

Chapter 599 Northward

“The Sentinels gave me everything, Lilith. How could I ever forget,” Gael said as his ash armor reformed, turning the man into a monster. His version had jagged horns and spikes growing from his head and shoulders, as well as his arms and thighs.

Ilea couldn't help but grin at the sight of him. Not your typical healing order, that was for sure.

“We should clear out the mine,” she said to Fey.

“I shall go send my report. It's overdue,” Gael said. “I assume there will be nothing left when I get back.”

“Probably. Best of luck on your other missions,” Ilea said.

“And to you, Founder. Thank you for the gift and your assistance,” Gael said and put a fist to his heart.

Ilea gave him a nod before he vanished.

Fey grinned at her.

“What?” Ilea asked, starting towards the mine.

“You inspire deep respect in your subjects,” he said.

“He's not my subject. Just a student in the organization I happened to finance,” she said.

“Whatever you say,” Feyrair mused. “Founder,” he added in a gravelly voice.

“Come on, let's clear the mine,” Ilea said with a light smile below her armor.

The two worked through the expansive mine for the next twenty minutes, finding only a few remaining creatures and their nest. Everything killed and burnt down, they returned to the surface.

“Not exactly a Taleen facility,” Feyrair said.

Ilea smiled. “Yeah. I'm glad we didn't have to clear out hundreds of kilometers worth of mine,” she said.

They returned to Samethol a few minutes later, finding the inn clear of patrons. Instead there was a tailor talking with Haya as they distributed clothing to the refugees.

Everyone froze up when Ilea and Feyrair appeared in the room.

“I can see you're well on your way then. Did Gael show up?” Ilea asked.

“He did. I've already sent the report to the nearest guild. Word should arrive in Ravenhall in a few days,” she said.

Ilea quirked up her eyebrows. “That quickly?”

“The guild has trained messengers, mages, and animals that can bridge the distance far faster than a single rider or flier ever could,” Haya said with some pride. “With the war, the Empire invested a lot more in a reliable and fast messenger system. We just happen to benefit from that too.”

I’m sure I can outfly them, Ilea thought with a smirk.

“Impressive cooperation,” Feyrair commented, checking on the clothes sitting on a nearby table.

He got a few looks but nobody dared talk to the mage.

“The mine is clear, found and destroyed the remaining Shredders and their nest. Maybe give it some time and check in to make sure we didn’t miss anything,” Ilea said.

Haya smiled. “That’s wonderful news. Should I... give the payment to you or have it sent to the Sentinels? Gael refused to be paid.”

“Have it sent to the Sentinels,” Ilea said. “How’s the rate anyway?”

The woman blinked. “What?”

“Compared to the adventurer’s guild and the Shadow’s Hand,” Ilea said.

“Eh... aren’t you the founder of the Medic Sentinels... do you not know? Ah apologies, I didn’t mean to offend, I’m sure you have more important matters to attend to. Well to be honest, it seemed too good to be true. Less expensive than an adventurer team of the appropriate rank... not that anybody of that level would show up to Samethol for a Shredder extermination job,” Haya explained.

“Why not? Challenging fight I’m sure, even for Gael,” Ilea said. She wasn’t sure how challenging it had been for the man exactly, but at least the levels would’ve been good.

Haya nodded slowly. “Yes... challenging, and dangerous. There is better pay to be had for far less treacherous work. Especially with the recent war.”

“I see, makes sense I suppose. Well do make sure to spread the name at least,” Ilea said. She wondered if they could just do jobs for free. It would benefit the Sentinels who did them in both fighting experience and plain levels. And with her funds, they didn’t really need anything else. But Ilea knew that a service like that would be fishy to most, downright inconceivable to others.

“Of course... hardly think anyone will believe what I’ve seen, but I’ll do my best,” Haya said and laughed awkwardly.

“Before we go, can you arrange for a map to Mothine? We’re to do a job nearby,” Ilea said.

Haya waved to the innkeeper. “Lilith needs a map to Mothine. Can you check with Caral?”

“Of course, I’ll be right back,” the large man said and ran out of the inn.

“Thanks,” Ilea said. “As to the refugees, how much would a few weeks of lodging and food cost?”

The woman waved her off. “There is no need, Lilith. We’ve received funds to take care of such matters within the Empire.”

“Everyone? Or just the northern region?” Ilea asked.

“It’s a massive undertaking. I do believe it’s a policy throughout the whole of Lys. Faster integration of refugees will lead to a smoother transition and less desperate people. Would have been wonderful

if they did the same in Baralia but I know even the Empire doesn't have unlimited resources," Haya explained.

"Would've thought they did," Ilea said.

"It may be an incentive for refugees to move to the Empire. It will weaken the occupied territories further while creating bonds with the populace itself," Feyrair said.

Ilea raised an eyebrow. "And how do you know all of that?"

