

## Chapter 600 Shortcuts and Ambitions

When people started to get in their way, she made sure everyone nearby was healed before she displaced both herself and Feyrair into another street nearby. She continued her healing where appropriate, taking in the busy city. Merchants shouted out what goods they had today, artists, warriors, and courtesans advertising their services.

Feyrair suppressed a hiss.

“What is it?” Ilea asked, catching the hand of a kid who tried to steal from an older man. She healed the boy’s injuries and let him go, ignoring his confused babbling before he ran off, staring at them from a hiding spot a few moments later.

“It stinks, makes me hungry,” Feyrair said.

Ilea walked to a food stand selling skewers and summoned a few copper coins. “Cities tend to be crowded and more or less dirty,” she said.

“Why would anybody choose to live here?” Fey asked as he looked around, gratefully receiving the skewers she handed him.

Ilea started eating too. “You know the answer to that, Fey.”

“Safety. But at the cost of this?” he asked.

“We’re not prone to like fighting monsters and eating raw meat in the wilderness quite as much as you do, nor are we nearly as powerful usually. Takes a lot of effort to get to two hundred even,” Ilea said.

“It’s like living in a prison,” he said. “And your houses... boxes of stone or wood behind walls and stacked together.”

“You have people around all the time, things are happening, entertainment and food is readily available. It’s warm,” Ilea said. “I enjoy coming into cities from time to time and while I wouldn’t want to live in one all the time, having an apartment or house is nice. A nice bed, a kitchen, bathtub.”

“But most here don’t have the kind of building you own,” he said.

“I know. Well not everyone can kill monsters to make a good living, or find treasure in ancient ruins,” she said with a grin.

“Yes, doubt many here would survive more than a day even in the wilderness here,” Feyrair said.

“I know. But if they’re happy with their lives, I don’t see an issue. It’s not like they can’t join an adventuring guild to go out there and fight,” she said. “It’s just that few humans want that if another option is available.”

“No wonder few ever reach a reasonable level then,” Feyrair said when they reached the plaza, the fountain spewing water out of a massive stone bear’s open mouth.

Ilea made for the largest building, a defensible slab of stone. She noted that not a single mark of the war was visible on the walls.

“What’s your business?” an imperial guard standing next to the iron grate asked, looking at Feyrair.

Ilea summoned her badge and the note. “We’re here to see Officer Barren about this notice.”

“Another one,” the guard said and looked her up and down. “Well alright, if it’s Shadows, this may actually be resolved.”

“Such a tough job?” Ilea asked.

“Shouldn’t be, you’re right. But nobody’s returned so far. Hard to say who’s hiding in that burg,” he murmured, glancing away.

“What do you know?” Feyrair asked, taking a step closer to the man.

The guard clutched his spear but the elf wasn’t impressed.

**[Warrior – lvl 68]**

“Just... seems. The job should have a higher rating, is all I’m saying. There must still be high ranking soldiers and officers around refusing to surrender. Who knows who they side with,” the guard said in a whispering tone.

Ilea grunted, walking towards the entrance with Feyrair in tow. “Thanks,” she said to the guard as they entered.

They quickly found the officer, a man looking to be in his forties with graying hair. He wore his uniform while sitting at a large desk in the entrance hall of all places. Stacks of paperwork lay scattered on his desk, soldiers and administrative personnel rushing past from time to time.

“What is it?” he asked without looking up.

“Your slaver problem,” Ilea said, flashing her Shadow badge.

He looked at her now, glancing at Feyrair and back to Ilea. “Don’t remember asking a Shadow to help.”

“I’m here as a Medic Sentinel,” she replied.

He grunted. “I see. That new healing order from Ravenhall. Well, a Shadow being part of their ranks makes the idea of hiring them not quite as laughable as I thought. Talk to Paulson,” he said and pointed at a bored looking soldier sitting on a window sill at the other side of the hall. An imperial scout judging by his armor.

Ilea didn’t say anything, instead just walking over to the indicated man.

“How very arrogant,” Feyrair whispered. “For someone of so little power.”

She glanced at him. “Rank carries power too. If you were to bother him too much, you could offend the Empire itself. But in this case I’m rather sure the reason is a lack of sleep and stress. Two factors that can make you unable to see the monster in front of you.”

“And said monster would be you?” the scout said, glancing at her with his green eyes. He wore a hood that covered a part of his face, his armor light but padded, two straight swords hanging from his belt. He too wore the imperial light gray.

**[Rogue – lvl 138]**

“I always thought it interesting that Rogues can be part of an army. Doesn’t the name suggest a conflict of interest?” Ilea asked.

He sighed. “If that confuses you, miss healer, then I suggest you participate at the front lines in the next war.”

Ilea smiled. “I am the front line. We’re here to take care of this one,” she said and summoned the notice.

The rogue perked up a little when he saw the casual use of a storage item, glancing at the piece of paper. “Another one. Just the two of you?”

