

“There is no way they can come here now,” she murmured to herself, sure that there wasn’t some secret teleportation gate around.

Probably just defended their cavern against the intruder, which is me.

She was intrigued by the new Praetorian variants.

I wonder if there were some in Iz too. Probably, by the sheer size of that place. But no arrows were fired on me there. Was I just lucky?

The size of that one was so fucking massive, you could put a hundred of those Izacan caverns in there. That definitely helped.

Where were they going?

She had seen a constant flow of machines moving towards the tunnel at the very back of the cavern. Ilea was reasonably sure that more machines had appeared within close by teleportation circles too, though she hadn’t confirmed, with the fast moving attacks constantly hitting her.

Levels, yes.

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 26’

‘ding’ ‘Azarinth Perception reaches 3rd lvl 25’

‘ding’ ‘Ash and Ember Unity reaches 3rd lvl 28’

‘ding’ ‘Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 2’

‘ding’ ‘Displacement reaches 2nd lvl 3’

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches lvl 17’

...

‘ding’ ‘Space Shift reaches lvl 19’

‘ding’ ‘Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 8’

...

‘ding’ ‘Body of the Valkyrie reaches lvl 18’

‘ding’ ‘Space Awareness reaches lvl 6’

‘ding’ ‘Veteran reaches 3rd lvl 6’

Maybe a converging point for their armies? Close to the Elven territories? Or somewhere entirely different, I don’t exactly have a lot to go on, she wondered, happy about the skills at least.

That Executioner would have cut right through me... Void on a blade? What even is that?

She shuddered at the thought, the image of the fast moving Praetorian moving through the air towards her.

And yet, still just three marks... I can take it, she thought and smiled. If only there wasn't an army to back it up.

'ding' 'Fear Resistance reaches lvl 11'

She rolled her eyes at the notification and turned around, ready to leave this place behind. Izacan was an entirely different beast, one she had neither the power nor the wish to face right now. Not until her third class had reached the power of her main ones, not until she had talked to her Elven friends about these new variants.

Ilea checked through the dungeon one more time, quickly flying past the buildings and tunnels, making sure she hadn't missed anything obvious. No more Guardians showed up, nor did she find any more corpses.

One reason for her delay was the slight fear that the Praetorians could somehow follow her here. She would prefer to face them within the confines of this dungeon than have them confront her up in the city.

She glanced at one of the inns in the root, remembering the enjoyable night she had spent there. *Some other time maybe*, she thought and returned to the Guild.

"You mean to tell me that all these jobs are taken care of?" the attendant asked, apparently undecided between being impressed, curious, and skeptical.

It wasn't the one who she had met the last time.

She summoned her green badge, both confirming that she had the power and dimensional storage to support her claims.

The young man sighed. "Very well. But it's on you if we call for the clients and you can't show results."

"I'll wait here. Call them here now," she said and stepped aside, leaving the clerk with a stack of job descriptions. She approved when she saw him ask for help, two more people quickly joining him to arrange things.

It was early afternoon, judging by the suns. Ilea wasn't sure if a single day or two had passed. Maybe even three. It really had been quite enjoyable to go and clean out the dungeon that had defeated her.

Ilea felt different about all the places in the north, many of them offering too much of a challenge for now. She didn't consider them losses. In part because they hadn't claimed her allies' lives, nor did most of them come close to claim hers.

The Descent was the closest one but she hardly thought of it as a single dungeon. More an accumulation of twenty individual ones. Nor did she like the idea of killing most of the remaining residents. Least of all the Trakorov, Deep Mirage, or lightning Elemental.

The Ascended most definitely was a loss. But she would repay that one in kind. She needed time to grow, to evolve. To both learn and level.

She ordered a few mugs of ale and a pitcher, choosing one of the tables near a wall before relaxing in one of the chairs.

This is quite good, she thought, taking a sip.

The guild hall was somewhat busy, many of the tables occupied by one party or the other. A few lone healers and mages sat around too, with various levels of gear, confidence, and power.

