

“She’s doing what?” Ilea asked.

Claire took in a deep breath. “Painting a portrait. Of the Meadow.”

“It’s a tree,” Ilea said.

“Yes. But also. No. I don’t know what to tell you. Just looking at the canvas from a distance makes me feel uneasy. I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Maybe you could check in with them,” Claire said. “If you have time.”

“Sure. Fights start again in the morning. I’ll have a look,” she answered and opened a gate to the north for both of them. Claire had come back to Morhill to check with her.

“*Meadow. Are you corrupting children now?*” Ilea asked.

“*The young artist is quite talented. I have not met someone able to paint my liking quite as well,*” the being replied.

“*You think so? She’s already managed to capture some of your eeriness through divination alone,*” Ilea said as she walked up to the girl, Fae, and canvas.

“*Oh? Well, I’m not surprised. Though Violence agrees that divination is no substitute for sight,*” the Meadow spoke.

Ilea stopped behind the canvas. She looked at the intersecting colors, shades of red and purple moving within a harmony of incomprehensible depths. She felt lost entirely, struck by confusion, fear, and awe before she shook her head and refocused. She tasted blood in her mouth and realized she had a nosebleed too. “Yeah. That one won’t go into the gallery,” she said, watching the girl paint as if in a trance, power emanating from her hands as she held an ethereal brush and her magic book. The one she claimed Scipio had given her.

“*What do you mean? Is my liking not to your tastes?*” the Meadow asked.

*Tastes.* Violence repeated, apparently part of the conversation.

“*We don’t want people to die or flee in terror when they see what you are,*” Ilea said. “*Or a part of it at least... she’s not quite at the same stage as what I see... and I doubt that’s all there is to your insanity, but it’s more than enough.*”

“*It’s not insanity, it’s genius. And if people can’t appreciate that, maybe they should flee in terror,*” the Meadow said and crossed a set of metaphorical arms, the gesture sent as a feeling.

“*Sure,*” Ilea said and looked at the canvas. There was something alluring in there. Something untouched. An artist’s sight and understanding. An objectivity. She looked up at the tree and back to the canvas. She knew the Endless Meadow, knew its character, trusted it, called it a friend. And yet the painting was different. It didn’t have the emotional connection but instead showed the cold eldritch truth. A hint only. A glimpse at the depths of knowledge, of possibility. “*That way lies madness. I’d love to hang that in my room.*”

“*So now You want it,*” the Meadow said.

## Gallery

*“No, Violence. We won’t have it there. People in general do not like their eyes popping out,”* Ilea said.

The creature crossed its tiny arms.

*“I’m flattered that you’d have a painting of myself in your room. I didn’t know you thought of me in that way,”* the Meadow said.

*“Yeah. Shows me what’s out there. What I need to be prepared for,”* Ilea answered, ignoring the joke entirely.

*“But I’m always here,”* the Meadow said.

*“Yes. You. Not something like you,”* Ilea answered.

*“I don’t understand. Am I not a terrifying entity?”* the Meadow asked.

## Very

### Terrifying

*“Thank you. You’re a terror too,”* the Meadow said to the tiny Fae.

### Ancient

### Looming

### Terror

Ilea patted the little creature that floated near Cless. *“Of course you are. You’re both monstrous creatures. To be feared by all. How long has she been painting like this?”*

*“I have a few eyes on her magic, mana exposure and usage, and of course her health. She seems rather experienced. Strange, to focus on a skill like this but it seems she excels at it,”* the tree said.

*“What do you mean strange? She’s an artist,”* Ilea said.

*“Indeed. What I mean is her ability to convey what she herself cannot see nor understand. Cless is no ordinary human child, yet she is a child nonetheless. Were she to see me the same way you do, she would not remain sitting here,”* the Meadow said.

*“Interesting,”* Ilea thought and looked at the girl. *Almost like me with my battle trance like state.*

*“What happens when she’s done? She’s gonna see the painting.”*

*“I don’t think she herself will be as affected. I feel the skill protects her somewhat, though I will make it vanish the moment she returns,”* it spoke.

*“Sure. Maybe introduce Owl to her once she’s done. I have a feeling she will like her,”* Ilea added.

*“And keep the painting. I don’t want Violence putting it in the gallery.”*

### Boring

*“It’s called being responsible,”* Ilea sent back.

*“A child chastising an ancient being behaving like a child,”* the Meadow added unnecessarily.

Ilea gave them a look and smiled. *“The word you’re looking for is Kindergarten.”*

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Lily decided to spend some of her earnings to sleep in an inn for once. Despite her loss, she had won quite a bit of gold in the tournament. Three to be exact, and sixty two silver. For a few days of sporadic fights and little real danger of death, the payments were ridiculously high. It was no wonder so many people had come to Morhill to participate. *And tomorrow I'll get myself some armor.* She considered as she entered the inn and checked the crowd of drinking adventurers and tourists.

