

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration. A massive, multi-headed, and multi-armed demonic creature with glowing red eyes and a menacing grin dominates the center. It has a mix of green, brown, and red scales or skin. To its left, a winged figure in dark, intricately detailed armor is shown in a dynamic pose, as if leaping or attacking. The setting appears to be a dark, possibly ruined city or a cavernous space with some architectural elements visible in the background. The overall color palette is dark, with browns, greys, and muted greens, punctuated by the reds of the creature's eyes and the metallic highlights on the winged figure's armor.

RHAEGAR

AZARINTH HEALER

BOOK TWO

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*Dedication and thank you note at the very end.
Thank you for reading Book Two of Azarinth Healer.*

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The story so far...

Ilea Spears, a soon-to-be former student and kick-boxing enthusiast, appeared one day in a monster-infested forest. Suddenly equipped with a magical Class and a status informing her about various skills and stats, she trained and embarked on a journey to explore this new world she had found herself in.

Faced with Drakes, murderous Elves, and undead, she fought and leveled up her abilities to face whatever would come next. She soon made her way westward from Riverwatch, traveling with a caravan to Salia. When she reached her destination in Dawntree, she was offered the task of exploring an ancient Taleen dungeon, a long-forgotten underground town crawling with green-eyed machines ready to kill whatever ventures into their domain.

After helping an unlikely trio through the traps and dangers of the dungeon, she met and joined an expedition to explore it further. They reached the main room of the supposed Great Hall, where massive Taleen Praetorians, war machines from ancient times, decimated the expedition and forced them to retreat.

Ilea reached the exit of the dungeon and joined the few survivors. After a solemn return to Dawntree, they were faced with yet another danger. Elves had come to attack the western independent cities.

She left for Salia, but one of the Elves confronted her. The battle was close until the intervention of a team of Shadows, mercenaries from the Shadow's Hand in Ravenhall.

Ilea received her first third-tier ability, and her main Class evolved to become Azarinth First Hunter. She returned to Riverwatch, finding people desperate and afraid due to the Elven attacks. At the same time, she was unsure how to proceed after everything she had experienced in the Taleen dungeon. Felicia, Edwin, and Aliana had left her. Alice had lied to her, and Roland had lost everyone but Lily.

Seeking council from one of her friends in the Vultures Brotherhood, Walter, the barkeep, bard, and dark mage of the necromancer group, suggested she could travel to Ravenhall and join the mysterious Order she has already encountered twice in her travels: the Shadow's Hand.

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ONE

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A Guild and a Bed

The suns were high in the sky and cast a warming glow over the city. The restaurant Ilea had chosen was in the perfect position to take full advantage of the sunlight. She lounged happily while casting a curious eye over the passers-by. Many people here were of a much higher level than in the towns she'd been in before, and she even saw quite a few question marks.

As she surveyed the city, Ilea happily tried four different items from the extensive menu. When she finally left the restaurant about two hours later, she was quite satisfied. She navigated her way into the crowd and began to eye the many stalls and shops.

Now, what to get first...

She felt a sudden jolt as someone grabbed at her. Spinning around, she stopped the hand with her own and put pressure on it while peering into the mustachioed face of a wiry man in neat clothing with a small felt cap on his head.

There was a crunch of bone as the man screamed. Some people stopped to gawk, but most decided just to ignore it and mind their own business.

"What do you want?" she asked as she healed the broken bone. She hadn't intended to break it, but being around so many people again after her travels alone might have put her a little on edge. Plus, her patience for surprises had worn thin after that night in Earl's shop. She let the hand drop as soon as it was fixed.

"I... I'm... you're joining the Hand, right?" the man asked, grabbing the cap from his head and wringing it in his hands.

"None of your business." She started walking away.

“Wait! Your garb suggests you might be in need of an educated assistant. I would like to be your agent, organize jobs and all that for you. Would you like to...”

Ilea didn't hear the rest as she blinked into a nearby shop before blinking behind it into the next street.

Fucking annoying. Maybe I do need to wear my armor... although that might bring more attention to me.

That gave her an idea of what she wanted to buy first. She entered the first armory she spotted, only a few doors down. It had an elegant gilded sign depicting a golden anvil, which looked like it might have cost more than some entire stores she had entered in the past.

“Hello, miss. Anything specific you're looking for?” a well-dressed woman asked in a polite tone as Ilea entered.

