea shook her head, “I mean I never really informed myself about religions or important events in the past but I feel like someone would have at least mentioned the disappearance of a sun. I know a bunch of librarians. I can ask about it once I go back south.”

Maro nodded, “That would be an idea. Will that be soon?”

“I still want to go deeper into the Taleen dungeon, see if I can find some old friends.” She grinned. The man seemed to understand as he nodded, “Then maybe? There’s plenty of stuff to do here and while I’m more powerful now, I still haven’t ridden a dragon.”

Terok gave her a thumbs up when he stepped over a small hill, “No to the lightning but yes to dragons? Well I suppose if anybody is allowed to overestimate their own power, it’s you. If we walk in this speed, we’ll arrive in two weeks.”



“I know you don’t care about the elf but I’ll be the one feeling his wrath when I join the training again.” He added and laughed.

“Terok, do you know anything about Elos having three suns at some point?” Ilea asked.

The dwarf stopped and looked at her, “Sounds like cult talk. No. I mean there are many claiming ridiculous things like that. Or that the stars were once butterflies, that the world flowed from the womb of creation, the elder dragon placing the suns themselves. No, truth is, all of that sheit is made up and you’d better not turn into a nut chasing myths like those.”

“Well I know for a fact that Elos had three suns when Rhyvor was not a kingdom of ruins.” Maro said, shutting the dwarf up.

At least for a moment, “What? Well fucking tits. Does that mean the Worldeater Margalon will return and devour us all? By the gods...,”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “Now don’t you turn into a cult member immediately. All we know is that either Tremor was moved somehow or one sun really died out.”

“You mean the great change in the north could be related? The dark ones... well the connections are there. Many scholars theorize that the suns have an influence on how mana flows. Monster activity during the night is more frequent for one thing.” Terok explained.

Maro nodded, “That was the same back in my days. Well we lack information for now. Catelyn for one doesn’t even know how many years ago exactly this change happened. The human plains weren’t affected by it all either which raises quite a bunch of additional questions.”

*Hadn’t even thought about that. Just the north?* Ilea shook her head, “Well let’s go to Lisburg was it? If it’s the same town that would make the teleportation argument even less likely.”

Maro nodded, “Lead the way Terok.”

“Should be around here.” Terok said as he checked their surroundings. Ilea started looking with her Sphere and Sentinel Huntress but the dwarf found something before her, “Got it. Down here.” A small cave opening was revealed when he lifted a stone. Ilea didn’t see it through her sphere but when she concentrated, she noticed a faint glow of magic from the concealing enchantment.

*Great, now I have to focus on things like that too.* It felt the same as when Eve tried to hide from her but compared to shifts in the air, it was like a shift in the mana around her. They descended and immediately came upon a massive unnatural tunnel, hundreds of meters wide and at least fifty high. It simply led downwards, further than she could see.

A couple minutes of running later, they saw light in the distance. “We’ve got company.” Maro said when around ten warriors and mages in various gear and with various levels appeared around them.

*Hidden and concealed spaces above and below.* Ilea noted the cracks in the ceiling, the weird mana resonance felt again.

“Travelers, welcome to the Vineyard caves. What is your business here?” The being most certainly a dark one, clad in black full plate armor. A massive torso but thin insect like arms reaching out. It carried no weapons.

Ilea was about to speak when Maro took over, “Guardian of truth, we are friends of the Dark Ones, seeking shelter in the Vineyard Caves as well as an escape from these unrelenting lands.”

“You speak truth, ally of the dead. It is an honor to host you then.” The being turned to Ilea, “Healer of ash, it would be most benevolent of you to lend your powers to those in need. Many have fallen in the great war.”

“Of course, armored one.” Ilea said, not able to think of anything else. She didn’t want to repeat the ridiculous title Maro had given the being. It didn’t

seem offended in the least, bowing lightly before they all vanished again except for one creature that looked like a floating orb of purple energy.

“Pleasssse folloooow.” It said into their minds, all of them familiar with the feeling it seemed.

The dozen guards near the massive gate relaxed the grips on their weapons when the three approached with the floating Dark One. Ilea noted the defensive structures and small wall that had been erected, as well as the fresh blood still clinging to various parts of it as well as the ground itself. At least an effort to clean it has been made.

“Do beasts wander down here?” Ilea asked the ball.

“If theeee consssider the curssed Feynooor to be beasssts.” The ball cackled, sending sparks of purple energy off to the side.

### ***[Death Wisp – lvl 221]***

“It still sounds ridiculous to me that those creatures found intelligence and now threaten an alliance of Dark Ones...,” Maro murmured.

The gates were opened, letting in the three travelers. “If you would be sssssso kind, the injured are in the tentssss to the leffft.” The wisp said before returning out, the gates closed again by two massive creatures with oxen heads, arms as thick as Ilea’s whole form.

Her ashen armor slowly retracted as she took in the valley spreading before her. Purple, blue, yellow and golden stars scattered the sky, illuminating it all. *Crystals or metals*. She noted before walking towards the indicated injured. “Do you want to stay together?” She asked.

“We can meet back up here in around five hours.” Terok said and walked off. Maro shrugged.

“I’d prefer some company if you’re not averse to the idea.” The king said.

Ilea nodded, “Sure.” He followed in silence as she made her way to the indicated tents. Fabric of differing quality and colors clad the hastily built

shelters, groaning noises from various unknown creatures could be heard the closer they got. A guard stepped up to them and immediately nodded at Ilea.

He looked like a literal squid on top of a human body, “Hek sai liup?” Ilea cocked her head to the side, “Standard... apologies. Are you hear to offer your healing?”

She nodded, “Do you not have any healers here?”

The squid looked relieved, “We do, various kinds. Some wounds need more than life energy to be mended. The mana I feel from you is different. Perhaps some might find your presence comforting. Can you heal the undead?” It looked over at Maro.

“She can do that too.” He simply pointed at her, “I can only heal them once they are under my binding.”

“Truly. Then feel free to walk the tents.” The squid said, “Those in grave danger from the attack two days ago have perished or have been stabilized. There is no rush. Until they attack again.” It produced a farting sound that Ilea couldn’t interpret. The flailing arms at least indicated annoyance.

Maro watched her as she took care of several dark ones, many of them with broken bones, cursed wounds or simply unresponsive. The unknown biology of most of them brought additional difficulty but her healing skill had been boosted so much due to her recent evolutions that most of the injuries were curable.

She watched in fascination as a small black wisp grew in size as she poured healing mana into it, Maro standing to the side with a smirk.

***[Undead Terror Wisp – lvl 183]***

“I feel... dead again!” The noise sizzled into her mind as the wisp turned around in the tent before flying off.

“I remember fighting one of them. Never seen a dark one come out of such a spiteful being.” Maro commented as he looked after the flying orb of dark magic.

It took her barely an hour to take care of the ones she could help. There were three beings with wounds her mana couldn't heal. Curses and poisons still in effect she noted. They wouldn't get worse if a healer pushed their health from time to time but what they needed was simple rest.

The squid came to thank them when they left the premises. “If there is anything you need, just come to me. I will make sure the dark ones will know of your generosity.” It said and bowed.

Maro didn't follow Ilea immediately, “Where may we find the oldest Dark Ones in this marvelous town?”

“Hmm... I have not been here for a long time. Best ask around the arena, it is the main focus the Vineyard Caves have to offer. Other than shelter of course.” It said and laughed with a weird gargling noise. Maro got some directions before joining Ilea again who was already strolling off and checking the wares of several street vendors.

“Found anything interesting?” He walked next to her and looked over the wares, an undead with sunken in eyes and dried out face sat behind it.

“I have no idea what any of this is.” Ilea said and knelt down, checking the colorful marbles. *Some kind of enchanted stones?*

“Prrrr... Presius stones!” The undead muttered, for the third time since she had stopped near him.

“I think it's meant as jewelry.” Maro commented, “You know what that is?”

Ilea looked at him and back to the stones, “Of course. Just. I just thought it was more than just shiny marbles.” She said and walked to the next vendor.

*Poisons.* The same lanky insect like being sold food which didn't seem like a good combination. Ilea smiled when two four legged furry creatures resembling dogs rushed past, one of them apologizing for brushing her leg.

“This is fucking weird.” She said, scratching her head.

Maro stepped next to her, his helmet off before he made a disgusted noise. “Not worth the copper.”

Ilea laughed when she saw the plate of poisoned stew in his hands. “I don't want to just throw it out now.”

Ilea just took it and handed it to a lich like being walking past, the thing bowing before it slurped up the stew. “They don't give much of a fuck here.” She said.

“Dark One settlements are always a treat. Rare. I guess it's nice they finally have a more permanent place now that this area is so hostile to most other sentient beings.” Maro said.

“I mean they had caves and mountains before too. Was there no dangerous terrain before?”

Maro smiled, “No there was but I guess not as much as now. You're human too. What do you think most empires and kingdoms would do to such a place if they found it?”

She snorted, “Nobody expects a crusade. Or how did that one go? Hard to get a group of people together against a level two hundred settlement of Dark Ones.”

He waved her off, “Funds and armies are often used for a less than a grand purpose. Humans don't have the right set of priorities most of the time.”

“And what would those be? Oh wise king?” Ilea asked, checking out a bunch of necklaces. *This is jewelry.* Holding up one of them over her own, she checked herself out with her sphere.

“Teeth and bones. Fits I guess.” Maro commented which made her smile. “I suppose there are no universal right priorities. Though I doubt hunting down people just trying to live their lives is one of them.”

“Nice way to evade my question. How about just letting each other live for once. I came north to get away from the wars and what do I find? Another fucking war. These people are the same as humans. I thought other races were actually different.” She ranted, Maro just nodding in turn.

“It’s sobering to think there isn’t someone better out there. Maybe there is and I just haven’t found them. Well I understand your reasoning but with a lack of funds, dangers lurking everywhere and others looking to take what you have, your idealistic approach of letting each other live isn’t as obtainable as one would hope.” He commented.

Ilea shook her head, “I know.” She put the necklace back and continued on the street, not in the mood for shopping anymore.

# Chapter 308 Mansion of Bones

## Chapter 308 Mansion of Bones

The two walked in silence for a while before Maro made a delighted noise, stepping over and into a store Ilea identified as a wine seller. The inside had walls lined with bottles but she could tell by the smells alone that this wasn't exactly what the king had been looking for.

He stood near one of the displays, looking dejected as he held one of the bottles. "I thought with the name remaining that maybe some of the wine had too."

Ilea chuckled, "Well there are some bottles left in Tremor, not sure how many Terok drank already." She added the second part a little more quietly.

"It's not really about the wine." He said, more to himself as they stepped out again, ignoring the shopkeeper's attempts to sell the dubious potions. The streets weren't cobbled, instead dirt or wood covering the obviously worn sections connecting the buildings varying in design as much as those back in Hallowfort.

Coming out on a square, the two walked towards the railings and found a view overlooking nearly the whole of the cave. Much of the city had remained, ruins now or repurposed as well as integrated into the new homes and dwellings of the various dark ones living here. There were hills too, covered in green but the plants didn't look like vines to her. Still, coupled with the serene beauty from the stones and crystals shining in their various hues, she could understand why the king had liked it so much here.



“You know. Even warped as it is, I hadn’t dreamed of it to retain any of its beauty.” Maro said after a while.

“Not overrun by fucked up creatures like Tremor? I can see that.” Ilea said as they sat. She summoned two meals, handing one to the king of Rhyvor.

When they were done eating, Ilea stood up and stretched, “So.” She said afterwards, “Where do you think that key would be? If it remained at all.”

He smiled, “Gadrian had a massive mansion. If the geography didn’t change it should be near the back end of the cave.”

“Then let’s see what remains.” Ilea said and smiled, lending him a hand to get up. He laughed and took it.

The two of them flew over the city, the only notable thing they spotted being an arena that according to Maro hadn’t been there before. “We could have our bout there.” He suggested when they landed near the open gravel road leading to the mansion on the distant hill.

“Yea if you want to destroy the whole thing.” Ilea replied with a smile.

He waved her off, “You think too little of the dark ones. Their buildings might not look conventional but they’re sturdy. More so than most cheaply made houses in most human cities.”

“I know. Most of them build their homes themselves. Doesn’t mean they’re more sturdy than what a professional builder or architect can make. Heart isn’t going to save a house from a flood.”

The king chuckled, “Well I suppose it would be true if builders actually cared about their work. Where you’re from, didn’t people and cities just decide on cheap solutions making the whole thing badly constructed?”

Ilea pointed at him while they walked, “Don’t bring my world into this. There’s magic here, it should be much simpler to build a sturdy home.”

“Well if all it has to hold against is rain and snow then I doubt there are any issues either. Wait.” He said and held up a hand, “I can sense an aura of death coming from this place.” Maro said.

She looked around, noticing only now that the whole area seemed deserted. Not just void of people but plants and insects. It was utterly and completely silent. “I guess you have a point. Doesn’t mean we didn’t have wars among ourselves. Plenty of destructive potential there. Natural disasters were a thing too. What are you sensing? Monsters nearby?”

He kept walking, “No. Just a feeling. With how long you’ve been here in Elos, I think you know too that magic doesn’t just solve everything. I would prefer a lack of monsters and magic to what we have here.”

Ilea stayed silent. She didn’t agree for various reasons that she kept to herself. Earth still had monsters, just ones disguised as other things or people themselves.

“You disagree?” Maro asked when they reached the courtyard. The silence persisted.

“I do.”

He walked up to the doors and knocked, “Why? Humans the only species, no monsters. I bet millions were living a wonderful life, filled with joy and riches most in Elos could only dream of. Not having to hide behind walls, not having to fight against beasts. Knowing that without levels people were the same. Of course wealth and influence remains but in the end I can’t see it being worse than here.”

Ilea shrugged. She didn’t know what to tell him and was happy that the doors opened a moment later, stopping their conversation. She felt the mana around her fluctuate but didn’t let herself react in any way. *Enchantments?* She wasn’t sure, her arcane sight through her sphere still new to her.

A man looking almost human bowed to them, dressed in a black suit that was torn in more than one place. His eyes moved weirdly from side to side, as if they were marbles placed in a doll's head. *Jewelry?* Ilea asked herself when he spoke.

“Welcome, travelers, guests. Visitors are so very rare these... days. Why not come in and join the lord on his banquet. It is almost time for... dinner.” The words came out without his mouth moving. Ilea rolled her eyes and looked at Maro.

The king wasn't wearing his helmet, instead smiling brightly as he bowed back, “We would be happy to accept such a generous invitation. Much have we heard of the lord's prowess.” He didn't even glance at Ilea before he stepped inside, herself close behind.

### ***[Human – lvl 30]***

She identified the butler and had to roll her eyes again. *What the fuck is going on here.* Ilea assumed Maro had an idea, which is why he had accepted the invitation. *So it's an illusion or something? I doubt anybody would be identified like that. That guy is dead.* She looked at the creature walking in front of them, leading the two through the dark mansion and up a flight of beautiful stairs. Her sphere again flickered, Ilea nearly staggering as she saw the bones and rotten meat around her. The most irritating thing was that she didn't smell any of it.

A fire was burning in the hearth of the big hall, a long beautiful table had been set with various foods displayed. A big glass chandelier hung above, candles bathing the room in a warm light as they approached. The *human* moved a chair and Maro sat down without a care in the world. *Is he somehow influenced by a spell? I won't believe it. Guess I'll go with the flow for now.*

Ilea too sat down. At the head of the table, a figure wreathed in darkness appeared.

### ***[The Undying Lord – lvl ???]***

She glanced at it and watched Maro lightly incline his head. “Necromancer... and a healer. How amusing.” The voice spoke directly into her head. “Have you come here to die?”

“We haven’t come to fight you. Spirit of Death.” Maro said. A hiss resounded from the dark figure, its features entirely hidden.

“It is not your choice to make, human. Those walking into my halls willingly or not, are mine to feed upon.” It said. Ilea was getting tired of listening when Maro grasped her hand and squeezed lightly.

“My Lord. Before we are to die, may I tell you about a man I once knew? He was the owner of this very mansion. The one who had it built even.”

The dark figure moved forward a little, hands of bone moving out of the shadows. “Is that why you have come? Yes... I remember him, vaguely. A long time has it been. I had been young then, powerless and wild. A land torn by war yet governed by humans such as yourself. Gadrian was his name was it not?” Ilea saw Maro gulp at the mention of the name. “A formidable mage, despite his injuries and the battles he had fought. His death was quick if you cared to know. His remains rot in the cellar to this day.”

The wood of the table and floor cracked when Maro’s teeth ground against each other, a burst of deathly mana washing over her.

Maro sighed, “He... he was a good friend. One of the few that had remained to the very end. Gadrian loved this town, loved the quiet. This mansion was built to capture the best view of the sunset, did you know that?”

A hollow chuckle came from the being, “A tragic story then, that such town would fall to monsters, would vanish into the earth, the very suns unable to reach it anymore.”

“Perhaps. I do believe Gadrian lived his life to the fullest. If either one of us was truly fulfilled, it was him.” Maro said and shook his head.

“Is it revenge then that you seek?” It asked, the tone casual.

Maro tapped onto the table with one finger, “I don’t know. I guess I wanted to see Lisburg again, find out what had happened to Gadrian. It has been so long in this world since I sealed myself away, one way or another he would have passed. To learn about his demise, to find the one who killed him even. It is more than I had expected to find here.” He sounded almost defeated Ilea noted, unsure about how he felt about all this.

“Know that it was not malice but simply my very nature that had me kill, makes me kill to this very day. You, one of death would surely understand.” The being said. “Are you here to die then?” It asked again.

Maro stopped his tapping and stood up, “No. I don’t know what I expected to find, stepping into the domain of a spirit of death. I’m sorry but we’re not here to die.”

The doors swung closed before the room turned from the nicely furnished and clean hall to one of death and blood. Bones littered the wooden floors, rot and blood coloring the walls. Ilea pushed the plate of meat a little further away when the spell was lifted. She moved her head over the chair’s side and puked up the food she had eaten just an hour ago. Maro’s helmet was back on his head as the being stood up, black mist lifted to reveal the skeleton protecting a black ethereal form within.

It was two meters in height, the bone grown out enough to form suitable armor, nearly creating something akin to a full plate suit. “This mansion. Has been one with death for millennia. Those seeking it come here. Rarely do I stray. Know that it is an honor to bring one as old as yourself to rest.” A beam of black energy slammed into a shield of the same color thrown up by Maro. Ilea summoned a flask of water and cleaned out the taste from her mouth, more used to the scene around her.

“Why do you resist? All the rare humans meeting my path have acted the same way. Clinging to life with all they have. Let go and rest. You already feel my power Necromancer. Though impressive, you cannot stand against me.” The beam turned purple, as did the shield. Maro seemed unimpressed

as Ilea moved the chair back and stood up, cleaning off her legs and ass from the filth on the chair.

“You should really clean up a little better.” She said to the butler standing to the side unmoving.

“I have not come alone.” Maro said. “Ilea, I know you have done a lot for me. This I ask you for both myself and the thousands that have died to this creature. I’ll invite you to dinner once it’s over.”

She looked at him and frowned. “Just brought me here because of this?” He smiled, an apologetic look on his face as she sighed.

The beam stopped, “A healer will not stand against me. You have known this futile when you stepped into this mansion Necromancer.” It moved its hand towards Ilea before a beam of purple energy smashed into her.

She simply stood, her leather armor rotten through in a mere instant before her skin started to melt. Her armor of ash formed as she spread her arms, intercepting the beam to allow her chest to be covered by ash too. The wounds reformed quickly as the death magic burned into her ash, moving incredibly slow through the element. When it stopped, her armor simply reformed, her skin healed already. “Ash?” The being asked.

“Yes exactly that.” Ilea said, her chest heating up slowly as lances formed around her. She jumped onto the table as her ashen limbs formed behind her. “You have lost murder privileges death sprite.”

“So bold. Come then human. Perhaps you will be the second one in this month to escape with their life.”

Ilea raised an eyebrow and watched the bones around her move to form weirdly proportioned warriors, claws and weapons of bone as they quickly rushed at both her and Maro behind his shield. She appeared in front of the creature only to be engulfed by a massive beam of purple light. The energy shaved into her defenses but she simply pushed on against it, blinking again a moment later before her fist smashed into the lord’s leg. Her mana flashed

into him as he screamed in pain, vanishing before he appeared once again floating in the middle of the hall.

The skeletons around her rushed in, stopped by the ash that formed around her. The lances, having reached peak density were fired at the dark mage, impacting its bones with a loud shattering noise. The bone won out. Ilea spread her wings before the creatures broke through her ash, flying up and towards the mage.

“Will this be the one?” It asked, excitement flowing into its voice as another beam enveloped her, Ilea simply pushing through as the death magic intensified, slowly getting through her ash before she reached him again. His hands rushed out with lightning fast speed, making her blink away to avoid the grab. She appeared with a skull in front of her, his hands again grasping at her. This time they found purchase. Ilea smiled as it tried to squeeze her very bones, one of his hands around her arm and the other clawing into her chest.

Her healing mana flowed into him and her ashen limbs smashed into his head to deliver more damage. She held her fist close to herself as she charged up Absolute Destruction, counting the seconds. When she felt his attack coming through her third tier Azarinth Fighting ability, she simply continued. Her heart suddenly quivered, pulses of death mana directly flowing into it and exploding. The skeleton in front of her showed no emotions and after the fifth pulse, her heart exploded.

It paused but when her assault didn't stop, the being moved on to her brain. It was then that Ilea sacrificed five hundred health and punched its chest with a ten second charge of her mana intrusion ability. Blue energy was visible as it flowed through the bone and into the black mist below. The death spirit screeched, writhing in pain as it tried to get away from Ilea who was now the one holding onto his hands. Her grin was wide as her heart reformed in an instant, another chunk of mana sacrificed.

*I have more still than I expected.* Another attack was already charging up as she stopped the assault from her ashen limbs.

“Marvelous... the Azarinth.” It said, the dark form within it writhing as blue lines burnt up more and more of it, her reversed Sentinel Reconstruction continuing to push mana into him. She noticed the being wasn’t floating on its own anymore, her strength and wings keeping it in the air as the skeletons on the floor looked up, some smashing into the shield of an unconcerned Maro.

“What do you know of the Azarinth?” She asked but the being simply exploded in purple light, a flash of magic burning a part of her armor before she too released her area attack to prevent it getting her health down. Fire erupted, cinders dancing over the skeleton, half of the black mist withing turned to ash. Feeling another attack coming, Ilea punched and released the charged up attack.

“I thank thee, for granting death.” The blue lines became bigger before the rest of the black mist evaporated, the skeleton sagging down to the ground immediately.

She held onto it, watching all the other skeletons collapse. The butler too fell down, head rolling away from his torso. Ilea hoped he was fine.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [The Undying Lord – lvl 540] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and thirty or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 303 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 302 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Absolute Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Reversal reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 2’*



*'ding' 'Armor of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 9'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 10'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 11'*

*'ding' 'Death Magic Resistance reaches lvl 12'*

She slowly landed, placing the massive pile of bones onto the table.

*Basically a single piece of bone. Hey I leveled.*

“You got the whole kill. Good.” Maro smiled as he stepped towards one of the fallen bone piles. “Thank you Ilea.”

# Chapter 309 Pyre

## Chapter 309 Pyre

“You didn’t interfere because of that?” Ilea asked, tapping the bone. “Damn, we should have asked him more questions.”

“Him? It sounded female to me. Interesting. Didn’t seem like a talkative fellow if it wasn’t about his beautiful villa.” Maro said as he cleaned up the bone piles with his ring.

“You can use them as minions?” She asked, looking at his work “Don’t tell me you planned all of this from the moment we got you out in Tremor.”

“I’m hurt that you would think so.” Maro said and laughed, “I’d like to think of myself as a good strategist but no. I didn’t know what was in here until we stepped onto the premises. Your abilities are such a good counter I thought I’d risk it.” He waved her off, “Don’t look at me like that, if he would have done significant damage I would have intervened.”

“You would have just healed him with your own death magic. And losing a heart isn’t significant damage?”

He shrugged, “That’s not how death magic works. And no, apparently losing a heart isn’t significant to you. I would have felt it if it was. Damn, you’re pretty indestructible then. No wonder you cleaned up the kingguard so quickly. Battle healers... might be an idea worth pursuing in the future. Always though it was stupid to spread oneself so thin at early levels.”

“Guess I lucked out with my class then. I won against level fifty people while below and with only one class.”

Stepping into another pile, Maro made the skeleton vanish before he spoke, “Really? Is that the Azarinth he mentioned? The blue stuff. Never seen a mana intrusion spell that looked like that. Most work with blood or death magic. Yours looks more... well more like mana itself.”

“Healing orders and their experiments... guess something good had to come out of those lunatics at one point or another.” He grumbled, done with the cleanup.

“You want the big one too?” Ilea asked.

“I think you could use some of that to make armor. Just have to find someone capable of molding bone. If your fists can’t crack it I think it’s safe to say that the quality is good.” The king suggested and appeared, touching the chest of the thing, “Yea this is prime quality. I’ll take whatever’s left of it.” He added and laughed.

### ***[Undying Skeleton – Timeless Quality]***

“Hmm. What does timeless mean?” She asked.

“I’ve seen it only twice I think. It can regenerate if you push mana into it. Not as quickly as your ash armor but at least you don’t have to repair it constantly.” The king explained as he looked around the room.

*I guess instead of skin it’s bone... full circle.* She smiled at the thought. The drake scale armor had been one of her favorites. *I hope Goliath can work with this at all. And I hope it can be made into light armor.* It didn’t look light at all. She put it into her necklace and found it taking up four spaces on its own.

“I’ll go downstairs to find Gadrian, give him a proper burial.”

“What about all the other skeletons?” Ilea asked.

Maro shrugged as he walked down the steps, Ilea following after she placed the remains of the butler into her own storage item. “I didn’t know them. Nor did the monsters he created match up. No necromancer worth his money would waste such a large amount of bones.”

Ilea nodded when they came up on a closed double door. “Enchantments.” She said as he put a hand over them. A pulse of purple mana flowed up and the door opened.

Maro stepped through without a word, Ilea shrugging. The stairs led down and into another big open hall. No more monsters were present and compared to the piles of bones and rot upstairs, the glint of gold, silver as well as other colors shined through all the death. “It’s all yours as far as I’m concerned. Just leave the bones for now until I found the old fucker.”

Ilea smiled. *That’s a lot of damn work.* It turned out the work wasn’t as excruciating as she had expected. Her own efforts were sped up by her ashen magic, both her limbs as well as ash simply moving around the bones and separating gold and treasure into their own piles. Maro helped by supplying around forty skeletons that searched through the piles and piles of bones and treasures.

Ilea separated it all into piles. “It’s a small golden key by the way. Let me know if you find it.” Maro added after a couple minutes.

It took the two of them and their ashen as well as bony help two hours to sieve through most of it all. Much of it was rotten, old and useless.

*428 gold coins*

*13821 Silver coins equaling 138 gold coins once exchanged.*

*Pile of gold treasures with varying worth, detail, age.*

*Pile of weapons and armor of various quality.*

Ilea stored the gold and silver. “Hey can I have one of your crates?” She asked, Maro not quite done with his search as he separated bone piles. He appeared next to her and summoned a crate. “Thanks. Still haven’t found him?”

He shook his head and continued, Ilea dumping the pile of gear into the crate as well as most of the weapons. *These all belong in a bloody museum.* She requested another two crates and put in the treasures as well as the rest of the weapons and armor that wasn’t completely rusted away or rotten. Most of it was.

She stored the crates in her necklace and started moving through the room again. *Probably gonna sell all that... wait no.* She smiled at the thought. *I mean at least I don’t have bones there too.* She decided to keep all of it and put it into her own house’s little exhibition. The three crates took up a lousy three units which made her decision final. *Maybe give some of the treasures to an actual museum if such a thing exists around here. Some of it probably is as old as time itself, coming from this fucker’s... oh hey look.* She moved away a pile of bones and found a glint of gold. “Maro!”

The man appeared as she retrieved the key with a thin tendril of ash. “That it?”

He didn’t look at the key, instead kneeling down before he moved some bones away. What remained was the skeleton of a man. His hands shook as he carefully touched the skull. Ilea stored the key as he carefully touched each bone, stored safely in his ring. At last he held the skull again in his hands, his helmet vanishing to reveal his pained expression. The skull went into his ring before he looked at his empty hands.

Waves of black and purple energy shot out, the piles of bones around him rotting away more and more with each touch. Ilea’s armor formed quickly as she remained at his side. The waves intensified, his helmet appearing again. With a last wave rotting away a layer of her ash, Maro looked down

and let out a single shout with all his breath. He was heaving when Ilea took a step towards him, putting her hand on his shoulder. “Let’s burn this fucker down.”

Ilea added the corpse of the butler to the small pyre they had built in front of the mansion. Her ashen limbs had ripped through half of the entrance to get enough wood. Her fire sphere summoned, she looked at Maro with a questioning gaze. “You do the honors.” He said, not wearing his helmet.

Ilea shrugged, stepping towards the pyre before she pushed mana into the sphere. The wood wasn’t wet but the pieces were rather big, leaving her with a couple minutes of burning before it finally caught. She refrained from using her Heart of Cinders in consideration of the event. When the fire started taking over, she moved back to Maro. “I’m sorry.” She said after a minute of standing there.

The man didn’t speak, simply watching the flames move. Ilea noticed that with time more and more dark ones gathered close to the estate, none actually stepping upon the dead land. “We’re attracting a crowd.” She said to the king.

“It seems so.” He simply said.

“Mind if I set the whole place ablaze?” Ilea asked when the pyre started to collapse. Maro shook his head lightly as she stepped towards the broken in entrance. Most of the mansion was built with wood. When she was inside, she did actually use her Heart of Cinder to dry out and slightly burn the stairs while using her sphere to actually set them aflame.

When the flames started spreading, she activated her ashen armor to avoid losing her last set of leather armor. *Guess I still have a bunch of clothes. Just no light armor.* She released Heart of Cinder in the dining hall and added her tiny flamethrower into the mix. *Should be fine now if nobody stops it.* A good part of the mansion was burning now, Ilea stepping down

the collapsing stairs before exiting, her ashen armor receding as she joined Maro.

The crowd had grown and the previous silence had been replaced by cheers and loud conversation. When Ilea joined Maro again, she formed a spear of ash before releasing it towards the cave ceiling. He smiled and lifted his arm, adding a ball of darkness that exploded in a flash of wild mana when it reached a thirty meter height.

The man sighed deeply as he looked towards the crystals above them. Different elemental spells started shooting out from the crowd, first only a couple but soon a sea of spells added to the colors of the ceiling. “When I went under... I didn’t expect to come back.” He spoke, Ilea looking at the man. “To come back. And now I’m back to bury all the people I had known, the kingdom I founded. It’s not how it was supposed to go.”

Ilea looked up too then, “How was it supposed to go?”

He just smiled lightly, “Well I suppose it could be worse. At least Elana is still around.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we just defeated Death. I think you can cut yourself some slack.” She said, putting her hand on his shoulder.

“I’m not your grandfather that needs to be comforted Ilea.” He said but didn’t move her hand. “I’m the king of Rhyvor, feared necromancer and legendary womanizer.”

“Still human.” She said as the spells started to subside, the house now fully ablaze, chunks of wood and stone falling to the ground.

“So what are you going to do now, having killed Death itself?” He asked.

Ilea looked at him, finding him staring back at her, “Isn’t that what I’m supposed to ask?”

Maro laughed and shrugged, “Perhaps it is. It isn’t a question I can answer right now. Now being King sounds lovely though.” The first people started

entering the dead land, walking towards the two still standing alone. The mansion actually burning down probably convinced them that the lord was dead. Ilea hadn't really thought about the significance he had held in the dungeon. Seeing the dark ones not getting hostile, she was glad they weren't in a death worship cult cave.

“What about you? You didn't answer either.” He said in a teasing tone.

“I came here to get away and have fun. Getting stronger is a nice benefit too. I think I can stick with that.”