“I assure you, that is more than enough,” Ilea said.

“Who are you exactly?” Paulson asked, really looking at her for the first time.

“No one of importance,” Ilea said. “Can you show us where those slavers are hiding?”

He kept looking at her before his attention went to Feyrair. “Hiding? Oh they’re not hiding, miss. They’ve taken a military fort half a day’s ride west of the city.”

“And you’re not doing anything about that?” she asked.

He shrugged. “They’re bothering the villages and refugees nearby but they don’t have the men and resources to strike against Mothine.”

“And you don’t have the resources to deal with them?” Ilea suggested.

“No, we do. But it’s cheaper to hire someone else instead. Plenty of imperials have died in this war. I believe the Officer things to keep casualties low,” Paulson explained. “You’re the highest level ones to take the job, so that’s promising at least. Still... just two people,” he murmured while shaking his head.

“Where’s the fort then?” Ilea asked.

“I’ll bring you close. Tomorrow, it’s already getting late. Make your mounts ready, if you use any. We ride at dawn,” he said.

Ilea looked at the man before she turned to Feyrair. “I don’t think we should wait any longer. We can fly. Fast. We’ll carry you there.”

“And leave me stranded while you infiltrate their fort? No,” Paulson said.

“No, I’ll bring you back before we do that,” Ilea said.

He looked at her and smiled. “As much as I’d like to see that, we’ll ride tomorrow.”

Ilea sighed. “The curse of normalcy.”

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Paulson watched the woman turn and address the officer, a layer of ash spreading out from her back, quickly forming into a thick layer of lithe armor, a dull black reflecting little of the light in the hall.

“Officer Barren, I’ll borrow Mr. Paulson for a little while, is that acceptable?” the woman said.

“My soldiers are mine to command, adventurer,” Barren said as he looked at her.

A cold feeling suddenly went down Paulson’s back. He couldn’t breathe, the hair on his body standing up as he realized that the woman hadn’t been joking. From one moment to the next, she had changed from a high level healer to death itself, a monster he had no hope of ever defeating.

Paulson had seen many a creature and plenty of arrogant high level adventurers and even Shadows. Half of them were nobles or rich children who didn’t know what they were talking about, running into dungeons or military positions never to return. He didn’t know about the woman’s experience. She seemed young, careless, and cocky, but now he knew that at the very least she was different than most he had faced before.

*A fear spell? No... it feels different, instinctual. She isn’t using my mind or fear against me, she’s just showing what she is.*

“I came here to deal with Slavers, not to be sent into an inn by a lazy Scout. If those people really are as dangerous as some have claimed, I think it best for us to deal with them immediately. Wouldn’t you agree, officer?” the woman spoke.

Barren tried to speak but words failed him, the whole hall standing or sitting frozen with their eyes on the woman.

Paulson couldn’t help but be amused. Perhaps it was the first time most of these people have felt the presence of an overwhelming predator. It was a little hypocritical of course, he himself had weaseled himself into this position because it was well paid and safe, without a chance of encountering demons and beasts. But it turned out that he hadn’t been entirely correct.

The cold feeling of danger vanished just as quickly as it had come, but the ashen warrior remained. Well, ashen healer.

“Take him,” Barren said, throwing him to the beast as easily as he breathed.

Well, that was another thing he liked about this position. Barren was predictable. It just so happened that in this case, he got the shit end of the stick. “Well, I suppose you were convincing enough,” he said. “I can’t fly myself, so, to the roof?” he asked with a shrug.

The woman looked at him now, piercing blue eyes squinting lightly.

He found himself taking a step back, nearly hitting the wall.

“There is no need,” she said and the world shifted.

Paulson appeared outside, falling at about fifty meters in the air. He activated his enhancements and prepared for a hard landing. *Might break my legs... ah that’s going to suck.*

Something grabbed him under his shoulders, smooth black limbs flowing around him before he hovered in the air. “What?” he asked, looking up to find the ashen woman. Two black wings now adorned her back, moving slowly as a tail swayed in the wind. Her armored companion had his own wings, made of white flame that looked near invisible against the sunlight.

"I'm starting to feel like you're overqualified for this job," he said.

"Who cares?" the woman asked as she moved closer, easily keeping him in the air with a few of the ashen limbs coming out between her wings. "Where's the fort?"

*Flying really makes a massive difference... it's like looking at a map*, Paulson thought, pointing to the road leading west. "We have to follow the road for a few hours, see that heightened terrain in the distance? The fort is located at the highest point, surrounded by a small forest."

The woman moved him closer, her wings starting to vibrate slightly as a few of her limbs went over to grab her slightly unwilling companion.

He smiled to himself, knowing that he wasn't the only one carried by the ashen monster. *And here I thought he was the stronger one of the two.*

Paulson chuckled when the air was suddenly punched out of his lungs, his sight going dark as his body tried to push against the sudden acceleration. He felt his magic surge, screaming against the air that flowed into him.