The store looked incredibly fancy inside. The dark wooden counters were polished to a high sheen, silver and other precious metals were inlaid on the shelves, and the air smelled vaguely of perfume. Ilea was sure that if it weren't for the question marks the level 80 woman likely saw above her head, she'd have been kicked out in two seconds.

“Yeah, I need comfortable leather armor... with a hood.”

The woman nodded quickly. “Please, follow me. What's the price range you're looking at?”

“What ranges do you have?”

“We have cheaper sets starting at two gold coins. Higher-quality ones start at five gold, and specialized creations start at ten gold.”

“The high-quality one, then. Five to eight gold is fine.”

Ilea was soon standing in front of several very nice-looking sets of leather armor, all displayed in a back room lit by magically glowing gemstones. She decided on a deep brown set that looked especially comfortable. It had a lot of fabric and padding, so it wasn't necessary to wear anything under the armor.

“That's six gold, then,” the saleswoman said. “Would you like to change immediately?” She smiled at Ilea's subsequent nod, and her smile grew even wider when Ilea grabbed the gold from her backpack and handed it over. She walked away with the money, leaving Ilea to change.

Once dressed, Ilea blinked out into the street again and put up her hood, hiding her distinctive black hair and blue eyes a little.

Hopefully I don't look so poor and uneducated anymore that someone feels they can just grab me and try to become my secretary or whatever...

"You're wearing inferior armor now. I think *that's* dangerous," Aki said, the talking dagger still in his sheath and hanging from her belt.

"I know. Right now, the benefits outweigh the risk, and I'll try the trick you mentioned with the storage item if I need to put my other armor on in a hurry. I'll practice that soon."

She immediately resumed her procrastination by going into a cake store instead. After a brief inspection, she made five cakes vanish before she put three silver coins on the counter. The cakes were being sold for less, but she didn't want to count out the coppers. A glance around showed there were a few tables where customers could eat, two of which were occupied.

She was glad that there were people willing to bake delicious cakes in a world filled with magic and monsters. They were the true heroes, after all.

"Not bad," one of the nearby customers said, an older man sitting across from a woman dressed in black robes.

"Not close to heavenly, though," the woman sighed, two green eyes looking at the piece of cake on her fork.

Ilea wondered how people with cake on their plates could be so unhappy. She vanished to ensure she did not let their sour mood infect her too.

Next thing... hmm, yes... yes, that is very much an important thing... Ilea thought as she looked at the store in front of her.

It looked much the same as all the other buildings with its stone walls and European-style architecture. At least, that was what Ilea compared it to. The buildings around her looked similar to Salia, though a little more geared toward practicality and less toward artistry. The difference in the store in front of her, however, was what was *inside*, as is often the case with stores.

Ilea walked in and was immediately greeted by an annoyed-looking man standing in front of a bookshelf.

"Yes? What do you want?" he asked, putting on a dismissive smile.

"I want to buy," Ilea said.

"She wants to buy. And who says you're allowed to buy?" the man asked, catching her so off-guard she was literally speechless.

After a moment, the gears in her head started turning again, and she was about to reply when a young woman walked in from a side room.

“Herschel, stop it. Miss, how can I help you?” The woman smiled at her and motioned for her to follow.

“I want to buy a bed,” Ilea stated as she followed the woman.

“Sure, they range from four to ten gold. All made with real feathers and masterful labor.”

Isn't that enough to feed someone for years? What kind of luxury part of town have I ended up in?

Ilea smiled, hoping the beds were exquisite.

“Anything especially fancy?” Ilea asked, and the woman nodded.

“There's one remaining Nell feather bed, I believe. Seven gold. Would you like to try it out?”

Ilea nodded in turn while also wondering what a ‘Nell’ was, and she was brought into a room with a rather large bed, though not quite queen size.

“Leave the room for half a minute, please,” Ilea requested. “Don't worry, I won't steal it.”

The woman reluctantly left the room and waited outside. Ilea saw her sighing and signaling toward ‘Herschel,’ who was looking on from downstairs.

Ilea quickly lay on the bed and nearly moaned at the magical feeling. She smiled as it vanished into her inventory, and she blinked upward so as not to fall onto the ground. The wooden frame came with it as well.

She walked back out and handed the woman seven gold coins. “Business done?” Ilea asked, and the woman nodded.