He shook his head, “I think you'll get involved with time. No matter how much you want to deny it.”

“Humans of ash and death, have you killed the Undying Lord?” A being with antlers not unlike Maro's head gear asked, bowing to them as it approached.

“Deny what?” Ilea asked, “Yea the fucker's dead. Why is that relevant to you?” She wanted to at least know if a fight was coming.

“One of ash, the undying lord has demanded tribute in the form of captured monsters or sentient beings for hundreds of years. Of the few remaining dangers in the Vineyard Cave, the spirit of death remained its greatest. You have done us a service we cannot repay.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “Don't worry about it. Glad we could help you get rid of it.” She looked at Maro who had a wide smile on his face, his helmet appearing a moment later, “What?” Ilea demanded but he just started laughing.

“You fuck. Tell me your secrets.” She said, jumping at him but finding the king appear a couple steps away.

“Can we... do this later?” His plea seemed sincere, making her stop as more and more people gathered.



She started to ignore the questions. Most of them simply walked to the mansion itself, offering a variety of slurs, prayers, spit or even gifts. Wanting to leave due to the mass of people, she blinked away. Maro followed a moment later and they made their way back to the city. “Seriously though, what did you mean before?” She tried again when someone appeared a couple meters behind her.

Ilea turned because it was a human. The man bowed, smiling at her brightly. “You prevailed against that terrible creature. Thank you.”

*[Mage – lvl 321]*

*Whoa, not bad old man.* “Sure thing.” She gave him a thumbs up and turned around, Maro staring at her and then looking at the old man as he smiled. The old man looked unsure, lifting one hand as to continue the conversation. “Look I’m not in the mood to talk to random people all day. I didn’t reach this level to be held to social expectations. Plus I’m hungry.”

“Ah yea, you puked. Didn’t think you would react in that manner. The young and inexperienced.” Maro said and the old man chuckled, a joyous sound.

“Hmm, yes. Perhaps? Mocking others to avoid one’s own pain is quite common for those of a young age. You my dear friend should be above such. No offense meant.” The man said as he looked at Maro. Ilea turned again as she processed the man’s words, looking at Maro and back at the man.

“Do you know each other?” She asked.

Maro didn’t reveal anything below his helmet, “Not that I’m aware. Did you serve Rhyvor?”

“Rhyvor... the old kingdom. Ah yes... wasn’t this ruin a part of it too? I believe some of the records state such. No. You misunderstand. You have defeated one to sow death and pain amongst those seeking a peaceful life, it is enough to consider you friends. It’s been a while since I met a member of

the Hand, how's the old order holding up?" He said, smiling at Ilea with his disenchanting charm.

*I really need to get Charisma Resistance.* The man was older, only relative to Ilea though. In his seventies perhaps looks wise. He wore black pants and sturdy leather boots. A simple shirt covered by a brown poncho above. His face was wrinkled and near bronze in color and his gray hair thin, his whole frame was thin for that matter.

The man held a wooden staff that he leaned onto while they talked. The reason she assumed him to be old wasn't necessarily his look, more the way he looked exhausted just standing there. If it weren't for the fact that he appeared out of nowhere and had a level even higher than hers or Maro's, she would be sure he was a retired craftsman who had worked hard in his field and now spent his days fishing on his boat in some southern country.

"You know the Hand?" Ilea said. He waved her off and started walking.

The man had a brisk pace and passed them shortly, stopping before he turned, "I think you wanted food? I'm hungry too. I've lived here for a couple years. You'll want to avoid most restaurants, being human and all." He laughed, "Come then young ones, my treat, for taking care of that spirit." Ilea looked at Maro and shrugged, the king not reacting before she followed.

"The Hand, yes. Few know the order here." He said and led them into the city. "We work with jobs and other than expeditions there is little incentive to come here. Plenty of dangerous dungeons and beasts down south, if that is what someone is looking for. Not many humans here to talk to, cities to enjoy. I doubt you're here on a mission either. No, I don't think so." He pointed his staff at her.

Ilea smiled, "No, I'm not."

"Thank the suns, almost thought you had been sent to fetch me. Hahaa, well I suppose the old man would be forgotten at one point or another. Is Verena still alive?" He asked.

“Well after the demon invasion she vanished, Ravenhall was destroyed mostly but with Dagon and Sulivhaan I think it’s in good hands. The defenses now look much better too.” She replied, the man stumbling before he fell face first into the dirt.

“Ah motherfucker.” He exclaimed and groaned, “Apologies...,” He got up again, dusting himself off before he smiled at the two, “Destroyed?! By demons?? Bloody...,” He shook his head, “Oh don’t tell me... that fool!” Ilea felt mana emanate from him, her sphere informing her that yes, his level wasn’t a joke or illusion. He calmed down again though, hands shaking as he summoned a pipe. Ilea’s sense of smell told her it wasn’t tobacco inside.

Lighting it with a small silver lighter, he took a deep pull and exhaled the smoke, “Mhm, yes. Adam Strand. It was him wasn’t it?” He asked, calm again. Ilea nodded. “Did you retake the city?” She nodded again. “Casualties must have been in the hundred thousands? But the empire? Is it still standing?” He looked at her with big eyes.

“Yes to both. Well Baralia started a war last year so I’m not sure if the empire is still there. At least the demons didn’t seem as much of a problem anymore. You’re part of the order then? One of the ever absent Elders I presume?” Ilea asked.

The man smiled again, “Oh you have to tell me all about that. It is however good to hear Dagon and Sulivhaan taking over the order. And yes, Lucas is my name, elder of the Shadow’s Hand, at least as far as I know. Pleased to meet you.”

# Chapter 310 Opinions and food

## Chapter 310 Opinions and food

“Figured as much. I’m Ilea, joined a couple years ago. Any reason you’re here in the North instead of you know... doing your duty as an elder?”

The man looked at her and laughed again, pulling on his pipe. “My dear. The duties of an elder aren’t very well defined. Perhaps it is changed now... well it is no concern of mine.”

*Of course it is...*, Ilea was confused, the man certainly not making the most competent impression. “Maybe helping out when another elder destroys the whole city?”

He nodded and sighed, “Maybe. Yes. I’m sorry. Being so far away, I didn’t even know.”

Maro touched her shoulder as she noticed the ash coming to live around her. She swatted his hand away, “I’m sorry? Hundreds of thousands of people died... turned into demons and nearly wiping out all of humanity!” She kept her voice leveled, more ash moving around her.

“Now now.” The man said in a calm voice, moving his hands as he nervously looked at the ash, “I am sure you handled it well my dear. I’m far removed...”

“Would you have cared had you known?” She asked, sitting back again as her ash vanished. The answer didn’t matter of course, either way he hadn’t

known, couldn't have. Still, somehow she felt like blaming him. *The other elders that weren't there are at fault too. He knew immediately that it was Adam.*

He murmured something to himself before he spoke, "You did well. I'm glad you were there. If I could give you my title, I would. Sadly it involved votes by current elders... well. I suppose it doesn't matter anymore."

*It matters that you didn't stop Adam.* Ilea ground her teeth, thinking back on the carnage left behind by the demons, all the people that had been slaughtered. A statistic, hard to grasp. A numbing feeling she hadn't thought about much. Perhaps now that someone who could have prevented it stood in front of her, it became more real, not an unavoidable tragedy but the massacre it had been.

The elder stopped and sighed, "We have arrived." He said and pointed at the ruined house missing a roof and half of its front.

Ilea blinked up, finding a nice table with a good view before seating herself. Maro appeared a moment later and sat down too after looking around. "Certainly changed." Ilea didn't react to his comment, waiting for the old man slowly entering below.

"Ah, no no it is quite alright. Bring whatever you have. How is the family? Another three hundred babies... well I hope you can get some sleep." They heard the elder talk below. He laughed at the answer Ilea didn't understand, spoken in a language she had never heard, "Don't worry about it. The plums should be ripe in two weeks. Beautiful, the taste is exquisite I tell you."

*Is that code?* She wondered but if he spoke the language why use code in standard? He walked up the stairs a moment later, groaning at the movement. "Why don't you teleport?" She asked in an annoyed tone, staring at the man while he avoided her eyes.

"Aaaah, no no. These old bones need some movement too. It took too long to reach the two hundreds and now?" He paused, "I pay for it." He sat down with a loud sigh and rested his back, the staff vanishing from his hand.

Ilea leaned forward, resting her head on her hands, “You knew about Adam then? Why not prevent it?” She felt herself get agitated again at the sheer thought. It annoyed her but she couldn’t ignore it, thousands had died because of that man.

“I know Adam.” He said and paused, “If... if what you say is true, then perhaps I hadn’t known him as well as I thought.” He puffed on his pipe and leaned back, “I’m aware of some things about him that others do not know. Yet I couldn’t have fathomed him going as far as summoning demons into Ravenhall. Unthinkable.” He shook his head.

“How did you know it was him when I mentioned the demons?” Ilea asked, impatient with his slow explanations.

Lucas looked at her then, “Hmm.” He removed the pipe and leaned forward, “He is the only summoner I know that is capable of such a feat. The only one who could hide something like that.” Seeing that Ilea wasn’t satisfied with his answer he continued, “You know... the man has been looking for a way to get there. To bring back something that was taken.”

“Bring back something from the demon realms?” Maro asked, the elder nodding in return. “What exactly? Are you suggesting demons can steal things from our realm? Steal people?”

The elder waved him off, “Hmm, yes. Well no. I do not know. Summoning as well as the demonic realm are no interests of mine, Adam is the one I learned from about these things but... well I forgot most of it.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ilea asked, “You could have prevented this, prevented the summoning and saved all those lives.” Her ash was back as he held up his hands in a placating gesture.

“Hey now dear. I have summoned nothing. You have the wrong elder.” He said in a shaky voice, smiling again as he put his pipe back into his mouth.

“He’s right you know. I get that you’re angry Ilea but trust me on this... some people’s actions can hardly be predicted.” Maro said, calming her down somewhat.

The elder relaxed, touching her arm despite the ash that twirled around her, “I am truly sorry my dear. It is past... let bygones be bygones.”

“So Adam is looking for something in the demon realm? Any idea how to get there?” Ilea asked, her ash casually moving away his hand from her arm. He shook his head slowly. “What is he looking for?”

“I... ehm... I forgot.” He said. “If you find him... tell him I am disappointed.”

*Disappointed...*, Ilea couldn't help but laugh, sitting back as she calmed down. She looked at him with contempt. *You did nothing. Hid here in the nor...*, She stopped the thought and looked down, her ash receding. *It's different.* She heard herself justify herself.

“You were the human that fought the spirit last.” Maro said suddenly, interrupting the awkward silence and changing the topic.

Lucas smiled, puffing on his pipe, “Hmm, perhaps. Maybe I have sought to discourse with the undying lord. I am not keen on fighting anyone but I suppose that one has a way to make me show the worst of me. I'm thankful you took that burden from this town. One of the few things remaining to retain the feeling of a dungeon.”

Ilea sighed and sat back, her chair leaning on a wall of ash she had created. “Why are you here? Just to help out the community?”

“I am sorry I disappointed you my dear.” Lucas said, “I tend to have that impact on people.” He added with a quieter tone, “I meant that before you know, you becoming an elder. Or doing something similarly impacting. Surviving here is enough to get you a high position in any human order, kingdom or empire.” He pointed at her, “I am frankly tired of it all. The constant wars... battles. Dark Ones are much more relaxed.”

“I came here for the exact opposite reason.” Ilea retorted, his talk about the wars and battles resonating with her. The only thing she disagreed on was that the Dark Ones were any different. Some perhaps but she knew plenty of humans who just sought to live their lives in peace.

The elder nodded, "I'm here to study the north, the events that changed this environment two to four thousand years ago. More so I'm here to try and change it back. The trees and vegetation you see growing in this dungeon are the first step. With time I'm sure at least a part of the magical imbalance can be restrained. Not perhaps to the extent it had been before but better at least."

"That event. We believe Elos had three suns before." Maro interjected, the elder nodding and pointing his pipe at him.

"A theory. Well many exist but one can't realistically replace a sun. Trees is the next best thing, water and a working ecosystem. Introducing animals and monsters back into the environment." The elder replied but Maro shook his head.

"No, no. I was there. Before. I was trapped and unconscious for thousands of years. There were three suns before. These lands were normal, the beasts below level one hundred. At least outside of dungeons. Lisburg was the pride of Rhyvor, its wine unparalleled." He explained, the elder nodding as he looked at the king.

"You must tell me about before... how it looked, where the lakes and rivers were."

"Later." Ilea interrupted, glaring at him, "Why not fix the war down south?" she asked with a smile.

The man pointed at her with his pipe, the pipe she was about to rip out of his hand and snap. She wasn't quite sure why he irritated her so much, "Hmm, Baralia. They are incapable of winning such a war. At least not if anything major changed in the last decade." He laughed and shrugged.

"Why don't you go and stop it?" Maro asked Ilea instead, "You seem to care a great deal. I have fought Rhyvor's enemies whenever necessary."

Ilea was about to answer when the elder stood up, "Ah yes, the food is here." He laughed as a tiny dark one with two leathery wings brought eight plates filled with food at the same time. More quickly followed.



“To answer your question Maro.” Ilea said, finishing another plate. “I’m not even from there. I don’t know the politics, background or anything else. Even if I know Baralia with its slavery sucks, what do you think happens if I run in there and kill a bunch of royals? A month after I left the whole country would be in flames. All the soldiers now leaderless might just scatter and burn down whatever settlements they can find.”

Lucas re lit his pipe and nodded, “Mhm, you’re probably right. You should listen to her.” He said to Maro.

Ilea burst out laughing, the elder smiling at her before she pointed at him with a bone she had cleaned off of meat, “You’re not excused. You’re obviously knowledgeable and could do something with both your influence and power.”

“I am the king of Rhyvor.” Maro said, “To get disrespected like this... refreshing.” He wasn’t wearing his helmet anymore either, a content expression on his face.

“Ah, the king of Rhyvor. My respects.” He bowed without really moving. “A necromancer. Well most of the surviving records and murals only talk about the queen.” Lucas said. “As I said young one, Ilea. I have not been down in the south for a decade. My intervention would be... problematic.”

Maro smiled, “Good to know that at least history will remember the true ruler.”

He lifted his mug and spoke, stopping Ilea’s retort, “To Rhyvor, Elana and to Gadian.”

Lucas just puffed on his pipe, Ilea raising another dinosaur leg, “To the chef, bloody delicious. You get points for that at least, old man.” He really hadn’t offered much more. Still, Ilea had enough self awareness to know food was the way into her heart.

The elder laughed, “Hmm, points are always good, are they not. Maro my friend, I wondered if you could share some knowledge on death magic with me. It has become increasingly hard to find a capable necromancer willing to come so far north.” He puffed again and looked at Ilea, “Let us stop this talk of war, I would rather just plant trees to be honest.” He laughed and Ilea sighed before continuing to eat.

“Yes, yes. I have cast aside all violence from my life, all war and slaughter. I have tried convincing people, talked to many leaders that would listen but did it change anything? No.” He added sending smoke upwards.

“Didn’t you fight the spirit just recently?” Maro asked, “Or are you just an occasional pacifist?” He laughed, the elder waiting for him to calm down.

He puffed again, refilling his pipe before he lit it again. He leaned back and sighed, “My failures are many, some more recent than not. I try my best.” He winked at Ilea, “Maybe you should too, stop all the fighting and killing. Do something good for once, create something or help people out.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, hearing him preach after admitting his inaction, “They were pretty grateful hearing that the death spirit was dead.” She said, finishing the plate and taking the next one, “I don’t disagree with you by the way. The world would certainly be a better place without war but sometimes to stop violence, you need even more of the same.”

“No, I disagree I think. Endless killing. Well I do not fault you either, you are young and I am sure you have suffered terrible losses to become so cynical and jaded. Just remember my words.” He pointed at her, “Time, my dear, will heal.” Lucas said, Ilea looking away from his gaze.

Maro leaned forward, “What do you think of monsters then? Even in my time, after other people, the highest cause of death were monsters. Wild animals acting on instinct.”

Lucas raised his eyebrows before he spoke, “Walls...deterrents perhaps? There is little understanding. Of their nature, their thoughts. They are wild perhaps, yet exactly that may allow for us to find a way to deal with them. Without killing.”

Ilea couldn't believe it, after what she had seen the demons do. They weren't even completely mindless. She could understand his logic, knowing the worst animals humans had to deal with on Earth were put into zoos to amuse visiting children. To suggest to a cave man any other way but violence was ridiculous. Peaceful ways were reserved for those with overwhelming power. The cold war didn't turn hot because of nukes, not because people understood and talked to each other. It's easier to ignore someone without weapons of mass destruction. Here she fought monsters capable of wiping out villages or even towns on a daily basis, humans weren't at the top of the food chain, not by a long shot.

"They want food and they eat. We can relocate them or whatever, at least the lower leveled ones. Animals aren't the only monsters though. What do you call someone who starts a war where thousands die, someone who murders others just for their own gains, someone who summons demons into a city full of civilians for whatever reason?" She asked.

"Mhm, it is certainly a difficult question. I believe people act for a reason, do horrible things because they think them justified. With sufficient time and convincing arguments I think even someone like Adam could be redeemed." The elder suggested.

"I thought this was just going to be a nice dinner." Ilea whined, "I get where you're coming from Lucas. I really do. But for what you suggest we need proper education, rehabilitation of criminals, proper laws and people to enforce them. You guys don't even have psychologists here." She ran her hands through her hair, "You can talk it out with humans. Monsters sadly understand only two languages, mind magic and good old violence. I only have the latter at my disposal."

Lucas smiled brightly as he took another puff, "Hmm, you are fascinating. Are you a realm traveler perhaps?" Ilea didn't reply, "Very rare those I think... even rarer for them to reach such a level of power. To adapt so well to a new environment, yet the things you talk about... your world must have been so different. Maybe you could build a school, become a teacher or one of those psychos you mentioned. I am very interested in the things you suggested we need."

“It was similar and different at the same time. I’m not a teacher, I just like to complain about everything.” Ilea said, drinking a mug of ale, “Neither am I here to teach you about my world.”

“Perhaps then, you might hunt monsters and help with the gold. The Hand should enable you that much at least. Maybe we could learn from the world you were born in. If you are not willing to tell me, I am sure others would listen. It is your choice of course, your life.” He said, leaning back as he patted his belly.

Ilea nodded, “Oh we weren’t born there. I’m artificial, made of nano robots.” The sarcasm wasn’t lost on them but Ilea wasn’t in the mood to talk about Earth anymore. Neither did she care what the elder could share about world travelers.

“Thank you.” Lucas suddenly said, “It has been a while since I talked to humans. The dark ones think differently, they rarely are very opinionated on topics like morals or nonviolent communication. Whenever you feel like telling me about your world, I am here.”

*How many people have you talked to death to reach that power. We’re all monsters here. Ilea thought and leaned back with a smile, Have I always been this edgy? I think so. She breathed in deeply and sighed, Guess it’s all that power going to my head. Fighting unthinkable beasts, losing my head and pretty much becoming a spirit of ash. Now I have to invest in the establishment of psychology as well as therapy before I can even get help.*

She was thinking on the possibility of a healer existing that had a skill like that, just let magic solve it. “I think what you talk about Lucas, it’s an interesting approach. I’ll definitely think about it.” Maro said when she focused on the conversation again.

*Oh no, did I miss him using his skill to ensnare Maro. “Think about what?”*

The king shrugged but Lucas answered for him, “Try to live a life less focused on power and violence, prioritizing creation and harmony over all.”

“Yea, I think your charm stat was overwhelmed by his.” She said to Maro, the man looking away a little embarrassed.

“What that’s it? You’re not going to make fun of me for considering it?” He asked when Ilea continued eating, his voice almost disappointed.

“Why?” She asked with a full mouth, “You’re free to do whatever the fuck you want Maro. As does he. I’m gonna question it maybe but in the end we all reached insane levels of strength. You can become a gardener for all I care. Who’s going to stop you?”

“A gardener... no, none of my skills would work. Maybe that’s exactly why I should try.” He said. Ilea hadn’t realized the king was so lost after waking up.

*Guess it makes sense, he basically went through what I did when I was brought to Elos. Just that he’s already a powerhouse to begin with. “I don’t think you’d make a good gardener. Maybe you could become a counselor or trainer, or you could try yourself at brewing. I know a necromancer who’s pretty good at that.”*

“Hmm, yes. I agree with her.” Lucas said, “Death magic and gardens are not a favorable combination. The plants would die if you just looked at them.” He laughed, “Ah, I could put in a good word for you at the Hand, some will still know me I am sure.”

“I can do that too. No need to move yourself from the north.” Ilea said.

“Good, good. She is your woman then.” He said. Ilea wasn’t even mad. She was more irritated with herself, trying to fault him for his choices.

*Aren’t you the one advocating for freedom of choice? She asked herself and smiled at him. If you fault him you have to fault yourself too. Stop that, you know our circumstances are complicated. So are his. Why are we pretending to be multiple people? Eat more.* Ilea listened to the last thought and continued her meal, the waiter continuously exchanging empty plates with full ones. She thought about his suggestions and would certainly consider some of it. The philosophy wasn’t unknown to her of course,

Gandhi being a famous example from Earth. Yet there were plenty of historic examples where violence was the solution in the end, some people simply too ignorant, stubborn or convinced of their ways to even listen.

Maybe there were some ways to change some things for the better without giving up her freedoms or catching herself stuck on a side of a war she couldn't stand behind completely. She smiled to herself, *Time will heal? I wouldn't even have considered his words last year when I came to the north.*

She frowned when she saw the old man smiling at her, "Don't look at me like that. Your charisma has no influence on me."

Maro leaned over to him, "She thinks it's a hidden stat."

"Oh no. Does she know our secret?" The old man whispered.

"Being insanely attractive, eloquent, powerful, mysterious and filthy rich?" The king suggested.

"You're not rich Maro. That treasury is probably being raided by Terok right now. And with those rags I doubt the old man has anything but debt." Ilea said.

"Hey hey. It was a common style in the south." The elder said with a chuckle.

"Did you give him the key already? I intend for you to have most of it. I don't want to bring him into the moral dilemma of choosing between our friendship and gold. You know what he would choose." Maro replied.

"Calm down, I have it. Speaking of Terok, we should meet up again soon." She said, summoning a piece of gold and putting it on the table, "I like this place."

"No, no. I said I would pay." Lucas said, pushing the gold towards her.

"Do your finances really allow for that? I ate thirty four plates worth of food." She said, patting her belly. There was nothing there to show. *Makes*

*me sad, all food babies destroyed and digested before they even see the light of day. Damn my insanely powerful body.*

She stood up and yawned, “Come on old man. On your path of peace I doubt there’s a ton of money to be made.

“I think that’s way too much money for the food we had still.” Maro said but she waved him off.

“It’s a tip.” She said.

“You are being unreasonable with your money.” The king said, “You’re going to be poor by the end of the month if you continue this trend.”

“Just have to find a couple more thousand year old death spirits to kill then. One point for the path of violence.” She replied.

# Chapter 311 Challenger

## Chapter 311 Challenger

“Hmm, Violent yet generous. I knew you were not all bad.” Lucas said, “Did you come here just for that spirit?”

Ilea smiled at him, “He wanted a vacation after being freed from his thousand year sleep. Scouting the kingdoms he would take over once his evil power returned.” She pointed at Maro.

“Yes, a sense of humor as dark as his magic. You two make a good pair. I approve.” Lucas said.

“He’s married.” Ilea replied, “Now I’m sure you know all about the tourist attractions of the famous Vineyard Caves, care to show us around?”

“Ah, surprising. With all the talk about our morals and education you certainly hold conservative views on relationships.” Lucas said and got up, cracking his back in the process, “Ow ow ow. I can show you around, of course. I will need to go back to work in two or three hours, trees don’t plant themselves you know.”

*Isn’t that kind of how it works? With fruit and seeds and all?* Ilea didn’t want to start into that branch of conversation.

“Hmm, If you have time and if you are staying for a while you could use some death magic on the trees, I would like to make them more resistant to



such influences before moving on to the high mana density in this whole region.”

Ilea walked down the stone stairs, “Ever been to the Penumra dungeon? Plants there seem to grow a little too well. Might help you out in your research.”

Lucas waved her off, “That monster eats and grows without giving anything back. I am trying to regulate the ecosystem, not suck it dry. If you want to do something good you could clear that dungeon out.”

“What? Can you not just talk to the plants there? I’m sure once they realized they’re not conducive to a harmonic landscape, they’ll dial down their needs.” Ilea suggested in a serious tone.

“Hmm yes, I tried. It has different views on the problem. It stated that if the whole world were covered nobody would suffer. Ridiculous.”

“I mean it’s probably not wrong. Without any sentient beings, there is no suffering either.” Ilea said as they stepped out into the street.

Maro stretched and smiled, “Ah, I missed this.”

“Stretching?” Ilea asked.

“No.” The man replied, “Listening to bickering idiots.”

Three ashen limbs smashed into his side, the man not moving an inch as a barrier shimmered in her sphere. “Hey not bad. Old man, that arena we saw before, what is it? I have weird pent up frustrations that need to be let out suddenly.” She said.

“Yes, of course you would be interested in that. Well I cannot fault you, it is one of the few buildings added by a dark one that could qualify as an attraction. I have tried to convince them for years to shut it down.” Lucas shook his head and started walking, “I gave up on it two months ago actually.”

“Why?” Maro asked.

“Trees started being set aflame by unknown individuals. It was not worth talking to someone if that is their reply.”

“Should we go find them?” Ilea asked.

He shook his head, “No, no. I confronted two of them in the act. I understand now that the arena is more than just barbarism. It has a long standing tradition and holds cultural value for many. Letting each other live seems like the better option.”

She didn’t comment on it further, suffice to say that she would have handled the situation differently. *His choice.*

“I would have killed them to send a message.” Maro said.

“What do they do in the arena? Fight each other?” Ilea asked to change the subject.

“Yes, yes. That too, fighting animals, monsters or simply testing each others powers.” The elder said.

“I need to exchange silver somewhere too.” She added.

“You may do that near the arena too. It is the center of the town.” Lucas reassured her.

*138 gold and 21 silvers.* Ilea added the money into her necklace, thanking what the collection of dark ones having gathered in the building. The amount had created a bit of a disturbance, the sellers contacting other shops to get all the coins together.

Ilea joined the others in the arena with a new total of 725 gold coins to her name. *Maybe I really will have that school built. If Claire hasn’t purchased one already.* Grabbing a drink from a floating orb near the entrance, she activated her Sentinel Huntress skill to quickly make out Maro and Lucas’

distinct smells. *A little creepy that one.* She was glad there had been no other option to replace the skill because she would have probably taken most anything. *Except the shit that's still available.*

She wasn't too surprised to find Terok standing next to the others, shouting wildly at the warrior currently battling three burrow Dragons. "Hey guys." She said, taking a free seat next to them.

"Welcome back. Got your gold?" Maro asked to which she nodded.

"I would not drink that." Lucas said. "Brewing is not exactly their strong suit."

"I'm well aware of that." Ilea said and took a sip. *Better than Hallowfort at least.* "What's his goal? If he should kill them he's not doing a great job." The three monsters circled the warrior who was panting and bleeding in several places.

"He needs to survive for another two minutes... clock's ticking. COME ON YOU CAN DO IT!" Terok explained and shouted, pumping his fist into the air. Ilea couldn't identify the dark one fighting down there but his movements and the amount of damage he had sustained made her assume he was in the low two hundreds, perhaps even below. If the dragons were close to the level as the ones she had fought previously.

Two tense minutes passed, the dark one struggling against the three circling creatures, trying to keep them at bay with his spear. One of his legs was nearly severed by a bite he didn't manage to avoid in the last ten seconds. When a gong resounded, a bunch of people jumped down and slaughtered the creatures, overwhelming them with sheer numbers.

"Disgusting." Lucas hissed while Terok screamed with joy.

"Oh man that was a close one." He said and looked to the three, "Did you see that? Fucking brilliant footwork. I knew Raiden had it in him but against three Burrow Dragons, phew."

“How much did you bet Terok?” Ilea asked as she stood up, looking around to see if anybody even attempted to take care of the bleeding dark one who had sunken down on the side of the arena, coughing up blood.

“Everything of course. No reason to doubt my man Raiden.” The dwarf replied, giving her a thumbs up with his steel arm.

“You sound like you know the contestants. Is this not your first time here?” Maro asked.

He waved the man off, “Ah, you lack heart Maro. Believing in someone is enough sometimes.”

Ilea understood why he was in debt now, blinking down to the dark one and extending an ashen tendril towards him. He looked at her with delirious blue eyes and thrust his spear at her. Ilea grabbed the weapon mid movement and held it to the side, “I’m a healer. You won. Relax now.” A slight sense of understanding washed over his eyes before he closed them and went unconscious.

She went on to heal his wounds, the leg had nearly been separated and he might have bled out. “You are not allowed to interfere healer.” Someone said behind her, a group of dark ones walking up. “The wounds are his to bear.”

“I do whatever I want.” Ilea said, not turning to the trio. The middle one wanted to say something when another stopped him with a hand to his shoulder.

“She is the ash wielder who healed our wounded.”

He hesitated, “The rules of the arena are their own, regardless of her merits.”

Ilea turned her head a little.

*[Warrior – lvl 210]*

“Listen. We two in the arena, I stand still and you get to injure me, cut into me and torture me as much as you like for five minutes. If I’m still standing afterwards I get to punch you once. How does that sound?”

He snickered, dark blue full plate armor and twice the size of her with a hammer massive enough to be used as a ram. “You have an impressive level but a healer, even one using ash could not stand against me.”

The two others looked at each other, not quite as sure of him as he was of himself. “Good. Hey let’s change that. I get to hit you with your own hammer if I win.” She smiled, the man in front of her relaxing, now completely topped with health. His armor was ruined but he had surely won something in the challenge he had survived.

“Rohin, do you accept the challenge?” One of the other warriors asked, his voice sounding excited.

“I do.”

*Oh you bloody idiot. Ilea though, I love having that healer tag back. The sheer arrogance of people. The leather armor helps I guess.*

The warriors jumped to the stands and the details of her challenge quickly spread. Apparently there wasn’t a set schedule or a pause was planned anyway. She left the unconscious warrior behind and walked to the center of the arena. *Something I wanted to try anyway.* She activated her Armor of Ash but focused on keeping the ash off of herself, instead just forming a tiny sphere behind her back. It would allow for the bonuses to her body without presenting the impressive looking armor itself.

*I should also test the range of my limbs. Feel like they were more flexible against the undying lord.*

“The challenge is set. The wielder of ash, defeater of the legendary Undying lord stands against the noble Rohin.” The voice was booming and cheers erupted as soon as the words spread through the arena.

*Way to spoil it.* Ilea thought, watching the warrior in front of her take a step back, looking around confused.

“If he cannot bring the human down, she will be allowed one strike with his own hammer, the sledge of justice.”

“You named your hammer sledge of justice?” Ilea asked, making a bit of a face.

“Do not mock me human... perhaps your abilities allowed for you to slay that spirit of death but I won't believe it until I see it with my own eyes. A warrior is something quite different than a spirit.” He said and lifted the hammer from his back. A terrifying sight to most.

“Time's ticking big guy.”

The warrior stepped towards her and stopped a meter away. “Kick her ass!!” Ilea heard Terok scream through the crowd.

*What's that supposed to mean?* She turned her head before a fist as big as her head slammed into her stomach. The force lifted her upwards before she landed half a meter further back. *Twenty health... aaaand it's back.* The crowd cheered, went silent and then cheered again.

“Kick his ass!!” She heard him again, rolling her eyes. *So much for gambling.*

The warrior laughed, “Great. You really are durable.” He lifted the hammer next to him and tested its weight, trying to intimidate her. “Are you sure about this? I don't want to kill you.”

“I'll warn you if you get close.” Ilea said with a bright smile.

“Kick her ass!!” This time it was Maro who shouted over the crowd.

