

“You can’t trust him,” Pierce said finally, her composure calm again, tone more serious than Ilea had ever heard her talk.

“Of course not. That’s the whole point,” Verena said.

“I have detailed documentation on the attempts on my life, corpses of assassins hidden away in secret locations. You could confirm their identity and affiliation with Helena Pierrot but then you may as well tell her I’m alive, and who I’m working for. If you still had someone worth my skills, they could confirm my story, but then I wouldn’t be needed in the first place,” Wayland said.

“I’m not a fan of spies,” Ilea said. “*Can’t we have the Meadow look into his heart or something?*”

“*I don’t think even the tree would know for sure,*” Verena said.

Pierce remained quiet.

“So it’s telepathy. I was wondering what you and Claire were doing up there,” he said. “You should learn how to talk through the mind and with your mouth at the same time. It’s less obvious then.”

“I’m sure you noticed,” Ilea said. “But I’m not exactly one for subtlety.”

“Right. You’re not,” Wayland said and poured himself another glass. “What have I gotten myself into. The flame berserker too,” he muttered.

“Do we have a problem?” Verena asked as she summoned herself a glass and held it out towards him.

He walked over and emptied the bottle. “Always difficult to navigate you. Like an unpredictable monster. You single handedly destroyed a lot of schemes, killed a lot of good people,” he said and clinked his glass against hers before he downed half of his.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Verena said.

Wayland looked up for a moment as he swirled his glass. “Officer Nyle, around forty, forty two years ago,” he said.

Verena thought for a moment before her eyes opened wide. “That was Nipha?”

He nodded lightly. “Strand never found out, or he chose not to tell you. Thirty six years ago, the ale shortage.”

Verena sighed before she handed her glass to Ilea. Her fist started burning before she punched the man in his face.

He stumbled back and fell on his ass, blood trickling from his mouth as he resummoned his glass and stood up slowly. A red mark showed on his cheek, the slight burns visible.

“You caused a lot of death,” Verena said.

He didn’t deny it. Instead he looked at Ilea. “And now I can prevent more. That or you can wait until half your Sentinels are covert loyalists of Nipha, Lys, and Kroll, the other half blackmailed

into silence. If you don't want me with any direct control, let me teach people you trust. It'll take longer but with monsters like you acting as deterrents, it might not be too late."

"You should discuss this with the council, not me," Ilea said.

"You're the key. They would never approve of cooperating with the spy master of another country, even if they know someone like me is needed," he said.

"I don't know if I approve," Ilea said. "Pierce, you know him, what do you think?"

The woman sighed and looked back, a smile on her face. She looked vulnerable. "I'll keep an eye on him, and we'll talk to the council. It's true that he's been hunted for a long time. I'll have to check my sources in Nipha but it seems way too convoluted for him to be some kind of double agent. And if he is, then it's not Nipha sending him. We're gonna have a very long talk, Wayland. And I'm not looking forward to this," Pierce said. "Let's see if the Head Administrator is available, haven't bothered her yet. Ilea, can you join for a minute to confirm the story? I'm not exactly seen as a trusted source of information."

"Sure," Ilea replied with a shrug, moving the group through the city until they appeared inside the central administrative building. "*Claire? Found the one listening to us. Got time for a talk with them and Elder Pierce?*"

"Sulivhaan is here, we have time if his presence isn't an issue," Claire informed her.

"Perfect," Ilea replied. If anyone in the council would be against hiring a self proclaimed ex state spy master, it'd be Sulivhaan. Which means if Pierce and Wayland manage to convince them, they'd have some certainty of his motives. His loyalty would likely be questioned forever, but she supposed that was part of his job description. A use of fabric tear brought them all in front of Claire's office. She didn't want to make the anti space magic enchantments look bad in front of everyone present. "*I cracked the new ones in four seconds,*" she informed the woman and knocked at the same time.

The door opened, revealing the masked gravity mage and Claire, her hair up in an orderly bun by now.

"Been a while," Ilea said, waving at Sulivhaan.

"Lilith, and Elders, good to see you all alive and healthy.

[Gravity Mage – lvl 281]

Not static, not exactly wiping out three mark populations in the north either, she remarked and went to the bar. Claire had added bottled ale from various local breweries. Ilea didn't expect the same quality as from Walter but with all the refugees and professionals starting anew in Ravenhall, she'd be happy to give them a shot.

"And who would you be?" Claire asked.

Wayland entered and bowed, taking off his brown hat as he looked at them with his black eyes. He seemed neutral, the identification tag showing his real level at three hundred. The door closed behind him. "An interviewee for a vacant position in your rather young government. My name is Wayland, thirty years ago I quit my job as the spy master of Nipha. Today I came to offer my services," he said. "A pleasure to meet you."

Ilea left the group after the initial unpleasantries were taken care of. She jumped from one roof to the next, trying her best not to damage the buildings. They weren't flimsy by no means, quite sturdy actually, able to withstand heavy magical impacts. Some even enchanted for more durability.