“Thank you, it's a lovely bed,” Ilea called, smiling brightly at Herschel, who looked at her with derision in his eyes.

That man lives a dangerous life, she thought as she exited the store. *To the Hand then...*

* * *

Soon Ilea arrived at a symmetrical building that looked a little like a temple. It was located at the very back of Ravenhall, in the part of the city that was built against and into the slope of the mountain.

Two people whose levels were 202 and 205 stood next to a doorway in the shape of a triangle. Ilea walked up to them and entered without being

hindered.

Inside, the room opened up into a massive hall. White stone similar to ivory decorated every surface, though the feeling was altogether different compared to the Taleen Great Hall. There were paintings on the walls, and a range of decorative plants and lush carpets brought warmth and a 'high society' feeling to the room. Even more so than the fancy armor shop she had been in earlier.

Ilea walked up to the woman standing behind a counter in the middle of the hall. She was surprised to see that the clerk was a level-173 mage.

"Yes?"

"Hey, I'd like to join the Shadow's Hand. Is this the right place to do so?" Ilea asked.

"Yes, yes. You have to be level 200 to join, but seeing as you got inside, that requirement should be fulfilled. Now, there are two ways of joining: either you get a contract and work off your debt, or you pay three hundred gold upfront. You will be treated as an initiate either way, I hope you understand. If you pay, you can leave at any time, no questions asked," the woman explained in a monotone voice.

Ilea nodded. "I'd like to know more, but I'll definitely go with the upfront payment."

The woman took a small bell from beneath the counter and rang it. A moment later, a man who looked to be in his forties appeared next to the desk and extended his hand to Ilea. His well-kempt gray hair reflected some of the light from the nearby candles, and the air cooled ever so slightly.

Quite attractive.

Ilea shook his hand as he introduced himself. "William Hendricks. Nice to meet you."

"Name's Ilea," she answered.

"Ilea, then, would you please follow me? We have a couple formalities to complete before you can join. Any questions you have, I'll answer to the best of my capability." He motioned for her to follow. "Teleportation?"

She nodded for him to continue.

William vanished, and Ilea perceived him appearing in a room on the first floor. She followed with a Blink and took a seat opposite William, who was sitting down as well.

"Perception and teleportation. Already two very valuable assets. Now, you would like to join with the upfront fee?"

Ilea nodded. “Though I would like to have a better picture of what exactly I’m buying, if you would be so kind.” She eyed the question marks next to the man’s mage title.

He nodded and started explaining. “I’ll give you the short version. Ask whenever you need me to elaborate. The Shadow’s Hand is a mercenary guild famous for its highly qualified members and their strength. As long as someone pays us and is not trying to harm humanity as a whole, we will accept the requested job. As a member, you either join with payment or without. With payment, you can leave whenever you want to. There are no strings attached.

“Otherwise, the treatment you will receive won’t differ greatly from that of the debt-based members. However, you won’t have to do guard duty, and your cut for jobs finished is significantly higher – ninety-five percent compared to thirty percent. Additionally, you may refuse any job without reason. You will be evaluated by me and two other high-ranking members and put into a team. You will train and learn with them for the next six months while doing jobs that depend on your capabilities.

“You will receive complimentary lodging here, but, of course, you may stay wherever you like as long as you are here for mandatory training and classes. As a paid member, you may refuse your assigned squad once and only once. Members are put together into teams to get the best synergy of abilities and to maximize your chances of survival.”

Ilea interjected at that point. “There are classes then? What are the mandatory ones, and what else is there?”

“The mandatory ones are Team Combat, Team Tactics, and Monster Knowledge. The first one is four hours a day, and the others are each one hour. No classes when you are out on jobs. Each group gets assigned an instructor. These may change as time goes on.” He paused for a moment, then continued.

“There is a range of other classes you may visit, each with an instructor of at least level 100 in the specific field or skill. You may choose freely here, but if there are less than three members in a class, you will have to pay an additional fee that varies depending on the class.”

“Can I join classes again after the six months is up? What if I leave the guild at some point?”

“Of course you can. And as long as you don’t work against humanity as a whole or the guild, you won’t be banned from our services. I do not see a

reason for anybody to stop associating with us, but there's always the possibility they wish to cut ties completely. That would be akin to a ban, and all documentation we have on you would be erased. You wouldn't be allowed to take jobs anymore or join a team.