*Maybe this is where we get our bout. I don't think the arena will stand after that.* The hammer swung through the air and impacted her shoulder. It seemed Rohin really was a little worried about killing her. *He's got time.* The hammer impacted, the force going through the both of them before it

slid to the ground. She noted that there wasn't even a bruise below her light armor. *Sixty health.*

The warrior laughed, a blue flame starting to burn around him, "Marvelous."

*Maybe five minutes was too long.* Her natural regeneration was taking care of the damage so far. The next hit was aimed at her leg, blue fire raging over the hammer before it impacted. Again, she wasn't moved even an inch, the force pushing down and sideways. *Ninety health, we're getting there big guy.*

As time went on, the warrior started to target her head and back, slamming the hammer down as quickly and powerful as he could, the crowd cheering less loudly with each strike. It was clear by the two minute mark that he wouldn't be dealing significant damage. Ilea decided against healing, her natural health regeneration and toughness enough to tank the hits, mostly because they came very slowly.

The warrior was getting frantic, panting hard as he continued to use his skills, delivering hit after hit with the blue flame intensifying over time. Right before the five minutes ended, he lifted the hammer high, the fire around him intensifying. Ilea looked up as the hammer slammed straight down on her head, her boots stored safely in her necklace before she was smashed quite literally into the stone floor.

A trickle of blood flowed down her brow, the thin cut quickly healing up as she stepped out from the ground, boots appearing on her feet again. "I did it." The dark one said, doing down on his knees as he panted. "How much health did that last one take?"

"Three hundred." Ilea replied honestly, the warrior laughing.

"And what's your level, warrior of ash?"

"That's a secret. Now I believe you remember the deal." She said, stepping over to him as her ashen armor expanded from her back, quickly at its full potential. *Didn't think it would be quite as one sided.* She stood before him,

wrapping her hand around the hammer before she lifted it up. The thing was heavy but manageable with all her buffs to Strength. The warrior must have had quite the buffs as well and a much higher base Strength with his level in the low two hundreds. Her resilience however wouldn't be bested by him, not even with half her defensive power.

“Do it quickly. I shall die here for my foolishness. May it be a lesson for those watching.” The warrior said as she played around with the hammer, moving it from side to side as she got used to the balance.

“What? I'm not going to kill you. Relax.” She said and twirled the massive thing, letting the heavy head take over. The warrior didn't quite grasp what she had said and neither realized she was moving the weapon from the bottom up and not the other way around. A loud boom echoed when the massive steel slammed into his crotch, a crack resounding as the crowd winced.

The warrior was lifted up a whole meter before crashing down, groaning in pain as his hands went to his crotch. “Hey I quite like this hammer.” She said and threw it upwards, catching it again with both hands. *A bit unwieldy because it's so long. Maybe Goliath can make me one.* The balance was a little off she realized because she was simply not tall enough. The man groaned again, “Hey, your injuries to bear right?”

Ilea set down the hammer before checking on the warrior with a tendril of ash, just in case she had underestimated her power. *Just his crotch. Good.* While her Strength was absurdly high, the damage wasn't buffed massively due to her neither using her offensive skills or her own body to attack. A pure warrior likely had plenty of Vitality too. Walking towards her group, she jumped up and sat back down as the people around them clapped and cheered.

“You just won me sixty silvers Ilea, cheers to that.” Terok exclaimed with a thumbs up.

“Thought you were betting against me.”



“Misdirection, I did as well but that was only five silvers. Many already knew you had defeated that lord, first time I had heard of it. Would have been much more profitable if you had been an unknown.” He complained.

Maro looked her way and shook his head, “Don’t look at me that way. You know we need more space and no living beings nearby. At least if you don’t want collateral damage.”

Sitting down, she noted that the warrior was crawling towards an exit. *Nobody’s helping.* She glanced at Lucas who had a big frown on his face. “Hey he’s alive.”

“That is not what I’m frowning about. Something’s about to attack the town. Feynor probably.” He got up and dusted off his clothes, “I’ll have to cut your tour short.”

“Feynor? What?” Ilea asked.

The man breathed in before shouting, “Breach!” Ilea watched in fascination as the people around them immediately sprung up and rushed to the exits, many sprouting wings or simply flying up as they readied their weapons. “It’s already the third time this month.” He shook his head and started floating too.

“You’re going to fight? How did you even spot them?” Ilea asked, looking around but neither hearing fighting, feeling or seeing anything indicating battle or intruders.

“I will try to reason with them while those unable to fight will seek shelter. They haven’t broken through so far but this feels different. All my saplings have been destroyed, at once. You have chosen a bad time to visit this town it seems.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “I have a gift for bad timing.”

“Feynor coming? Fuck that, what are we going to do? Is there another exit?” Terok asked.

“Perhaps. Yet I would like to see how the elder handles this.” Maro said, floating up next to him. “I doubt Feynor have the power to stand against dark ones... interesting for sure.”

Ilea spread her wings and joined them, “Come on Terok. You can run away if they really overwhelm the place.”

“Of course she would fight too.” He grumbled and floated up. “Just once I try to sit back and enjoy myself.”

“Didn’t say anything about fighting. It’s not my war but I can still heal people.” She said, quite aware that she would probably not keep it at that. Ilea was surprised to find herself neither annoyed nor angry. It really wasn’t her war but if herself and her friends were attacked for no good reason, she would play her part. *What will you do?* She asked, looking at Lucas and Maro’s back as they quickly rushed towards the entrance, hordes of dark ones rushing towards the same destination.

# Chapter 312 Unreasonable Demands

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It was a weird atmosphere when they landed on top of a building near the massive gate. Ranks of dark ones stood in formation, mages behind as barricades were created. Weapons at the ready, they waited. The gates remained closed. Lucas had moved to the very front, none of the people stopping him. “You think he can do anything?” She asked Maro who was standing next to her.

“I doubt it. I like the way he thinks, I really do. Admirable. Depends on the enemy forces I suppose and what their goal here is. If they even break through the guardians positioned outside. I don’t know much about the political situation as well as the Feynor.”

“Will you fight them?” Terok asked, constantly switching his attention between the gate, the dark ones below and the two people next to him.

Maro didn’t reply, simply focusing on the gates. Ilea wasn’t sure either. The elves had left no survivors, going as far as eating dead humans. She didn’t know what would happen if Baralia took Virilya but some of the soldiers had killed civilians without restraint, others had ignored them. *Let’s see what the Feynor are like.* The only thing she knew was that once those gates opened, chaos would ensue.

“They will attack us regardless. Those dragon worshipping cunts are ruthless.” Terok commented.

“Have you fought them then?” Maro asked, the dwarf shaking his head, “Then let’s see where this leads.”

Ilea sat down a moment later, her legs hanging freely. *Came here to have some time off from fighting and all I did so far was fighting.* She smiled, at least it hadn’t been Taleen or undead knights. And she had some food, though the shopping was underwhelming.

“How the fuck are you guys so calm? We’re all going to die...,” Terok looked around, as if he was trying to find an escape route.

Maro glanced at Ilea but turned his head forward again. “At least I get a warning this time. With all the other attacks it came out of nowhere.” She was the one to answer. “Just stick with us, you’ll survive.”

“Probably.” Maro added.

Ilea smiled, “Probably.” She repeated. It was true of course. Terok would be safer as far away from the gates as possible but the dwarf was at level 223 already, higher than most of the dark ones standing below. It simply depended on how powerful and numerous the attackers were. The same was true for Ilea and Maro and while she didn’t know his reasons, she refused to ignore an event like this happening close by. Ilea would be standing there even if she was the only one inside the dungeon.

The pounding on the gates became louder, different spells and explosions audible in a muffled tone. “At least thirty of them. If we assume only attack mages are trying to get through we should expect at least eighty of them.” Maro commented.

*They shouldn’t stand so close together.* Ilea noted, looking at the dark ones gathered in the big area before the gates. The house they were on stood around two hundred meters further back, the sounds audible thanks to the silence of the defenders. Ilea could feel them through her sphere, at least those standing close enough. “They’re terrified.”

“Course they are, their home is about to be sacked.”

“Tell me dwarf, what happens to settlements the Feynor attack?” Maro asked.

“They usually don’t leave anything behind. An affront to their own culture. At least that’s what everyone says.”

The king nodded and walked to the back of the house, holding out his hand before bones started dropping down to the alley below.

“So you will fight?” Ilea asked.

“There might be no choice. As much as the old man believes there to be one.” He replied.

One last explosion bent the gates inwards, the torches and glinting reptile eyes reflecting the light indicated quite a bit more than the eighty attackers Maro had suggested. A single one walked inside, the collective holding their breath as he approached. A small figure compared to most of the people in Lisburg, not taller than Ilea herself. Squinting her eyes, she could make out some details. It reminded her of a lizardman, the tail much shorter and where they were greenish, these people were going towards yellow, gold or brown.

The head was completely different, more dragon like than anything else. Even the drakes had lacked some of the features the Feynor sported, the amount of horns the most prominent one. The reptile looked dangerous, powerful, its spear glinting in golden light. It wore light armor, open in several places to reveal scales it likely deemed appropriate in defensive capability. It was too far away for Ilea to identify of course but the sheer confidence it exuded after entering the dungeon had her guess its level pretty high.

“Welcome noble warrior, to the Vineyard Caves. May we...,” Lucas was interrupted by the Feynor.

“Your kind is not welcome here. Do not speak for those dreadful monsters.” It raised a hand and continued, addressing not the elder but the people of Lisburg, “Surrender now and you shall die without pain, I swear on the dragons of the high peaks. Be returned to where you came from, released from this world you do not understand.”

“Negotiations braking down.” Ilea commented, Maro snorting next to her. The people around them were getting more and more terrified with each word the Feynor spoke. The sheer arrogance and contempt was damn near graspable even from the distance.

“That’s how you keep the moral high ground after slaughtering a people.” Maro said, his magic spreading behind him, Ilea glancing back.

“Terok, if shit goes south, lead people to the arena and barricade yourself in with them.” Ilea said to the dwarf who obviously didn’t want to stay there. He nodded quickly, not even glancing at her as he stared at the torchlight quietly swaying in the dark tunnel beyond.

“These people are peaceful, unwilling to take part in your war. Neither do they encroach on your territory. Leave this place, you are unwanted here.” Lucas spoke loudly.

The Feynor nodded, “You shall die with them old man.” He shouted something in a hissing language before a storm broke loose. Dozens of the Feynor appeared beyond the gate, spells started flying in as defensive barriers and walls were erected by the Dark ones who quickly spread out, rushing into houses or behind cover as the first spells impacted. The speed and precision of both the attackers and defenders was a marvelous and terrifying thing to watch. Ilea glanced a wooden wall forming where Lucas had stood, now obscured by rising smoke, explosions and fire.

Ice rained down on them as Maro raised a shield above. Terok looked at Ilea and she just nodded, the dwarf vanishing right after. She watched as Maro lifted his hand, a beam of black opaque energy slamming into a flying ball of fire, the thing exploding in mid air. More and more of the creatures rushed in, hunting down the dark ones still remaining near the gate. Four or

five to one, they broke through their defenses and cut into their armor, skin or ethereal bodies.

“What are they doing?” She asked as she stood up, her ashen armor forming as a series of dark orbs slammed into her. Maro stood behind his barrier as she felt his magic intensify, the noises of bone on stone audible behind. Many of the dark ones were already fleeing or repositioning at this point, not thirty seconds after the initial breakthrough.

“The gift for surrendering was a painless death. There is no rush when they hold the only entrance.” Maro suggested.

Ilea shook her head, a Feynor appearing in her sphere before he lunged at her, barbed spear in hand. Stepping to the side, she grabbed his neck and squeezed.

### *[Warrior – lvl 159]*

He thrashed and clawed at her armor, spear continuously slammed away by a limb of ash before she slammed another one down his throat, exiting on his back after severing the spine. The creature went limp in her hand before she let go. A skeleton moved up next to her, grabbing the body before bringing it to Maro. “So you’re going all out?” She asked.

“They’re already burning down the city. If anything I owe it to Lisburg to stop these ridiculous creatures. What are you going to do?”

Ilea watched as six of them taunted a downed dark one, blood seeping out from his severed legs as they kicked at him. She noted that it was one of the two warriors that had stood behind the idiot in the arena. “Dunno, improvise I guess. Oh man, this is going to be a mess.” She didn’t wait for Maro’s reply, blinking twice to reach the group of Feynor. Identifying them quickly, she noted the highest leveled one was just below two fifty.

“Healer...,” One of them spat when she stood above the dying dark one, a tendril of ash sending mana into him to stabilize his body.

“Yes. Why don’t you just finish him off. There’s no reason to torture him.”

“They are not of your kind? Why do you care human?” One of them spat.

When two others moved to attack, her limbs rushed out, piercing four of them while one managed to deflect it. Her ash extended further than she had moved the limbs before, a change from her evolutions she hadn't tested so far. Pushing further, her limbs punched out of their heads before retracting again. The Feynor took a step back. “Look around you. Do you think beasts would build houses, sell trinkets? Why don't you stop this and fuck off? No further killings necessary.” Ilea knew of course that they would ignore it, she had killed four of them right here.

“You will die and so will they, in pain, suffering, wishing you were...,” Ilea appeared behind him and punched the back of his head, bones cracking as he shot forward and impacted hard on the ground. She followed up with an ashen limb cutting into the wound and smashing his brain.

She avoided the strike from the last survivor of the group, the one with the highest level. His weapon was clad in crystals. When the blade rushed at her, she just let it hit, her Azarinth Fighting informing her about the impact.

It bit into her ash before she grabbed his arm, her limbs cutting into his body with quite a bit more difficulty than the others. Still the end result was the same, his limbs ripped off before head was pierced. Ilea ripped out the blade that had cut surprisingly deep into her ash considering the kingsguard hadn't managed as much with some of their strikes. *Must have been confident.* She noted the crystals growing in her ash but simply discarded that part before remaking her armor.

Locating the dark one's missing legs in her sphere, she extended her limbs further than the ever had and grabbed them, bringing them back before she healed the warrior. Enough so he could at least run. *How far could I reach before? Three or four meters, that was at least eight or nine just now.* Sending a wave of mana into him, the warrior gasped and coughed. “Go to the arena, defend it.” Ilea simply said and walked towards the exit. She saw a group of skeletons rushing by, Maro hard at work.

Entering the combination of mist, fog, smoke and ash that had formed, she trusted into her ash. She watched a group of Feynor cut into the corpse of a



dark one before another one came and hissed something, the five muttering but walking towards the city. *This isn't an invasion.* Ilea noted, appearing between the walking ones before ten limbs of ash absolutely shredded through them. Bloody and limbs were sent flying as her arms of ash moved through a second time. They were all dead, below two hundred all of them.

“Hey, what did you tell them?” She asked, appearing close to the one she heard talking before. The smoke around them moved and light broke through, revealing the creature before her.

***[Mage – lvl 251]***

“A healer... human even, no, you are more than that. Why are you defending them? Do you not know what they are?”

Ilea's teeth ground against each other, “Same offer to you. Leave this place and don't return. Or die.”

The creature hissed before a curse crashed into her, her life draining as he moved backwards. She simply shook her head and kept walking towards him. The power of his spells were impressive, yet his curses were nothing compared to Elfie, his drain nothing compared to the Miststalkers. “Fool.” He said and vanished, appearing farther towards the exit.

Ilea followed, blinking once to reach the middle of the square. She found what looked like a cocoon of wood, cracked open with a bunch of dead Feynor laying to its side. *Negotiations failed?* She blinked once more.

“Kill her.” The same dragon like creature shouted as a dozen mages sent their spells at her. Ash moved, forming barriers in front of her, reforming and moving in parts to deflect and stop the projectiles. Many managed to get through, Ilea moving quickly to dodge, trying to not exert herself too much as the spells rushed past, some grazing or even impacting on her armor.

“Stop it.” She said, forming shrapnel from what remained of her ash before all of it smashed into the shields and defenses of the Feynor, the first line losing at least eight as her ash punched through scales, organs and bone

alike. The ones with a higher level survived, some injured while others managed to stop her attack entirely. She noted the shouts as well as warriors moving in behind her. “Good. Now that you’re all here, I’ll repeat it.” The mages looked at the collapsing corpses and the lances of ash forming above her head, “Leave this place, or die.”

Roars came from all around her as they attacked in unison, the lances sent into the mass of Feynor still standing in and beyond the bent gate. Ilea vanished, twelve ashen limbs on her back now, they slashed through the confused mages and warriors, vanishing again as soon as she could to keep them on their toes. It was absolute chaos, her Sphere and high reflexes keeping her focused and in control as she slaughtered the beings. Her spells she only used against the higher leveled ones, absolute destruction and storm of cinders taking quick care of even level two twenty enemies, their defenses simply lacking against her form of attack.

Her limbs were defended against rather well by many of them but for every one deflecting her blows, there were three being cut apart. It was obvious that at least half had some form of spacial perception but it was her positioning against theirs. As long as there were dozens of weaker Feynor in the tunnel, she could simply use them as shields or cover against the spells and swords from those more powerful. Ilea had no time to meditate, conserving her mana and using her reversed Absolute Destruction whenever possible.

Finally reaching the end of their ranks, nearly sixty meters into the tunnel, she grabbed one of them and formed another shroud of shrapnel. This time she tried a star like shape, investing quite a lot more time in the mass and density before the attack rushed into half confused half pursuing enemies. She let go of the dead warrior, her reversed healing having killed him, “Flee and I won’t pursue.” She said and slammed a spear to the side before four of her limbs crashed into the warrior, denting his armor, one of her arms piercing. A kick sent him flying, impacting several more as they appeared around her, blades, spears, arrows and spells flashing.

As she thinned their ranks, Ilea moved back towards the city, more and more spells impacting her now that the chaos was reduced. The remaining warriors and mages became increasingly defensive as she slaughtered one

after the other. She wasn't seeking the city for help but for cover against their ranged attacks. While few had pierced her armor even half way, it would only get worse over time. When she reached the houses again where Maro and herself had stood on, she noted that there were no corpses around. It was nearly quiet, the enemies behind her moving in and as well as explosions resounding in the distance.

Blinking into an apartment, Ilea took the spear of the appearing Feynor right on. It dug into her ash two thirds of the way as her limbs cut into his neck. She moved two ashen arms around him to get him closer, a hard punch ripping off his head. Three more appeared while a group of mages sent spells in through the windows. She danced through, her ash ripping into them, now fourteen limbs that were still as easily controlled as her initial eight.

The heat in her chest started to increase as more and more warriors appeared, poking at her while they deflected her ash. Only elites had remained, all her resources being drained by the mages outside while a curse slowed her down and made her feel sick. Her mind was being punched by magic too but all of it was manageable thanks to her resistances and healing. The more simple offensive spells were simply dodged or ignored as they slammed into floating ash or her armor, burning away layer after layer while the warriors got in hit after hit.

She used the time to meditate, deflecting only the most dangerous attacks. The drain to her resources became more and more negligible as time went on, the heat in her chest reaching levels where her health started to drop. Ilea blinked, appearing near the biggest cluster of six mages as her ash rushed out to envelop them in a thin mist. *My body, no teleportation.*

The warriors appeared within her range and rushed at her before she sacrificed five hundred health, activated her third tier Aspect of Ash and released Heart of Cinder.

A sphere of fire and heat ripped through them, Ilea spreading her wings as she floated above the crater. Half of the house was missing and of the two dozen enemies only one remained, both arms missing as he had been aiming a spell right outside the range of her attack. His eyes were wide as

she floated towards him, sixteen ashen limbs ripping through the defenseless mage before silence returned to the square.

# Chapter 313 Cycle of War

## Chapter 313 Cycle of War

Ilea sighed as she returned the ash to mana itself, her health returning to the max as her mana recovered. She slowly flew towards the arena, corpses littering the streets again soon after. When her mana was back to two thirds, she sped up, seeing purple beams in the distance. Dozens of spells rushed towards Maro who was floating above the arena, his shield simply tanking the hits as the mages were returned to dust by what looked like instant and unlimited in range beams he sent out.

She landed on the ground, a Feynor looking at her before he turned and rushed at his brethren. *Undead*. She noted, a group of skeletons jumping on the defending warriors as they were slowly overwhelmed. Ilea joined in, finding the biggest groups of Feynor as they tried getting into the arena, blocked by walls of stone, ice and water, spells raining down on them from the dark ones inside. She cut through four groups before blinking inside.

Terok appeared close to her, “The wounded are in the center. We’ll hold them back.” He vanished again, the impacts of dozens of spells reverberating constantly. Blinking to the dozens if not hundreds of groaning or dead dark ones, Ilea spread her limbs, finding the maximum controllable number reached at sixteen, the range around ten meters. And then she meditated, stabilizing the creatures as her mana quickly drained. There were at least a dozen other healers but half of them were out of mana and more

injured were brought by the minute, some bleeding out, losing arms or burnt so badly their features were barely recognizable.

Ilea fought against the smells, the cries and screams of unimaginable pain. A minute passed but the injured still numerous, few of them ready to go back to the fight. Most were stable at this point, would survive if no more attacks would land on them. Ilea opened her eyes when a skeleton tapped her head, her armor gone to allow for a tiny bit more mana to be focused on her healing. She nearly puked when she saw the scene around her with her own eyes but focused on the skeleton. It pointed at her with one of three fingers on its hand and then up to the necromancer in the air.

She nodded and blinked up, wings spreading before she reached him. “Most are stable, we need you fighting. They are breaking through my undead there.” He pointed towards the chaotic fighting below, “Ilea, we’ll need to intercept the reinforcements from the tunnel, there were still several hundreds of them in there.”

“I took care of them.” She said, making him pause for a moment before he nodded.

“Good. I saw several units move towards the trees, Dark Ones are hiding in the forest. Once...,” Several projectiles impacted his shield, making him sway to the side. Ilea reached an ashen limb towards him but found the man uninjured. “Once you’re done here go there, we have this under control.” Two beams of purple smashed into the Feynor mage two hundred meters away, standing on a building before he was quite literally evaporated.

Ilea didn’t wait any longer, blinking down before she sped up and landed hard on the ground, sending rubble flying to the side before her limbs lashed out, cutting through the dozens of Feynor and undead alike. She had no way to tell them apart but if all were dead, her enemies will have fallen.

Spearing through the last three warriors standing against her, she trusted Maro and sped up, her wings moving in the air and bringing her towards the trees in the distance. *I’m flying faster.* She noted, a change likely brought by her evolution too. Both her ashen magic as well as her ash itself had improved. The wings were awkward to use for blocking and her limbs were

more versatile for attacking. *Maybe I should still try, it's a body enhancement and ashen magic skill after all.*

Speeding up even more, Ilea reached the tree area half a minute later, landing near the corpse of a Feynore before she ran in. She heard the sound of spells a couple seconds later, turning towards them before she came upon a group of Feynor. Her sphere let her know they were terrified. Feeling the attack coming, Ilea blinked up, watching dozens of roots pierce the warriors and mages before they were ripped apart, blood and guts spraying on the ground as her armor freed her mouth. She puked, retching up whatever remained from the glorious feast she had earlier.

It hadn't been the worst she had seen today but it simply pushed her to the limit. The blood managed to spray as far as the twenty meters she was in the sky. Something moved in the trees and she quickly rushed towards it. A Dark One was teleporting before something impacted it, sending it crashing into a tree. Ilea landed before she turned, seeing none other than Elder Lucas. Only he was covered in bark and two meters tall, roots extending out of his body and into the ground. Blood and guts were all over him.

A spear of wood rushed at the dark one before Ilea intercepted it. The being looked up in fear, "Are there more Feynor here?"

It shook its head, "He...h...he killed all...,"

"Run." She said, turning back as her wings formed a cocoon in front of her, the roots and lances glancing off. *Hey this is better than the ashen walls at least.* She was being pushed back by the impacts alone but none managed to pierce.

"Hey asshole! It's me, stop this!" She shouted and appeared before him, slamming her fist against his protected head without her mana intrusion skills.

"AaaaAaah... you...," He lifted his hand, wood forming before another punch sent him stumbling. "Ah... Ilea. I'm sorry... I...," A previously invisible Feynor suddenly appeared a meter behind the elder, thrusting a spear towards his back. Ilea just watched as wood suddenly extended from

Lucas, piercing the creature and lifting it up before a beam of light burst his head like an overripe melon. Again, she retched as her wings protected her against the blood.

The man fell to his knees, "I'm... sorry... I..." She just stepped next to him and put a hand on his shoulder, ignoring the roots that grew and tried to pierce her armor.

"It's alright Lucas. You tried and they decided not to listen. It's ok. Calm down for me alright?" She asked and pushed healing mana into him. She frowned when she saw a group of Feynor running towards them a hundred meters away. Three Dark Ones intercepted them a moment later, slaughtering the creatures as she sighed in relief. The wood around her slowly receded, even the elder's armor going back.

"Come on, you can rest now." Ilea said, grabbing the man when most of the roots had receded. She moved him towards a tree and set him down with his back resting on it.

"I didn't mean to, they just didn't listen..." He kept talking to himself but Ilea just nodded.

"I'll check on the others. Do me a favor and stay here alright? I'll send a bunch of dark ones to look after you Lucas." He seemed to understand but didn't reply, Ilea quickly blinking and reaching the three that had killed the Feynor.

"The human wood mage is a hundred meter that way. Can you look over him?" She was pretty sure the man had made enough of a name for himself so that this would be enough of a description.

They looked at each other before one of them spoke, "We usually let him use up his mana before anybody approaches. It's too dangerous."

Ilea hesitated for a moment, "He has already calmed down, I talked to him. His armor is gone at least. Keep a distance if you think approaching is a bad idea." Two of them nodded before her wings spread and she soared upwards. Flying back towards the arena, Ilea already spotted Maro flying in



the distance. He wasn't hovering above the circular structure anymore, instead going towards the gates leading out.

An army of skeletons and Feynor were running below her in unison, rushing through the houses and alleys to find any survivors of the enemy forces. "How are the injured?"

Maro turned his head and nodded, "Your healing isn't needed, the arena and surroundings are clear. Terok as well as the elite dark ones are guarding the place. Most survivors have flocked to the location. Forest?"

"Lucas killed most of them, lost control... not like a berserker but... no idea, I could still talk to him but he did try to attack me. He... ripped them apart. I don't think any Feynor survived there."

The man snorted, "And here I thought so highly of him. Well I suppose it's better than dying for his beliefs. It's only a matter of time then. The Feynor will either look for easy targets, attack the arena or try to flee. I'll move towards the entrance, clear out whatever is left."

Ilea nodded, "Send a beam upwards if you need help. I'll check on the wounded." She didn't wait for his reply before flying off, landing in the arena less than a minute later. She noted that most of the injured were in fact already stable, the healers doing a great job as they moved around, some casting area of effect healing before nearly collapsing due to mana exhaustion.

Spreading her ashen limbs, she meditated and simply healed the worst injured. A couple minutes later, she moved on to the areas outside the arena, finding survivors under the rubble and corpses thanks to her sphere. The smell of blood and feces was nearly overwhelming, Ilea missing the ability to regulate her senses inside her sphere. The varying biology of the different beings didn't help. Throwing a bunch of corpses to the side, she found a coughing warrior missing both arms, a gaping wound in his belly.

Immediately she went to her knees and started healing, focusing first on the wound and then on his arms, the immense blood loss making it a miracle that he had survived at all. She continued healing, making his arms regrow

as he gasped and screamed, the sensation overwhelming. “You’re fine.” She said and slapped his cheek lightly before moving on, looking through the rubble. Many of the houses surrounding the arena had been destroyed or at least heavily damaged. There had been more Feynor than she realized, the chaos having been too great to make out individuals.

*At least twice as many as in the tunnel.* It was surprising the dark ones hadn’t been able to make a better stand. Most had broken rather quickly as soon as the Feynor entered the dungeon, even warriors and mages of level two hundred and above. If the elves had anywhere near the numbers and efficiency, no human city would stand a chance against them. Not even Virilya with its massive walls, completely ignored by the flying mages and warriors.

She heard screams coming from inside the arena but trusted the healers to take care of it, lifting a chunk of stone with her ashen limbs as well as hands. “You’re a lucky fucker.” She whispered, kneeling down to heal the furry dog like unconscious dark one. Most of its ribs had been crushed but it was still breathing. When the creature was stable, she moved on. A group of dark ones was looking as well, two of them coordinating the others as they pointed out trapped people.

Half an hour later she was reasonably sure no more survivors hid between the rubble. Not about to collect corpses, she made her way back into the arena, checking again on the injured. Few remained and the healers reassured her it was only because of their lacking mana. In general the dark ones in the area had thinned out again. Ilea watched a bunch of them drag a Feynor corpse out from a room before dumping him on a pile.

“Terrific smell eh?” Terok asked as he stepped next to her.

“They’ll need to be burned soon.” Ilea said, the dangers of infection and sicknesses likely small for the usually high leveled dark ones but still a reality.

Terok nodded, looking at the pile of corpses, “Another reason not to participate in any wars.” He said.

“What do you mean?” Ilea asked.

“Torture. Already brought in fifteen of the fuckers. At least they close the doors.”

Ilea raised her brows, walking over to the closing door before putting her hand between the wood and stone. “What is it?” Someone asked before she pushed it open, a warrior struggling against her before he realized who she was.

The room was small, its initial color barely recognizable under the amounts of blood covering the floor and walls. She noticed how her boots stuck to the ground as she walked to the Feynor bound to a metal chair, dark ones around her confused as they waited, knives, pliers, needles and more tools Ilea ignored in their hands as well as distributed on the heavy wooden table placed next to a wall.

Looking around, she slammed an ashen limb into the Feynor’s throat, ending his life with a single strike. “What...” A voice resounded.

“What are you doing?” Another asked.

“He was a prisoner! Information that could save the city!” One of them said, stepping closer to her and wrapping his hand around the handle of his blade.

Ilea spread out ash in the room, her limbs moving on their own as four of them each hovered in front of the same amount of dark ones. The aggressive one had stopped, looking at the others with an unsure expression on his goat like face. “I played a big part in saving the city. No torture, not here. Out.”

She watched as they at first didn’t move but nodded after looking at each other, stepping out of the room slowly. “You, wait.” She said to the one that had reached for his blade. He gulped, looking at the others with a pleading

glance, meeting only their backs. “Close the door. I’m not going to hurt or kill you, come on.”

“Now.” Ilea said, sitting on the table, blood still covering the floor, running down the walls. “Tell me what you found out so far.”

The perplexed look didn’t surprise her, “But... you killed it...,”

“Him, a male Feynor. The penis... easy to see, even after you cut it off.”

The dark one gulped and nodded, going into what they had found out so far. Formations, numbers of attackers, future plans, expansions, names and possible levels and classes of high ranking officers in their tribes as well as unified military. “The attack today wasn’t isolated either. Several dark one strongholds would be attacked, as well as independent settlements.”

“Hallowfort?” Ilea interrupted and the dark one nodded.

“It was mentioned, yes.”

“Thanks.” Ilea said, getting up and patting him on his shoulder before exiting. A group of dark ones had gathered, all above two hundred. Terok stood to their side, arms crossed.

“Ashen healer.” One of them said, Ilea already preparing to defend herself in case her interference had caused this. “We thank you for the help in defending the town as well as healing those injured in the attack. We ask you to refrain from killing captives, they are a source of information. I don’t believe you want the Feynor to win more ground. Your kind would suffer as well.”

“I’m well aware of the uses of torture but if I see someone doing it I’ll stop it. No matter what.” She said and nodded to Terok, “Hallowfort was likely attacked too. We should go see if it’s still standing.” The dwarf immediately stepped forward.

“Fuck, I’ll get Maro and Lucas.”

“Leave Lucas. Ask Maro if he’s willing to help.” She said and he looked at her for a second before nodding.

“As you wish.” He vanished.

“After you have dealt with the Feynor, we suggest seeking an audience with the Dark Protector. I am sure your deeds here shall result in high favor. The enemy has to be defeated and we could use your prowess, noble healer.” The dark one spoke again, Ilea nodding to him.

“I won’t. Good luck in your war.” She said and spread her wings, following Terok towards the exit.