Ilea wondered what their stories were. She could guess at one of them. A healer wearing a tattered robe, something cut out near the chest and right shoulder. A quick maneuver it seemed.

The woman looked young, her eyes darting around the room as she assessed the various groups. So far nobody had approached her.

Nobody came to me either..., she thought and watched the girl, her eyes pausing for a second when they met Ilea's.

She scrambled up a moment later, walking briskly towards the exit.

"You forgot your staff," Ilea said, now standing next to the table the girl had been sitting at. She had failed to displace the thing due to its magical nature.

She twirled it around, looking at the woman who now waited with a hesitant look in her eyes.

Ilea could feel her distress. She also noted that nobody seemed to care. Only a few had even looked up after Ilea had spoken out.

"Come, sit with me," she said and walked back to her own table, leaning the staff against the wall.

I wonder how easily the Ascended could take me apart by now. My third tier resistances should make a difference. As should the additional teleport ability. The rest is probably still kind of useless. Could I displace myself out of its grip? she continued her train of thought from before, taking another sip as she stared at the steady flame of a nearby oil lamp.

The chair opposite her creaked when the girl sat down, her eyes boring into the table at the noise she had caused.

"Don't like the attention?" Ilea asked, displacing a mug of ale in front of her.

The healer looked at the mug and blinked, glancing around as if she had missed the person who put it there.

"Drink, might help," Ilea said, taking a sip herself.

[Healer – lvl 72]

Probably high level enough to make alcohol ineffective.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

The girl gingerly took a sip of the ale, coughing before taking another one. She looked at Ilea and nodded.

The hood covered most of her face but now that she looked up, Ilea could see her a little better. The woman would be around her age, judging by the low level, that assumption was likely true. Her hair was brown, weaved into a single braid that hung down past her shoulder. It looked hastily done.

She had dark brown skin, her green eyes downright striking due to the contrast. She was smaller than Ilea, both in size and height.

“What do you want to eat?” she asked.

“Can’t decide?” Ilea added a few seconds later. “Don’t worry.”

She quickly went to the bar and ordered. “One menu please.”

The barkeeper nodded. “We have quite a few different things, what do you fancy?”

“No, you don’t understand. One menu. One of each of the things that you serve,” Ilea said.

“But you’re just two people,” he said and glanced at the healer and back to Ilea.

Ilea nodded, looking thoughtfully towards the ceiling. “You’re right. And more are coming. Two then.”

He chuckled. “Two it is. Can I ask you to pay upfront, I don’t know you.”

Ilea summoned a piece of gold and placed it down on the counter. “Is that enough?”

“More than enough,” he said.

“Keep the rest,” she said and walked back.

Ilea heard him murmur to himself as he stepped towards the kitchen in the back. “Fucking rich people.”

She sat back down with a sigh, happy to feel that the girl wasn’t quite as stressed out as before. Her mug was empty.

“I’m Ember,” she said after a while of silence, Ilea back to staring at the oil lamp.

“Ilea, nice to meet you,” she said, smiling at the name.

“What is it you want from me?” the girl said.

Ilea looked at her before taking a sip of ale. “You looked like you needed some food and ale.”

“Th... thank you,” the girl said and paused, seeming to consider. “Were... were you part of the order too?”

“What order?” Ilea asked.

“The... the Corinth order... before the city was taken,” she said in a whisper, glancing around again.

Ilea laughed, causing quite a bit of irritation in the woman. “Whispering doesn’t exactly help. At least four people just heard you,” she said and lifted her mug at one of them, a roguish looking man.

He lifted his and grinned, winking at her.

“The Corinth Order... one of the main healing orders right? Wasn’t... yeah, she was part of it. And her too. Bunch of assholes. They’re pretty big in Dawntree, right?” she asked.

The woman blinked a few times before answering. “Were... we... they were. Not anymore.”

“I see,” Ilea said. “Pissed off the plebs, have you?”

“I couldn’t see it... I thought we were doing good, helping the poor, healing those who required it,” the girl said, getting more agitated with each word.