She knew they could've just walked, but Ravenhall had filled out again, the streets full of people. Smells of various foods, products, sweat, and even magics permeated the levels below, even worse in the growing underground of the massive southern city. Her enhanced senses didn't exactly help, nor the fact that she simply wasn't used to this anymore.

Verena didn't comment on the slight cracks and pieces of stone vanishing due to random untraceable space magic fluctuations. She had no interest in sitting through the talks either.

"What would you be doing anyway? You don't *have* to come to the talks with Hallowfort, you know," Ilea mused as they traversed the city in an illegal manner. Nobody dared come closer than a few dozen meters.

"Are you kidding me?" Verena asked. "I'm not one for politics but we're talking about an event that historians will write about in a thousand years. Least I want to do is stand in the background and see it all."

Ilea smiled and sat down on the roof opposite the Sentinel Headquarter. "It's just gonna be a lot of fawning over the magical tree. And all the other weird powerful beings in the north," she said.

"You've just gotten used to it all. The North itself was something very few of us ever even saw. And most of the higher leveled humans don't dare travel there. Or anywhere far beyond the plains. Shadows most often reach these heights, but they're also the ones vanishing in unknown locations at one point or the other," Verena said.

"Someone ever come back after centuries? Or even longer? Suddenly a three or four mark and ready to take over the world?" Ilea asked.

"No," Verena said in a straight tone. "No, I think they all... just die."

Or they just don't care enough to do anything. Still waiting on that random baker who's a four mark wizard in disguise. Would Veteran be able to get through his disguise? He would likely have other skills. I suppose I wouldn't know until I destroyed every human city, forcing them to show themselves.

The plan didn't seem viable exactly. Not only incompatible with her morals but who would know how such an old and powerful mage would even react? Maybe they'd just move on to the next town with a simple teleportation spell. "Just... seems unlikely. That I'd be the first."

"That's true. But we won't know until they show themselves. Besides, someone has to be the first," Verena said.

"Like I'm some kind of chosen one. I don't like the idea," Ilea said and jumped down. Trian and Kyrian were still out, but there were plenty of Sentinels to destroy within the Headquarters. At least Ilea knew the whole other realm idea of Wayland didn't apply to her. She appeared without any magic after all. Maybe she appeared close to a powerful elixir for one reason or the other, but it wasn't like the Azarinth were completely unknown.

I won't know until I see the event happening with someone else, and even then I'll only see one side of the space fluctuation.

She entered, her mana signature disabling the enchantments on the door before she stepped inside, gesturing the Elder to follow. Ilea considered checking the forest around the Azarinth temple at some point. She doubted anything remained, doubted anything had remained even a second after she had appeared in Elos. It still may be worth a look with her space manipulation.

One floating and currently meditating Sentinel opened his eyes and landed with a smooth motion. She wore the stonehammer and bone armor inspired by the looks of her Mantle. The woman bowed as ash moved around her. "Welcome, Lilith."

Verena looked at her and then glanced at Ilea.

"Awesome," Ilea said and clapped her hands. "Ten points for that performance, Hadley. The ash might be a bit too subtle for lower levels. Just go for it."

The woman didn't reply for a moment, scratching the back of her helmet. "T... thank you," she managed to stammer out. "I... we have time thinking about how to welcome people when it's guard duty. It's incredibly boring," she said and immediately covered her mouth with both hands. "I didn't mean to say that!"

"I mean it is," Ilea said. "Aki's shouldn't be gone for too long though, and I'm sure there's a good reason for you to do this that Trian can explain better than me."

The Sentinel just nodded.

Ilea walked past and touched her shoulder. "Keep the ehm... guard duty up, good job," she said, immediately hearing the heart beat of the woman speed up.

God I suck at this, she thought when they walked down the stairs.

"You suck at this," Verena mused, a slight smile on her face.

"How dare you insult the great Lilith," Ilea answered.

"Right, especially at the heart of your cult," Verena added.

"It's a religion actually," a passing through Sentinel said.

"What's the difference?" Ilea asked the man.

"Wealth, goddess Lilith," he answered with a shrug and a yawn. "I should catch some sleep," he added with a murmur.

They reached the mess hall where four Sentinels sat eating, two alone and two together. *Seems just as busy as the last few times I was here, despite the higher leveled ones being out on missions and at least one or two squads with Trian.*

She saw a class of twenty listening to Lyza, the teacher cutting into a bleeding Stalker Hound with a sharp blade. The woman reached inside with her hand before she started searching for something. Which was when Ilea stopped paying attention.

Orthan was watching over a group of battling healers in one of the larger training halls, offering single word comments from time to time. He seemed content with their performance.