Maro was found looking through the corpses in the tunnel with a bunch of dark ones. “There she is.” Terok said as Ilea walked up to them.

“Good work here. Not a single one escaped.” The king said.

“I’m beaming with pride. Mass murderer number one.” Ilea smiled a bitter smile, “We’ll have to cut our vacation short I fear.”

Maro nodded, “I have heard. Elana is in Hallowfort too, I offer my help of course.” He stepped towards her and punched her lightly, “I think you’re number two at best for today.” A wink before his helmet appeared, the undead and skeletons in the tunnel rushing towards him before they collapsed and vanished into his ring.

“We’re just feeding the army of an unstoppable necromancer...,” Terok commented, the king laughing his best evil laugh.

“Seriously, I can’t control more than a hundred, not if I want them capable.” He said, “We’re not getting the elder? He survived right?”

Ilea nodded, “Yes but I don’t want to babysit an unstable pacifist attacking friendlies. I’m happy to visit once the situation has calmed down.”

“Didn’t sound like it will anytime soon. Favor for the Dark Protector and his army has grown after this attack. I hear the elders have unanimously decided to support him with whatever resources and people they can.”  
Terok supplied, having picked up more near the arena. “You two don’t want to join as well, do you?”

Ilea looked at Maro, “Not more than I already have.”

The king shrugged, “I’m with you on that.”

Terok clapped his metal hands together, “Good, then let’s go. Maybe the smith I owe money to has tragically lost his life.”

# Chapter 314 Worthy Opponents

## Chapter 314 Worthy Opponents

Ilea checked the plethora of messages she had received during the battle in Lisburg. Most of them were kill notifications, the highest level being a 261 mage.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Spearmaster – lvl 151 / Iron Defender – lvl 138]*

...

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Soul of Fire – lvl 189 / Sharpshooter – lvl 172]*

*‘ding’ ‘Blood Magic Resistance reaches lvl 15’*

*‘ding’ ‘Dark Magic Resistance reaches lvl 13’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Stamina Drain Resistance’*

*‘Stamina Drain Resistance – lvl 1*

*The more rarely used drain magic focused on Stamina. Its effects are not as immediately noticeable as Health or Mana drain skills but the end result is just as devastating. You have learned to resist such spells to an extent.’*

For all the death and chaos, the yield was certainly lackluster. At least the new resistance boosted her resilience thanks to Avatar of Ash. Probably the biggest change. The three were quiet as they flew towards Hallowfort. Ilea had Terok hold onto her back to allow for a faster flight. It was luckily dark enough already, no arcane storms active anymore. Maro could nearly keep up with her, the added weight of Terok making little difference.

“What was that mist accruing all over the place?” Maro asked when they entered the caves above the town.

“Miststalkers. Can’t kill them yet... well actually. I should probably try again at some point, with all the changes. They drain mana and health, use mist magic when you’re closer so I suggest staying away.”

“Interesting. Yea without a healer even I don’t want to try drain monsters. The benefits usually come with a somewhat lacking defense so you should definitely face them again.” Maro explained. “If you’re looking to fight more monsters that is.”

Ilea didn’t reply, listening instead to the noises coming from the caves around. “Dead.” Maro said after they found the destroyed gate and went inside.

“Sounds like it’s already over.” Terok said, the trio appearing in the crystal lit caves where both the Descent as well as Hallowfort lay. Smoke was rising from the town. Various buildings covered in flames. The bridge had been cut, likely not stopping many of the attackers. They landed on the statue holding the settlement, bones piling up as Maro moved them from his ring to the ground, the wet sounds of corpses landing on stone as Ilea looked over annoyed.

There was blood everywhere, Maro simply adding to the massacre. Dark ones as well as Feynor. Ilea moved a big body to the side, the thick armor punctured in at least fifty places, head dented in. *Fuckers*. She grabbed the heavy hammer and stored it in her necklace. The thing now manageable compared to last time she had lifted it. *May you find peace*. She thought and moved on, the two behind her following slowly, more and more of the corpses standing up. “Maro don’t use the dark ones.”



She found an injured one holding a wound on his belly when she reached the square where the Hunter's Den was located. Crouching down, she healed the wolf like creature, "The Feynor. Where are they? Where are the survivors? Injured?"

He winced, barely conscious as he coughed up blood, Ilea's healing moving quickly to stitch up the cuts, regenerate the lost arm. "The Abyss... we... are to gather... there. Should an attack... happen... barricade it. Came from... below." She nodded, standing up as soon as he was stable, his arm recovered. "Thank... you... Warrior of Ash..." He smiled as she nodded, blinking down the stairs and running towards the inn, Terok and Maro as well as a part of his undead moving quickly.

The inn was warded, her sphere unable to pierce the walls and her blink unable to bring her inside. Instead, she simply kicked in the doors, three dark ones holding them closed were flung backwards as she stepped inside. Lightning smashed into her chest as she moved in, her steps slowed by dark magic wrapping around her legs before she heard Haiden's voice from further back, "Hold! She is no enemy!"

The spells stopped, the mages looking at her and then Haiden, confused. "Do you have healers?" Ilea asked, blinking to the cat who was wearing light armor for once, head covered in dark steel. "Where are the Feynor?" Dozens of Dark Ones looked at the newcomers with fear and confusion, some with weapons unsheathed, hammers and spears in hand. Others tried to get closer to the walls.

"The injured are in a back room. The city is cleared, the attackers were more numerous coming from the Abyss. Catelyn went down there an hour ago." He informed her quickly, moving to the room as Ilea followed.

"You two, go help the fox."

Terok motioned to Maro and the two rushed down towards the Descent, dozens of dead Feynor and skeletons following the necromancer, some of the Dark Ones nearly attacking the former before others stopped them. Ilea blinked into the room as soon as it had reached her sphere's influence. *Since when am I so squeamish.* She was appalled by the smell, the sounds, the

overwhelming scent of iron, wetness of blood on the floor. A single healer was there as well, a dark one with reddened eyes, tears still rolling down their cheeks as it moved from person to person, sending whatever little mana they had to stabilize the dozens of heavily injured.

Ilea's ashen limbs moved through the groups, checking on each as she determined the most important to treat. *Worse than I thought.* She started with those about to die, her mana quickly rushing into them, focusing only to treat the worst of wounds before moving on to the next. Their health would recover on its own, given enough time but broken bones, open cuts, infections as well as fevers and coughs would slow it down, even make it impossible to recover at all.

The battles had been recent, meaning she could take care of missing limbs, ears, eyes or other body parts as well. The lacking knowledge on most of their anatomy had her use the reconstruction skill without advanced methods like she could on herself. The rebuilding was slow, taking much more mana than her own body's or another human's would require. Still, together with the other healer, they quickly stabilized the group. The two worked without words, Haiden leaving again when he saw them start. The other healer was at level one twenty and after seeing her work, the being had sat down and started meditating, pulses of healing energy flowing through the room as Ilea saw the health of all recover slowly, infections taken care off and even the blood on the floor slowly evaporating.

She in turn focused on the individuals more, healing the missing limbs and taking care of the bad wounds that the pulses mostly ignored or could only start closing before they opened again. The likely sheer lack of mana and recovery the lower leveled dark one had would make this endeavor difficult anyway but she was glad she wasn't alone. There were too many here and simply spreading out her ash and healing all of them would suck her dry damn near instantly, not that it worked at all. The control she needed for effective healing could only be delivered with her ashen limbs or by touching them with her real body.

Ten minutes later, the worst had been taken care of and Ilea started focusing on two or three people at once, regrowing limbs as they coughed and screamed. They worked in silence, the pulses vanishing after a couple

minutes but starting again two or three minutes later. It likely used up more mana the more people there were. She was impressed by the number of near corpses that had been brought into the storage room.

“Good work.” She said, clasping the dark one’s shoulder as she stepped over, “Can I leave you alone for a while?”

The being looked back, eyes focused and hard before it nodded, another pulse of healing power washing through the room as if to confirm. She didn’t wait, blinking twice to reach the tunnel leading down into the city between Hallowfort and the Descent. There were dozens of warriors and mages near the entrance, poised and focused as they waited for enemies coming up. She jumped down, their eyes focused on her before she focused on the magic around her. *Dead, undead, skeletons*. Quickly, she sensed the trail and rushed through the darkness, seeing the dozens of Feynor corpses all around, only increasing in number the closer she got.

Some skeletons lay broken too. Soon she saw light flickering in the distance, increasing in speed and blinking before she appeared in a big hall, the heat burning down on her. Flames still clung to many of the bodies around her, others had half of their torsos rotten off. “There she is.” She heard Terok, the dwarf wincing as he lay unmoving with his back on the wall near the entrance of another tunnel.

Appearing before him, she pushed healing mana into him. “There’s still a bunch remaining. Catelyn must have run into a trap. Maro moved ahead.” Bringing him back to half health and taking care of the worst wounds, she nodded.

“Thought you could heal yourself now.” She commented.

The dwarf chuckled, “Low level skill still. Only reason I’m still alive. Now stop being sassy and go.” She nodded and rushed onward. Corpses littered the whole way and the next hall showed a similar picture. When she passed through the next hallway, she could hear fighting coming from ahead. Maro was deflecting a Feynor’s attacks, his body and arms clad in purple flame, beams shooting out that were in turn dodged by the drake like being, half

his armor burnt away. Dozens of them were fighting the skeletons as well as their brethren, slain Feynor quickly standing up again to join their enemy.

The groups seemed more organized than those in Lisburg, healers as well as barrier mages present, the rest carefully moving the undead into corners, taking out Maro's troops with efficient formations. Still he stood, pushing them back, slaying them with his own numbers rising. "Don't interfere. Help the fox, she's one hall ahead." He said, no pause in his attacks and without fatigue in his voice, the Feynor he was facing hissed and appeared behind Ilea.

She simply blinked too, the glint of Maro's beam coming at her the last thing she saw before she ran towards the Feynor guarding the entrance. Barriers were up, her ashen limbs crashing into them before she sped up and smashed her fists into them, the softened up invisible blockade shattering as her Destruction spread through it. She blinked right after, ignoring the enemies that remained. The heat increased again, Ilea starting to charge up her Heart of Cinder in addition, rushing into the flames.

Dozens of mages of warriors were positioned around a five meter tall and even longer fox clad in flame, teeth as long as her arms and roaring.

***'ding' 'You have heard a mighty beast's roar. You are paralyzed for 0.5 seconds.'***

She noticed the change in her body but fought against it, the moment passing before her ashen limbs spread out, shearing into the mages who already struggled against the constant fire flaring up around them. Ilea blinked through, the flames sticking to her armor of ash as she landed on one of them, the mage wrestled to the ground as her ashen limbs crashed into his shields and armor below, her fists crashing onto his helmet time and time again.

A sudden burst of ice froze her up but her legs remained wrapped around him, her ash cracking the ice in the next second before her assault continued, his shields broken through with loud cracks, helmet deformed with the first punch before a heavy projectile impacted her, sending her towards the wall. She saw someone appear next to the injured mage as she

tried blinking. The spear clinging to her flared up, preventing her skill before it exploded in green shards that dug into her armor, digging in further and further as they started moving.

Ilea shed her armor, moving the shards away with her ash before a new one formed, two Feynor appearing next to her. Hear of Cinder was released, making their weapons slow down, a scythe and shining claws before she blinked again, her armor reformed. The ice mage was already standing again, Ilea reactivating her area skill as she blinked at the two. This time she ducked, avoiding another spear from the other mage, her limbs lashing out at them as they jumped away, the ice mage vanishing before she felt the air around her cool down, her ash freezing over before she blinked.

The fox released a wave of fire, clawing at the warriors that had attacked her, three more mages sending their magic into them, another two spreading their magic outwards around the group. Ilea saw it in her sphere but couldn't see the effect before entering the area. Curses as well as a mana and stamina drain. She pushed on, the barriers stopping her ash as she formed lances, charging up Absolute Destruction while her limbs weakened the mana intrusion defense.

She heard the ice mage scream, ripping away the deformed helmet before his wounds slowly recovered, another Feynor touching him with a hand, hard eyes looking at Ilea. "Leave and live!" She shouted, her fist charging up as she stood unmoving behind the barrier, the mages focusing on the fox.

Ilea unleashed her punch, blue magic flowing through the barrier, a loud crash resounding before she blinked, spells rushing past behind her as she slammed into their healer, ashen limbs whirling around as they tried to pierce and slash into the mages that vanished or jumped away, raising their shields before her lances rushed at them. Two avoided the black missiles but one was pierced, having concentrated too much on the limbs coming for him. The lance was stopped by his bones but still sent him sprawling as Ilea pumped her destructive mana into the healer below her.

*[Warrior – lvl 305]*

Several thoughts flashed through her at once when she saw the scythe wielder appear behind her, fire burning over them all in the instant after. Ilea's armor barely moved but the scythe wielding warrior had buckled over, screaming before his armor started melting. The Feynor she held down was burning too, his scales melting but reforming quickly before she smashed her fist down, health sacrificed before eight hundred mana spread into him. Her position now hidden by the continuous stream of fire from the fox allowed her limbs to cut into the one below her.

She focused on his neck, cutting in again and again before she saw his spine, her ash glancing off, unable to get through. Her punches sent more and more destructive mana into him while her reverse Reconstruction worked against his recovery. The Feynor was certainly on her level when it came to regenerating his own wounds but hadn't shown an instant heal like she could manage with her third tier. Her Meditation was working hard to recover her mana but she was already using way too much. His resistance against the flames seemed high too, the scythe wielder having vanished out of the fire already, his back melted and his screams still resounding from somewhere to the side.

Sacrificing health again, her fist slammed down, Heart of Cinder releasing just as it started to damage her. The metal was now washed away, half of the warrior gone, his brain exposed as her ashen limbs cut into it. His bones were still undamaged but she didn't stop, her damage overwhelming before the ding resounded in her mind. The flames around her turned and moved towards the screaming warrior, her body suddenly freezing up entirely, icicles forming on her ash before she blinked away, appearing next to the Feynor struggling to rip out her ashen lance.

Ilea's mana was down to half, her mind pushing the lance further into his wound as he screamed, his magic identified as the cursing and drain kind. He added health drain to the mix when she moved closer, the ice on her ash cracking before she dodged a spear flying at her. The thing exploded when it passed, sending black and green shrapnel into her armor, digging into it as her limbs added shallow cuts into the curse mage, denting his armor as she pushed him back.

The fox roared behind her, the shrapnel reaching her skin before they exploded once again, ripping into her flesh as one of them appeared behind her, Ilea turning to face the warrior as his claws ripped into her flesh and ash alike.

*[Warrior – lvl 310]*

His helmet had been melted onto his face, blinding him entirely. The rest of his body was steaming, half molten and black but the attacks weren't any less powerful. Still, her wounds were recovering quickly, her ash reforming as she focused on deflecting his claws and continuing her assault onto the curse mage behind her. Ilea's movements were slow, allowing for meditation in between strikes. When she finally grabbed onto the warrior's hands, she moved him towards the oncoming spear, seeing the projectile stop an instant later.

Fire rushed over the three of them as she heard the fox roar. The scythe wielder moved in and dug his weapon into the monster's leg, the flames moving up and away from her enemies. She watched the claw warrior scream through his molten skin and steel as he moved apart her arms, kicking her in the stomach and sending her back, his arms free again. *Two thousand mana left.* She thought, her armor reforming before shards of ice crashed into both her and the fox. When another lance rushed at her, a purple beam intercepted it, sending it crashing into a nearby wall before skeletons rushed in, cut apart by scythes and claws. She stepped towards Maro and the fox too moved closer, the heat setting his shield and her armor aflame, neither inhibited as her limbs reached the two, quickly healing their injuries. "Their healer is down." She said, grinning as her own ashen lance slammed into an incoming metal one sent by their highest level mage, his armor black and undamaged.

# Chapter 315 Survivors

## Chapter 315 Survivors

Ilea noted that Maro was uninjured still, his shield with a purple hue in her sphere and dozens of connections to the undead and skeletons that rushed at the enemy group. Catelyn stepped back, moving closer to them as she panted, blood dripping from various wounds and burning up immediately, slowly healing thanks to Ilea's power. *We need time to recover. How much fucking health do you have foxy?*

Ilea watched the skeletons freeze over, the level two eighty ice mage having lost his helmet looked mostly uninjured, the two warriors burnt and steaming cut through the undead Feynor with scythe and claws, sharp enough to sever steel and bones as the connections to the necromancer were cut. One was at three ten and the other at three twenty one. The barrier mage at two seventy five was crawling on the floor, moaning in pain as he grasped his missing face, scales, armor and skin molten together. The curse and drain mage had stopped draining mana, likely because her resistance was causing more problems than it was worth it.

The lance still stuck in his side, he was bleeding from dozens of cuts, limping alongside the wall as he tried to get some distance between the groups. He was at level three hundred nine. The fire burning the ground, walls and ceiling had stopped near the Feynor and she saw in her sphere that one of their mages, at three hundred and two was influencing the flames. Lastly there was the mage in black armor, none of his features showing as he formed three lances of steel around him. The battle had gone



on for a while, both parties starving for mana, some for health as well. It had cost her heavily in resources, Catelyn likely as well, to take down their healer but in the end it would be worth it.

The others likely had a way to recover too but it would be slower than a dedicated mage. *Should we even fight?* She wasn't sure. The enemy had the numbers but the fight hadn't been as one sided as one might expect. Ilea's ability to pretty much ignore Catelyn's ridiculous fires had cost them a man and Maro brought numbers to distract them, bones still piling up next to him as more and more of his creatures formed and stood up. One look at Catelyn was enough to tell her how this would end, the fox monster literally seething.

“Recover your mana. I'll keep them occupied.” Maro said, stepping forward as a tide of his skeletons rushed at the Feynor, many of them quickly cut apart or frozen, a broad purple beam crashing into the fire mage, his own magic trying to cancel the death magic before weapons of bone slashed into him from the creatures rushing towards them. Minor cuts only but enough to distract him, a second beam slamming into the mage's legs while Ilea deflected the steel lances flying at the necromancer.

Her own projectiles were sent at the injured mages, the barrier mage pierced before he slid away, not dead but certainly taken out of the fight for now. The curse mage managed to deflect her attacks but he stumbled and fell, his injury worsening. It didn't take long but when Maro's creatures were all cut down, Catelyn stepped forward, releasing a cone of fire that enveloped all but the warriors, ice and steel mage who teleported to the side of the limiting hall.

She heard the muffled screams from the barrier and curse mages as well as the fire mage who tried redirecting the attack but failing mostly. A beam of purple light slammed into him before an ashen lance pierced his head, sending his body tumbling back, dead and unmoving.

Three notifications, the mages reduced to molten steel and skin. Ilea had recovered a couple hundred mana but still waited as the remaining warriors approached quickly. Her heart of cinder was eating away at her health but she refused to let it go yet. Catelyn moved to the side as quickly as a small

fox would move, dodging the scythe strikes as the warrior using claws slammed into Maro's shield, ripping away at his defenses while his body started to burn with purple flames. Beams flared out but the warrior dodged them with incredible speed. Ilea realized that the metal mage was forming a massive array of needles, hundreds of them floating in the air around him.

She in turn formed walls of ash connected to herself, moving them when he released the attack, focused on Maro. The air around her froze when she blinked to intercept his projectiles, a chunk of her ash turning to ice before it shattered, hundreds of needles rushing through, stopped by her ash or armor. She felt them dig in but ignored it, instead blinking to the ice mage who vanished immediately, Ilea following as her wings spread. A beam of freezing mana slammed into her chest, her ash cooling down as crystals of ice formed on her. She didn't blink, waiting until she had reached the Feynor.

His eyes wide open, he vanished. Ilea blinked to the disturbance she felt in her sphere, appearing while she sacrificed three hundred health before releasing Heart of Cinder, the attack charged up longer than she had ever tried before. The heat rushed out, slamming into the mage as her ashen limbs cut into him, her wings moving them both forward before he smashed into the wall, Ilea slamming into him right after.

Whatever shield he had put up had saved his life but his armor was gone now, as were his shields. Her fist slammed into him, time and time again, lances of steel slamming into the ashen armor on her back, coupled with dozens of needles, both exploding and digging deeper before once again ripping out chunks of armor, skin and muscle. It didn't change the sound of bones cracking under her fist, the wet sound of brain matter being reduced to an unidentifiable sludge. Ilea knew he was dead before the ding in her mind even resounded. She deflected two more lances with her limbs, a third one navigating around them before it dug into her skin, finding a spot where her armor hadn't recovered yet.

She stumbled to the side, the remains of the dead Feynor hanging inside the broken in wall as she felt the steel dig deeper and deeper, dull explosions resounding as she healed against the damage. New tissue formed over the needles that exploded moments later, ripping through what she had

recovered. The mage was focused on her alone, only standing ten meters away as more and more needles of black steel formed around him.

A group of explosions ripped through her lungs, heart and other organs as she blinked away. A chunk of mana left her as her body returned to normal, armor of ash forming on top as she stared at the mage. A massive shock wave made them both turn towards the others, bones and corpses exploding in purple light as both Catelyn and the scythe warrior moved quickly through the debris to avoid the death magic.

The sounds stopped a moment later, purple and normal flames littering what remained of the hall, water dripping down from above. Ilea gulped as she saw the claw warrior standing before Maro, his stomach pierced by the shining talons. A sudden flare of purple fire pushed the Feynor back a little, bones forming around Maro as a roar resounded, the hairs on her back standing up before she ran to the side, dodging the steel needles rushing after her.

Ilea reached the mage before she felt the attack coming, her ash pierced by the spikes suddenly extending from his armor. Her back was pierced by the needles as her ashen limbs started smashing into his armor. *You should have blinked.* She thought with a savage grin, pumping destructive mana into him, his arms holding hers as they struggled against each other, ash against metal, both his armor and projectiles against her limbs and walls of ash forming to stop his needles to get in.

Neither relented, both meditating to recover mana. Whenever his steel was pierced, it reformed and closed up again just as her own ashen armor recovered time and time again. The only difference was that his actual wounds didn't heal as quickly. They stayed entangled for half a minute, his spikes ripping into her defenses, digging into her ash before explosions ripped out more and more of it. Her back had opened up already, tissue ripped out and recovering time and time again.

When she finally slammed her ash through the steel covering his head, she cut into one of his eyes before releasing her Heart of Cinder, big parts of his steel burnt away and his face partially molten. He stumbled back, steel falling to the ground as it moved out of her body, Ilea's wounds slowly

recovering as she fell to her knees, nearly out of mana and focusing only on recovering the wounds. The Feynor made pained noises, Ilea grinning at the realization that he didn't have his Pain Tolerance in the second tier.

While she recovered more mana, she didn't let up with her ashen limbs, cutting into his face again and again as he struggled to recover his armor, her limbs moving on to his legs and stomach. He stumbled to the side to dodge the lances she sent his way, the third one hitting and breaking through. Ilea stood up, her ash connected to stop his teleportation magic before she grabbed him by the shoulder. Her armor had recovered entirely, his attempts to attack her slamming into her defenses as she charged up her Absolute Destruction. She only had enough mana for five seconds, her third tier Aspect of Ash wrapping her arm in fire, her sacrifice of three hundred health lighting up blue runes below her ash. Her fist landed on his face, his head bending backwards as her mana wrecked his brain. Her limbs followed, cutting into his neck before she finally ripped off his head, throwing it to the side, the ding resounding in her mind.

*No head recovery at least.*

The hall was filling up with water, parts already flooded as more and more flowed in from the cracks above. She found a crouching Maro covered in wounds and protected by bones, purple fire around him as he deflected the scythe time and time again. Slowly, she walked towards them, her mana recovering and her wounds healing. Catelyn was gone, not gone but small and unconscious, lying below Maro. The other warrior lay cut in half to the side and the scythe wielder didn't look to be in much better shape than the necromancer himself. Both were panting, their attacks slow, the scythe digging into the man with each strike, the fire flaring up before each hit.

Ilea blinked behind the warrior, the Feynor turning before his blade cut into her, stopped by the ash as she grabbed onto his weapon. He jumped back, effortlessly ripping the pole out of her hands before he sunk down to one knee. His armor had been discarded, the Feynor only having his scales for defense. Looking around, they heard the ceiling crack, chunks of stone falling down as Ilea extended her limbs, stabilizing both Maro and Catelyn, the latter in much better shape than the necromancer. Her eyes opened wide as she saw his wounds, his body barely alive. *That's a death mage for you.*

She grinned, looking at the Feynor who panted hard, coughing up blood as he stared at them with hate. *Leave.* Ilea thought, the ceiling cracking more before the warrior rushed at them. Her limbs moved out, the Feynor dodging them with quick movements before steel projectiles slammed into his chest, Ilea's ashen ones piercing his stomach before a beam of purple light enveloped his head. He stumbled back, weapon flung to the side before he slid to a stop. Terok appeared above him, his arm slamming down on the Feynor's head. The hit landed but the creature grabbed and moved away his steel arm, the metal groaning before Terok's other arm shifted, a beam of white light cutting into the enemy's head before his arm went limb. A ding resounded in Ilea's mind as Terok stumbled backwards, holding his arm as the steel reformed.

"We have to get the fuck out of here." He said, Ilea lacking the strength to speak as she pushed all her recovered mana into the two mages. She grabbed Catelyn with ashen limbs and supported Maro with her shoulder, his arm weakly wrapping around her as they stumbled out of the room, Terok holding up a shield to deflect the chunks of stone coming down on them. Water flowed out into the hallway, the sounds of collapsing stones audible behind.

Ilea never stopped healing, her mana recovery directly flowing into the other two. Catelyn was stable when they reached the next room but Maro's condition didn't change. She collapsed when they came out into the hall, the necromancer falling next to her as she meditated, forcing herself to stay awake as the corners of her vision became blurry. Terok stood next to the three, asking something that Ilea couldn't hear.

Time passed, Ilea's mana recovering as she healed away. Her vision was back to normal and while exhausted, she was ready should there be more enemies waiting. "Was that all of them?" Terok asked.

"I think so." She said simply, spitting out blood that had accumulated in her mouth. "Why were they here?"

The dwarf shook his head, checking on Catelyn. Maro was on his knees, head towards his chest with eyes closed. Ilea felt him exude mana still, likely in a meditative state as well. Her healing was showing results by now,

much slower than anybody she had healed previously. There was nothing inherently wrong with his body, at least not to her spell. The pulses of purple mana in her sphere were likely an indication.

When Catelyn's insane health pool was topped, she started pushing mana into her more aggressively. On the third try, the fox woke up. Coughing lightly, she stumbled up and looked around, baring her teeth. Ilea chuckled, "You're safe. Look almost cute without knowing about that fire form."

The fox laid down and snorted, "You... you saved my life."

"As did those two." Ilea said, her ash still in contact with all three of them. "We should head back, in case the Abyss gets attacked." She stood up and nearly stumbled, catching herself before Terok moved in to help. "Don't." She exclaimed, holding a hand out towards him.

"You should rest. Too much mana use. I trust Haiden and the power of that group... they weren't here for the town." Catelyn said, starting to pace around slowly, "We need those corpses. Anything left behind could help..." She said, looking at the dwarf, "Terok. Can you get them out or are your injuries bad?"

He looked at Ilea and then shook his head, arm forming into a big sledgehammer, "I'm fine. Only joined the fun in the last moments. My rate is twenty silver per hour."

Catelyn ignored his mention of pay, "Why would they target me? Or did we misjudge the Feynor's power. The Dark Protector will run into trouble if some random attack squad has six people above three hundred."

"The attacked the Vineyard Caves too. Didn't see a single one above my level. Amongst hundreds." Ilea supplied, looking at Maro who had stopped exuding mana. She quickly moved when he collapsed, catching him before he woke up.

"Ah... my dreams come true. A lovely knight in nothing but her shredded leathers." He muttered, quietly. The strain on his body to deliver the joke must have been enormous.

Ilea switched her destroyed leather armor to a shirt and pants, “Thought you were a goner for sure.” She said, punching his head lightly.

“Death itself cannot be bested.” He coughed, blood spraying onto her shirt and face. “Sorry.”

She laughed, ash moving past to clean off the blood, “Then it was targeted. The vineyard caves have much closer ties to the army. Why me?”

“Looked like dragon worshipers. Seems like this age didn’t change much.” Maro said, sitting up as he reassured Ilea he was fine, “You know what they usually like?” He paused, “Fire. You damn near broke through my shield with your presence alone, what the fuck even are you?”

The fox chuckled, smiling wryly while Terok started to rip out chunks of rock from the collapsed in hall. “Well they just wasted incredibly strong people. Can’t say I dislike it. What do you want for you help?”

Ilea shrugged, “I can pet you whenever.”

Maro thought about it and nodded, “Same. Though maybe you can help her with some leather armor.” He chuckled.

“I can ask Goliath, don’t worry.” Ilea replied. The fox just looked at them in turn before shaking her head.

“Elana was right.” She said, “You two are utterly useless when it comes to negotiation and management. I’ll open accounts in your names, my debt will be repaid, if you want it or not. The petting is fine, as long as you don’t sexualize me. I’m a fox.”

Maro snorted, “The big version capable of melting forged steel is a turn on, not going to lie.” A hard hit by Ilea made him shut up.

“Don’t jeopardize our privileges. What are you going to do about the Feynor?” She asked.

“This is a heavy loss. I doubt they will try something again soon. All I can do is make Hallowfort more attractive for powerful people and level up

myself. Guess my days of dabbling in alchemy are over.” She said and sighed.

“Need someone to pinpoint their locations. I won’t dig out that whole bloody room.” Terok said, having paused his work.

“I’ll get someone to you. Come, let us return for now. If there were any Feynor still, they would have attacked already.” Catelyn said, moving towards the town, guided by three flames floating in the air.



# Chapter 316 Cleanup

## Chapter 316 Cleanup

Ilea wrapped herself back into her ashen armor when the three of them returned, Catelyn announcing the group through the opening before they ascended.

The fox addressed one of the warriors when they arrived, “Galín, go help the dwarf. Follow the trail of blood.”

“Sure you’re alright?” Ilea asked Maro, the man just shrugging.

“Where’s Elana?” He asked the fox when they joined up with Haiden, the cat person grinning when he saw the three of them.

“She returned a couple minutes ago, interrogating those we captured from below.” Haiden explained.

Ilea didn’t see her in her sphere and simply blinked to where the barkeeper was pointing. Opening the door, the enchantments deactivated and she gulped at the scene. Five dead Feynor lay on the floor, eyes closed and no wounds showing on their bodies. Elana was standing in front of one, Mist swirling around the creature before Ilea heard a bone snap. “Here to stop me?” She asked, smiling at her.

Ilea stared at her and then the Feynor, looking uninjured other than his broken neck. The woman glanced at Maro and Catelyn joining, “Pain is not

a reliable way to get information my dear. I assume you won then? How many escaped?"

"None." Catelyn said as she stepped forward, "What did you find out?"

"A diversion. To draw out the one carrying the flame's blessing. I assume that is you. They spoke of one of the most dangerous squads in the Feynor troops. The numbers were overblown I thought. More interesting was the fact that they all named one Obsidian creator as the leader of this assault. Did you encounter him? Black armor head to toe."

"I killed him." Ilea said. "None escaped."

"Good. That makes this simple then. We have several options but if I know you Catelyn, you'd rather ignore it." Elana said, the fox stepping up next to the Feynor.

"Some might see it as a notable challenge to attack us. There were other attacks, did you hear about them?"

"Some. Those I interviewed knew little of the bigger plans sadly." The queen replied.

Catelyn nodded and sighed, "We will support the dark army, at least financially. Plenty of gear available from all the dead too. I doubt the Protector will leave such an array of assaults unanswered. The Feynor will be too busy to attack us. In the meantime we can work on our defenses. Word of the expedition?"

"Still nothing. One scout returned just before the attack, he told of creatures behaving frantic even in the first layer. We have to send more and prepare to defend, I don't have a good feeling about it Catelyn. Will you three be sticking around?" Elana asked.

"There's only two here." Maro said.