"After the six months, you won't have an obligation to the guild anymore though, not if you have paid beforehand. For example, you may leave for fifty years and come back to join a team and take jobs again. However, we don't allow fewer than five people to take certain jobs except if you are a higher-ranking member."

"Alright, so the Hand is more about providing an initial period of training, and then it's just a network used to bring together teams and do jobs," Ilea clarified.

William nodded. "Though our influence and recognition reach further than what you describe."

"Yes, I see. Well then, I don't see a downside." Ilea grinned at him.

He stayed stoic and simply opened a drawer to remove a handful of paperwork. "This is the contract. Read through it carefully and make sure you agree to all of it. If you don't comply with the rules, you may be banned from the guild."

"Alright, I'll read it downstairs and tell the receptionist to ring for you as soon as I'm done," she said.

William nodded and watched her disappear into the hall downstairs.

* * *

Ilea read through the contract over the next hour and made sure that there were no loopholes. Aki confirmed as much when she was done, so she signaled she was happy to the woman working at the reception desk. The contract was pretty straightforward and seemed even less shady than the one Ilea had signed to work at her old shitty fast-food joint.

Guess instead of having level 200 lawyers to make a bunch of rules, they have level 200 mages to deal with those who break them...

Perhaps if she had known the world better, she would've considered doing everything on her own, but learning scraps of basic knowledge here and there wouldn't compare to the benefit of high-level education. She

wasn't too sure about the prospect of working with a team, but considering they would be at the same level as she was, it would surely be fun.

And I'll get to fight them.

She smiled to herself as William joined her.

"Done then?" he asked.

"Ready to sign and start," Ilea said and smiled at him. She wasn't proud of the itch she had to fight the man.

I'd love to see the mild, gray-haired man turn into a wild warrior. It's been a while... She sighed, then followed William back into his office.

The contract was signed with mana and her written name, though Aki assured her there was no such thing as a magic-bound contract, and even if there was, the only part she had to fulfill was paying them a sum of gold. And she had plenty of that, at least for now.

She had put the gold into her backpack in preparation for making her payment while reading through the contract, though she couldn't be sure William didn't know about her storage item already via some skill. If he did, he didn't show it.

She got the gold out of her pack and stacked the money on his desk. He watched and then counted it out slowly and deliberately until, finally, he nodded and took the money. It vanished immediately upon his touch, which made Ilea feel a little silly.

"We can do your evaluation tomorrow, right after midday, if that works for you? Do you need specific materials, an environment, or anything else during the evaluation to show us your full capabilities?"

"No, I should be fine anywhere. Though not underwater, if that's possible."

"I'll note that. In that case, I suggest the underwater fighting class, if that aversion is caused by something that can be worked on."

"I'll think about it. Where do I stay until tomorrow?" Ilea asked, already thinking of having to share a dorm room with a bunch of other applicants.

"As a paid member, you will get your own rooms. Wait down in the main hall. An assistant will take care of you shortly. It's a pleasure to have you join us, Miss Ilea." He got up and shook her hand before she blinked down into the hall.

That was quick. I hope I didn't just make a huge mistake.

Huh... Why did he bother counting the gold? He would have known how much it was once he stored it. Bit of a control freak? Still hot, though...

* * *

It didn't take long until someone else showed up. He was a lithe man with a rugged jawline who looked like he might be some kind of assassin but was instead working as what appeared to be a glorified bellhop. Level 120 this time. Ilea couldn't help but ask, "Hey, how is someone with your level working this job?"

The man looked at her sideways as he beckoned for her to follow him down a long corridor that appeared to lead into the bowels of the building.

"You get training here, and opportunities. And you can work toward the fee you'd have to pay at level 200 to join as a member. The positions are actually very hard to get, though every other new member I talk to still asks me why I do it. Sometimes I get to go along on expeditions or can join a team that will have me. It's a good gig, okay?" The man looked rather peeved, and Ilea decided not to pry any further. They descended deeper into the building in silence.

"Welcome to the Shadow's Hand," the man said as they reached the end of the corridor. As they emerged from the hallway, something akin to the Root opened up before them. It was a massive indoor space with buildings and open areas, like a small town built into the rock. Magical lights were set into the stone ceiling far above. They were inside the mountain now.

Doesn't look natural. An artificial cavern carved into the mountain?