A large part of the present Sentinels were training with each other, meditating, studying, or working on their resistances. Two were having sex and one was masturbating. Details Ilea picked up within her perception, ignored like so many other things she saw whenever she was inside of a city. *Ah, college. Drinking all night, waking up with a massive hangover and getting rid of that with some*

healing magic, setting yourself on fire at nine, getting stabbed at ten. Then alchemy, before being abandoned in a dangerous cave in the afternoon. The joys of youth.

Ilea got a plate and started piling on some food from the self service area.

“Can I take some too?” Verena asked.

“I don’t know. Probably,” Ilea replied. “I don’t even know if I’m allowed to, but I think I can handle Trian,” she said and walked over to a Sentinel she didn’t know. “Mind if we join you?”

The two sitting together ignored them, both close to level two hundred. They had some cold food in their plates and a slew of papers spread out on the table, one pointing down at a section depicting some kind of battle formation while the other listened intently. The last Sentinel, also sitting alone glanced at them. She stood up and gave Ilea a respectful nod before she returned to her meal and the notebook next to her.

The young woman gestured for them to sit down. “I don’t mind. I just won’t stay for long.”

“Resistance training?” Ilea asked as she started eating. The food was good, coming from high quality restaurants in the city but the menu was certainly cooked with energy taking the highest spot of the priority list. It was all kept warm and fresh with enchanted containers.

Verena sat down opposite Ilea, some distance between her and the Sentinel.

“Experimentation,” the woman said and avoided eye contact.

[Battle Healer – lvl 85]

She had brown eyes and wore simple training leather armor provided to the Sentinels. The thing that stood out most was her long blue hair, the color not something Ilea remembered seeing more than a few times in Elos.

“How did you get the blue hair?” she asked. “It looks nice.”

“The vails flower. It grows in the valleys to the east of the city. The process isn’t that complicated, you just have to collect enough and it takes quite some time,” she explained. “I’m Neireen. I don’t think I’ve seen you two before. Are you Hunter Ranks?”

“I’m not a Sentinel,” Verena said, pouring herself a whiskey.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to drink alcohol in here,” Neireen said.

“Better ways to train poison resistance,” the Sentinel sitting a few meters away commented.

“I think we can make an exception for her,” Ilea said. “I’m one of the founders, Lilith. She’s a friend.”

The woman sighed and continued eating in silence.

“What is it?” Ilea asked.

“You’re like the eighth person who’s said that since I joined. I get that you’re really strong, but it’s getting really old. Maybe find someone newer than me,” she said with a slight smile.

Ilea blinked her eyes before she started laughing, Verena joining in after a moment.

The young woman just shook her head.

“So what are you experimenting on?” Ilea asked after a short while, her plate already half empty.

Neireen glanced up and turned a little red. "I'm... trying to make poison that... heals."

"Wouldn't that just be a healing potion?" Ilea asked. She could tell the woman had heard that response a few times already. At least as often as people claiming to be Lilith.

"Sometimes I forget that all you've ever done is punch monsters," Verena said. "Poison making is rather delicate. And an entirely different approach to healing potions." She glanced at the woman sitting next to her. "You're not the first who's tried. But the only ones I heard of that succeeded were specifically made for one target. Once the target leveled up even once, the healing effect returned to something dangerous."

"I'm surprised you've even heard of it. Even the Shadows I asked in the city didn't know about it. Who are you again?" Neireen asked.

"You can call me Verena," she answered.

"Verena. Can I ask you some questions? I'd love to hear more about what you know... and the people you mentioned succeeding," she said.

"We can join you after?" Verena suggested, glancing at Ilea.

She shrugged. "Sure. Maybe I can help somehow by punching something really, really hard."

Neireen sighed again.

Ilea made a fist. "*Really* hard."

"She's not wrong, you know," Verena said, her face perfectly straight.

"Or I can provide funding, that's the other thing I can do," Ilea mused. *Good thing that punching is such an effective way to gain power and wealth here. Plus more importantly, wings and food.*

Neireen led them to a research room a few floors down after they finished their meals. She did give Ilea a few annoyed glances at the full plate the woman carried still. Either the high level or the fact that she wanted to talk to Verena made her not comment on it.

"You just get these rooms?" Verena asked. "That's better gear than what the Shadows provide to their members."

Ilea smiled. "State of the art," she said and tapped a random distilling tool.

Verena gave her a look. "You have no idea what any of this is."

"No," she replied. "I punch stuff."

Neireen opened her notebook and started asking Verena questions, pretty much sidelining Ilea completely.

"I'll go check the fighting. Back in twenty or so," she sent to the Elder.

The woman gave her a slight nod, focused on the notes of the much younger woman.

Ilea teleported through the halls and joined Orthan.

The man jumped with bones breaking out of his arms. "OH... it's just you," he murmured and cracked his forearms back into their fleshy containers. "Don't give me that look, you do worse every day."

"How would you know?" Ilea asked as he stepped back next to her.

“No other way to reach your ridiculous power,” he mused.

The group of Sentinels started sweating just a little more as they noticed the predatory eyes watching them increase to four, something in their instincts telling them to perform well. Very well.