"Ben talks. I sometimes listen," he said with a smile. "And while I care little for this land, now that I travel through it, I may as well be informed about current affairs."

Did he get scarier? I feel like he did.

"Where's my battle obsessed monster?" Ilea asked with concern, gently touching his shoulder.

"I would show you, but the environment may not endure our struggle," he mused in a whisper that nobody except for Haya and Ilea picked up, the former tensing up slightly.

Two young adults had walked closer to Ilea, both part of the refugee group. One of the women opened and closer her mouth a few times until Ilea turned towards her.

"Yes, you have a question?" she asked.

"I... we... were wondering... about your... Sentinels, I... I would like to become a healer," she said and bowed. The other woman followed suit.

"You can try to get in. I'm not sure about applications or anything but you'll have to get to Ravenhall first anyway. Haya can you arrange something? I'm sure there are caravans or traders going that route," Ilea said.

"From Samethol to Ravenhall? No. To Virilya though, sure, and from there they can continue. It's a rather long journey but mostly safe," she said.

"How much for the fare?" Ilea asked, summoning a piece of paper and her pen. She wrote down a quick few notes for Claire.

"Without any goods to transport or Classes to guard the caravan... I'd say about two gold coins each. We won't be able to pay that much sadly," Haya admitted.

Traveling is expensive. Damn. If only there was some sort of teleportation gate network, Ilea thought and summoned four gold coins, handing them to the two women. "Don't get robbed. Give me your names and then you can give this note to the Head Administrator of Ravenhall. She'll at the very least get you a job. As for joining the Sentinels, you'll have to figure that one out yourselves."

The women gave her their names, excited and overwhelmed as they looked at the note together and stowed away the gold with lithe movements.

"You're surprisingly generous," Haya said with a smile. "That's a lot of coin."

"If they want to become Sentinels? Why not," Ilea said. That much gold was nothing to her, even with just what she had on her right now. Ex slaves rescued by Gael and her personally, willing to make the trip to Ravenhall to join the Sentinels? She didn't know much about inspiring loyalty but this case was obvious even to her.

She just wasn't sure if the two would make the cut. The resistance training wasn't easy. But maybe Claire could get them something else.

The innkeeper returned then, with a rolled up piece of paper in hand that he quickly gave to Ilea.

"Thanks, how much is it?" Ilea asked, looking at the map detailing the specific journey between Samethol and their next stop.

"It's on the house," the man said. "It's good that the mine is cleared, plenty of people here depend on it."

Ilea could tell that the general attention had been on her for the past few minutes, many in the group unsure if they should talk to her or not, if anything was expected or if they had to wait for her to say something.

It felt a little uncomfortable, so she decided to cut it there. "Well it was good to see your town and I'm glad Gael was safe. Good fortune to all of you," she said and vanished.

Feyrair appeared at her side, their wings spreading before they flew northwards.

"Not one for attention, are you?" he hissed with joy.

Ilea sighed. "Not usually, no. Especially not when they look at me like that."

He grinned. "Ah... I understand now. The normalcy. That's why you show up in plain clothes, hiding your power in such a way. The way they watched you... you understand that it was not enmity."

"I know," Ilea said.

"They admire you, look to you for guidance. It's only natural," he said before he looked towards the sky. "You have power... but at the same time you show compassion. A combination I rarely see in Elves. Perhaps there is merit in such a way."

"I just do what feels right to me, and I don't like it when people stare at me like I'm some kind of official," she said.

The elf just smiled to himself, lost in thought as they sped over the grassy plains and meadows.

The distance was noted down as several days' worth of travel but they arrived near the city of Mothine in less than an hour. A few landmarks mentioned on the map made sure that they had followed the right path and came to the correct place.

Ilea took in the city from a distance, floating in the air as she let go of Feyrair, the elf spreading his own wings again as he hissed.

"Was it necessary to come here this quickly?" he asked.

"No, I just like to torture you. Just a little," Ilea said, not looking at him.

The city walls were high and looked sturdy, simple in design. The town itself was built between two large rivers that split the surrounding plains. It looked like one of the smallest Baralia cities she had visited so far, but the roads leading to and from bustled with activity. She realized that the only bridges nearby led into the city and out of it again to the north.

"What did you read earlier?" Ilea asked, curious as to the books he had gotten out during the flight.

“On the history of Baralia and Lys, specifically the regions we’re in right now. Dull, but less so than the Taleen records. At least you have frequent battles,” he said.

“I don’t think that’s a good thing,” she said.

“It is for a book,” he answered. “Mothine with the rivers Kaar and Nela mark a definite border of the kingdom, well not kingdom anymore as I hear.”

“Where did you even get those?” Ilea asked.

“You gave me coins, remember? I used some of them,” he mused.

“Yes, also your outfit. I don’t mind much but we’ll have to get something different for you if you want to accompany me to Yinnahall,” Ilea said.

The elf hissed. “You would take an elf with you?”