It didn't quite reach the size of something like the Taleen ruin she had been to, but it still felt impressive, with buildings carved into the stone, murky windows, and wooden doors. While the dungeon had been much larger, this place felt more lived in. Ilea was already smelling something tasty and hearing music from farther in. A single road interspersed with stone steps led deeper into the cavern on a downward slope.

The architecture of the houses was the same as in the rest of Ravenhall, but the whole thing was built quite a bit more vertically to save space. It all felt rather practical. She could tell the walls and doors were thick and well-made. To defend against a possible attack from outside? She wasn't sure.

Quite a few other people were walking around. Adventuring types, mostly, though some looked like artisans, others like merchants, and all were moving with purpose. She got glances from all of them.

There were trees planted into sections of dirt between the cobbled stones, and the entire area was quieter than the city above. There were

fewer people here, though she still felt watched. The atmosphere didn't feel tense, but just knowing about the power of the Shadow's Hand members made her focus.

A city inside the mountain... yet a small one, to be sure.

The lighting came from massive magical constructions above, mimicking a set of stars without being blinding. Ilea kept following the annoyed bellhop, who had accelerated for some reason. There were dozens of people milling around or standing in circles talking to each other. They were of all shapes, sizes, and genders. Different classes, too. Though Ilea didn't spot many healers. Wisps of black smoke eddied above some of their armor. Spells and possibly enchantments were visible on many of them. Food was being sold or made, and Ilea even saw some smiths and other stores.

"Are they all part of the Hand as well? Or independent?" she asked.

Her guide answered a minute later after they had entered one of the many houses. This one was small and nondescript but well-maintained.

"They have contracts with the Hand and aren't allowed to sell anywhere else. It's a bit of a gamble if you ask me, but it ensures we only have quality work here," he explained as he led her upstairs.

Using a key to open one of the doors on the first floor, he gestured for her to enter. "Your rooms. As a paid member, you have the apartment to yourself. Any looting or unwanted entrances are to be reported. Trespassing is considered enough for a ban, but just as a tip from someone who's been here for a while... don't keep too many of your valuables here. There are some ridiculously good thieves and rogues around. Some of them make it into a challenge..."

He handed her the key before walking back to the door.

"Good luck," he said. But it didn't sound like he meant it.

Ilea smiled and looked around, checking everything with her eyes and sphere. It was a fully furnished apartment with three rooms and a toilet. It was very well-appointed. The bed was nearly of the same quality as the one she had bought earlier that day. The toilet had some kind of magical plumbing that was close to what she'd had on Earth, and the carpets and decorations didn't disappoint either.

She had expected a dark theme to the room, as the Shadows she'd met so far all seemed to have this, but it was instead more focused on dark red and gold, while the walls were white stone.

Ilea pulled her hood back and jumped on the bed, smiling at its softness. *So tomorrow is the evaluation. And then I'll get a team and some education. Seems like I'm at the same point as I was in my previous life then.* She balled her hand into a fist. *The only difference being that I can now punch holes in walls and survive the attacks of magical death elves...*

She smiled and closed her eyes. It had been a while since she'd last slept.

"Aki, wake me if anybody comes," she said to the dagger, then dozed off in a matter of minutes.

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Storage Skills

“Wake up!”

Ilea’s eyes shot open. Her buffs flared as she faintly perceived a person vanishing from the middle of the room. Something felt wrong. She quickly checked her belongings but found nothing missing.

Ilea was sure that the person’s silhouette had at least looked feminine as she used her Hunter’s Sight to check for any clues left behind. But there was nothing. No new smell in the room, no faint depressions in the rug, nothing. The room was untouched.

I’ll ask around, I guess. Suppose the warning wasn’t a joke. Ilea jumped back onto her bed with a grin. Nobody that looked familiar was in her sphere of perception.

“What did you see?” she asked Aki as she got up again and walked toward the windows. Though the space inside the mountain seemed small, there were now enough people and merchants that it seemed almost as busy as in the city proper.

“I immediately woke you as soon as I sensed someone. Whatever it was vanished at your waking before I saw anything. I do not believe it was illusion magic, though I also don’t think someone was actually in the room. It was something I’ve not sensed before...” Aki finished.

“Something you’ve not sensed before, huh? Well, I think we’re gonna find quite a bit of that here.”

Ilea found that she felt more excited than worried about the intrusion. *High-level mages all around.*

She walked back to the bed, sitting on its edge. “How long did I sleep?”

“One hour, thirty-two minutes, and thirteen seconds,” Aki answered.