She walked up to the counter and glanced at the woman overlooking her domain. Lily too had made sure there was nobody too focused on her, or her gold for that matter. For the first time in a long while, she was actually worth robbing. It was a strange feeling.

“One room for the night,” she said to the woman.

“We’re fully booked,” came the reply. She turned and squinted her eyes at Lily. “Wait... you’re the Savage Wolf, aren’t you?”

Lily didn’t reply. She felt both caught and confused. Why would the woman bring that up? Was she out to exploit her?

“You can have a room for free,” the innkeeper said. “That was an incredible display today, and I made quite a bit betting on you in the first few rounds. Shame you had to go up against that Sentinel, but it was only a matter of time.”

“Don’t think I could’ve beat her?” Lily asked.

The woman scoffed. “You haven’t seen the half of it. When it’s a magic user or someone using a weapon, that madwoman just ignores it. That wolf form gave you an edge in weight and the small wolves prevented her from stabbing you. I was rooting for you.”

“That impressive... I didn’t think she was that dangerous,” Lily admitted.

“You should see the one in the main tournament. These Sentinels are a menace, I tell you. I suppose it’s good with them being healers and all...” the woman murmured the last bit, considering before she shook her head. “But you can have a room, here. Food and a bath too? You do look like a savage wolf after all.”

Lily looked at her with suspicion but she didn’t see a way this could backfire. A trap perhaps? But why? Maybe the woman was angry she had lost money on the fight today? *I can still just run away if I have to.* She took the key and nodded. “Food and a bath.”

She found the room and had her pack check first the hallway, then the accommodations themselves. Nothing seemed suspicious. She found no hidden runes or enchantments that weren’t supposed to be there. Lily looked down from the window and teleported to the alley, then back to one of her waiting wolves. It worked without issues. *And there are Sentinels and Shadowguards around. If I scream or make a scene, they will at least investigate.*

The heavy wooden door was already closed, locked with the key she had gotten and now held in her hands. She set down the simple bag she used, a little food and clothing inside. Normally she would wash her things once a week but now she was in a bit of a strange place. She could tell some people were bothered by her smell but it wasn't wise to insult or challenge an adventurer over something so trivial. And there were worse ones around. Her nose was somewhat sensitive too after all.

Her low quality leather armor had even more holes now, her clothes below showing cuts and burn marks despite the robust make. It really was a bit of a stretch to even call them clothes at this point. More a somewhat connected set of cloth pieces, held together by faith and the leather pieces on top. Lily assumed the local tailors and smiths increased their prices because of the festival, but she kind of had to. *Or I wait until the teleportation gates are usable to everyone. Which should happen at some point this week. Then I can go to another city and check the prices there.* It sounded like a reasonable idea. Her other set wasn't clean either but at least it showed a little less damage.

*If I get a bath I can use the water afterwards. Maybe there's even soap.* She smiled, sitting down on the bed. It was soft. Very soft. And warm. She moved her hand over the blanket, feeling the fabric. An oil lamp hung from the wall opposite her, weak but warm light illuminating the room. A wood floor and walls, a simple table with a magical light set atop in case someone had to read or write. A thin fur was on the ground, both as decoration and to provide some variety. A few paintings hung from the walls, depicting forests and mountains, much like the panorama one would see looking out the window, if the suns were out.

She sighed. It was nice. Warm and comfortable. Her eyes opened wide, then she squinted, her pack once again searching through the room while she waited and listened. Lily unsheathed her blade and stood up when she heard the steps come closer. A knock on the door. She didn't respond. Another knock.

Lily went to the door and unlocked it, moving through the shadows back to the bed, ready to face an attacker.

"Sorry! Your bath, miss," came the muffled voice of a young woman. The door opened slightly before it was slowly pushed forward. A girl with blonde hair bound into a ponytail stumbled inside, huffing as she lifted the wooden tub. She sighed and cracked her back after she had set down the thing. She raised her hands towards the wood, a stream of water forming in front of her until the tub was half full. The woman glanced at Lily then filled it some more. "I'll send Tammy up to heat it up as well. You're not a fire mage are you?"

Lily waited, her dagger held behind her back, eyes following every movement of the woman. She was a low level water mage, nothing to be concerned about. "I'm not a fire mage."

The woman nodded. "I'll have her bring up your food as well."

Lily was left alone until another knock came, a second woman entering, this one carrying a wooden board with both a plate of food, and a mug.

### ***[Fire Mage – lvl 23]***

She set the board down on the table and went towards the tub.

Lily watched her until the woman turned her way.

"Do you want to check the heat?" she asked.

Lily walked closer, each step deliberate until she crouched down, still ready for an attack. Her hand went into the water. She sighed, forgetting about the potential dangers for a few seconds until she

looked up and found the black haired woman staring at her. She could feel her face flushing and whipped out her hand from the water, splattering some of it onto the floor. She took a step back, revealing the knife.