"Terok must be close by. I'm sure you will already be suitable repaid for the help today. I know I'm cold Ilea but thank you. I do appreciate you two

saving one of the few sane beings in these god forsaken lands. I'm sure the council can grant you some more privileges if you take on some assignments." The woman spoke, Catelyn nodding.

"We need more information. Plenty of things to work through for now." The fox said and turned, "I'll coordinate with Haiden. Is Goliath still missing?"

"He's in a Taleen dungeon to the north." Ilea supplied.

"He gave you his obelisk?" Catelyn asked, chuckling, "Of course the old fool would trust you instead of me."

"Can't fault him there, she just saved your furry ass." Elana said, "Good to know the smith is alive. I'll organize the cleanup if that's alright. You take care of the defenses." Catelyn nodded to her.

"We'll move back to Tremor for a couple days after this." Ilea said, looking at Maro.

"It's going to be a week at least to get a grasp. There will surely be interesting work for you afterwards. Check back if you feel like it. Oh and let me know if you leave anything in the armory behind." Elana said, nodding to Ilea and Maro before she walked out.

Catelyn jumped up, floating right in front of Ilea's face before she touched her face, "First you bring me cake and now you save my life. Whenever you need me, I'll be there." She moved on to Maro, "No cake but also thank you. It's a shame you got your out. At least your charms don't work as well on Dark Ones." She giggled and vanished, leaving Ilea there with the king.

*So it is a skill. Or a stat.* Ilea squinted her eyes at the man who hid behind his helmet. "I'll check the injured again, back to help Terok and then off to Tremor?"

He shrugged, "No vacation then. Well I suppose it feels good to stretch my muscles again. Maybe moving some rocks would be fun too."

“Sure you didn’t hit your head?” She walked out, making her way towards the room with the injured. Maro chuckled at her question but didn’t reply, simply following her in silence. Most of the Dark Ones looked at them when they passed through the main room, nods and approving gestures aplenty. Ilea was glad none actually talked to her.

The weakened healing pulse she felt coming through the thick wooden door made her smile. The healer was still at it, granted she was only gone for an hour, less even. The creature looked up and inclined its head lightly. “Do you need help? Missing limbs or anything serious remaining?”

The creature nodded, getting up from their meditative position and quickly moving around the room, pointing out those with injuries they apparently couldn’t treat. Ilea moved her ashen limbs and recovered missing organs, limbs as well as simply treating wounds too extreme to quickly stabilize for the other healer. Maro sat down with the creature and joined them in meditation while they both worked.

Ilea mostly let her skill do its magic, knowing nothing about the alien biology of the creatures here. She checked through the notifications from the fights.

*‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Genesis Regenerator – lvl 305 / Warlord Chieftain – lvl 290]*

...

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Scythe Ruler – lvl 321 / Guardian of Ki – lvl 318] – For defeating an enemy ten levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 304 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 303 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 9’*

*‘ding’ ‘Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7’*

*‘ding’ ‘Curse Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Heat Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 13’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ice Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘You have learned the General skill: Obsidian Magic Resistance – lvl 1’*

***Obsidian Magic Resistance – lvl 1***

***A rare form of steel manipulation requiring a strong mind and an abundance of Obsidian. Like many obscure schools of magic, its powers are varied and flexible, molded by their masters. Your body has suffered heavy damage from such magic, making it a little more resistant.***

*‘ding’ ‘Obsidian Magic Resistance reaches lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Obsidian Magic Resistance reaches lvl 3’*

Ilea finished healing the last of the injured as she invested her remaining 25 stat points, ten coming from the previous fight and subsequent level ups. Ten she put into Intelligence, ten into Wisdom and five into Vitality. “Hey Maro, are there multipliers for Wisdom and Vitality?”

The man opened his eyes, looking at her when she walked back. He nodded to the other healer and stood up, “Possibly. One of my class skills reduces the mana cost of active skills used, why I can keep going for so long. It actually increases in potency the lower my health goes.”

“That sounds amazing... although I’d just walk around half dead to get the benefits.” Ilea said with a smile. “Any idea what’s up with Catelyn’s health?”

They walked back towards the shaft leading down to the ruined city above the Descent, landing in the darkness before they continued towards Terok. “Maybe she just invested a lot into it. The two warriors we fought had ridiculous health too.”

“I guess.” She said, shaking her head.

He glanced her way, “What is it?” Neither were bothered by the darkness.

“Just... you know we just won against a bunch of three hundred plus enemies... actual people. Just surprises me.”

Maro laughed, “They didn’t fight just anybody. Plus didn’t you clear out Kingsguard just a couple days ago? They were five hundred. More predictable of course but still. My own brilliance ignored for now, Catelyn is probably older than those Feynor combined. Those flames... I understand why someone worshipping dragons would come look for her. They lacked the intelligence to simply ask for her knowledge to be shared but hey, everybody makes mistakes. Then there’s you. Recklessness and a deathwish getting you classes more powerful than most. Mana intrusion and healing adds a combination few prepare for, rare in both monsters and people.”

“Don’t look that lost in thought. I was down to my last three hundred health, that claw one nearly got me. Catelyn was literally knocked out, I don’t want to know how low her health was. If Terok hadn’t come I’m not sure if we two could have killed that warrior.”

*So I nearly died... again.*

“Now I don’t know what you just realized but a creepy grin shouldn’t be your go to move. They came in a prepared team and in most other circumstances they would have succeeded. I assume they tried to capture Catelyn. Capturing a three hundred plus creature. Fucking ridiculous. What they didn’t expect were two even more ridiculous people coming to help.”

“Three.” Ilea added, hearing the sound of Terok’s laugh. For as selfish as he gave himself, he had really pulled through every time so far.

“Yes. Well he’s a brilliant opportunist. Do you think he will ever realize that he doesn’t have to try to impress you anymore?” Maro mused and Ilea just chuckled.

“It’s good for him. His fear of being left behind coupled with immense greed bring out the best in him.” She said, nodding towards the dwarf who waved at them from a distance.

Maro looked at her but didn’t say anything, the two reaching the dwarf and dark one. “Need a hand?” Ilea asked, cracking her neck.

“About a hundred, yes. Just start smashing through the rock. You know where the corpses are.”

She nodded and got to work, the warrior stepping aside with grace. Ashen limbs cut into the stone with ease, the pressure alone softening them up before chunks were ripped out. Terok looked her way and shook his head, “You’re embarrassing me. Do I even have a use for you anymore?”

“I like you as a friend.” Ilea said after a while, the dwarf just looking down on his metal arms before continuing their work.

Bringing out the last corpse, Ilea lowered it onto the pile right outside the tunnel, guarded by Maro who really could have added some undead to the help. “That’s the last one.” She said, the warrior nodding next to her.

“Thank you. For defending this town and for defending the revered alchemist.”

Ilea wasn’t sure what to think of that title, Catelyn likely forcing it on them. “Hey, you know most guards here.” The dark one looked her way, “I talked to one a while back. Found him dead when we arrived. This was his hammer.” She said and summoned the massive obsidian battle sledge.

“Tal was their name. A noble warrior protecting Hallowfort for centuries. May they find their way to the next life, or rest in peace should they wish so.” The warrior said and looked up.

“What will happen to the hammer?” Ilea asked, twirling the heavy weapon in her arms.

“It will be stored and given or sold to somebody. Perhaps molten should nobody want it.”

“What about family?” She asked.

The warrior shook his head, “Tal was a solitary guardian, such as many that reside in these parts. Should you wish to have it, I am sure they would be honored, to have their weapon wielded by the Ashen Savior.”

“Ashen savior?” She asked, looking at the obsidian weapon, black as the night. It was a little shorter than the one she had wielded in Lisburg, acceptably balanced for her height.

“Does the name not please you? My apologies ashen healer. Yet without you and the king of death I doubt the outcome today would be so favorable.”

Maro chuckled from the side, Ilea rolling her eyes, “Don’t worry. I would like to have it. I’ll leave some gold with you too.”

The warrior immediately shook his head, lifting both hands to stop her, “I refuse. In the name of Hallowfort. It is the least we can do to repay you.”

Ilea was about to retort when Maro spoke up, “Take the bloody hammer you dunce. What is this? Bloody court? Nobles trying to up each other on their generosity?”

“Hey fuck off.” She said, looking at the hammer with a smile.

***[Quiet – Rare]***



An appropriate name she thought, given by a guard that died for no fucking reason. *Thanks Tal.*

“The answer of an uncultured warrior with no regard for nobility.” Maro said, shaking his head.

“Yes exactly, and the reason you’re sticking with me I assume.”

A snort came from Terok, the dwarf exiting the collapsed hall, “Just warn me when you start fucking. I don’t want to die because of a stray spell going off in your fated battle.”

“He’s married.”

“She hasn’t bathed in years.”

“A lie.”

“Why can I never shut up?” Terok asked and held up a finger to his metal head, “No... keep your witty shit to yourself. I nearly died today. So did you two as a matter of fact. Why can’t you shell shocked like any normal person, rethinking their life upon such an event.” Terok mumbled to himself as he walked past.

“Death holds no meaning to its king.” Maro commented dryly, helmet on and showing confusion through his body language.

Ilea nodded, “I’m just collecting near death experiences for my next evolution.”

Terok’s murmuring became incomprehensible, Ilea holding out a fist to Maro who didn’t react. “You’re supposed to hit it with your fist.”

“Why?”

“It’s like a celebratory gesture when a team does something they’re proud of.” She explained.

“So we’re a team now?” He asked, Ilea taking down her fist.

“Forget it necromancer.”

Terok looked back, “To Tremor? I saw at least two people I owe money to in the Abyss. Maybe your treasury holds something useful.”

“I could use the money I have here.” Maro suggested but he waved him off.

“They can wait another day, or week.”

“You don’t intend to pay them?” Ilea asked with a chuckle.

“Maybe after the story of a brave dwarf saving Catelyn and her helpers has spread far and wide.” He said and laughed, the others joining in, the tang of blood around them not bothering her anymore.

The organization of Hallowfort certainly wasn’t sleeping, the Abyss empty when they returned. The fires had been put out already, the cleanup under way. Several small pyres had been built, groups of dark ones and others standing near as the fires consumed the bodies of those fallen. She noted that the Feynor too had gotten a pyre. The three were recognized and greeted as they made their way through the town, the scenes reminding Ilea more of the days after a massive festival instead of an attack by an enemy force.

“They’re taking it well.” She noted when they reached the bridge. Tal wasn’t lying there anymore she noted, halting as she formed a single lance of ash. “Rest in peace friendly warrior.” She said and sent her ash lance flying, the projectile dismantling and fading away a couple dozen meters into its flight.

“Well it’s not the first time someone attacked Hallowfort. Mostly it’s monsters roaming out of a nearby dungeon or trying to find new nesting places. Three takeovers by extraordinarily stupid scavengers have been

attempted since I came here. There's a reason it's supposedly one of the oldest settlements in the north." Terok explained.

"They just need better fucking ale." Ilea said, "You sure you're not a brewer in disguise?" Her gaze was on Maro.

"No, I'm sorry I shattered your favorable image of the noble necromancers. Most of us just raise corpses and bring death." The man replied, with an obvious lack of brewing knowledge and experience.

They made their way out, walking through the tunnels before reaching the surface. Ilea looked over to the entrance of the Penumra dungeon. "You think I can handle them now?"

"Maybe. Only problem I see is you getting paralyzed and falling in. Their numbers are higher the further down you go and they swarm no matter how many already focus on someone." Terok commented.

Ilea looked him up and down, "How did you go in there then? Your group was laughably underleveled."

"Normal people inform themselves about the monsters and dangers lurking in dungeons. Then they prepare, preferably with plants that give off a smell these particular beasts hate. You will probably survive quite a bit longer if you would put in even a minimal effort into such endeavors." The dwarf added, Ilea rolling her eyes as she summoned her monster encyclopedia.

"Shame there's nothing about half the beasts out here."

Maro chuckled, "Then maybe you should write one yourself."

"I'm not a writer, nor an artist. Ask the elf, he's good at sketching beasts."

"Ah yes... you reminded me. He will want to talk to me." Maro said.

"Why are you bothered? Hate elves too?" Terok asked.

The king just shook his head lightly, "I just don't feel like talking about Rhyvor. Not yet."

“Talked about it plenty already.” The dwarf said with a chuckle.

“It’s different to being interrogated.”

Ilea shrugged, “I mean you don’t have to talk to him. What’s he going to do? Throw a tantrum?”

“He helped train Terok and the three elves that helped clear out the knights of Rhyvor. You can call me many things but ungrateful isn’t one of them.”

# Chapter 317 The End of Patience

## Chapter 317 The End of Patience

Ilea was still playing with the idea of trying the Penumra dungeon as they made their way back to Tremor. The suns were shining in the sky, black clouds visible as they moved over the landscape, purple lightning flashing from time to time. “Don’t do it Ilea. As tough as you are, it can’t be healthy.”

Terok had been the one to speak, Ilea following his gaze to a nearby cloud. She smiled, “Don’t worry. I’ll try that when I’m not with you two. Hey Maro, doesn’t that look like your death magic?”

“Not exactly.” He replied, “I can see why you didn’t become a mage, differentiating between intricate and ageless schools of spells by color.”

“Fist go smash, yes?” She asked in a mocking tone, both of them laughing.

“Seriously though, your what was it, Azarinth magic? It’s quite unique. How do you get a class associated with it? Can’t see how something like that can be forgotten.” He added. “Incoming.” He said suddenly, the three of them moving towards the wall, hiding in small crevices as the body of a massive snake like creature moved past them in a high speed.

*[Earth Serpent – lvl ????]*

“Don’t try it.” Terok said from behind her, Ilea just rolling her eyes.

“Hey I’m not as irresponsible as I was.”

“Four question marks.” Maro commented as they exited from their hideouts. “It definitely noticed us but I suppose we’re not worth the trouble.” The snake had nearly filled out the whole crevice, hundreds of meters long and at least fifteen wide. A near golden sheen on its scales.

“To answer your earlier question, you eat a moss. Elixir I suppose. Kills you if you’re unlucky. Then you get the class.”

“Healing orders...,” Terok commented, shaking his head. “Not worth the trouble.”

“Why do I feel like I could take it?” Ilea asked suddenly, looking at the snake that vanished around a corner nearly a kilometer away.

“It’s mostly the size that constitutes its power, not its magical expertise.” Maro commented.

Ilea scratched her head, “I fought a Basilisk back when I was below a hundred... the thing took damage I think. Now... with all my upgrades.”

Terok chuckled, “I’d love to see that.”

“Basilisks are rather peaceful creatures, mostly ignoring small creatures like us. I’m not sure how you even managed to get one to fight.” Maro said.

“It attacked us out of nowhere, dozens died to that peaceful creature. When we left it didn’t pursue.” She explained.

“I suppose it had its reasons. Young maybe or you simply walked into its territory.” Terok said.

“Everybody an expert on Basilisks now? Try to tank its wind magic.” She said and shook her head.

Maro held up a hand, the three of them flying into another crack after surfacing for a couple hundred meters. “They don’t use wind magic as far as I recall. Wasn’t it lightning?”

Terok nodded, “Aye... yellow lightning. Never seen it but my father talked about it once. The ground shook when it hit, the creature hundreds of meters up in the air. I imagine it close to what those storms do.”

“What the hell did it do then?”

“Ever had ants in your home?” Terok asked, “I doubt you’d burn them up with your most powerful spells.” He said and laughed.

Ilea didn’t, she was glad the thing had acted as it did. Otherwise she might have been toast back then. *I’m sure it didn’t act. Now I’m interested.* “It seemed weak.”

“Well I’d like to see you fight after pushing out a baby.” Maro said, Ilea rolling her eyes at the comment.

“I’d be fucking angry probably.” *And exhausted, in pain, wanting to see my kid instead of some idiots camping in the hospital room.* It was a possible explanation but she wasn’t completely content with it. *I planned to face it anyway.*

“Don’t go and fight it.” Terok said, “Worrying as a friend.”

“I do what I want.” Ilea replied.

“Yea I know, that’s why I warn you. No sane person would seek out a Basilisk.” He said, “I’ll take whatever you don’t need of its body. The scales are supposedly incredibly versatile.”

*Not good at defending against ice magic.* She thought.

They shared some more thoughts on the Basilisk as well as the healing order’s elixirs. The Azarinth order was apparently not the only one with painful or dangerous initiations. Neither knew why that was the case when she asked.

“There are healing classes you can get without eating the world’s hottest chili though?” Ilea asked when they entered the mountain below which Tremor lay.

“Yes but healing orders have always discouraged non members practicing the magic. Not uncommon. Lightning magic was nearly unanimously reserved for nobles, as was anything related to blood or the void. I would assume those still hold true.” Maro surmised.

“Probably.” Ilea said, only remembering that one healer back in the Taleen dungeon expedition. *Didn’t they try to poison me? Or was that Alice’s family? Well I remember that healer to be an ass either way.* Trian was a noble, as was Edwin and Maria, the three examples of lightning, blood and void magic she thought of. *Another way humans are jeopardizing themselves. The adventurers in the guild looked at me like a fresh baked muffin when they saw my healer tag.*

“Any idea why it is like that? Couldn’t any random person learn lightning or blood magic?” Terok asked.

Maro waved his hand, “Well yes and no. Without knowledge it’s definitely harder. Elixirs help too, especially to get a class initially. Most influential people wouldn’t want commoners practicing their choice of magic. I doubt any of those schools are any better or worse than anything else. Otherwise all the most powerful adventurers would be nobles.”

When they landed in the cathedral, Ilea immediately noticed the piece of paper stuck to the double doors with an expensive looking dagger. She walked over and read it quickly.

*‘Ilea, I seek your assistance.*

*Deceived, running off to face the Great Hall.*

*They are not ready.’*



The letters were rushed, Ilea spreading her wings as she focused. The handwriting was the same as the books he had translated, “The Taleen dungeon. Turns out the trio didn’t learn after all.” She said and ascended, blinking twice before she appeared in the rock formation above the entrance. Checking for storms, she shot off. Ilea ignored the crevices, instead moving in as straight a path as possible, her wings moving stronger and faster than before her evolution. *Let’s see if these fuckers are enough to avoid the storms.*

A cloud moved dangerously close a couple minutes later, forming out of seemingly nowhere. She flew to the side but the cloud was too vast, lightning flashing down a couple meters away from her. Ilea was moving high, near where the dark storm hovered. Her Azarinth Fighting picked up the lightning a split second before it struck. The impact smashed into the stone below, a shock wave visibly expanding over the land.

Her ashen armor reformed, seared by the pure arcane power that had flashed by a couple meters away from her. Ilea moved a little lower, giving her more time to react while far enough from the ground to ignore the shock wave of the impact.

***‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4’***

Another strike came from above, Ilea blinking to get distance between herself and the dangerous power. The armor on her back was burned through, her wings reforming as she fell for a second. And then she was out, blinking several times to get distance to the cloud that moved eastwards. Breathing out, she focused and moved on. *Not training in there yet. But I can survive.* She pushed on, her storm resilience testing moved ahead by reason of overconfident elves.

Ilea sped over the land, concentrating on the destination and slowing down as she blinked through another passing arcane storm. The lightning hit much further away this time, allowing her to speed through without interruption. The safe area in front of the dungeon entrance was visible now, only a couple hundred meters more to go.

When she landed, Ilea found Elfie pacing in front of the entrance with a grim expression on his face. When he noticed her, his mouth twisted in a way she didn't understand. "How long have they been inside?" She asked, her wings disappearing as she looked around, trying to sense anything.

"I do not know. I couldn't stop them... they moved when I was out. Ilea please..." His voice was frantic, his claws out as he hissed.

"How do you know they're even here? Maybe they went further down into Tremor. More importantly, why aren't you looking yourself?" She stayed calm. As risky as their decision was, the three weren't pushovers either. She would certainly help out, if only for Elfie's sake but their stupid decision to go on with this was their own.

He hissed again, this time at her, "You know very well that I cannot do that human. I know, I sensed them. Do you believe I lack understanding of those I train?!"

Ilea stepped closer, her ashen limbs forming behind her, "I know that it's a stupid rule by your fucky oracles. If you care so much about them then maybe you should rethink your bloody priorities. And don't fucking hiss at me like I'm your fucking prey asshole. Be grateful I'm here to help." She knew there were actual physiological reasons not to enter but the others had managed somehow so he could too.

His face twisted again as he gazed at her and then the entrance, his hand clawing on his own neck so hard blood started flowing. Ilea rolled her eyes and moved towards the dungeon, "Are you coming or not?"

Ilea didn't say anything else, just shaking her head as she turned her eyes from him and rushed into the Taleen dungeon. Her Sentinel Huntress skill quickly picked up on the magical signs of the three. They certainly had grown in the past year. Enough to face the Centurions. Green eyes flashed in her mind, memories from long ago. The pain and terror making their way back before she willed them out. *No*. She refused, simply refused to be afraid, to let herself be beaten again by those mindless creatures. It wasn't planned, she wanted to train more, get more powers but at the very least she

would try. If anything she wouldn't let them take any more of the people she knew.

“Really am a fucking Sentinel...,” She spread her wings when she reached the town, blinking and rushing through in her full speed. She noted the Taleen Guardians moving below her, all making their way towards the Great Hall. The fleeing expedition had rushed right into the blades of the oncoming Guardians, it seemed the elves had triggered a similar reaction. *They're really here then.* She gulped, a smile coming to her face as she focused on the power rushing through her, “You're not the same as back then.”

Ilea landed on the bridge, dozens of Guardians turning her way as she breathed out. Her ashen limbs rushed out, piercing through steel limbs and severing heads as if their defense was made of paper, she blinked twice, the crowded machines on the bridge reduced to scrap. The gates had been forced open. *They needed time for that.* She blinked in, finding fewer machines here, many more already destroyed. Small craters as well as burning pieces suggested destroyed Centurions, at least two. The hall was bigger than the one she had visited before, the same white stone but several hundred meters of it, chairs, tables and even smaller buildings were crowding the place in addition to the guardians of this forgotten town.

She focused her gaze on the closed green gates at the end of the hall. If she knew Goldie and Hera, that's where they'd be. Neither cared about treasure, no, they just wanted to fight the toughest fucker in the room. *It's going to be a long lecture by Elfie. Didn't sound like they beat him. Avoiding the strong to fight the stronger doesn't seem advisable. Have they never heard about steady progression?* Her thoughts came to a stop when she reached the gates. They were closed, a bunch of guardians pierced and ripped apart by ashen limbs when she landed.

Her sphere saw through the steel before she blinked, a massive mace slamming down onto her wings, the force rushing through them and her hands right behind, the ground cracking slightly under her strained legs before she looked up. Green light shined down from above, a white throne was centered in the back of the big hall, eight pillars connected the floor to the ceiling on each side.

“I had that...,” Heranuur said, coughing up blood as he struggled to stand, a big grin on his face, his sharp teeth showing.

Ilea pushed him back with two ashen limbs and started healing, “Oh yea? Four organs destroyed and most of your ribs broken. Let alone your back... how can you even move?” She looked around the hall and focused forward again.

Her damaged wings reformed as they opened up, Ilea staring down the two green eyes set into the tall creature’s head. She could swear they looked different than the normal machines. *I knew they were different.* Her muscles were tense, her breathing steady. “We meet again...,”

***[Taleen Praetorian - ???]***

She noted that Neiphato had finally decided to use his second class, wood continuously growing around a second Praetorian a couple dozen meters away, the elf standing before a crouching Seviir, the latter breathing hard, likely trying to recover mana. *He’s actually holding it back.* The scythes had difficulty gaining enough speed to cut through the wood, more and more roots replacing those already cut as he slowly stepped back. “How long can you hold?” Ilea asked in his general direction, never leaving her foe out of sight.

The mace again rushed at them, this time horizontal and aimed at her. The air whistled as the weapon neared, Ilea activating her blink before she saw magic emanate from the mace itself, her spell disrupted before the heavy weapon was upon her. One wing intercepted the blow from the side as she held up her arm, the blunt hit traveling through her as she was sent tumbling to the side, skidding to a halt. *Bruised.* Her whole side was bruised, internal bleeding even. Her healing started working.

Neiphato didn’t reply, sweat dripping from his face as he focused on his magic. *Not long then.* “You three should leave, if you couldn’t beat Elfie you’re not going to beat them.” She was back to full health as the Praetorian turned towards her, mace casually held in both hands. The difference in its green eyes really made it seem like an intelligent insect, studying its prey.

The elf looked her way and she knew it was futile, “Ilea... we worked months...,” He coughed, blood spraying onto the floor, “This is it. If we can’t beat them...,”

“You are so fucking stupid.” Ilea murmured with a grin, “Well, if you die. You die. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She shot off, the mace coming at her immediately. This time she ducked under the long handle as the main piece rushed past behind. *Even the one using the fat weapon is fast as fuck.* She needed a plan, quickly. Her limbs smashed into the Praetorian, slamming into a magical barrier as her mana flowed into it. She managed to hit twice before its mace came back.

She dodged sideways to avoid the blow. Feeling an attack coming, she blinked back as far as she could, a green expanding sphere of energy burning over the floor. *No visual cue, no activation time either.* She knew it would have corroded through her armor with the initial hit, part of her skin too. The floor sizzled, whatever that sphere produced was still burning into the white stone. *The one back then never used that ability. Are these different ones?*

*Might want to avoid it.* Dodging another three hits, she focused on one of its massive steel legs, hitting it with all sixteen limbs, the shield flaring up each time. There was no mention of Storm of Cinders damaging others’ skills but them being machines it was possible the shields came from enchantments or were even considered natural defenses. The fact that she could see her destructive mana still eat through the upper layers of the defenses at least supported her assumption.

The mace crashed down again, Ilea jumping back twice to avoid the hits, the Praetorian following with quick movements. Closing in, the creature used its area skill again, corrosion eating into the nearby pillars as Ilea blinked away once more. As long as she kept it away from the others, there was no danger to herself. At least Heranuur wasn’t trying to intervene for now, instead rushing to the others as his mana recovered, his remaining bruises and injuries healing very slowly. The hall was big enough for plenty of maneuvering, making her speed and teleportation quite effective against whatever the machine threw out so far.

*Those Three aren't enough against that scythe one.* She thought, continuing to lead the machine as it tried to strike at her with a green mace as big as her chest. Another set of attacks followed, Ilea barely moving out of the way before her limbs smashed into the one leg again, the increased range making it a simple affair. She already saw the problem though, her mana eating into the defenses but with the amount she had already used it wouldn't be enough. The damaged layers were already recovering. She needed her Destruction too.

Ilea looked to the side when she heard the groaning of wood, Neiphato's staggering back as the scythes slowly pushed through. *Oh fucking hell.* She thought, moving towards the struggling elf in an attempt to lure the mace Praetorian towards the other machine. The creature was right behind her. Ashen walls formed in front of Neiphato, the elf staggering back as one of the two scythes pierced through, slowed as they slammed into the ash, cutting through before Ilea appeared in front of the elf. "Do something useful or fuck off." She said.

The blade stopped halfway through her wings. The second machine had closed the distance, Ilea's eyes widening as its area attack expanded. She activated her blink but the scythe was in her ash, pushing further and preventing her from moving away. She hastily formed as much ash as possible, two of the elves already having teleported away but Neiphato still stood there, his hands still held up and connected to the wood holding back the Praetorian.

A cracking noise resounded, a part of the attack stopped before the corrosion ran over her defenses, burning about halfway into her armor. The barriers shattered. Elfie had appeared in front of the closed gate, blood running from his mouth, nose and ears as he held up his hands, claws extended. A blow from the mace followed, the immediately forming barrier dented in as he shouted, "Neiphato, get out of there!" She felt the power emanate from him, healing up Neiphato behind her, damn near a third of his body gone.

# Chapter 318 Engage

## Chapter 318 Engage

Rushing to his side, Ilea grabbed Neiphato, six of her limbs carrying the injured elf as she healed him. Hera and Goldie were injured, barely on their feet as they joined Elfie behind his barriers, both having lost some of the fight in them. Neiphato was simply passed out, out of mana as his body slowly recovered. The scythe Praetorian broke out of the wood and rushed towards them, focusing on her before the blades slammed into a set of barriers brought to life by Elfie. “What are you... doing...,” Heranuur asked, Ilea picking up the two with a couple ashen limbs, making her way to the gates before her remaining limbs slammed into the steel gates. A thrown scythe got through, one of her wings moving up to deflect the weapon before it slammed into the entrance, cutting deep into the steel.

“You are no help here.” She said. The red haired elf looked at her, eyes going wide.

“No... we came this... far.” He was pleading now.

Ilea suddenly stopped her efforts to open the gates, looking at him. Elfie struggled to reform his barriers as the two Praetorians hammered into them. “You will die.” She said, her healing having recovered most of their injuries by now, Neiphato’s side having reformed as he slowly opened his eyes.

Heranuur landed on his feet as she let go, wiping the blood from his face as he ripped off a dented armor piece from his leg. He winced when a wound reopened, quickly closing thanks to her continued healing, “And what is the

problem with that? There's no meaning to my fighting if all I do is getting saved." He said and stood up. "These machines... they are the reason we're here, the reason we fight. I understand... that you humans think differently Ilea... but you. You face impossible odds all the time." He cracked his neck, a grin forming as his sharp and bloodied teeth glinted red from below, "Thanks for the heal." Seviir looked better, the elf's eyes focusing as bones started forming some sort of armor around him. Heranuur collected his swords from the floor, "I will fight here, no matter the outcome. It was an honor to have met you."

Neiphato sat back as he watched the scene unfold. Elfie was stepping back as a scythe moved past his face, only slightly deflected by his defenses, the other Praetorian slamming his mace into the annoying barriers. She watched as both Seviir and Hearnuur walked towards the other elf, their skills activating as they prepared to fight. Ilea's healing stopped as they neared their full health. "Stubborn, inexperienced... I know what you think." She heard Neiphato speak up next to her, "But please. Let us help here. Let us show them, what elves and humans can do." He got up slowly, his face not looking quite as young anymore as he stared at the machines.

"Let us show them, that it is them that should fear us." Ilea felt goosebumps rush down her arms, the elf touching her shoulder gently as she stared at the green eyes of the Praetorians. She closed her eyes and breathed in when two new figures appeared next to them.

"You are all idiots." She said, skeletons rising slowly, metal spikes hovering towards the machines.

Terok laughed as he appeared next to the two elves behind Elfie, "Quite a mess, and here I thought we were done fighting for a while."

"Humans and Elves." Maro mused as he slowly walked to her side, Neiphato glancing at the necromancer. "I'm not the only one with a hidden stat it seems." Purple flames came to life around his heavy robes.

"The hammer one has a spherical corrosive area spell." Ilea said as the three of them joined the others, Elfie coughing up blood as he kept the barriers up. She extended a limb to heal the elf, finding his whole body in turmoil.



“Don’t. He just needs time to adjust.” Neiphato said next to her. Ilea noticed his condition worsening as she used her healing mana, stopping immediately.

Roots formed around the elf next to her, his whole demeanor changed. Neiphato spoke with confidence, “Necromancer. I assume you are above three hundred?” Maro nodded, “Good. You and Ilea will be the best shot we have at actually defeating these monsters. The shields are hard to penetrate. Focus on damaging their legs as soon as you’re through. Take the one with the hammer.”

The wood creator stepped next to Elfie and touched his back, “The rest will hold back the second one. The disorientation will fade, Cerithil Hunter.” Ilea noted how Elfie gulped at the words, their roles very much reversed, “Move now! May we die in honor or destroy our enemies!” Neiphato shouted, the mana of dozens of skills pulsing in the air around them. The barriers broke and chaos returned, Ilea and Maro teleporting to the right side of the hall as the necromancer sent his undead at their assigned Praetorian. Ilea formed ashen lances while the others rushed to the other side, their two groups separating the enemies successfully.

“You think you can take that one alone?” Maro asked as they stood a couple meters apart, a beam of purple crashing into the shield followed by lances of ash that shattered upon impact. The Praetorian lifted its mace to block the continuous beam before a sphere of corrosion melted away the skeletons and undead Maro had created.