“You’re making that up, aren’t you?” she said, twirling the dagger after unsheathing it.

“It was around one and a half hours...” he said before being promptly thrown into the wall with enough force to get stuck in the stone.

“So you know how long an hour is now?” she asked as she made her armor vanish into her necklace. She was now standing in the room with only her underwear and necklace on.

“I figured it out, yes. Why are you getting naked?”

“I’m trying your thing... works with both armor and clothes, right?” She summoned the Taleen clothes she had removed earlier. They fell in a jumbled heap on top of her.

“You really are talentless. I’ve never heard of anybody having difficulties with that... Just picture yourself dressed, I guess,” Aki said from his position on the wall.

Ilea made the clothes disappear again, then resummoned them. The same thing happened, though at least the chest piece appeared near her chest this time and not on her head.

She tried it again and again for the next half hour and finally figured it out. It wasn’t just about picturing the clothes on her; she had to think about the position of the arms, the legs, and the hole for her head, and she also had to picture the clothing stretched out and not jumbled. She was sure that people who had spatial storage items were either told as much or had to try just as long as she had to build experience.

Talentless? Fuck off.

Next came the armor. Though it had more separate pieces and intricacies, Ilea managed to summon it onto her body after just fifteen minutes of trying. The next steps were combining the two and switching between her leather armor and her Taleen and Elven combinations...

* * *

Aki looked on as his new wielder switched between armor sets in mere seconds. He didn’t actually know how long it usually took someone to learn to do all this. In the faint memory he had of them, all his previous wielders who had had spatial storage items had already mastered this technique.

A strange pride filled him as he watched his master, no, wielder, put on her clothes. She was certainly different from all the others before her, or was she?

It was good, he found. To be active. To see things. To perceive. To talk. After so long.

* * *

“I’m getting good at this...” Ilea said as she blinked to the wall, where she removed Aki and put him in his sheath on her waist. She was wearing the light brown leather armor again and put up her hood before she looked around the apartment again.

I like it. Though it would be better if it were mine. Can’t feel at home in someone else’s house, she mused as she unsheathed Aki again.

“Does it hurt or is it somehow uncomfortable inside the necklace?” she asked.

“No, it’s similar to a meditative state. Though I would prefer to stay outside, if at all possible,” the dagger answered.

“That’s fine then, you can stay out all the time. Except for the toilet, that’s too weird, even for me,” she said, making him vanish.

Finally having something resembling proper plumbing was quite the luxury after spending so long on the road.

The wonders of modern magic...

Her business done, she summoned Aki again and got ready to leave the apartment.

Following the guide’s instructions, she didn’t leave anything valuable behind and locked the door on her way out. Walking downstairs, she realized that the apartment below hers was empty and seemed undisturbed.

Her sphere wasn’t blocked by anything, so she assumed others would see into her apartment just as easily – if they had the right abilities. Not that she cared deeply. Privacy wasn’t necessary, though it would certainly be welcome. She would get it in time.

Across from her apartment was another house pretty much the same as hers. It was close enough that she could already see half of the rooms, though at the moment, it didn’t seem like anybody was there.

Ilea walked out into the street and looked around. The road was paved with too-neatly-cut cobblestones that she assumed had been carved by magic, and the houses had the same thick walls and samey look.

Some people were playing music on different instruments, while someone with a beautiful voice was singing. Farther down the winding road, she came upon a square with a large fountain at the center and a statue of a robed man atop the delicately carved stone.

Several people shifted as she approached, hands moving closer to the sheaths of their varied armaments, though only two or three of them actually turned and looked at her. Other people were sitting on the ground, playing a game of dice with a clawed insect in the middle of them. A quick inspection showed both question marks and levels closer to hers in the low two hundreds.

The locals here certainly looked different from those she had seen in the adventurer guilds so far. The gear alone showed that. Armor moved with shadowy wisps, blades glowed with strange lights of varied colors, and helmets were adorned with horns or wings. Their levels were not the only powerful things these people possessed.

Ilea didn't approach anybody and just checked out the various stores, which seemed more like luxury yard sale stands. At first, the whole place didn't seem very different from the Root, but having a community based on higher-leveled adventurers brought a certain amount of 'fanciness' with it.

The vendors were all well-dressed, and while some were scarred and gruff-looking, none were sloppily drunk or yelling insults like they did in the Root. They too were at far higher levels than Ilea was used to seeing for mere shopkeepers.