The fire mage smiled, looking at the blade and then her face. “You’re safe here in the city. Should sometimes come back to settlements, or you’ll forget how it’s like.”

Lily looked down at her weapon but didn’t say anything. She felt both embarrassed and threatened.

The woman didn’t move. “Should I make it warmer? You adventurers often have Heat Resistance.”

Lily waited for a few seconds before she nodded. It had already felt so nice. But warmer. Warmer would be better. She watched as the woman held out her hand, steam soon rising from the water.

The fire mage stood up slowly, her hands clearly visible before she stepped back towards the door. “Enjoy it,” she said. “And just come down if you need anything!” She left and closed the door behind herself. And that was that.

No assassination. No robbing. Just... an inn. And a bath.

Lily rushed to the door and locked it, taking the key out before she went to the bed. She checked the window and then suspiciously looked at the bath. The water was still steaming. The food was there too. She sent two of her wolves to investigate each. *No poisons. Nothing wrong with the water.* She knew as much half a minute later.

She waited for another few minutes just to make sure. Then she went and grabbed the plate and mug, sitting down on the soft bed with her legs crossed. Her dagger she held in her right hand, the spoon in her left. A stew with plenty of meat. It smelled nice. Better than what she could cook in the wild. She closed her eyes as she savored the taste, then sipped on the drink. It burned a little in her throat, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Lily could feel her body heat up, her stomach growling, demanding more.

She finished the food and drink, putting it back on the wooden board before she approached the bath in a crouch. Once inside, she would be more vulnerable. Without her armor. She looked down on herself and sighed. *Not that much protection anyway.* The steaming water invited her. It was very alluring.

Lily gave in a few seconds later, opening the straps and her belt before she took off her armor pieces and clothes, careful not to further damage anything. Slowly, she stepped into the wooden tub, the heat welcoming her before she submerged herself up to her head. She smiled to herself and started giggling. Her joy was interrupted slightly when she scratched the wood with her dagger, quickly turning it away before she relaxed. She checked the door and her surroundings ten times every minute but nothing happened.

*Just a bath. Inside of an inn.*

*A hot bath. Nice food. The life of an adventurer.* She couldn’t wipe the grin off her face, deciding to go with it instead. Lily submerged her head in the water and squeaked with joy. She could get used to this. *But I shouldn’t. I have to stay tough!* The water won out in the end. As did the soft bed and the warm blanket. Her dagger at the very least stayed out throughout the whole night.

Lily woke up with birds chirping outside her window, voices audible from the alleyways below. Sunlight drifted into the room and illuminated the pile of dirty clothes and wooden tub. She sat up with a start, clutching her dagger before she looked down on herself. She flushed again, quickly grabbing her second set of clothes before she smelled them and reconsidered.

The water in the tub wasn't exactly clean anymore and it was cool as well. *I forgot to wash anything!* She sighed. If she did it now, it would never be dry. *Or... could I? I have silver. It wouldn't be that strange.* She decided cleaner but wet was better than dirty and dry. Washing her second pair of pants and shirt took the better part of twenty minutes. She had luckily found a brush in one of the cupboards the past evening. Cleaning her leather armor pieces was much easier.

She got dressed and armored, water dripping to the floor. Sneaking out of her room, she made her way down into the hall where a few adventurers were eating breakfast. She got a few looks. Nothing that showing her canines didn't solve. Lily was glad when she found the same woman who had heated her bath, now standing behind the counter. She walked up and grabbed her pouch. "Can you dry me?"

"Good morning. You look relaxed. Also... dry you?" the woman asked.

Lily nodded.

"I... suppose. Of course. Why not," the fire mage said and gestured for Lily to come into the kitchen. She raised her hands before a stream of heat flowed out. "Say stop if it hurts."

Lily didn't really mind it. Most fire magic she faced was far more dangerous. This one didn't even set anything aflame. A minute later she was already dry.

"If you're looking for tailors or smiths, I can give you a few recommendations," the woman said with a smile.

Lily looked at the missing sleeve of her right arm and the holes in her pants. *Maybe. Maybe I shouldn't be so stingy.* "How much do you think a set of clothes would cost?"

The woman raised her brows and smiled. "You really should visit towns more often. No more than a few silvers. You can mention Tammy and they shouldn't ask for more. If you don't have the coin, I can get you something simple... without holes."

Lily squinted at her. Few people helped like that without a motive. *But then I did spend coin here. And if they're nice I would suggest the inn to others. It's just sensible.*

Tammy smiled at her. "We can leave the kitchen now. Except if you want to try out as a cook."

"I... no. I mean no, thank you," Lily said and rushed out. She waved at the woman and left the inn before running back inside to get her dirty clothes from her room. This time she teleported down to the alley, with the names of a few tailors, and two smiths. She smiled to herself, checking her pouch before walking towards where the stores should be. *First, check and compare prices! Then I can go and watch more fights.*