Ilea formed more lances as she started towards the machine, her wings vanishing, “I mean you lot already joined. Still a chance for you to fuck off?” Her sixteen ashen limbs writhed behind her, ready to strike. “I’ll try to weaken its shield with my mana intrusion. Can you tell anything about its strength?” As much as she itched to try herself, the damage to its shield from before had already recovered. Having both of them on her would spell trouble.

She rushed in, jumping over the mace as she twirled, her limbs smashing into the shield. Sixteen uses of Storm of Cinder burned quite a bit of mana. She watched the shield turn red in parts, the cinders sizzling through as she

jumped up, her fist delivering Absolute Destruction, the skill at 100 mana per strike still using more than her sixteen limbs combined. Ilea saw the blue mana burn into the shield before she blinked away, the sphere of corrosion spreading.

“I mean you can see it too.” Maro said, floating between the pillars as he sent beam after beam of purple energy right at the spots Ilea had already damaged, “Focus on separate spots, I don’t think the enchantment is encompassing the whole thing.”

Ilea didn’t let up, rushing in again as soon as the wave had vanished, the ground sizzling and a weird scent coming to her nose, “Front two legs first then.” She said, her limbs smashing into the legs as the creature moved quickly to avoid her strikes, its mace rushing at her time and time again as she dodged and weaved through, the fourth hit unavoidable. Her blink was disrupted once again, her arms held up to block the metal coming from above.

The weapon impacted, her arms smashing into her face as she was partially pushed into the stone floor, stone cracking against her armor of ash and the power of the strike. A wave of air rushed out from the impact, Ilea already healing her bruised arms as her limbs once more delivered their payload into the right front leg of the machine, remaining for a moment to add her reversed healing. Maro’s beams didn’t let up either, precise and deadly as they burned through the shield, her own mana coupled with his digging through the defensive layers, stripping away more and more.

Four overhead slams she dodged, the fifth one coming from the side, sending her tumbling once again before she slowed down, skidding on the floor. The Praetorian followed, moving as quickly as she flew, Maro teleporting to be able to target its front legs as Ilea formed a set of ashen walls in front of her. The mace crashed into and through her ash, Ilea ducking under the slowed attack when her Storm of Cinders finally got through the shield. “Now, the front right!” A powerful purple beam cut into it as Ilea blinked closer, her fists crashing against the leg that stood as tall as her, Absolute Destruction and Storm of Cinders coupled with her sixteen limbs sucked her mana dry, some returned thanks to her second tier Reversal but the machine had a high defense against it. She felt the attack

coming but didn't let up, getting in another strike at the same time as a purple beam rushed past her shoulder, the leg ripped off right when the corrosive sphere burned over her.

Ilea blinked back, the ash on her discarded as new one formed, her face, chest and thighs burned through, her skin dissolving as she counter healed. The Praetorian pursued but nearly fell, the damaged leg snapping when it took a step, its integrity not enough anymore for the heavy and fast machine. The time it needed to adjust was enough for Ilea to recover, the corrosion continuing to burn into her skin behind the newly formed armor of ash. Heart of Cinder didn't seem worth it considering the shields, focused attacks necessary. *One leg down, five to go.* She smirked, reminded of her first battles against the Taleen Guardians. Her mind focused, jumping back to avoid another strike as Maro started working on its second leg.

A glance towards the other group revealed that they weren't doing just as well, Elfie having collapsed, defended by Terok while the others teleported and moved quickly to avoid the scythes. *Fight or die.* She watched the scythes slash through the air, three elves teleporting and moving in between as they tried cutting the shields whenever an opening presented itself. Even with an instant, she knew that both of them would be too much for her still. *As expected.* She smirked, a little annoyed about it but a test run with a team distracting the enemy wouldn't hurt.

She noted with the next attacks that the Praetorian learned just as the Centurions did, already more on the defensive now that one of its legs was broken.

The second one snapped half a minute later, Ilea jumping back to join Maro as they recovered some of their mana. Four legs were still enough to move but not quite as fast and efficiently as before, not with the heavy torso on top, let alone the weapon. "You ok?" Maro asked, sweat on his brow as he created a beam of death magic that reflected on the drops, working on the next target already.

"I'm alright." She replied, checking her resources as her mana recovered quickly but not as fast as she spent it. Even with all her resources recovered, she had fought the death spirit in Lisburg, had fought the Feynor there too

as well as in Hallowfort and now she was here, perhaps a couple hours of sleep would have been advisable.

A dozen green mist like spheres suddenly formed above the Praetorian, the machine unmoving as it created the green shimmering projectiles. "I'll take care of them, just keep focusing on the leg." She said and started forming ash, sending streams of it at the quickly approaching acid that sizzled through. Ten were already dealt with when they reached the pair of fighters, Ilea's wings quickly forming before the magic ate through most of them, leaving skeleton like protrusions coming from her back before she discarded them again.

Compared to her created ash, her wings benefited from their own bonuses just like her Armor did. Not nearly as powerful but enough to make them noticeably different than her freely created ash. The machine hadn't moved while the attack was happening, Ilea advanced again as soon as the spheres were dealt with. The ten seconds of meditation had gotten her enough mana for a couple more doses of Storm of Cinders.

The Praetorian did what it could, going as far as feinting with its massive mace to get Ilea pinned down, the only way it could manage to kill her quickly. It targeted Maro too several times but the man was fast, his teleportation having a longer range than Ilea's too. He was aware of his surroundings at all times and Ilea noted too that his beams never got in the way, not even with her frantic dodging and quick weaving around the enemy's attacks. The most impressive part was that his beam rarely stopped burning into the machine's shields.

"Ilea!" The sudden shout of Terok made her vanish, appearing where she heard the voice. Neiphato lay on the floor as Seviir held back a scythe with his arms, the former damn near cut in two by his waist. She blinked again, slamming away the Scythe to get an opening, the second weapon coming in before Heranuur deflected it with his blades, flying back ten meters from the blow. Her ashen limbs moved the open wound together as she focused on healing it, the Praetorian distracted once again by the two elves, Terok in close combat too after leaving Elfie behind.

*By now they should have learned to go for the injured.* She noted, watching Maro around fifty meters away as he continued blasting the leg, some skeletons having joined his ranks again to take over her role as a melee distraction. It would be enough for a while, the machine slowed down by the missing legs. Neiphato coughed, groaning in pain as the wound finally closed. “Your bones are fine, it missed most of your organs.”

The elf grit his teeth and slowly got up again, hands lifted as wood started to form again, “I’m fine. I’m sorry...,” He said, eyes looking towards the scythe Praetorian as Ilea blinked back towards Maro.

Only two skeletons remained but she noted the difficulty the machine had at dealing with them, resorting to its corrosion sphere to finally be rid of them. Moving in, her limbs delivered their payload, her fists smashing into the now unshielded leg several times in the two seconds it took for the Praetorian to use its area attack again. She stepped to the side and punched one last time, its mace smashing the ground next to her as a beam of purple light finally cracked the metal and Ilea blinked away.

They didn’t let up and twenty seconds later the fourth leg was destroyed, Maro immediately summoning a bunch of skeletons from his ring as both of them teleported towards the second undamaged Praetorian, “I’ll keep it occupied.” He said, one out of the six skeletons he animated running at the machine, two legs and arms remaining as it dragged its massive body over the floor towards them, the grinding noise overshadowed by Heranuur’s explosions.

Neiphato screamed, wood forming before him with both scythes stuck within as the others hacked away at the shielded legs. *It’s reforming too quickly for them.* “Shout before it gets through!” She appeared next to the front left leg of the creature, the purple beam hitting before her ashen limbs crashed into it. The enemy immediately ripped out its scythes from the wood, Neiphato staggering forward as it slashed at Ilea, both weapons coming in horizontally. She jumped, straightening in the air as the blades rushed past her both above and below. Blinking immediately after, she continued her focus on its leg, the others moving in and out as her sphere perceived it all.

Seviir appeared near its head, slamming his bone claws into the shield to distract it. Terok was back with Elfie, metal shields held towards the crawling Praetorian. Maro didn't let up, hovering close enough to intervene with everything, more skeletons forming and hacking away at the crawling monster. Her resources were getting low already and not even one of them was destroyed, *So much for fighting them alone.* She smirked.

Neiphato went as far as stopping his attacks as he teleported towards Terok, standing a couple meters away as he recovered some mana. She thought about going for the machine's arms but they moved too frantically, much harder to target as well as more dangerous, even with the high range of her limbs. Attacking close and personal allowed her to blink if necessary, getting her limbs tangled up ten meters away would be problematic.

"Incoming!" Maro shouted, Ilea seeing the spheres of corrosion before Neiphato teleported again.

He shouted back as he held up his hands, roots forming as the spheres started moving towards him, "I got it!"

Jumping back, Ilea avoided the scythe rushing past, scratching the ground as she felt the air pressure. She was one with her skills and her body, her legs stepping back quickly, her torso turning before she ducked, followed by a somersault backwards. The metal scratched against her ashen armor, the Praetorian building more speed with each swing of its scythes, its torso turning quickly, the weapons scratching deeper and deeper before she was forced to teleport, appearing behind the machine and targeting one of its hind legs.

*It stopped.* She attacked as the Praetorian slashed at her again, its speed back to normal. *It builds up speed with each attack.* The two elves each came from another angle, the Praetorian still focused on Ilea when finally, a punch of hers fueled by most of her skills except her third tier Aspect of Ash ripped through the first leg, the metal piece flying off towards one of the walls. *We're running on fumes here.* She thought while moving on to the next leg, using the moment of disorientation to land another hit immediately. Despite her mana dipping below a thousand, Ilea was

thoroughly enjoying herself. The others were likely worse off except for Maro with his seemingly unlimited supply of beam energy.

They could get injured and required healing, sure but right now Ilea knew her own power wouldn't quite be enough to face the two of them. Compared to the cluster fuck of an expedition force that was with her the last time she had fought Praetorians, this time she trusted each and every one of them to fight without errors, to ration their resources and keep at it, no matter the danger. It was more akin to her group in the Shadow's Hand but this time they had an unanimous foe and no reason to bicker. While it was incredibly dangerous for the others to face the machines, she was happy they provided the opportunity to maybe even destroy them.

This wasn't a job for money, fighting some monsters that were bothering a nearby settlement or taking care of some lunatic blood mage that got drunk on his power. This was a different league, the Praetorians a more personal enemy for both the elves and Ilea, their destruction not a simple mission requirement but a rebellion against an untouchable foe that had terrorized them in different ways. She breathed out, moving her torso back as the massive blade moved past. A blow that would have cut her in half the last time.

Another blade came at her, Ilea lifting her arm to deflect it ever so slightly, her limbs rushing out from her back to slam into the enemy shields. Her eyes shined blue in the dimly lit hall, ash wreathing around her, *I'm not running today.*

# Chapter 319 Taleen Praetorian

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Seeing the others unable to respond, Ilea simply deflected the blades coming for her, the third hit cutting halfway through her armor and the fourth one penetrating. Her skin and muscles weren't easily damaged either, blocking most of the force before the fifth hit was only stopped by her bone, her arm trying to regenerate around the blade as she tried holding on to the weapon. Maro finally separated the second leg of the scythe Praetorian, the two elves waiting to the side as they regenerated mana, Neiphato focusing solely on the crawling machine, wood corroded through as they both formed their elements of magic to fight one another.

The second scythe penetrated her stomach with the ever increasing speed and power, ripping through her armor, skin as well as organs. She smirked, blood dripping from her mouth and onto the ash covering her face. Her right arm gripped the blade and held it in with all the strength she had, her ashen limbs covering both blades as she held them back, Maro moving on to the third leg of the creature. *You're going to lose.* She felt the cold of a curse spreading through her body but it was insignificant, her defenses and resistances too powerful for the effects to take hold in a meaningful way.

Six seconds she could hold onto the weapons before they were ripped out of her body, dealing just as much damage as they did when they had penetrated. Freeing up her armor near her mouth, she spat a mouthful of blood to the floor before blinking away, her injuries healing. Not as quickly as they should thanks to whatever curse was inside of her but it was



manageable. “Are you ready again?! I need some time to recover mana!” She shouted, watching the creature turn before the two elves moved in again.

Meditation came on and her recovery increased, her mana down to two hundred and her health down by a couple thousand. Healing was a priority for now and she had used only her Storm of Cinders as a means of attack in the last three minutes. Still, with sixteen limbs it was quickly burning through her batteries. *They wouldn't have stood a chance.* She thought, watching the elves move in. The shields were ridiculous, only Ilea and Maro combining their efforts doing enough damage to get through. *And here I speculated on who would win between a Kingsguard or one of these.* The elves successfully got its attention, mostly dodging as fast as they could with alternating attacks to give each other room to breathe.

“Watch out!” Terok shouted towards Neiphato, the elf focused on the corrosive mist spheres, unaware of the thrown mace flying right at him. The dwarf appeared, metal shields held forward before the weapon hit, taking both the dwarf and the elf behind him on a short flight through the throne room. They both teleported before they hit the wall, the flying weapon luckily not categorized as an enemy in contact with their bodies. Ilea kept regenerating, her wounds closing as the dwarf and elf resumed their posts, Terok's metal and armor suit had dented inward but held up surprisingly well. Throwing a two handed mace while crawling is not the intended way of using it after all.

*I'm surprised the thing even thought of doing that.* Having recovered a couple hundred mana, she moved back in, focusing on distraction first and foremost, using Storm of Cinders when an opening allowed for it. Maro with his constant meditation didn't have as much of a mana problem, both of them continuing their focused assault. Knowing that the machine built up speed if its attacks kept going, the three melee fighters teleported away whenever it started with its frenzy, quickly distracted and stopped by someone attacking from behind.

When they finally broke through the third and fourth leg of the scythe Praetorian, Ilea blinked towards Terok, the others following quickly while the Praetorian toppled over. Nobody spoke at first, Ilea breathing hard as

she formed several walls of ash just in case the machines used their limited ranged capabilities. Neiphato and Maro joined them too, "I'm pretty much out. Is it safe enough to recover for a while?" Maro asked as Neiphato collapsed next to him. Slight burns from the acid but otherwise uninjured Ilea noted.

"We should fly up to make sure they can't reach us." Terok said, grabbing the still unconscious Elfie before hovering upwards. The rest followed suit, flying up before hovering slowly. Ilea held onto Neiphato, taking over his job of neutralizing the corrosive attacks with her creation skill. Her walls of ash moved up with her.

"Stay behind me. Take him." She said, moving Neiphato into Heranuur's hands with four of her ashen limbs. The scythe Praetorian threw his weapons as soon as it realized the group was unreachable with most of its legs broken and the fact that they were hovering above. Ilea's wings spread as far as they could, the weapons cutting through her walls with ease before impacting her wings. The momentum was reduced enough to allow the others to dodge easily. The weapons rushed back to the machine before they slammed into its hands again.

"Did we win?" Terok asked, "Doesn't look like they can do much at this point." The machine put down one of its weapons, using both arms to throw the scythe at them.

*Nicely jinxed.* Ilea thought, her wings overlapping, the ash punched through before the blade slammed into her armor. The blade had a greenish glint of magic on it, cutting into her defenses and a couple centimeters into her chest. She ripped it out before it fell downwards, Ilea seeing the Praetorian spinning after having slammed the two legs into the floor for stability. The second blade was released, spinning quickly before it crashed through her reformed wings, her armor and her chest. She saw the damage it would do but nobody else could likely take the attack and live.

The blade pierced muscle and bones, finally stopped by the armor on her back, a cough filled with blood left her, the cool feeling of the curse flowing through her before she ripped out the weapon, holding it against the second blade that was coming. Most of its momentum was stopped before it slid

past, crashing into the wall behind them. She sacrificed a couple hundred mana to recover instantly, “Maro it’d be helpful if you start burning down its health, I won’t be able to take this forever.”

Terok gave Elfie to Seviir and moved closer to her, a part of his armor separating and forming a shield that quickly hovered in front of her. “Might help a little.” He commented. Maro moved behind her too, his purple shield forming around the two as he continued firing his beam at the scythe wielder.

“Couldn’t you do that earlier?” She asked, ash forming to stop the corrosive mist.

Maro shrugged in the air, “You wanted to see what happened didn’t you?” The next blade hit, ripping through his barrier before penetrating Terok’s shield and slamming into her wings. The blade still got through her armor but this time it didn’t penetrate her bones. “I doubted it could throw that hard.” Maro added in a serious tone, their combined defenses not enough to prevent damage still.

*What do I need to block these throws.* Ilea wondered, watching the purple stream of energy flow down, the barrier and metal reformed to take the next blow, the wound healing as her mana continued to recover. She focused completely on defense now, all the ash she formed connected to her body and creating an ever growing wall. It left her somewhat immobile in the air and soon she had reached the limit of ash she could control, the scythes now barely punching through her armor after working through the thick layer coupled with Terok’s metal and Maro’s shield.

“Will they explode?” Seviir asked after a while, Neiphato awake again and adding another layer of defense to Ilea’s arsenal. She had started splitting off parts of the ash to send lances at the incoming blades as well as unshielded parts of the machine. The Praetorians tried circumventing their defenses but it simply led to the group moving together more tightly, trusting Ilea’s defensive capabilities boosted by the powerful additions.

“We’ll see.” Ilea said, the scythe throws now barely reaching her body anymore. Her focus moved to ashen lances now, a big chunk of her mana

recovered as she sent the projectiles crashing into the unshielded torso of the machine. Finally, after around twenty lances, one of them penetrated. “I think we’re getting close.”

A sudden wave of mana flashed through her sphere, Ilea feeling herself being pushed back a little. The scythes had stopped, the machine now frantically moving closer to them on both legs and arms. Another wave of mana went over them. “Move away from it, steady.”

“Get behind me, as close together as you can, make whatever defenses you can.” Ilea said as they hovered through the hall, the Praetorian following. When a third massive pulse of mana reached them, the machine stopped moving and looked up. Ilea turned around, her wings spreading around the group of elves, human and dwarf. Most of Terok’s armor moved out, reforming in a dome like shield behind her back, Neiphato’s roots forming a sphere around them with Maro’s shield layered in between. Leaving the throne room was the safer bet but Elfie was still out.

A pulse of kinetic energy washed over them, cracking the pillar they floated behind, cracking the walls and the floor, the second Praetorian sent skidding as its corrosive projectiles dispersed. Ilea felt the heat behind her, saw the approaching wall of energy that burned through everything in its path. It moved slowly, almost in a crawl compared to a conventional explosion. The energy reached them, burning through the walls of ash, the wood, metal and death magic shield. Ilea smirked, looking at the half awake Elfie who held out a hand, purple veins pulsing all over his face and arms, blood seeping from every orifice on his body.

The barriers cracked and shattered, Ilea circulating healing mana through herself and all of them as the energy pushed into her. Her Ashen armor was burned through, her skin and muscles evaporating faster than she could recover it, using chunks of mana to instantly recreate what was lost. A second wave of energy came a couple seconds later, the hastily reforming defenses crashed instantly. When she was nearly out of mana, her normal healing took over. Their defenses were gone. Her bones were seared, the back half of her body pretty much gone, Ilea’s skills and classes taking over as she fell. Two soft dings resounded somewhere in her mind.

Someone caught her as her sight returned, her brain reformed before anything else, blood dripping down as her organs started recovering. The smell was overwhelming, everything had been burnt. She found herself not really caring, looking up at Maro's face, the blood pooling below them. One of his arms was burnt to the bone, his teeth gritting against the pain. "Did... anybody... die?" Speaking was difficult she found, all the recovered mana instantly sent to reform her body.

"We're fine. Thanks to you. Now stop speaking until you have recovered. You're one hard nut to crack." Maro said, purple flames going up and searing his wounds shut as he nearly buckled from the pain, still holding her.

"The gates broke!" Terok shouted, his armor mostly gone, a couple of metal lances hovering around him.

Ilea closed her eyes and focused on her healing, hearing Neiphato speak close by. "Come, it is our turn now to defend them." Turning her head slightly, she wearily blinked open her eyes, seeing the three elves ready their weapons, burns showing all over. Taleen Guardians, some rare Centurions in their midst pooling in as a wooden barrier formed around them, Terok grunting as he dragged Elfie inside.

Maro put her down ten seconds later, the bleeding had stopped and her skin mostly reformed. Bones came from his ring as he animated the skeletons with his magic to help the others. "I'll support you from here, mana is still rather low." He said, Neiphato nodding as his roots continued to spread around them.

"Now let's see who can get more." Heranuur said, Ilea knowing that he had a stupid grin on his face. She heard the cracking of Seviir's bones. A chilling sound, she found. Had she met the elf back in Riverwatch, him being one of the attackers.

*I can see that. And yet they're so normal.* She breathed in, her chest reformed and her lungs back in working order, the partially cut rib cage as strong as before.

“You will lose.” Goldie said, the two of them running off before the dull sounds of fighting could be heard, steel and bone against metal, the impacts of projectiles on wood, ranged Guardians below level two hundred hardly a concern.

Ilea relaxed, closing her eyes again as she lied on the floor. Her body had recovered, barely a minute after half of it had been missing, no mana left and her health down to half. She smiled, *Half of my body missing, half my health. Maybe that's what the critical damage calculation bit meant.* She sighed happily and checked the messages, trusting the elves as far as handling themselves against the horde of Guardians.

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Taleen Praetorian – lvl 600] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Taleen Praetorian – lvl 600] – For defeating an enemy two hundred and ninety or more levels above your own, bonus experience is granted’*

*‘ding’ ‘The Azarinth Sentinel has reached lvl 305 – Five stat points awarded’*

*‘ding’ ‘Kin of Ash has reached lvl 304 – Five stat points awarded’*

The ten points went into Wisdom immediately. *Nearly three hundred levels higher and I got one level out of it.* “This three hundred business sucks.”

“Sure, if you’re in a group.” Maro said, “Glad you’re back with the living. Almost worried there, when I held the remaining half of you.” He looked down at her, his arms crossed and helmet gone. A warm smile showed on his face, covered in blood and sweat.

Sitting up, Ilea's ashen limbs came to life behind her, reaching out towards the three nearby people, her sphere back online too now that she didn't immediately need all the mana for her healing anymore. Maro's arm wasn't just burnt but damn near gone completely, insides mangled and fucked up. Nearly half of all his bones in the right part of his body were broken, some damn near pulverized. "Do you perchance have a pain reduction?"

He grinned at her, "Partially. Most do at our level Ilea. Otherwise you wouldn't remain standing for very long." The man closed his eyes when she started healing the damage, his breathing and heart rate slowing. Neiphato was mostly fine, him Terok and Heranuur had been shielded by her the most. Seviir was at the side but she knew he had some sort of self healing. Not the best but at least something. Still, the wood mage had broken bones, severe inner bleeding and a couple crushed organs.

*Tough fuckers.* She started healing him too, the elf glancing back with a smile and striking blue eyes. *This guy should represent elves around humans, not the idiots that just murder everyone.* Terok only had minor bruising, the best in shape of the five. Elfie was out again but other than checking his body, she still left him alone with her mana. None of his injuries were a danger to his life either. Other than Maro and herself he was the toughest here. She continued healing them, her ash cutting through a part of Neiphato's wood to allow a view on the shattered gates, blown out partially by the Praetorian detonations.

The two elves were flying through the chaotic horde of machines, bits and pieces flying around. In the actual throne room only two Centurions remained, the two elves mostly avoiding them and using the other Guardians as shields against the thrown spears.

*'ding' 'Absolute Destruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Sentinel Reconstruction reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 13'*

*'ding' 'Azarinth Awakening reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12'*

*‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Fighting reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 10’*

*‘ding’ ‘Armor of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 12’*

*‘ding’ ‘Aspect of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 8’*

*‘ding’ ‘Storm of Cinders reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 3’*

*‘ding’ ‘Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 7’*

*‘ding’ ‘Keeper of Ash reaches 3<sup>rd</sup> lvl 5’*

*‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5’*

*‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6’*

*‘ding’ ‘Arcane Magic Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7’*

*‘ding’ ‘Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7’*

*‘ding’ ‘Blast Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8’*

*‘ding’ ‘Corrosion Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 2’*

*‘ding’ ‘Pain Tolerance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5’*

While the level ups to her classes weren't spectacular, the skills certainly profited. *So the blast was arcane in nature? Maybe a mana core or something powering them. Weird that I never got anything like that from the Centurions. Oh and Pain Tolerance leveled. I did activate the second tier only in the end. Guess the accumulated pain until now was enough to trigger it.*

“Hey Maro, is there another cap at level twenty for third tier skills?” She kept her eyes focused on the fight happening before her, the elves focusing



on the Centurions now, fighting one each.

The man leaned over the wooden barricade, already completely useless to protect anybody but Terok. Still, a nice gesture she felt. “No idea. Haven’t gotten that far yet. I’m very close though.”

“They’re actually doing it.” Terok said as he walked a little closer, standing near the barrier. “Hey Maro, can you drop me some of that metal you still have? I feel naked.”

Ilea smiled as Maro handed over some ingots, the dwarf’s metal eye focusing on her, his beard disheveled. “I think you look great.”

He rolled his one real eye and started funneling mana into the steel, “Thank you lassie. Saved my ass once again.”

She leaned back and looked at him, “No worries. It’s what I do.”

# Chapter 320 Aftermath

## Chapter 320 Aftermath

The throne room was in shambles, two big craters digging nearly fifteen meters into the white stone, revealing the ordinary rock starting further down. Not even rubble was left behind, most of it simply turned to dust. The gates had been bent and mangled, allowing the Guardians from outside to enter. It seemed though that after the initial wave, those waiting farther back in the great hall didn't rush towards the throne room anymore.

*Now that the Praetorians are dead. Maybe they'll return to their normal positions.* An explosion resounded, the shock wave traveling towards the group of waiting people, Ilea's black hair moving back, settling again a moment later. Heranuur had downed his Centurion first, the blast sending him flying. He rolled a couple times before crashing into the wall with a wet thud. Still moving, Ilea noted. The laughter was indication enough, Seviir and his Centurion battling each other the only noise remaining in the hall now that most of the machines had been cleared out.

Some of Maro's skeletons had rushed out of the hall to push them back even more. "Can your summons fight the Guardians?" She asked after a while. Ilea was in high spirits, both knowing she had successfully saved the lives of all present but mostly because she had helped in the killing of two Praetorians. Her contribution had been significant. It would have been interesting to know if herself or Maro had dealt more damage. *Probably him... damn range.*

Elfie gasped behind them, Terok looking over from his impromptu workbench provided by Neiphato. The elf had formed himself a chair of wood, sitting down with a sigh as he started meditating. Ilea nearly asked for one too before she remembered her own ability to make one out of ash. She was just about to make one when the elf woke, the purple veins showing on his pale white skin. He was already slim but the toll this experience and entering the dungeon had taken on him definitely showed. His cheeks looked a little sunken in and his eyes only opened halfway before he groaned in pain.

He scratched his head before shooting up into a sitting position, eyes wide open as he stuttered something to himself. "Is that normal Neiphato?" Ilea asked. The wood mage opened his eyes and smiled.

"Oh yes it is. Very painful. He's going to feel that for the next couple weeks. I think it's a good experience in the end, one to make us stronger in the long term. Freeing too. Finally rid of the horrors of our kind." He spit on the floor, his blue eyes fierce.

"I... betrayed... everything. All of it.. gone." Elfie said, holding a hand to his face. Ilea wasn't sure if he would rip off his face or start to cry. What she certainly didn't expect was the manic cackling that followed. Even Maro looked away from the fight happening near the gates, glancing at the elf.

"See? Freeing." Neiphato added, self satisfied as he closed his eyes again and continued his meditation. Terok looked a little annoyed, forming armor pieces with the steel provided by Maro.

As quickly as his manic state had come, the elf calmed down again, his eyes focusing on Ilea. "You."

Ilea pointed at herself and looked around in a questioning manner. "Hey, your choice mate."

"Niivalyr Olanis. For many years... I believe, I have known the way. I had not expected a human as annoying as you, to finally bring me here." His expression was sincere, his eyes showing more emotion than she had seen

out of him so far. Other than his fear of the oracles and their laws he had sometimes shown.

“Hey I’m not that annoying!” She retorted, pointing a fork at him as she sat in her newly formed ashen chair, much more comfortable than she had expected. It moved to her will after all. Keyla’s cooking couldn’t be topped by anything right now. Maybe a shower but it was close.

Terok lifted his one eyebrow and shook his head, continuing his work. Niivalyr smiled softly, “Annoying, yes. Also reckless, naive and young. Yet brave and powerful, in spirit and heart. You are truly exceptional, Ilea.”

She lifted her fork and took a bite, noodles in an egg and cream sauce with pieces of bacon. Garlic and cheese were present too as well as some other flavors she couldn’t place. Definitely some sort of Carbonara. “Half of that was negative.” She commented after swallowing.

“Of course. I wouldn’t want you to think too highly of yourself, warrior. It is too easy to think oneself infallible, especially at such a young age.” He said and quickly glanced towards the fighting Seviir. “We all learn in time. Some faster than others.” His tone was bitter before he gulped, his eyes turning a little glassy as he seemed to look past her.

“You took the step Niivalyr... nice name by the way but I need a nickname. Too many elves around now for Elfie.” Ilea commented and thought about it, “Niivalyr... the Ni elf? The elf who says ni? Val? I don’t know.”

“I defied the oracles... broke the unbreakable law.” He looked at her again and shook his head, “This is no time to think on nicknames...,” The words spoken not to her but the general vicinity.

“Calm down, they broke the laws too. I broke a bunch of laws as well.” Terok said and laughed, molding a robotic head. “You’re old as fuck, high time for a teenage rebellion.” He added.

Neiphato opened his eyes and stood up, his face serious as he approached the sitting elf before him. “Master Olanis. You knew the truth, knew that the laws were restricting, shackles binding our people in suffering. Now you

are free. Think on the possibilities, the power you have gained through this understanding.” Ilea stopped chewing as he stepped next to Niivalyr and held out a hand, “Now stand, noble warrior. For all the domains, those alive, those long dead and those yet to come.”

Niivalyr’s expression turned serious, a glint of fear remaining but he grasped the hand with a determined grip, standing up before he hissed at the other elf, a broad grin showing his sharp teeth. Neiphato followed suit, hissing too. Ilea looked at Terok, the two of them a little lost. Maro on the other hand was smiling ear to ear. “Are you crying?” Ilea asked him in a whisper.

He kept staring at them, “I think there’s onion in your food.” He said, “This is great. I wish I was an elf.”

*That’s not how this works.* Ilea thought but just shook her head, smiling at the two elves before a boom resounded behind them, the shock wave traveling past. Moans of pain followed, the clattering of metal falling to the stone floor audible throughout. “My cue.” She said and stood up, taking another bite as she blinked twice to reach the deformed body of Seviir, her healing mana immediately reaching him through her limbs. “That was one centurion.” She said in a low volume, taking another bite and chewing.

Ilea realized most of his injuries hadn’t come from the battle just now, especially his left side being mostly mangled. Heranuur cackled from the side as he stumbled towards them. “I win.” He said and collapsed, an ashen limb landing on him softly before the healing commenced.

*Is this what it’s like to have children?*

Their injuries were taken care of, the others except for Terok joining her at the front of the hall. Niivalyr spoke up, glancing at the two elves sitting up and finally the wood mage, “Neiphato, now that this is done with. Could you please explain to me why in the name of all domains... you chose to face Praetorians?”

The confidence on the wood mage’s face waned quickly, his gaze averted as he started stammering out a response, Seviir saving him the trouble, “It was

a test. To see if we could conquer the dungeon. Once we were inside I suppose me and Hera got a little overexcited. You know how it is.” He hissed, Heranuur hissing his affirmation.

Ilea was surprised she could tell some differences by now, the hissing just a part of their language. “Yes. Well I will add Pain Tolerance training back into the routine for a while. Just in case you get halved like Ilea here. Soon enough we will be able to face Praetorians, don’t rush things. I am nearly seven hundred years old, there is plenty of time. Learn something from these humans. Steady progression will lead you to greater strength.”