His heart beat quickened and he struggled to breath until something warm flowed into him. He first thought he had pissed himself but came to the conclusion that it was healing magic. It felt a little different than the one he had experience before but it was essentially the same. *What a service. I wonder if I could hire her to transport me to Virilya for a few days off.*

He would've asked but couldn't speak with the constant flow of air.

"That the place?" the woman asked suddenly, pointing to the distant forest.

Paulson calmed down and coughed a few times before he rubbed his eyes. "Lady, I can't see that far."

"Is this the forest? There's a fort standing on top of a hill," she said.

He looked around to find that they were in fact in the right area. "Holy swords... you're fast. Well I don't know if there are any other forts in the area but I suppose that's the one. May I go back now?"

"No," Ilea said. "You come with us. Both as a witness and an imperial scout in case we need the authority you wield."

Paulson sighed, gesturing to the ashen limbs and his general situation. "Authority?"

"Yes. I don't know officer Barren, so you'll come with us, just in case he acts brazen," the woman said.

"Like you did?" her companion asked.

She pointed at him. "Exactly."

The three suddenly dropped down, falling before their descent slowed and they landed in the forest.

*Ground, how I've missed you*, Paulson thought, on his knees as he touched the earth. "Alright, I'll come with you. Might as well get some reputation and more pay out of this. Care to tell me who you are now?"

"Still no idea?" the woman asked.

"Are you famous or something? You're not an ordinary Shadow, that's for sure. A favor then? For someone who's locked in that fort? Or a personal vengeance? I don't think you're a General of the

Imperial army. Northern tribes or Baralia itself?” Paulson guessed. He really had no idea who the woman and her companion were. Neither did he know if it was a good thing that the mage snickered to himself.

“I’m Lilith, one of the founders of the Medic Sentinels,” the woman said.

Paulson nodded. “Lilith, great. Well, welcome to Baralia. It’s as fucked as you’ve surely heard.”

She sighed. “Yes, I know. I was here, clearing cities of Cursed, fighting alongside General Velamyr.”

“That makes sense, with that flying speed and level. Makes less sense why you’re here though,” he said.

Lilith started marching towards the higher elevation, laughing to herself as she passed him. “Let’s just go.”

“I like you,” the mage said and made a hissing sound. He had red reptile like eyes and glared at him with an almost predatory gaze.

“Just don’t eat me alright,” Paulson said. He noticed Lilith tensed up and glanced back at him but she resumed her walk a moment later. *Careful what you say. Powerful people on a personal mission. Just keep your head down, get a few medals and a recommendation. Not an officer rank, but maybe I could be a Captain. Might be more relaxing than this kind of work.*

The position in Mothine had been somewhat relaxed, most of the conflict after the war focused on the larger cities in the former kingdom. Mothine had fallen early and while the fighting had been fierce, afterwards it seemed clear that the town would simply become part of Lys. Few local nobles had remained nor were they unwelcoming of the imperial rule. But beyond that Paulson neither cared nor informed himself much.

He kept pace with the two powerful Shadows, Sentinels, monsters, or whatever they wanted to call themselves. As they neared the fort, he started to see familiar parts of the forest and he noticed that he was getting winded.

“Can we slow down a little?” he asked and pointed at a large boulder sitting in the middle of a clearing. “That’s where I brought the last groups who took this job.”

Lilith glanced at the boulder. “How many were there before and what were their levels?”

“Three adventurer teams... four to six people, first two were ruby teams I’d say, last one sapphire, but that one had a mage at level two hundred and ten. Pretty rare to see such a difference. They seemed experienced too,” he answered.

“Three teams took the job and none came back? But it’s still the same rating?” Lilith asked.

Paulson raised his hands and smiled. “Hey, I didn’t put up the job. Officer Barren didn’t change the rating. He did complain about the lack of courage and experience within adventuring teams... for way too long,” he said.

“What do you think then? A level two hundred mage was either captured, killed, or somehow persuaded to leave the fort alone,” she said.

“Yeah... I mean they’re adventurers. It’s possible they were paid off. The reward is good, hence the interest, but after the war... well I hear a lot of treasuries were empty, already broken into. Missing

nobility and otherwise rich folk... just straight up assets gone or hidden. Baralia is probably full of treasure right now, and full of dangerous people,” he said.

Lilith scratched her armor where her cheek would be. “Yeah. Like a bunch of pirates.”

“I suppose so, miss,” Paulson said. “Though they do usually use ships.”

“Oh, do they now?” she asked, obviously not expecting an answer as she continued towards the fort, glimpses of the large structure now visible through the gaps in the trees.

Paulson wondered if he was walking into an easy promotion or into the den of a Hydra. The woman had proven to be powerful but while he knew she was strong, the spell she had used could be anything. They were both above his identify range but that too could mean many different things. Either way, he couldn’t get away, that much he knew. So he decided to just roll with the punches, help out here and there and hopefully get back alive and a little richer.