“We were blind... indoctrinated and used. To think they taught us political maneuvering...” she punched the table and giggled to herself.

“You don’t seem particularly happy with them,” Ilea said.

“Particularly happy?!” Ember said and spit to the ground. She suddenly looked embarrassed, brushing over it with her shoe.

“I only met a few. One I believe tried to poison me... the other one. Well, let’s just say she had a bit of an annoying superiority complex,” Ilea said.

“Not all of us were like that. I was chosen simply because I had a talent for healing and a keen mind. That’s what they told me at least. I didn’t know they leveraged healing for political influence and gold,” Ember said.

“Hmm... well you’re out now. Any plans for the future?” Ilea asked.

“The Corinth order isn’t gone. They’ve just been removed from Dawntree. And they won’t stand by that. I’m sure they will try to come back and weasel themselves back into whatever group is ruling this city by then. And if they catch me outside, I’m dead. Or back in the order,” she looked up and smiled. “I’m not sure which is worse.”

Ilea smiled. “I could offer an alternative. If you don’t want to remain here,” Ilea said and glanced to the entrance of the guild, the first of her clients currently looking around the room.

Blond hair reaching down to her back and blue eyes.

She had changed quite a bit.

Ilea waved at her, finding the girl frozen in place.

“Ilea!” Jaime called out when he entered behind Alice. “What a wonderful sight!” he quite literally dragged Alice behind himself and towards the table.

“Good to see you, Jaime. I thought you wanted to get out? Don’t tell me this whole revolution was your doing,” Ilea said and gestured them to sit down.

Alice was wearing a formal dress that would still allow battle.

[Healer – lvl 115]

[Mage – lvl 141]

“It was a lucky coincidence. Nothing more and nothing less,” the man said and sat down.

Alice was still standing.

“I can feel your sphere... well done, Alice,” Ilea said with a smile.

Jaime looked back at the girl and cleared his throat. “What did you want to say?”

Alice looked at him, grinding her teeth before giving up.

She bowed and spoke in a subdued tone. “Thank you, Ilea. For giving me a chance when I deserved none. For sharing your power with me... allowing me to fight on my own.”

“You’re acting,” Jaime said with a sigh. “Sit down.”

The girl sat down.

“She’s learning. Albeit slowly. What brings you to Dawntree?” Jaime asked.

“I finished the two jobs you posted. Retrieving corpses and information on the expedition. You know, the one I joined in the Taleen dungeon. I hadn’t thought you would care,” Ilea said.

Jaime laughed out loud. “You’re the one who took those assignments? Of course you are. The esteemed Forkspear family was involved. Alice lacked the funds and influence for such a large scale operation. Hence, your then quite dangerous adventure.”

“Manipulation. Are you still as naive as you were back then?” Alice asked, this time in a different tone.

Ilea chuckled, ready to displace the woman up into the ceiling fan, if there was one. The girl however spoke first.

“I would have killed me, if I had been you,” she said with a sigh. “Why didn’t you?” the question seemed genuine.

“I’m not you,” Ilea said. “It did feel pretty shitty. Especially after I rescued you. Twice basically. Three times now, seeing your level,” she said, finding that she had little emotions left for the girl. Because of her she went into the Taleen Dungeon and found a quick way to power.

Alice seemed like a lost girl stumbling in the dark, compared to Edwin. Maybe she gave her too little credit. Or maybe it was because the girl seemed entirely insignificant, sitting opposite her now.

Alice nodded. “Jaime always tells me I have to change my ways. I regret that I lost you as an ally, and through my inability to spot a friend... I lost that too,” she downed a mug of ale. “I’ll pay for that of course, the ale I mean. I was allowed a seat in the new government. And the Forkspear mansion was given to me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ilea said.

“If you want to fight me, we could do so down in the Root. I can hold my own now, even against the likes of you,” she said.

Ilea couldn’t help but snicker, nearly choking on her ale.

She placed the mug down and looked at Alice. “I might take you up on that offer. Girl.”

Alice gulped, glancing towards Jaime.