Seviir hissed in annoyance, looking at Ilea and Maro, “They are outliers... humans do not...,”

He was interrupted by a barrier slamming his back, “Ilea overtook you, quickly. She knows how to calculate risks, knows when to retreat despite her pride as a warrior. Her healing gives her an advantage but you have two classes as well, it’s your own fault if you can’t keep up. Most humans live a more secure life, with values and goals hard to understand but we can learn from them, as we can learn from any race or people.”

Niivalyr bowed to the humans as he continued, “I haven’t heard of a Praetorian killing in a long time. Though news from the Cerithil hunters is scarce, what elves have failed to do reliably in centuries was accomplished by the people present here. Most of the work I assume was done by the two of you. I doubt someone below three hundred can reliably damage the shields. As you should know.” The last sentence he dedicated to his students. “Now that I can stay in mana dense places I will guide you more strictly, alongside Neiphato who has finally accepted his second class. Congratulations.”

He sighed and looked up to the heavily damaged ceiling. Neiphato stepped next to him and put a hand on his shoulder, “You will find your way my friend. In time. For now, let us focus on this dungeon.”

*They’re childish and mature at the same time.* Ilea smirked, watching the ancient beings talk about finally being rid of the abusive relationship of all powerful oracles. *The idiots rushing in wasn’t a completely stupid thing to*

*do after all.* She glanced at Neiphato, questioning if he had anything to do with it. Especially with how supportive he was acting now. The other two didn't seem to care much, more annoyed about the Pain Tolerance training which was just a fancier word for torture.

“Emotional lot. Come on, I'm sure there's treasure abound here.” Terok joined, a new machine suit on him that looked much less complex. He had still managed to get one done in less than half an hour, impressive work Ilea thought. The metal was dark gray and somewhat matte. He had added small forward facing horns to his helmet but Ilea refrained from calling him a copy cat. She had gotten that from the original Juggernaut armor in the first place.

“There should be treasure.” Ilea said, “I've been inside of a great hall before. Don't underestimate the traps, nearly killed me back then.” *When I was just a wee lass, unable to tank a Praetorian's scythe.*

“Good.” Terok said, pointing behind him towards the shattered throne, only bits and pieces remaining, “Then we can start with the hidden room behind this one.”

Maro laughed at that, “Had to get your armor done first?”

The dwarf chuckled and started walking towards the wall, “Of course, wouldn't want to get left behind. Although you two deserve most of everything here. Anybody disagree?”

Neiphato waved him off, “Of course not. We would all be dead without them.”

“I do ask to see what we find at least, if it has great relevance to me I would like to offer a trade.” Niivalyr suggested, neither Ilea nor Maro replying in any way.

*They're taking this way too seriously. There's plenty more dungeons with loot around.* She looked at Maro who didn't seem to care much either. They still had the treasury and armory in Tremor left to open, likely holding quite a bit of stuff as well.

They stopped in front of the wall, Ilea not sensing anything wrong with it. She didn't know if her old Hunter's Sphere would have let her sense anything. Considering her arcane sight didn't reveal the secret either, she doubted it. "There's enchantments here. Illusion, strong skill disruption, shielding and a bunch more, all defensive in nature. Maro what do you think?"

"I don't see half the things you mentioned." The man said, surprising the dwarf as he cocked his head to the side, shrugging a moment later.

Terok turned to the elves waiting behind the group, Heranuur and Seviir punching each other every couple seconds, giddy and apparently highly uninterested. "You two can go clear out more of the Taleen." Niivalyr suggested, both of them grinning before Ilea interrupted.

"Don't enter any of the side paths from the main hall. I don't want to clean off your corpses from a bunch of spikes." They nodded and vanished, bickering amongst themselves as they left the throne room. Ilea rolled her eyes, Maro watching her with a grin.

"You're a good mother you know." He said, crossing his arms as Ilea pondered about punching him. It would only add fuel to the fire so she refrained.

*Still didn't have our bout.*

"As I was about to ask." Terok said, "Do you have runic knowledge or experience with enchantments?"

Neiphato shook his head and Niivalyr spoke, "Only elven. Though I can read the Taleen language if that is any help."

"Seven hundred years and he doesn't know his runes." The dwarf murmured, getting to work.

"Niivalyr. I have something for you that I'd like to have translated and transcribed." Ilea said, looking at the elf who looked back with interest. She hadn't trusted him enough but their actions today ranked at least him and



Neiphato quite a lot higher than before. She summoned her big crate of stuff and rummaged through, her sphere allowing her to find what she was looking for quickly.

A little leather bound diary, worn by age, any color gone from it. Yet it had survived and now she had found someone that claimed to know the language. “It’s something I found on a dwarven skeleton, Taleen likely. The gearon him was named Legate Guardian Armor. Also where I got this.” She tapped the necklace with the Guardian like head.

Niivalyr smiled brightly, “And yet again I fall deeper into your debt, Ilea. I had been wondering about that necklace but deemed it inappropriate to pry. May I?” He held out a hand before she handed over the small book.

“Did you find that in a Taleen dungeon too?” Neiphato asked, looking at her necklace. She nodded, Niivalyr summoning a table and chair before he carefully opened the book. Carefully moving through it, he grumbled and hissed time and time again.

“Most of it is faded. It is a diary.” He said. Ilea felt like he was missing glasses to top off his look.

“Any of the most recent entries remaining?” Maro was the one to ask.

“Yes. Let’s see... *3rd cycle, the year eight hundred and sixteen... Some of the numbers are faded, it might not be exactly that. Still I am afraid. Questioning every day if it was the right decision to make, even if it had meant our doom. Surrendering control, long theorized yet hardly tested. I fear for my brothers and sisters, their children and those to come after. Still, we must fight, must prevail. My duty will soon be irrelevant, replaced by the Guardians assigned. Either that or the enemy will hunt us down, slaughter each and everyone of us.*

*May the One without form prevail. I will guard the Tungsten key with my life.”*

He looked up, “That is one of the later ones. Some more entries talk about hunger, sleep and death. I suppose survival priorities had sneaked up on the

dwarf. Yet still, he had remained at his post.” Niivalyr concluded. He looked at Ilea with sharp eyes, turning on his chair a little, “Did you find the Tungsten key?”

When she didn't reply he continued, “Supposedly Cerithil hunters have found several such keys, each pertaining to a specific metal. The runework and complexity surpasses anything they had ever seen. Yet these stories are mere legends I suppose. The Cerithil hunters lack resources as well as mages to even start to study such a thing. Yet it was deemed important enough for this dwarf to guard with his very life.”

Ilea nodded, “Well let me know if you find out more about it.” She didn't mention the key itself but everyone present could guess at the location. Especially her not denying the possession.

Niivalyr nodded, moving back to the book. “It is safer with you to be sure. If it is in fact in your possession. I will let you know once I have found their purpose.” He hesitated, tapping the wooden table with one sharp nail, “You don't suppose we could see it?”

She sighed, “You said your understanding of runes is bad? Let's go with this, once you all hit three hundred I'll think about it. Sound interesting?”

He grinned, “Well I thought more about paying you your human currency. Or perhaps offering anything else you would be interested in. Yet once again you surprise me. Do come back here at some point, we will be sure to meet your requirement in a reasonable time. Likely not as fast as you have but we cannot take the same risks.” He looked over his shoulder towards the entrance, “They don't count.”

“Of course they don't.” Ilea said and chuckled, Terok cursing near the wall as a sizzling noise resounded. “You plan to stay then? Clean out the whole place?”

Niivalyr looked at Neiphato then her, “I don't know yet. There is much to be learned in this place and the Centurions will be enough to let us advance to the next evolutions. You have laid the groundwork.”

# Chapter 321 Relaxed Exploration

## Chapter 321 Relaxed Exploration

“Just don’t fuck with the dark one smith in the facility. He’s a friend.” She said.

Neiphato nodded, “Our enemy are the Taleen. We will not hurt anybody else should they chose to offer the same courtesy to us. It is a shame, the marred reputation our race has gained over the countless millennia.” He looked at Niivalyr with a serious gaze, “Perhaps that is something to consider too. Being freed of the oracles lends us power not only to enter dungeons but to question their very rule.”

Niivalyr hissed at that, angry or afraid Ilea noted. Neiphato hissed too, the former averting his gaze as he focused on his diary again. “It is unavoidable.” He added when Terok rejoiced, something clicking open. Ilea immediately saw the trap with her sphere, blinking in front of the dwarf before a spear smashed into her ashen armor that formed quickly, her body not moving an inch as the weapon was stopped.

“I could have taken that.” Terok grumbled.

Ilea nodded, “That one, yes. I remember there were some much more dangerous traps around and this dungeon is bigger too. Green flames that nearly killed me, acid as well as fire traps that you lot might not be able to deal with as easily.”

“Sorry.” The dwarf said, “Just surprised.” He shook his head. Ilea supposed it wasn’t a nice feeling to be protected all the time.

“You were in the fight just the same, saved Neiphato and protected Niivalyr. Don’t sell yourself too short Terok.” She said, mostly guessing at his reaction, “Don’t oversell yourself either.” She added, remembering who she was talking to.

He didn’t reply, suggesting her assumption wasn’t too far off the mark. Maro punched the dwarf’s arm before he joined Ilea. “What’s that?” He pointed at the altar standing in the middle of the small room they had found. “Nobody move in, there are enchantments all over the floor. I think...,”

“Yea, big explosion if you walk in there.” Terok supplied in a serious tone, “Anything else in there but that?” They all looked at the diamond shaped white form about as big as a fist, thin green lines flowing on it as if they were veins.

Niivalyr stepped closer, pushing Maro to the side as he stuttered, “That... could it be? Neiphato have you seen one before?” He turned to look at the brown haired elf. Ilea was a little concerned about the excitement in his voice.

Neiphato shook his head, not understanding where he was getting at, “I don’t know what that is.”

“Can we disable the enchantments... if what I think is true then that could be a gate key... you know about the teleportation network between all the Taleen cities? This was described in the notes I found on a murdered Cerithil hunter... two hundred years ago. I can’t think of anything else.” He looked at Terok in anticipation but the dwarf shook his head.

Terok glanced at the elf and then Ilea, “These are highly sensitive runes... I managed to bypass an activation when I even opened up the room but this would take weeks. Even then I would suggest getting a better rune mage.”

“Or I just blink in and take it.” Ilea suggested.

“Or that.” Terok said, “I doubt there’s more power in them than a Praetorian core detonation.”

Niivalyr was pacing, “The risks are too high.. we can’t...,” Ilea appeared in the middle of the room, grabbing the thing and placing it into her necklace. An explosion of green fire flashed around her, wings spreading before they wrapped her in a cocoon of ash.

*Didn’t even get through my wings...* She was a little disappointed in the trap, remembering the green flames from back then. Perhaps she was overestimating the dwarfs. Stepping out of the blazing fire, she gave a thumbs up to the mortified Niivalyr, Maro laughing next to him before he slapped his shoulder.

“What the fuck did you expect?” The necromancer asked, Neiphato having a sly smile on his face and Terok just shaking his head.

The dwarf asked the question, “Did you get it?”

“Of course I did.” She said and summoned the little piece of tech.

### ***[Taleen Gate Key – Ancient]***

“It’s called Taleen Gate Key so I suppose that’s exactly what you described.”

The elf took a quick step towards her, trying to grab it but Ilea just made it vanish again. “You have enough work to do here. Plus we don’t even know if there’s a gate here.” She explained.

Niivalyr hissed but calmed down quickly, “Apologies human. I get overexcited. To think there is a key... perhaps we might be able to access the whole network... doubtful but the possibilities. You know the meaning this item has for us? Our race’s very survival depends on it.”

Ilea rolled her eyes, “Don’t over dramatize it, elves are still around after how many thousands of years of this conflict? You’ll be fine. Plus I have my own goals with this thing.”

“What could that possibly be? No, I still believe it would be safer with you. You are right, we have this whole facility to clear out.” He showed understanding but she could tell he wasn’t completely fine with her having the key.

“I intend to find a good friend of mine who went missing.” She offered her explanation.

Niivalyr nodded, “You are aware of how many Taleen dungeons there are? Of course I won’t deny you but simply offer the low chances of your success. Dungeons aren’t the only places with gates either.”

Ilea nodded, “As soon as I’m done with it, I will pass it on to you. Should you have cleared this whole town and facility of the Taleen.” Another challenge and it seemed he was determined again, hissing fiercely as he grinned, licking over his teeth. *Some habits just can’t be suppressed.*

*I’ll see what Claire and Christopher think about this little thing. Doubt I could find Kyrian after all this time. His corpse maybe but if he’s anywhere close to as capable as I think him to be, he’s probably on the way back already.*

She realized a moment later that she had turned into an npc quest giver. *Oh also Niivalyr, collect 500 leafs of Taleen ivy.*

“So that’s the treasure?” Terok asked in a disappointed tone, “No offense but we have enough dangerous dungeons around. A gate to even more doesn’t excite me.”

Niivalyr scoffed, “It’s not a gate, it’s merely the key.”

“Even worse then. Ilea any idea where the treasure room is?” The dwarf added.

She smirked, “I might. Or well, he might.” She pointed at Niivalyr, “There should be descriptions of all the side paths in the great hall. You’ll be the guide I suppose.” He looked at her and inclined his head lightly.

“It’s exciting isn’t it?” Maro asked, “Exploring the unknown.”

Niivalyr looked at him after a moment, realizing he was being addressed, “I suppose it is. There are however many secrets not hidden within the confines of dungeons, human.” The group was standing in front of the entrance with the treasury mention.

Maro replied, “True, but in dungeons you have a pretty good chance to find *something*.”

“Death usually.” Terok supplied, opening the door, the stone sliding down into the floor before they entered. Ilea noted that it was an enchantment that activated a mechanical device sliding the stone downwards. The Taleen really liked not to use magic exclusively.

“Death to our enemies.” Heranuur said casually and while Ilea cringed a little, she was aware that he had literally just destroyed dozens of ancient robot guardians of a lost civilization that could tear through whole villages without being stopped. With a bunch of daggers.

*Interesting situations I find myself in.* She noted, taking the lead as she checked for traps through her sphere. Terok walked right behind her, his added detection helping prevent a dangerous situation. When the stairs ended, they came out into an open room that was rather low. Ilea immediately recognized the gears and compilation of beams behind the walls. “Oh, I know this one. Stay back, the door will close as soon as I’m inside.” Terok nodded, the rest waiting on the stairs, having heard her.

She looked up and shook her head, entering the room before the way back was closed off, the walls starting to move towards her. “Bloody field trip with my class of deranged idiots.”

“I can hear you!” She heard Maro shout, her ashen limbs moving out and slamming into the approaching walls, stopping them dead in their tracks.

The metal groaned, pushing against her ash.

“Deranged idiots with enhanced hearing, Maro.” She added, the steel bending, springs shooting out and steam released before the trap stopped working. “You can enter by the way.”

A boom resounded, Terok’s enlarged fist crashing through the stone a couple times before he stepped towards her. “Hey, this isn’t exactly dangerous.” He said, looking around as Ilea rolled her eyes, crossing her arms in front of her shirt.

The next room was cube like, open and large, simply occupied by a bunch of Guardians, ranged and sword bearers. Dull green light shined on from above, dozens of pairs of green lights shined towards the intruders. “Ok class, we’re going to get some practical experience here. Make sure not to stumble.” She said and vanished, deciding not to use her ashen limbs but instead dodging the attacks, grabbing onto the guardians and throwing them at the others. Some she simply punched, denting in their cores and sending them flying.

Beams of black slashed through the machines, barriers slamming them together as the steel groaned and bent. Roots pierced through the guardians, leaving them mangled as a set of warriors rushed through, their blades, claws and fists flashing as they obliterated the foes. The guardians were left crushed or in pieces, at least fifty of them cut through in the span of thirty seconds. Ilea blinked and kneed the last guardian straight through the next gate, the green lights winking out as she stood up, rubble and dented steel below her, icy eyes focused forward.

She grinned, looking at the five Centurions protecting an elevator a hundred meters away. The rest of the group caught up with her, stepping into the hall as well. Broad stairs led down to the white floor, green ivy growing on the walls to each side, both around ten meters away. One of the lights was flickering. Ilea wondered if it was intentional, to give a sense of dread. *Do you really want to face these ancient warriors? You don’t.* Taking a step forward, Niivalyr stopped her, grasping her shoulder.



“May we? It has been a while since I faced a Centurion.” He asked, Neiphato, Heranuur and Seviir stepping forward as they readied their weapons, the latter two grinning forward as the wood mage checked the walls.

Ilea took a step down the stairs and sat down, summoning a meal before starting to eat, her armor receding to reveal the white shirt and brown pants, both comfortable and providing the same level of defense as an ornamental flower dress. *I do have dresses actually.* She thought about it but the fabric was simply more comfortable, the cut easier to fight in. And she deemed it a little too extra, her nightmarish horned ash armor filled that role perfectly fine.

Maro sat down next to her and looked at the meal, “Looks good. Benefits of storage items am I right?” She smiled with a full mouth as Terok grunted behind them.

“When are we going back to Tremor?” He asked, looking at the elves that rushed at the Centurions, weapons and spells at the ready before they clashed. Niivalyr and Neiphato joined in somewhat close combat too, probably at the latter’s suggestion. Not every place will be as wide as this hall.

“After this I guess. Elana mentioned some jobs in Hallowfort but I don’t know.” Ilea said, taking another bite. Meatballs in a dark sauce with mashed potatoes and an added vegetable mix of eggplant and tomatoes on an onion and garlic base. *Very hearty.* She moved the dish a little further away from Maro, his gaze fixated on it.

He locked eyes with her and grinned, moving his attention back to the elves. “Good cook. Smells nice.” He paused before asking, “Do you not want to stay in the north?”

“She really is. Keyla, works in Ravenhall. I hear the restaurant is great in general. Golden Drake.” She took another bite, not answering his question because she didn’t know herself. Getting more powerful was the initial goal, she did that. Fighting the Praetorians had been on her list for a long time and while they weren’t the same ones, they kind of were. That was

halfway crossed now, as she had a group to help her out. Maybe she should keep training until being able to kill them herself, then again that would take quite a long time and after her failed vacation in Lisburg, maybe a place a little more safe would be nice for a change.

The monsters didn't run away after all. Then again, others might clear them out. *Miststalkers, Blue Reapers, The Descent, the cliffs Niivalyr has talked about.* For training and fighting there were plenty of options. Finding Kyrian was an option too but the elf was right, there were a lot of Taleen dungs and Kyrian would have likely not remained in the one he teleported to. A part of her didn't want to look for him either, as if the act would have her admit his need for help, possible death. Shaking her head, she refused thinking something like that. The man could drain health and was exceptionally capable. He wouldn't take unnecessary risks. Maybe he had shown up in Ravenhall already, there was no telling how far away whatever node he had appeared on.

The investigation into the Golden Lily was looming as well. She dreaded thinking about it, sighing as she watched the simple conflict of elf versus machine in front of her. *Could at least hire some people to look into Eve. The Lily itself will show up once I go look for them. If they have a bunch of people in my level range it seems like an unnecessary risk to rush it at least.* It has been well over a year since Eve had been murdered. Her stomach dropped a little when she thought of her, covered in blood in her bed. Still, the rage and anger she had felt back then didn't surge up again.

The first Centurion exploded, the elves moving back to avoid the blast. The shock wave washed over the waiting trio as Ilea finished her meal, the fork cleaning out whatever leftovers remained. "What are you going to do?" She glanced at Maro, "Join Lucas in meditation?"

He chuckled, "Maybe...at some point perhaps. I'm more interested in what humans managed to build and do in the millennia I was absent. Maybe have some good ale and visit the Golden Drake."

Ilea nodded softly, leaning back a little as she watched the fight commence. "Ilea." Terok spoke up, the woman looking up towards him, "I've been thinking. There's a ton of treasures here, good levels to be made and a

bunch of elves that care little about gold and precious metals. Would it be alright if I stayed with them? I'm always here if you need me of course."

She smiled, "Of course. You're not my slave Terok. Do whatever you want."

"But... I owe you everything...", He shook his head, "Sorry. Hard to get used to someone with such lacking economic insight."

She laughed and shook her head, "Maybe help out some people who need it too. I can take care of most of my problems but a level two twenty six mage can certainly be godsend for most people."

The dwarf chuckled, "Are you saying I'm useless to you?"

Ilea rolled her eyes, tapping the steel shin of his suit, "You have a tendency to be quite negative Terok. Feel free to stick around if you want to, now that my detection senses for hidden rooms are lessened I'll have to lug a rogue around me at all times."

Maro deemed the topic worthy to add an exceptional suggestion, "Or, punch all the walls."

"Easy for you to say Mr. Skeleton army." She commented to which he smiled.

"Your ashen limbs will do the job." He said, shrugging before his stomach rumbled.

Ilea summoned a meal and gave it to him without a comment, the king lowering his head before accepting the food graciously. The literal frenzy he went into right after too away some of the noble feel she had gotten before. "You can see mana now though right?" Terok asked to which she nodded weakly, looking at the elves again as another Centurion's core exploded, leaving three of them. The hunters didn't look particularly injured. "Well then you'll have to learn to spot subtle differences in the magic around you. Enchantments, except really good ones usually give off some form of

residue. With the quality of your classes I'd assume the skill would allow for such nuances." The dwarf helpfully supplied.

"Adding enchantment spotting to my training list. Thanks." She replied.

He chuckled, "I like how you always sound sarcastic. Half the time I wonder if you're taking me seriously."

"I take you very seriously Terok."

"She did it again." He said, shaking his head before he too tried sitting down on the stairs, finding his metal suit a little too bulky and stiff for the job.

"I think you'll first have to build a new armor in Hallowfort." She suggested but he waved her off.

"Don't worry lassie, I have steel here and the Taleen left behind quite a mass of tools, not that I need much. Plus for the details I have Goliath, you said he was down in the facility?"

"Should be." She replied, "Guess we can visit him before going back to Tremor." The last three Centurions exploded in a flash, Maro scraping every last bit of the noodles into his face.

"Keyla?" He asked, pointing at the box with his fork. Ilea confirmed before he looked up to the sky, "And here I thought finding the way to faith was impossible for me. I must meet her." His eyes sparkled green, serious and determined about his newfound goal in life. Ilea certainly approved.

# Chapter 322 Traps and Treasure

## Chapter 322 Traps and Treasure

The three watchers joined the elves again, Ilea watching in fascination as Neiphato's wood wrapped around a bleeding cut on Seviir's shoulder. Mana flowed into it, quickly taking care of the injury. He looked at her and seemed a little embarrassed, "I learned it after we destroyed the Praetorians... it wasn't available before..."

She nodded, somewhat enjoying the fear in his eyes before she smiled, "I'm fucking with you. Good to see you have a healer now."

The elf looked confused, glancing at Heranuur, "I thought you were fucking with him."

"You're fucking elves? Bold move." Maro said, chuckling.

Ilea rolled her eyes, "It's a figure of speech Neiphato. Why bold Maro?"

The king didn't back off, "Just the proclaimed enemy of all humans you know. Been like that even in my times. You know they eat human flesh?"

Neiphato and Niivalyr looked away as Seviir hissed, "They don't look that bad to me. Plus I can regenerate myself. Unlimited food supply Maro. Saves a lot of money for the household in the long run." Ilea explained slowly, making sure the king would understand such complicated economic decisions.

“I thought the number one enemy of humans is other humans.” Terok said from behind.

“What?” Maro asked, “No back in Rhyvor we lived in perfect harmony. We were actually overwhelmed by monsters in the end because nobody had any combat classes anymore. Very sad to see that perfect utopia gone.” He nodded seriously.

Ilea could tell making fun of Rhyvor and its people was reserved for him alone, not adding anything as she clasped Neiphato’s shoulder, “Make sure to level that skill. It’s going to be the game changer in this group.”

He nodded, looking into her eyes again as he smiled, “Thank you. I believe we all learned that from you.”

Ilea leaned over to Maro, keeping her hand on Neiphato’s shoulder, “See? Look how fucking cute this guy is. Enemies of humanity? I think not.” The elf turned a little red, Ilea letting go of him to advocate her stance against torture.

“They do look very pretty.” Maro confirmed, “How do their women look you think?”

This time not only Seviir hissed but Niivalyr too, Neiphato even putting a hand on his chest as his expression turned serious again in an instant, wood forming on his back as he apparently prepared to fight. “Our females are what you know as Oracles.” He pushed Niivalyr a little, staring into his eyes, “It is a great insult to suggest what you just did. To someone under their influence at least.” Niivalyr glanced at Maro and then at Neiphato, calming down again before stepping away, turning his back on the group.

“Now I want it even more.” Maro said before a barrier slammed him away, the necromancer sliding for a couple meters without any visible damage dealt to him. Ilea couldn’t help but laugh, joined by Maro and Heranuur quickly thereafter. Seviir hissed again but Ilea could tell he wasn’t too serious either. Niivalyr just shook his head as his claws retracted again. A sigh left him as Neiphato walked up to him and patted his back.

Ilea clapped and moved on, looking back at the others. Neiphato smiled at her, "Us two will stay back for a moment if that is alright." She nodded in understanding before stepping into the elevator. The group followed.

"Any traps?" She asked, Terok simply activating the thing as he shook his head. The drive was rather long, Ilea whistling something akin to elevator music before Maro joined in, Terok even adding his voice after laughing. It all ended swiftly when the elevator stopped, a guardian staring at them from the hallway beyond. A bullet was fired, Ilea catching it in her palm, her skin resisting the impact before she dropped it to the floor, a black beam eroding the creature's head before it sagged down. "No appreciation for impromptu musical interludes." She moved the body to the side with an ashen limb, walking through the hallway before they came into a room that made her eyes go wide.

Gears, spears, runes, pipes, scythes, barrels, pits and pressure plates all over. Fifty meters long and twenty wide, so many traps even the Taleen apparently had difficulties hiding all of them in the floor and halls. Maro lifted his hand before she stopped him. "No no no. Don't you dare destroy this masterpiece." Ilea said, Terok already laughing as the two elves looked at each other with confusion.

Understanding dawned on the king's face before he too laughed. When he calmed down again he in turn stopped her as she started towards the path leading through the massive art piece of death. "In that case, let me do the honors. With your defenses it would be boring, wouldn't it?"

She grasped his arms and moved her face close to his, "I think I'm in love Maro." She said with an over the top voice, the man literally taking her and throwing her away.

"Don't play with my heart you hussy! I am the king!" He laughed, walking towards the same path she had started on before. Ilea blinked and appeared right next to Terok, the dwarf just shaking his head.

"What do you think the makers of all this would think if they saw you two?" He asked in a silent tone.

Ilea thought about it and replied seriously, “I think they’d be happy that someone actually chooses to walk through it all. Additionally I think it’s the only way to get to the treasure at all. If it doesn’t trigger some kind of destructive explosion, poison or fire as well.”

The dwarf nodded, “Yea... there’s too much here to even get a grasp. You really think they would think so highly of their traps to simply allow the person getting through uninjured to get to the treasure?”

“Terok, what kind of person do you have to be to even build something like this?” She wasn’t sure of course, the Taleen might have just thought differently but it seemed so ridiculously over the top it would be kind of fitting. “Of course once we’re in there’s going to be another trap to seal or kill us there.”

Niivalyr and Neiphato came out of the elevator ten minutes later, staring at the group consisting of two elves, a dwarf and a human, all cheering as gusts of fire lit up the hall, spears and spikes flying around as well as poisoned darts, fumes and bullets fired from moving contraptions. Maro was dancing through it all, not quite as dexterous and quick as any of the warriors or Ilea would manage but what he lacked in speed he countered with shields. Ilea noted he never used his teleportation, either as a challenge or because there were runes in place. She assumed the latter.

A couple minutes later, the king emerged on the other side, his armor singed and pierced in various places before his helmet vanished, a grin on his face as blood dripped from his mouth, the man bowing with grace. “Thank you! I would appreciate a healer in the next two minutes!” He shouted and brushed a hand through his near gray hair, the glint of sweat on his brow showing in the green light.

“That means I’m next.” Ilea said and started walking, her armor of ash forming around her as she casually and slowly made her way through the sea of traps, the spears smashing into her defenses, the fire washing over



her and the bullets bouncing off without dealing any damage. She lifted her arms to the side when she reached Maro, “You call that a challenge?” She checked him and healed against the poison, already a third of his health gone.

“How can they make Praetorians and the traps here can’t even pierce my armor?” She shook her head, watching Terok move through, mostly relying on his shields to block the various attacks.

“Traps don’t have levels and stats to make them stronger.” Maro replied as he too watched the dwarf slowly move forward. Teleportation really was inhibited within the area.

“Why not? Shouldn’t a high level trapper be able to injure me?”

Maro nodded and glanced at her, “Of course. But do you think the dwarf who made all this is still alive?”

Ilea’s eyes went wide, “So you’re saying all this would have been even more dangerous if the makers were still around?”

“Likely.” He nodded.

*Good thing they weren’t.* She thought, “So the dungeon took over the machines but not the traps?”

Maro welcomed Terok whose armor reformed in parts, Ilea adding an ashen limb for him to take care of his health. “The traps are part of it too but again, no maker around anymore so they’re less powerful probably. The Guardians are autonomous with their own level and all. Makes traps incredibly dangerous though because a lot of people underestimate them and walk into one laid by a high level hunter.”

“Nasty shit.” Terok added to Maro’s explanation, “You can tell if you know how to look. The enchantments here are fueled by the dungeon itself. The difference is very slight.”

The elves followed, Niivalyr and Neiphato the least damaged, the former actually completely fine. Heranuur and Seviir made it a challenge to follow Ilea's example, walking slowly as their bodies were mangled more and more, Neiphato actually extending a root towards both to heal them as they approached. The severity of the damage was obvious as neither denied the help. "You are a bad influence Ilea." Neiphato said, actually hurting her a little.

She didn't react. While he was right, both of the elves were older than her, adults in their own right. They should know better. *At least they leveled some resistances.* She helped him heal the two before they entered the room beyond, Ilea stopping everyone as she entered. "This looks the same as the dungeon I've already seen. From here on only Terok and Niivalyr." She looked at them and was surprised to find nobody protesting. It was fun but the damage to the others and even Maro showed how dangerous the traps were, even in their ancient state and laid bare. "Don't stay in this room. Last time I nearly died because of it." She didn't mention her level on purpose to not give them a sense of security, false or not.

"Ready?" Niivalyr hissed his affirmation and Terok nodded, the three jumping down the shaft before they came out in an open hall, a shining white light came from Niivalyr's arm to reveal the sea of acid below. Ilea pointed at the opening in the wall, "As soon as we take whatever is left in there, the acid will rise. At least it did last time." She looked at Terok, not sure if it was wise to bring him but if he could reveal something about the trigger it would be worth it. Then again, his metal armor had held up incredibly well against the traps.

They floated towards the opening when Terok stopped them. "There is something here. Wait." He studied the wall, Ilea trying to focus on it with her sphere but finding nothing amiss with the magic. She had figured out Eve's incredibly hiding skills so she would find a way for this too. "It recognizes shifts in the air... I think. It's already triggered but nothing is happening."

"It only started once I was inside." Ilea said.

“Hmm... well then let's move on. I'll keep a lookout. You two just loot what you can.” The dwarf said.

Moving closer, Ilea's eyes opened wide as she saw the room. When they actually entered, the others stopped, “What happened here?” Terok asked. There were obvious signs of a fight, chunks of the wall missing in spherical shapes as well as the armored remains of a dwarf, again parts of him simply missing, as if cut out.

“Void magic.” Ilea and Niivalyr said at the same time, the two looking at each other. The dwarf had nothing valuable on him. Again there were twelve pedestals in the room. The chests sitting near the walls were open and empty, dust sitting inside of them. The air in the room was bad but either it had simply been shut off for hundreds of years or there was a ventilation system somewhere.

*No key this time.* Ilea looked over the pedestals, Niivalyr watching her closely. She couldn't tell if there was a difference between them or the dust that had settled on them. Terok kicked an empty chest, making her look at him sharply.

“We're too late.” Niivalyr said.