“Why not?” Ilea asked.

“Oh... there are many many reasons but I do believe you’re aware of at least a few of them,” he said.

“Sure, like the complete loss of reputation for the Sentinels and me in turn, what else?” she said.

“Then why, enlighten me?” Fey said.

“Might be fun,” Ilea said. “And do you honestly believe that someone would go as far as to question me? Let alone attack you to the point of revealing the features your armor hide?”

“Trian and Claire made the connection quite quickly it seemed,” he said.

“Sure, but they know me and what I do. I doubt anyone here would even consider a human working together with Elves. Also it’s fucking racist if they would just dismiss me, even if they found out,” Ilea said.

“The risk is absolutely not worth it. But it does sound fun,” he mused.

“So it’s settled then. Just act like a human, not that you’re too different to begin with,” she said.

“Is that a compliment or an insult?” Feyrair asked as they descended, landing near the road leading to Mothine. A few groups of travelers looked their way but nobody approached, keeping their business to themselves.

“Whatever you want it to be,” Ilea said and walked to a nearby caravan. She had changed into leather armor and waved to one of the cart drivers. “Hello, got space for two on your wagon?”

“A silver each and I take you to the city,” the wizened old man said, squinting his eyes at the two.

Ilea summoned the coin and handed it to the man before jumping on the broad cart. Half of it was empty.

The wheels creaked when she landed, the mules slowing down at the increased weight. More so when Feyrair sat down opposite Ilea.

The driver just murmured something about adventurers, happy enough with his silver considering the short distance.

“Another thought of normalcy?” Feyrair asked, his reptile eyes sparkling as he smiled below his scale armor. At least high level adventurers had special eyes from time to time, meaning he wouldn’t necessarily be seen as strange because of them.

“If you want to call it that,” Ilea said and summoned a meal, handing him a bowl too. “I also like to enjoy the moments when I don’t have to rush somewhere.” She used her storage items freely by now, anybody who would have the power to challenge her would not be impressed by something that trivial.

“A rare joy indeed,” Fey said and started eating, making sure to cover his teeth between bites.

Ilea watched him eat, wondering how many people so far east would actually know how an elf looked like. The western cities apparently had to deal with them even before the attacks in the past years but here? Perhaps they would know based on sketches or stories but with how mysterious they were, she couldn’t know.

The cart rattled lightly when they drove over uneven ground, a few holes in the road making their driver swerve to the right.

“Damn mages,” he muttered. “Blades don’t make holes in roads.”

“Some do,” Ilea said and continued eating.

He just grunted in response.

No time to repair the roads yet? Or they just don’t care, she thought, glancing to the side and out onto the fields. The grassland was ravaged, much of it overturned, small defensive positions made with stone still visible.

“Fighting seemed to have been rough here,” she said.

The driver grunted again.

“It’s an important city. To bring through supplies,” Fey said. “Would’ve been interesting to be here during the war.”

Ilea kept looking at the fields. “It’s better when there are just monsters and machines.”

He looked at her but remained silent, finishing his meal before he made the bowl vanish.

They soon reached the stone bridge that led over the first river and towards the massive city gate.

“You’re not my cargo, this far enough?” the driver asked.

“Of course. Thanks for the ride old man,” Ilea said and jumped out, followed by Feyrair.

Groups of imperial soldiers were present on the bridge, talking to each other or just watching the travelers. Most of them were at a rather low level but their gear looked to be in good shape and most of them remained somewhat vigilant.

Feyrair received plenty of attention, his scale armor sticking out even amongst the adventurers that made their way to the gates. The elf didn’t seem to mind, eyeing the people around him in turn.

“There are so many,” he said.

A dozen guards at the gates checked everyone who went in or out. They worked fast, only glancing at papers, sigils, and badges quickly before they waved people through or denied entry.

“Yeah, I mean there have to be some reasons why we’re still around,” Ilea said, summoning her Shadow badge to get the attention away from Feyrair.

“Welcome, Shadows,” the man said and waved them in without further questions.

Ilea summoned the piece of paper detailing the job and glanced at the man. “Where can we find Officer Barren?”

The guard pointed into the city. “Central plaza, large fountain that looks like a bear, can’t miss it. Largest building there.”

“Thanks,” Ilea said and walked on. “No fee to enter either,” she mused, looking at the many people walking around. Plenty of injured and sick begging for money. Ilea assumed most of them had either been slaves or soldiers before the war, having lost their occupation for the better or worse.

She just slowly walked past the people, a thin layer of ash flowing past the ground in a near invisible film that looked much like dust or dark sand. Everyone’s injuries healed miraculously, many of them giving their thanks to the passing healer.

“I thought you didn’t like attention,” Fey commented, a small crowd already following them, calls of healer ringing out as more people were made aware of her.

“They’re so weak I can heal them in seconds,” Ilea said, thinking that explanation enough.