“The expedition was sent to their doom, just like you were. The former was better prepared, that much is true but in the end a Taleen dungeon is highly dangerous. They were sent by the Forkspears and while Alice has much to learn, she has agreed to try and right the wrongs her family had caused. Both to their own and to others,” he said.

Still loyal to her. Their dynamics have changed though. They’re much closer. He’s not as reserved and she isn’t as controlled.

“You’re a good man, Jaime,” Ilea said. “Which is why I won’t take her up on that offer.”

“You should,” he said. “I give you my full approval. There’s even a guild training room we could rent.”

Ilea quirked up an eyebrow and smiled. *Does he want me to kill her?*

He leaned in towards her. “She’s quite durable.”

A lesson then. Can’t you do that yourself old man?

“Not as convincingly,” Jaime said and leaned back, his posture straightening to that of a trained butler before he took a sip of ale, as if to taste the strange liquid.

“I ordered food already,” Ilea said. “How long until you’re done?” she spoke out towards the barkeeper.

“With that order?! An hour at least! Damn adventurers,” he said, grumbling the last bit before he joined the two stressed out cooks again.

“Okay, let’s see what you learned then, Azarinth Healer,” Ilea said and stood up, brushing off her clothes and leather armor.

“What... is. Ehm, your offer?” Ember said, more to herself really as she glanced around, a little confused.

Alice looked at the girl with pity, lightly touching her shoulder as she walked past her.

“You can come and watch if you want to,” Ilea said and blinked to one of the clerks. She rented the aforementioned training room and informed them that the clients could wait at her table, should more of them arrive in the mean time.

“We have to wait for the food anyway. We can talk about it more later,” she said as the group entered the rather spacious training room underground.

Stone walls and a floor covered in hard sand.

“I assume you’ve found your Class to be quite good. Got a second one already?” Ilea asked.

“It is! The sphere is incredible and Destruction can damage even higher leveled monsters and people. I coupled it with my enchanter class, using runes to trap or slow down people before I attack,” Alice explained, quite agitated. She was already in a stance, prepared for battle.

Azarinth Fighting, Ilea noted. “What about the healing part, no mention of that?”

Alice grinned. “It’s good to trade blows but I haven’t had to rely on it too much.”

Oh you poor girl.

“You can prepare your runes and enchantments, I’ll wait,” Ilea said.

Alice shook her head. “I’m ready. This is a fair duel. And I’m prepared to take a beating.”

Ilea looked at Jaime, his eyes averted as he focused on not showing his smile.

“Okay,” Ilea said and walked towards the girl. “How is your Veteran skill coming along?”

“My Veteran skill?” Alice asked.

“Yes,” Ilea said, infusing her voice.

Everyone in the room was frozen in place, their eyes darting around as they read the message they must have received.

Ilea casually walked in front of Alice, getting her face close to the woman. “How about your Pain Tolerance?”

She touched her with one arm, assessing her health and her strength. Her ash lashed out, cutting through her arm with ease.

The removed limb fell to the ground with a wet sound, just when the effect of monster hunter stopped.

Ilea knew that Alice was fine. A little injured perhaps.

The girl stumbled back and grit her teeth, tears forming in her eyes as her breathing quickened. And then she vanished.

Oh!

Ilea turned and caught her fist, blood dripping from the closing wound on her shoulder.

She's healing it.

Her hand closed, breaking every bone in Alice's remaining hand before she let go.

I'm being mean. Would I do this to one of my Sentinels? No. No I wouldn't. But then again, this isn't one of my Sentinels.

She grabbed Alice by her neck and lifted her up, feeling that Jaime was getting a little nervous too by now.

"Don't worry, Jaime. I'm just playing a little," she said and added her own healing to the mix, the three people watching in amazement as Alice's arm reformed with increasing speed.

Ilea twirled and threw her into the nearby wall.

Alice blinked and appeared close again, pushed right back by Force, her body slamming into the stone.

A good decision to offer the Bluemoon Grass and books after all. This feels quite, cathartic.