Terok shook his head and continued to look around, “A couple thousand years, yes. Something activated too.” Ilea looked around but he gestured her to calm down, “Nothing will happen until we actually step out of here.”

“How did whoever came before avoid the trap?” Ilea asked, seeing no damage to the walls outside or in here. If the trap was the acid rising again then it should at least show on the stone, the skeleton or the chests.

Niivalyr brushed his hand over one of the pedestals, “They had a way to vanish out of here.” He tapped the pedestal and looked at Ilea. “Do you know who did this?”

She touched her chin and shook her head, “No. For all we know this could have happened before the north collapsed into what it is today. Maybe Maro has an idea but other than them using void magic, we know nothing. Well

they have a longer range teleport skill too but honestly, even those assumptions are just that. Assumptions.” She sighed, “The place could have been empty all along.”

“Doubt it.” Terok said, “Why activate the enchantments and traps then?”

“Misdirection?” Ilea asked but the dwarf shook his head.

He lifted the chests to check below, “No. I’m not a Taleen but if I know anything about dwarves, they don’t build all this for nothing. Do you have any idea what it costs to set up those traps above, the enchantments here? An acid creator probably had to stand there and fill the whole room up for weeks.”

Niivalyr nodded, “I believe there was something here too. The Praetorians remained and we found a gate key. If it is simply misdirection then I doubt we would have found something as valuable at all.”

“You’re probably right. Well we know fucking nothing then, other than that someone or something came and shattered the place.” Ilea said, “Well there’s more to be found, either here or in the production facility. Come on, let’s rush back up. There should be a trap activating as soon as we come back into the room above the shaft. Make sure to teleport directly to the others.

Following her advice, the three rushed back up, the acid beginning to rise as soon as they crossed halfway out of the treasure room. This time getting out was simple, the green flames avoided by simply teleporting a little farther. Ilea moved an ashen limb into the flames, finding the heat enough to partially burn it but it didn’t get through. Terok informed her that the trap was one time use only, meaning further testing or training wasn’t possible.

“The rest of the dungeon is likely not super interesting. If the layout is the same as the great hall I’ve seen before.” Ilea said and stepped back into the room leading down towards the treasure hall.

“You’re not coming then?” Terok asked.

Ilea shook her head, looking over the group. "I'm sure you can handle it. Plus I missed the opportunity to level my corrosion resistance the last time." Seviir and Heranuur started trashing the traps, Maro smiling at her proposal.

Niivalyr nodded and looked to be lost in thought, "I believe this could be beneficial. Would it be agreeable for us to join you?"

The other elves looked at him, Seviir hissing and Neiphato shaking his head, "Pain Tolerance, Corrosion resistance, healing for Neiphato and self regeneration skills as well as Health drain for the others, if we could use it on you of course."

Ilea shrugged, "Sure, there's enough acid down there. Though I'm not sure how effective it'll be without an actual enemy to fight.

"Not everybody has their resistances in the second tier already Ilea." Terok said and laughed. "Though I'll sit this one out, thank you very much." He walked to Maro and asked him for some more metal to work on his suit.

Ilea broke through the now closed off shaft entrance with her ashen limbs, looking at the group with an awkward smile, *the human jackhammer*. Seviir gulped at the display, Niivalyr looking disinterested while Heranuur and Maro seemed to approve. They could of course all teleport in but having only an exit through blinking wasn't the safest option.

Jumping down as soon as the work was done, she willed her ashen armor currently only a small dot on her neck into what was essentially a two piece swimsuit, storing her clothes in the process. Unnecessarily destroying them would be a waste, especially because she couldn't exactly get more quickly. There was probably a tailor in Hallowfort but it would still take an afternoon to go there and find one.

The acid had flowed down again, not as far as it had been before but the small tunnel was empty, signs of corrosion visible on the walls at least. Dipping in a toe, she watched as the skin was slowly eaten through, very slowly. *I'm not sure how effective this is going to be.*

Lowering herself into the green bubbling liquid, she activated her healing and tried bearing the pain without deactivating her perception. She wasn't sure if third tier general skills were even a thing but somehow she felt like actually experiencing some of the feedback her body gave her would ground her a little in regards to the abuse she constantly put it under. A little like the sphere not allowing her to decrease her senses anymore. She grit her teeth, the burning sensation covering her to her neck.

# Chapter 323 The Beach Episode

## Chapter 323 The Beach Episode

Ilea was breathing hard when the others hovered down, her skin constantly eaten through and regenerating. It had been quite a long time since she hadn't used her second tier Pain Tolerance for something like this. The pain was dulled by her resistance alone but it still felt like hundreds of paper cuts treated with lime juice. At least that's how she imagined it. The pain was distracting, near all encompassing in her mind but she could still talk, even if barely, "It's... nice." She got the words out through her grinding teeth. Despite her necklace having gone through worse than this without a scratch, she wrapped it in ash. Her armor was eaten into as well but the ash reformed too quickly to make it an issue.

"She's swimming in acid." Neiphato observed and gulped, "Are you sure master?" Despite their talks and the way he had acted around Niivalyr previously, he still addressed him as his clear superior.

The barrier mage nodded and hissed, his armor vanishing before a reflective barrier appeared around his privates. Heranuur looked confused, teleporting up before he came back, completely nude before he simply let himself fall into the acid, right next to Ilea. His smug smile vanished instantly as she tried grinning at him, the elf screaming in a high pitched voice before he vanished, appearing next to Neiphato, his skin mostly melted off, muscle showing and in places even bone. He couldn't get out a word before Neiphato started healing him. "It's going to be fine... just a moment." The healer said, trying not to touch the dripping and screaming warrior.

*And guys complain about water being cold. Have a look at that shriveled up shrimp.* Ilea managed to piece together the thought in between the surges of pain whenever the acid got deeper. Niivalyr moved down slowly, dipping his feet in as a root coming from Neiphato wrapped around his arm. He hissed but went deeper slowly, the healing coupled with his resistances and vitality apparently enough. He was in to his stomach before he stopped, crossing his arms and closing his eyes.

Seviir shook his head before he took off his beautiful golden boots, holding them in his arms as he lowered himself into the green liquid. He yelped when the acid started to burn through, Heranuur in the meantime mostly recovered, paled to a degree that made him almost unrecognizable coupled with the grim look on his face and thousand yard stare. Maro watched the scene in amusement before his boots vanished too, the king only grinding his teeth as he lowered himself downwards, more of his clothes vanishing before only his head remained above the liquid.

Ilea moved over an ashen limb to heal him as well as the others, should Neiphato fail or run out of mana. “You... too.” Niivalyr said, looking at him with a wicked smile.

“But... my healing... if... I won’t be able to concentrate!”

Niivalyr nodded towards Ilea, her mouth quivering and her eyes focused forward, “She’s... she’s... healer.” The words came with great difficulty. Ilea was surprised to find Maro holding up the best, at least according to everyone’s facial expressions.

“You have... Pain Tolerance, second tier?” She asked but the king shook his head.

“Elemental... resistance... and... pain red... uction.” He said through gritted teeth. Ilea was a little annoyed, her pain resistance higher, her corrosion resistance in the second tier as well as pain reduction from her Sentinel Core.

*It’s his charisma...* She forced herself to focus on her healing skill to see how he was doing, finding his teeth nearly breaking, his muscles tense and



his heart pumping faster than her own. His face however revealed little of that. “Ch... eater.” She said, the man forcing a smile that came out more as if he was a wild beast baring his teeth at her.

Neiphato’s face distorted when he entered the acid, his boots taken off, the skin quickly healing again time and time again. “What... a... pleasant activity.” Ilea smiled, the fact that she was the craziest one among a necromancer king, a seven hundred year old elf and three exiled Cerithil hunters hitting her hard with both concern and pride.

“How... long?” Seviir asked, Niivalyr hissing at his question, the noise interrupted twice making it sound like a muffled giggle. Ilea laughed and even Maro smiled, immediately gulping as the pain took over again. The barrier mage looked at Heranuur but the latter shook his head, still pale. He glanced at Ilea and she knew that from that moment onward, he looked at her in a different light. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

At least the pain made nobody care about the naked elf hovering next to them, they had concerns going above and beyond the possible embarrassment caused by nudity. Heranuur had never really cared and Ilea wasn’t too bothered by it either though she didn’t know if it was a thing elves in general cared little about. Maro didn’t seem to mind either but she could have guessed as much. With meditation, she could theoretically stay in the acid infinitely long, the wounds while covering near her whole body were shallow and inconsequential in regards to her health.

Adding all the healing for the others would force her to get out at some point at least. Ilea hadn’t felt constant pain like this in over a year, since getting her Pain Tolerance skill to the second tier. She wondered if her decision to feel it right now was something to be proud of or something her therapists would be highly concerned about as soon as she established the science in Elos. At least she felt good about not being turned on by the whole ordeal.

After a while she realized that the worst of it wasn’t the pain itself or the smell of the acid coupled with their combined corroded skin and muscle, it was the sizzling sound the acid made as it wrapped around their bodies, burning into them. The constant sound coupled with the sobs from the elves

as well as the grinding of their teeth. Heranuur's pride forced him to get back into the acid too at some point, going a little deeper than Sevir before the latter copied the move. Before long they were both down to their noses, occasionally going even further as they proved that their competition and pride stood above all, even unimaginable pain.

Even Maro and Ilea looked on with concern, not for their quickly regenerating bodies but for their troubled minds. Ilea could tell their bodies were left only with pain, their resistances much lower than her own or even Maro's. Niivalyr nodded in approval as Ilea thought about a hot tub with warm water and soap. At least the sweat and grime came off in the acid bath, her head going under for a moment as her hair and eyes were eaten through, regenerating quickly when she came up again. The pain she noted wasn't any worse, just another area of her body added to the agony.

Checking her messages after ten minutes, she found the training was more effective than expected.

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 3'*

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 4'*

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 5'*

*'ding' 'Pain Tolerance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Pain Tolerance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

“What?!” Niivalyr exclaimed, “The second tier grants full immunity?” He looked speechless, his body suddenly relaxing. “This is amazing. Do you know about this humans?”

Maro and Ilea looked at each other, “Yea.” The man said, “Though... I'm not... quite... there.”

Ilea didn't mention that she was in fact choosing to go through this. “Heard about it.” She said, Maro chuckling next to her but he didn't make a

comment, quickly overwhelmed again by the pain as his chuckles turned into sobs before he forced himself to quiet down again.

“Well that is spectacular. Also dangerous. Perhaps it wouldn’t be best for those two to have it. We’re stopping here.” Niivalyr said, quickly floating through the acid before he dragged the corroded bodies of the two heavily damaged elves out, their spirits and flesh broken, only driven by pride. Perhaps it was their very instinct to do so. Ilea and Neiphato healed them up, the elf looking with pleading eyes towards their trainer. “No, you stay.” Tears rolled down the elf’s face as he endured.

“Torture... bad?” Maro asked through gritted teeth.

“Training... isn’t... torture.” Ilea replied, feeling the pain dulling more and more as time went on. With three people gone, her mana situation had improved again, Neiphato mostly taking care of himself leaving only Maro and herself to heal.

Maro reached the second tier half an hour later, suddenly relaxing as he looked up and smiled, “You are crazy you know that? Pretty effective method to get the skill at least. Unthinkable without healers and high resistances as well as Vitality and durability. No wonder barely anybody has the skill in the second tier.” Ilea smiled, floating next to Neiphato while holding his hand in a tight grip.

“It’s... useful... but dangerous.” She said.

“There should be a smell resistance too, horrible really.” Maro commented, “Well as much as I enjoy bathing with you, I think I’ll pass on leveling this skill... for a long time. Maybe ever.”

She smiled as he floated up, his clothes and armor appearing again. “Should we start checking out other parts of the dungeon already?”

Ilea nodded, “Sure, not... too... dangerous... I think.”

The man gave her a thumbs up before vanishing, Neiphato resting his head on her neck as tears rolled down his face. “You can... stop... whenever.”

He's... not...really your... master.”

The elf looked up, a fierceness in his eyes she had only seen when he fought the Praetorians, “This... is... nothing.” He said, squeezing her hand.

When his hand relaxed another hour later, she looked at him as he smiled, his face quickly turning red before he pushed himself away from her. “Sorry... I.”

Ilea deactivated her pain perception and smiled back, “Don't worry. Happy to see you got it.”

“That was the most horrible experience in my entire life... why would you do something like this?” He looked scared and disturbed for a moment before he closed his eyes, “I'm sorry. I guess it's things like this that made you stronger than us, than Niivalyr or that necromancer.” He paused, his face turning serious, “Thank you. We are often spiteful, angry and proud. What my clan did... to humans, animals, other elves. How we treat your people... yet you saved our lives, gave us a teacher and I believe... you saved him too in a way.”

He sighed, “We would have died, against the Praetorians. You showed us what is possible, deeply and with all that I am, I thank you. The others will not say this to you but I know they feel the same. Know this, should you need our strength, be it much less than your own, we will fight for you Ilea.” He thought for a moment, “Guardian of Cerith. It seems a fitting title.” He smiled brightly.

Ilea moved out, the remaining acid both burning into her skin and dripping off before she put on her clothes again, “What does Cerith mean?” She asked, looking at the elf that remained in the liquid.

“It means life, yet not exactly what it means in standard. It is all that we are, our very purpose and spirits.”

“Thank you.” Ilea said and she meant it. “I really just dislike killing rational people. The training is easy with a healing skill, every added resistance a big help so I spent a lot of time to get them.”

Neiphato closed his eyes and shook his head, “Do not dismiss yourself so easily. Your reasons, be they contrived or true do not really matter. You saved three lives, perhaps four and you set them on a path that will impact them as long as they live.”

She gulped at his words and didn't say anything for a moment, “Are you not coming?” She asked as she flew a little higher.

“My clothes are up there. I'm not quite as brash and confident as the others.” He said and smiled.

Ilea nodded and grinned, watching him immediately avert his eyes, “You know I can see everything around me, even if you're hidden in the liquid?” She said, watching him turn beet red, “Trust me Neiphato, you're ridiculously handsome. Not being brash and overconfident like the others might be seen as a weakness in your culture but trust me, women would claw each other's eyes out to get a chance at dating you.” She left it at that and moved her wings, flying up as he sunk a little deeper into the acid.

*If he had the confidence he shows in fights or when it's about going against the oracles, in other situations, he could be the bloody leader of their race.* She smiled at the thought, coming out into the now trap free hall. There was a note pinned under a piece of shrapnel.

*Ilea, we are moving on to the dungeons.*

*Do not bed Neiphato. It is a grave... forget it. He is free to do as he likes. Still, simply for my sake. I will pay you with your currency.*

*Niivalyr*

She chuckled and set it on fire with her fire rune. Waiting for the elf didn't take long, back in his armor he joined her, looking composed. “They went

on to the dungeons. Let's go." She said, the elf nodding before they rushed off.

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 6'*

*'ding' 'Corrosion Resistance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 7'*

*'ding' 'Pain Tolerance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 8'*

*'ding' 'Pain Tolerance reaches 2<sup>nd</sup> lvl 9'*

"Finally..." Seviir said when the two late comers found the group, his left arm held in his right, severed by a Centurion likely. The wound was burnt shut. The grin on Heranuur's face made it clear how he viewed the situation, brushing his hand through his red hair that flowed out behind the helmet covering his face. Goldie hissed before Neiphato healed the arm back on.

Niivalyr stared at Ilea with an intense glare but she just shook her head with a soft smile, the elf nodding after a moment. Maro was crouching over a skeleton nearby, Terok tapping a bunch of steel chunks that sat on a stone table. "Found something interesting?" She asked the two, stepping towards them as Seviir tried punching Heranuur, the two teleporting around before a bunch of barriers slammed them through a wall.

Maro looked her way before touching the skeleton, "I mean. Kind of. It's in pristine condition. Whatever it was, not human, not an elf, not a dwarf."

"Dark one perhaps?" She asked, the man just scratching his head. It looked humanoid to her, a tail and horns as well as claws.

"Maybe... or a demon. Well I'll keep it if that's alright, the structure is pretty good. Not as good as the Undying one but I should be able to have an actually useful puppet in this one." He nodded and made it vanish.

Ilea tilted her head to the side, “You mean those skeletons weren’t useful?”

He stood up and brushed off his robe, “I mean yes. Just not very good. The bones weren’t assorted from once complete skeletons, just pieces thrown together. They were pretty damaged too and not necessarily powerful when they had been alive.”

She nodded, the group moving on to clear out the rest of the great hall. Most of the ways didn’t offer much other than low level traps and gear as well as the occasional battle against guardians, the machines mostly taken care of by the group of elves. Ilea yawned when they reached the end of the teleportation section, finding the gate broken and destroyed. *Guess this won’t be the place to test the key.* She hadn’t planned it anyway but perhaps just seeing if it worked at all would have been nice. *Plenty of gates back in the south.*

“I think we’re pretty much done here.” Maro commented as he checked the stone chunks left of the gate, standing up before looking at the group.

Terok clasped his hands together, “To Tremor then?” He had talked to Niivalyr previously, the elf accepting the dwarf in the elven group, to help with the facility cleanup.

“First want to see if Goliath is still around. Then sure.” She replied. Nobody complained and the elves wanted to move on to the facility anyway, their group quickly moving there. When they were about to leave the Taleen city, a saurian approached them. She could tell even without her sphere that the dark one was scared shitless.

“N... noble... w... warriors. We... would like to... thank.” The voice was grating and deep, its tongue straining to make the sounds. It revealed a red gem as big as her fist, holding it out to them with an expectant gaze. Terok stepped forward and took the gemstone, holding it up as he inspected it.

“Thanks.” He said and walked back, leaving the saurian in an awkward position, not knowing if to approach, stay or leave. Ilea at least waved at the creature when they stepped into the elevator.

Maro looked over at Terok who threw the gem up before catching it again, “Is it worth anything?”

Terok looked his way, “No. It’s a blood crystal. Might be rare here but there are some caves filled with the stuff. Holds little use other than for decoration. If you know a crystal make that can mold it.” He handed the crystal to Maro who looked at it before putting it into his ring, “Didn’t want to be an ass. We basically gave them the whole city compared to the small parts they roamed before, with great danger.”

Maro chuckled, “Maybe they’ll build a statue in our honor.” Looking at Terok, Ilea shook her head.

“Don’t give him ideas.” She said with a smile, the group stepping out of the elevator when it reached the top.



# Chapter 324 The Path Ahead

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“Hmm.” The smith hovered around the big skeleton, unbothered by the temperature in the facility, the light orange and red from the machines and molten metals interspersed with green from above. “Ah, yes.” He tapped the bones with his knuckles before he turned to Ilea, golden eyes twinkling. “A rare find, ashen... healer? Truly, full of surprises yet it is expected.”

The elves were mapping out the first floor, Maro and Terok remaining with Goliath after they had found him hammering away near his obelisk. The dwarf remained steadfast against the curse and health drain coming from the smith, now that he had reached a higher level. He did extend his steel to Ilea and drained some health from her occasionally to balance it out. “You need light armor. Perhaps I might be of service. It has been centuries since last I worked bones. May I use your mold to establish the dimensions? It will not be as fitting, not without a bone mage.”

Ilea looked over her shoulder but didn't find the elves anywhere nearby, “Isn't Seviir a bone mage? Can you ask the white haired elf for help? Tell him I'll break his legs if he doesn't.”

Goliath made a dark giggling sound and bowed lightly, “Of course. Yet I do hope threats shall not be necessary.”

*Oh you don't know that one.* She thought and crossed her arms, “And it will regenerate after being damaged?”

He hovered around the massive skeleton, looking intimidating still, even without a spirit residing within, “Timeless...it is possible, that the attribute is lost upon completion. Yet I believe success is most likely. We will have to modify the finished mold... to make it light, remove pieces. Protection will be lessened. Are you certain you do not wish a heavy variant?”

Ilea formed her ashen armor, the smith giving off a yelp that sounded more akin to a nightmarish growl, “Marvelous. My services... are hardly needed.”

“Just make sure the torso is a single piece and covers my chest, stomach and back. Also my neck.” Heading off to new adventures without some protection would be brainless after all.

“I shall do as I can.” The smith replied, not even asking for anything in return.

Terok spoke up then, stepping closer to the smith, “I will stick around with the elves, is it possible to help you out in some way? I’d like your help for some of my armor pieces.” He sounded nervous. Ilea remembered how he had acted back when he showed her the way to the smith. Even approaching had been impossible for him.

“Of course. I could use some help with cutting and enchanting as well as simply two more hands. Are you sure my curse is not a worry?” The smith replied but Terok waved him off.

“One of the elves can heal too and I can drain some machines if necessary. It’s much less of an issue than before.” They both sounded rather happy about the arrangement.

Maro leaned over to Ilea and whispered, “You really know the most peculiar people. What else do you have to surprise me?”

She knew it was a rhetorical question but replied nonetheless, keeping her face straight and looking at Goliath, “A demon, mind weaver. Good guy really. Oh, Aki... he’s a sentient dagger I found in the last Taleen dungeon. I guess the spider pet of Trian’s family would count as well. A skeleton

necromancer by the name of Neeto Bones, he...,” Maro squeezed her shoulder and shook his head, his face a little pale.

“Please stop.” He sighed and calmed himself down, “Ok but seriously. You’re fucking with me right?”

Ilea gently touched his cheek and smiled, “Maro, I have a charm resistance now. Also, you’re married.”

His eyes rolled so hard she almost thought he had turned undead himself. Terok was talking to Goliath about some specifics and plans before Maro spoke up again, “You were kidding.”

She glanced over, “Who do you think I am? Ilea fucking Spears.”

“You were serious?” His voice was calm again, composed as he too had his eyes fixated on the two talking metalheads.

“You’re goddamn right.” She whispered.

“That is settled then. I will travel with you, for a while at least. If you’ll have me.” The king went to one knee, his eyes looking deep into hers. She dodged his perfect enhanced smile by tilting her head to the side, the steel ceiling behind her sure to blush.

She held a hand out towards him and helped him stand up after he grasped it, “I’m doing random shit all the time Maro. Do you not want to stay close to Elana?”

He smiled, this time in a more sincere way, “Catelyn is a perfectly fine bodyguard. I doubt the Feynor would risk such a costly attack once more, knowing how it had ended. Plus... well I don’t want to bother her too much. She has found something new to work on and this time... she let me get away without being a pawn in it all.”

*So much for behind every powerful man is an even more powerful woman.*  
“And now that you’re free to do whatever you want, you ask to travel with me?” She grinned and shook her head, “Maybe you should find something

to do yourself. I don't mind of course, you're one of the least annoying people I know."

He smiled warmly before his eyes narrowed, "Then I'm doing something wrong." Looking back at the smith he continued, "I'll need some time to figure things out. You remind me of my old companions, before I founded Tremor and became king. Be it exploring dungeons or seeing the cities and civilizations that have formed in the millennia I was gone, I think staying with you will be interesting."

"I don't mind having you around but I do what I feel like. Also when I fight things I want to go solo. Otherwise I'll never reach my goals." She said.

"Fair enough. What are your goals anyway?" He glanced her way and when she looked at him, she didn't find any of his usual charm or mock there. A serious question then.

She thought about it. Being in the north, helping out the elves as well as Maro and Hallowfort had perhaps changed her views a little. She chuckled, thinking of the Saurian approaching the dangerous group trying to thank them for what they accidentally did with a precious gift to them that turned out to be mostly worthless. "We destroyed the Praetorians, yes. I don't fear them anymore but I think I just need to fuck some up while alone. To really prove it you know?"

He didn't say anything, waiting for her to continue, "There are some people I'd like to find and question. A friend that was killed by a powerful organization. Kyrian who got teleported away, maybe the key will help there. Simply exploring new places." She paused, "While I don't want to get involved directly too much, maybe I can use my power to shake things up a little."

The king waited again but she didn't add anything, his gaze moving back to Goliath whose eyes were sparkling, a noise Ilea knew to be laughter echoing through the vicinity, "Quite the list." He stretched, cracking his neck, "I'll help out where I can, owe you as much." He paused and looked at her, "Shaking things up... well I just hope you're not too idealistic. Humans are still humans."

She chuckled, replying in a soft tone, “Way ahead of you Maro. Plus, I have a couple ancient beings to get advice from. You don’t count by the way.”

The man laughed, “Well, I’ll offer my advice anyway, should you want it. As much as I disliked being king, you learn one or two things along the way.” He was serious again. If anything she knew the man needed time. Perhaps fighting alongside her for a while would help. She had been with herself for some time and Ilea didn’t think of herself as the worst company.

She wouldn’t push him either way, he would figure things out. “So what do you say? I think it’d be fun.” His green eyes sparkled as he looked at her.

“I already said it’s fine.” She replied before summoning her black obsidian hammer. The weight felt right in her arms, the balance too. The head had a cylinder like form, the bottom flat and the back narrowing into a spike. All of it looked to be formed of a single piece. While she knew obsidian was more akin to a glass like substance back on earth, this material, while she thought it looked similar, was way too heavy for that. It felt more like steel too but then again she had never felt obsidian.

Maro looked at the weapon with interest, Ilea stepping over to Goliath before showing him the war hammer. Terok and himself stopped their brooding over the plans as the smith looked at her, taking the weapon into both hands. “What do you think?”

“Truly... beautifully crafted. Simple in design, yet deadly. Some of my earlier work but it holds up. I rarely make weapons in this day and age. It has found its way to you, that at least is reassuring. Quiet was its name... was it not?” He asked and chuckled, handing the weapon back.

She had thought the smith might offer some improvements or critique but to think he had made the weapon himself. Well he was there before Hallowfort even existed if the stories were to be believed.

Storing the hammer, she looked at Terok, “Ready to leave for Tremor?”

The dwarf nodded, “Sure. Goliath, we’ll continue later. I think we’re onto something.”

Goliath nodded when Niivalyr joined them, hissing when he entered the smith's domain. "Ilea. You are leaving I suppose?" His eyes glanced over the people present, resting on her.

"I am." She said and stepped towards him, "Though I'll be back for some armor again."

He opened his mouth and closed it again quickly, glancing at the others before he summoned a small book, "This is the diary you have given me. Translated so you can read it." Again he looked at the others, Ilea just grasping his shoulder. He went rigid at the touch but didn't push her away.

"Make sure you guys don't die to something stupid. There are dangerous machines down here and I didn't save them twice for them to learn nothing." She smiled, letting go of his shoulder.

He gulped and nodded, regaining some composure. "I will train them. They will learn with time. Seviir and Heranuur are young still, their temperament uncontrollable at times, it is in their nature... in our nature." He paused, looking for words to say before he spoke, "Good luck Ilea."

"The same to you my friend. Come look for me if you need help."

He grinned, licking over his teeth once again, "I doubt we would find you. At least you know where we are, should you require our assistance. Assistance we are very willing to provide." He paused and turned before glancing back, "Friend." It sounded like he was tasting the word, shaking his head with a smirk before he vanished.

Ilea crossed her arms and smiled, Maro clapping her on the back as he joined her, "Proud of him are we?"

She ignored the mocking tone coupled with his grin and nodded, "Yes actually. I am. Come on, let's crack open that treasury." They said their goodbyes to Goliath who assured her a week was enough for him to get her armor done. Ilea was reminded by looking at him that she still hadn't tested out the Armaments of Trials since getting to three hundred. Too much had

happened too quickly for her to really bother with it. Now maybe, she could at least figure out what to do in it. *After the treasure.*

It was night, the mists flowing softly over the northern lands as the three finally returned to Tremor. It hadn't been more than a couple days but Ilea felt exhausted, despite all her resources being full. Not getting involved in wars and politics hadn't exactly worked out in the north. At least she made her stance clear and didn't join any cults. Even here in these desolate lands, the monsters and people competed in violent manners for one reason or the other.

She felt protecting places like Hallowfort or Lisburg was worth it getting involved, at least as far as fighting off attackers. "Are other sentients born at higher levels than one?" She suddenly asked, thinking on the Feynor and all the level two hundred warriors they had mustered for their attacks.

Maro looked her way, flying next to her, "No. Not if they are born sentient. Monsters do form at higher levels depending on the mana density, race and other circumstances. They can turn into what is commonly known as Dark Ones, reaching sentience with a certain level of Intelligence. That's the theory at least."

"Hmm." She replied and flew on, her wings moving behind her. They were flying slowly to allow Terok to keep up.

"Why do you ask?" The necromancer said, the three finally reaching the mountain under which Tremor was located.

"Was just wondering how many high level Feynor there are."

They entered and flew to the cathedral, landing casually amidst the wooden benches and worktables Terok and Niivalyr had put up, "You're worried about the towns around here?" Maro asked.

She nodded, “There are capable people defending them but Catelyn might have died without us there.”

“True.” Maro said and looked around, “But you can’t always be everywhere, prepare for everything. I’m sure they’ll make some arrangements after the attack. Didn’t you say Ravenburg was doing the same?”

“Ravenhall.” She corrected, glancing at him.

He shrugged, “Well you trusted your friends there to take care of it. Trust Catelyn to do the same. As much as I think highly of my wife, that fox certainly has brains for such a small head.”

She shrugged and thought about it, “Ravenhall’s enemies are human, just wanted to make sure the Feynor aren’t going to run in everything once we’re out.” It was only partially true. She had simply not cared when she had left, burnt out by the missions, losing Eve, seeing the horrors of the demon summoning as well as participating in Trian’s revenge. Her decisions were her own and she didn’t regret any of them, neither could she deny the impact it all had on her. A couple years ago she was thinking about what to study and now she had slaughtered hundreds of people, thousands of monsters. Some of it was hardly justified.

“Well if they could, they would have already done that in the last hundred years.” Terok commented, “This ain’t a fresh conflict lassie.” He glanced her way and shrugged, walking towards the cathedral exit.

Maro punched her shoulder, “It’s alright. This isn’t your war, neither is it mine. Didn’t you talk about not getting involved?” He laughed, “Slaying monsters is more fun anyway.”

She could certainly agree with that and smiled, “I didn’t say anything about getting involved in a war. Investing in defenses might already do the trick. Doesn’t hurt to learn about the local warring tribes and peoples.” She didn’t even know what the empress of Lys was called, who the king of Baralia was and why they attacked. More slaves and territory were likely argument



enough but a conflict involving two massive countries was usually more nuanced.

“Elana will be sure to deal with that. If you want to throw your gold away, feel free to do so.” Maro added and waved her off, surprising her with his uncaring attitude. She wondered if it was simply because he didn’t want the same thing to happen again.

*Well he did say he needed time. Just as I did.* She knew it wasn’t really comparable but she had lost a friend, Maro had lost damn near everything. She didn’t count her awakening in Elos, knowing that if it wasn’t all an incredible simulation or dream, Earth was still around, the people on it probably fine. *Guess I could visit at some point. Mark would certainly be impressed when I destroy the whole kick-boxing tournament in one punch.*

“Well I’ll talk to them again next week at least. Maybe some of the things left in your treasury could be helpful as well.” She said to which he nodded and smiled.

“Let’s hope some of it is left. If not, you at least found me and Elana.” He laughed when Terok looked back and shook his head, quite obviously displeased with the negative attitude.

“Do not curse our fortune Maro!” He spoke and pointed at him, “We already had one empty treasury, another one might just be too much for my old heart to take!”

Ilea laughed too, “Terok, the real treasure are the friends we made along the way.” She tried hard to keep a straight face, Maro nodding seriously next to her before Terok simply vanished, appearing in her sphere outside the double doors. The groan was audible through the thick gate, even without sense enhancements.

“You think that was too much?” She asked, the necromancer waving his hand as he looked at her.

He sounded serious when he spoke, “Terok will have to deal with worse if he stays with the elves.”

“Maybe.” They left it at that, Ilea blinking out followed by Maro. The three wordlessly flying towards the palace.

“Why didn’t we just fly there directly? Instead of going through the cathedral?” Terok asked, him simply having followed them before.

Ilea was about to speak up when Maro answered, “Feels wrong. Tremor is a dungeon now, a good entrance is just part of it.”

The silver rose like decorations on his armor glinted purple in her magic perception, Terok’s floodlights illuminating the dark path ahead. *He gets it.* She thought and yawned.