

Ilea took a sip of her ale and smiled.

Verena gently touched her shoulder before she teleported behind the bar. She grabbed a whiskey bottle and appeared next to Ilea, pouring herself a glass. “Well done.”

“Thanks. I think they could’ve managed on their own anyway,” she mused. Ilea had done a quick check on the injured during her attempts to get all the Soul Wardens back under the impressive barrier the town had set up. It turned out that war machines were unsurprisingly quite durable. While she did believe the city would’ve had a good chance of dealing with the problem themselves, the losses would’ve been a little different. She had seen three healers among the hundreds of warriors, engineers, and mages. At least her dominion allowed her to check up on a lot of people with little issue. *Just again shows how important the Sentinels or really any high level healers are. Even without me here, a few Sentinels could’ve made a massive difference.*

And those cannons. Oh... the cannons, she thought, a warm smile on her face as she remembered the heavy impact that managed to cave in her chest despite her layered mantle. It was no wonder they could fight back against even emerging four marks.

“Hundreds would’ve died, if not most everyone,” Bralin said. “You’re the hero of the Pit, unsung as of yet.”

“And so it will remain, for a while,” Ilea said. “Enough people saw me that rumors will likely spread. But let it take a few days, weeks, or even months. Actually, it might be good if the name Lilith starts spreading at some point. Maybe you can help with that.”

“After your performance today, I’ll do anything to get into your good graces, oh goddess Lilith of ash and flame,” he said and raised his tankard.

“None of that god talk,” Ilea said.

“Oh?” Pierce mused, mixing herself a drink with fruits and a bunch of alcohol she got from somewhere. “The goddess does not like her devout followers?”

Ilea gave her a look and smiled. *Don’t show your weakness.*

Pierce stared back but returned her attention to her drink a few seconds later.

“I assume the Dome fight is off then?” Ilea said.

“Why? The attack was a little different than what we usually get, sure. And the unknown... as of yet, help, we received was strange, but if anything it will make the fights even more sought after. You’ll do just fine. If you’re interested of course. People will know who you are once you show your powers,” Bralin said.

“I’ll keep it to my armor and maybe a few tricks,” Ilea said and summoned the massive sword she had taken from the first Soul Warden she had destroyed. The thing appeared in her hand before she laid it down on the bar. “It does look a little ridiculous without my armor on.”

[Blade of the Warden – Ancient Quality] – [Allows for magical infusions] - Enchantments [Mana Flow 3 / Sharpness 4 / Self Repair 2]

Bralin chuckled. "Yeah, plenty will be hunting for these now."

Ilea glanced at him and smiled. "Hmm, if only someone had collected about sixty of them."

"We'll buy them, if you want to make a deal. First I want to buy one for myself. Will get you an idea as well for the price to go for," Bralin said.

"I want one too," Pierce said.

Ilea gestured for him to take the blade on the counter. "It's yours. Pierce, you pay me. What do you think I can get for one, Bralin?"

"He gets one for free?!" Pierce exclaimed, spreading her arms as she nearly spilled a bit of her drink.

Ilea looked at her with a confused expression. "Of course, it's Bralin after all. Long term not fucking annoying person in my life. And I didn't see you anywhere near the pit, so you likely went looting. Did you get the key at least?"

Pierce scratched her head. "You know, I tried. I did. But your mention of the location was vague and the area was incredibly well enchanted."

"So that's why you're here," Bralin said with a smile. "I thought as much."

"What do you mean?" Ilea asked.

"Someone as powerful as you doesn't usually show up somewhere without reason. Not without having ties to a place. There are quite a few powerful and ancient artifacts here, both that and knowledge guarded for millennia," he said. "I'm not sure what key you mean, but yes... stealing might be your only option. That or..." he said and smiled before he burst out laughing.

Ilea gave him a look.

He calmed down after a few seconds, drinking from his tankard before he talked. "Stealing or well... beating the Champion of the Forged Dome. Which hasn't happened in... seven years now? Something like that."

"Coincidentally, I'm signed up for my first fight already," Ilea said with a smile.

"Weird right?" the dwarf said. "Ah I'm having such a great time. The last months were getting a little boring."

"She does that to people," Pierce said. "It mostly has to do with the insane risks she takes and luck to somehow get out of it all alive."

"It's called being a healer," Ilea said and raised her mug. "People coming by the way."

"Being a healer doesn't even come close to what you can do, oh almighty Lilith," the Dragonkiller said.

She didn't miss it. Oh well, as long as I don't get forcibly added to some kind of annoying pantheon with politics and responsibilities. I can still choose my own evolutions, and so far there always was a distinctly non monster or deity like option.

A group of dwarves and Dark Ones entered the bar, led by Grahn. They talked loudly, already boasting about their exploits in the short lived battle against the ancient menace of the Soul Wardens.

The dwarf went behind the bar and gave Bralin a meaningful look. He started filling tankards, handing them out to the dust covered and bloodied warriors, receiving cheers in return. The barkeep whispered something that most people would've missed. "Thank ye."

Ilea smiled and raised her mug, cheering with everyone else who had participated in the battle. *Glad I could clean up so efficiently.*

"The Shining Caves are cleared but I kind of doubt that was the last you'll see of the Soul Wardens," she said to Bralin and the Elders.

"This telepathy thing is really useful," the dwarf said.

"It is. I'll still need a replacement for the voice module by the way," Ilea informed him. *"And we have another two days until the first arena fight. I'll go down there again to finish off whatever is in that Soul Forge,"* she added.

"The Soul Forge?" Bralin asked as he raised an eyebrow. He tried to look casual but the impact was obvious.

"I want my war machine first. Otherwise I can't train," Pierce informed.

"You got one too? Congratulations," Ilea sent in a dry tone.

"If you wouldn't mind someone else to join you, I'd love to accompany you three to the Soul Forge. There's bound to be interesting treasure. And knowledge, that may or may not be best left undiscovered," the dwarf added, just a hint of concern in his voice.

"I doubt it'll blow our minds," Ilea answered. *"But sure, you're probably tougher than the Shades and they said they knew the way."*

He seemed thoughtful after that and finished his tankard with a light smile on his face, the attention of the group returning to the celebrations and their drinks.

An hour later they retired down into the workshop, Pierce eager to get her stolen goods prepared for battle. Ilea didn't exactly dislike the idea of not being the worst war machine pilot in the vicinity anymore.

"I'll go look for the Shades," Verena said and vanished.

"Thanks," Ilea said to her appearing form within her dominion. She summoned her armaments and healed the remaining damage she had left untouched back down within the pit.

Bralin brought another voice module and went to install it.

"Not quite as large as mine," Ilea said, looking at the war machine in front of her.

Pierce leaned against it with a casual look on her face, swirling the drink in her hand as she smiled. *"Oh you know. The best pilots are the ones with the older models. You wouldn't understand."*

"That is a high end machine. What Lilith has is simply beyond the normal standards," Bralin supplied. He knew full well that she was joking.

"Taking the side of the goddess, well what else could be expected from an opportunistic dwarven noble hiding amongst the common plebs," the Dragonkiller said before she sipped from her drink.

“On point observation,” he said. Bralin tapped the voice module and pushed it a little further into the side of Ilea’s armor. “Check if it works,” he added, handing her the sender.

“Best war machine around,” she said with the now familiar deep and booming voice.

“Probably,” the dwarf said and turned to the other machine.

Pierces, *acquisition*, was propped up by several steel beams, arms lifted to allow for better access. No other mechanics were inside the back hall, a few half finished machines standing nearby. Bright white magical lights with a hint of blue lined the high ceiling. Bralin walked around it, occasionally giving the machine a tap. “Been a while since this one got a proper maintenance.” He closed his visor and got out a few tools. “You ladies mind if I play some music?”

“Music? As in, recorded?” Ilea asked.

“Yeah. Not easy to make but quite popular in the Pit. I know most rich folk prefer live renditions,” he said and activated an enchanted box.

The sound of string instruments immediately resounded, a surprisingly fast pace compared to most music Ilea had heard so far in Elos. “I want this,” she said, carefully touching the device with childlike fascination.

[Voice Summoner – Rare Quality] – [Enchanted]

“It’s quite a nice device to have around,” Pierce agreed. “Can it be louder?”

“There’s a few gears on it. Feel free to fiddle around with it. What color did you want it, lassy?” Bralin asked.

“It’s been a while since someone called me Lassy,” Pierce said with an almost predatory grin.

“Make it blue. Dark blue.”

“As you wish, princess,” he said and continued his work, occasionally humming with the music.

Ilea tried the different gears. One thing she noted was that the piece only seemed to allow for a single song to be captured, and its mana was used up rather quickly, meaning someone had to go recharge it after every single rendition. Not much of a problem with her extensive inner storage space and incredible wealth, but it would take some time to record the music. *Ah I wish I had some epic themes for battles. But I’d have to first try and recall everything, give a musician my shitty rendition and have them copy it with actual talent.*

“How much is one of these?” she asked. “Without a piece of music stored inside.”

Bralin glanced back at her, a part of his suit’s arm inside the other war machine’s back. He shrugged lightly. “Three or four gold pieces.”

“What if I buy a hundred,” she said.

He just shook his head. “Gods,” he muttered. “Ten to twenty percent discount.”

“Hmm, I can just have Goliath copy this,” she mused, hearing a tool clatter to the floor.

The music still played in the background with Bralin staring at her. “Did you say Goliath? As in, the legendary Dark One smith from Hallowfort?”

“Yeah, he made the armor too,” Ilea supplied.

“By Lilith,” he whispered. “You truly do not cease to surprise. He’s a fucking legend. A myth. Every year there’s another fool who goes north to find the settlement.”

Pretty sure we could add this place to the teleportation network at some point, Ilea thought.

“Any one of us ever make it up there?” he asked. “Out of curiosity.”

Ilea nodded lightly. “Yeah, there’s quite a few dwarves there. Mostly various Dark One species. Terok is one of them, if you know him.”

He laughed and got back to work. “Terok she says. I know about eighteen of the fuckers. A few of em went north too. Might just be he’s a distant cousin of mine.”

“Dwarves,” Pierce mused.

He pointed at her without taking his eyes off the steel plate he was checking. “You better watch your mouth, lots of things that can go wrong with a high power war machine like this one.”

“Just put in a remote detonator,” Ilea said. “Maybe then she might actually shut up.”

“Don’t give him ideas, I can only get so excited,” Pierce said before she groaned. “Ah it’s not the same knowing you’ve actually faced down a Dragon.”

Another tool fell to the ground. Bralin looked up and sighed. “Please. I’m trying to work here.”

“How long will it take?” Pierce asked. “I’m already bored.”

“We can go sign you up for the Forged Dome,” Ilea suggested. “I’d love to watch you fail.”

Pierce whistled. “You’re on, goddess. I’ll fight you to the bitter end.”

“A one second battle doesn’t sound particularly interesting,” Ilea retorted.

The Elder walked off, finishing her drink before she placed the glass on a nearby workbench. “Jokes like that aren’t funny when what you say is true.”

Ilea smiled. “They are to me. See you later Bralin, and thanks for the work.”

He hummed to the music and waved them off. “I owe you at least sixty gold pieces for that sword.”

“It was a gift,” she said, making sure Pierce heard her. They teleported out into the street, Ilea stretching as she breathed in the fresh air coated with a healthy layer of smithing fumes and metal particles. “I’ll give you one for eighty five,” she whispered to the Elder.

Pierce looked at her and huffed. “I will purchase your intriguing tool. Here, that should be sufficient,” she said and summoned a small chest with obviously dwarven runes on it.

Ilea checked the thing and made it vanish, a hundred gold coins richer. “You’re even worse with gold than I am,” she said and threw the woman one of the massive blades.

Pierce caught it with surprising grace, swinging it around before she made it vanish. A few people stared at them, one young dwarf rubbing his eyes.

“Gold retains little meaning to me, Lilith,” Pierce said in a fake haughty accent.

“Seems like Verena found the Shades. She’s coming back this way. Let’s meet her on the way, I wanted to try some of the local dishes anyway,” Ilea said and started towards one of the side alleys.

“Always thinking about food,” Pierce said.

“What else is there in life?” Ilea asked, soon with her first bowl of steamed vegetables and juicy green meat. The hint of metal added a unique taste to the dish.

Pierce of course joined in, a bottle of ale or a drink added to each plate or bowl.

The festivities had spread throughout the whole of the Pit, either that or it was just a normal thing at this time of day. A time of day Ilea couldn't quite discern without a visible sun. Dwarves greeted them as they passed, many of them showing light bruises, dents or cuts on their armor, some even with missing limbs. The machines that were, not the people piloting them.

“You're healing them, aren't you?” Pierce said.

Ilea swallowed, her eyes closed as she enjoyed the taste. “Hmm. What? Oh, yes of course.”

“Have you no regard for the local healer guilds? How else will they make a living,” she said in a deadpan voice.

Ilea could see into most of the shops and smithies nearby. They weren't near the wealthier areas in the higher sections of the bowl after all, where enchantments likely protected against that kind of intrusion. “They don't exactly seem to have workplace safety laws,” she said, seeing a working dwarf hiss as he slipped and cut off one of his fingers.

He grabbed the finger with gritted teeth before he watched the thing regrow instead. Glancing at the severed and bleeding piece, he threw it into a nearby fire. The dwarf muttered something as he looked up for a brief moment and then got back to work.

“Hmm, this one is good,” Pierce said. “Forge's Forge Ale,” she added, reading off the label. “If only everything didn't have this slight taste of metal.”

“Might just be the air,” Ilea said. “Probably not healthy either.”

“Ah, you're just blowing things out of proportion. Typical healer talk. A bit of metal in the air is perfectly healthy,” Pierce said and waved to the other Elder a few dozen meters ahead.

Verena was followed by the two familiar Shade creatures, their excitement near palpable. Both of them looked at everything they passed. One stopped to pick up a block of iron from a stall. The other one joined to add some comments as they both admired the piece.

“You really do internalize it all,” Ilea mused when she reached Verena. “Thanks for getting them.”

“They weren't hard to find,” Verena said, choosing to ignore the other comment.

“This place is full of wonder,” one of the Shades said, a joyous expression on its mist like lack of face.

Ilea didn't know how she could tell but chose not to question her sanity quite yet. “We wanted to sign Pierce up for the Forged Dome, care to join us?”

“Ah, yes! We have heard much of this fabled Dome,” one of them said, returning the slab of metal without a shred of interest left.

I wonder if they've already forgotten about the Soul Forge.

Ilea pondered the implementation of forges in pretty much everything around them as they made their way through the city. The building they sought wasn't hard to find, but the problem was that most of it was gone. *Hmm.*

A lane of destruction went from their position to a distant cannon, the likely culprit of their current issue. *At least it got the Warden too*, she thought and turned back to the remains of the stone building.