The items on offer were not your standard fare. Many gleamed with gems or the glow of magic. The bags of gold changing hands probably held more than someone like Earl made in a year. Magical items and monster parts were being sold in equal amounts, and both seemed to fetch exorbitant prices. Wandering over but not getting close enough to be engaged by the sellers, Ilea saw all manner of horns, hides, and exotic plants. She didn't recognize any of them.

One vendor shouted to the square at large, startling Ilea slightly due to her heightened senses. "Beast parts and alchemical ingredients from the Northern Plains! Limited stock!"

A man in a long robe carrying a crystal staff approached the vendor and began to haggle over what looked like a stone eyeball. Ilea watched with raised eyebrows, partially because both their levels showed double question marks, but her eyes were soon back on everyone's weapons and equipment.

Much of it, she found, would be of little use to her. Her fists were her weapons, and someone with wings hardly required any 'specially manufactured climbing tools' like she'd seen at one stall.

Six months I'm gonna be here... well, maybe. I can leave at any time, after all.

Ilea continued following the road, down some small sets of stairs and a slight decline leading farther down into the mountain. She stopped again when the houses on either side were occupied by smiths, but after checking out some weapons, she decided to move on after a few minutes. The prices seemed ridiculous, and she had no way to discern what was a rip-off. Some of the items also seemed more gaudy than functional.

That village Lorcan mentioned should be reachable in less than an hour from here...

She had seen the name on her map, and she really liked Lorcan's sword. Buying from another smith before she even went to check out what the man Lorcan had recommended had to offer seemed ill-advised.

What do I even want from a smith? It's not like I ever use my mace...

She walked onward and quickly reached the end of the road, a broad square with various larger structures coming into view. There were taverns with rooms to rent and official Hand buildings, likely where the jobs would be assigned and discussed. A series of tunnels led farther down, and she could see metal chains and ropes attached to stone platforms at the end of them. Etched metal plates indicated where each would lead.

Haven. Library. Training Halls 1-5. Training Halls 6-10. Lecture halls. It's quite extensive...

Interestingly, very few of the people she saw were wearing the shadowy black armor she had seen members of the Hand use before.

Ilea was mid-thought when she subconsciously moved away from a heavysset man who nearly bumped into her as he barrelled by. He glanced back and smirked.

She chose to ignore the obvious taunt for now. She would get enough enemies here as it was. No reason to accelerate that by starting a fight immediately.

[Warrior – lvl ??]

“Stop fucking with the rookies, Miller,” another man said. Though his face was covered by cloth, his dark red eyes narrowed at the larger man.

The heavy man just grunted, waving to the other and toward the largest tavern. Something about him put Ilea on edge.

She was already walking back up the incline when she noticed the man had bumped into someone else. The small woman flashed a quick grin that Ilea only saw thanks to her sphere. Nor did she miss how the woman slipped something into the large man’s pack.

A bomb? A tracking device? Poison? A snake? A love letter? She wanted to know but felt it was ill-advised to point anything out to either of them. The whole situation had renewed her conviction to be very careful in this place and try not to make a scene for at least a couple of hours. And yet she smiled to herself throughout as the scene unfolded.

Soon, she entered one of the many bars and ordered a couple of mugs of ale before sitting at a table in a corner. The place was by no means empty, but it was certainly not comparable to an English pub for a soccer championship final. The ale tasted good – not as good as Walter’s, but good.

Surprisingly, the smell inside the bar was pleasant. Compared to the Root, Ilea felt like she had everything she wanted from an adventurer town without too much dirt and shit. The people seemed to have a little more tact as well. After all, a lot of expensive stuff would get destroyed if anybody here got serious.

There had been a rule about fighting in the contract. It said people could do so only in the designated training areas and arenas. There had to be reasonable grounds to kill somebody, and at least three witnesses had to confirm that both parties had agreed on a fight to the death. The winner would still have to pay a sizable fee, as killing someone above level 200 would be a major loss, or so the Hand thought.

Ilea enjoyed it in the bar and only got happier as a group of people decided to perform some live music. There were level 130 bards there, likely trying to gain recognition or even get hired by somebody in the room. One young man was especially enchanting with his lute.

Ilea didn’t even notice the time passing as she enjoyed the atmosphere, the food, and the entertainment.

“May I join you?”

She looked up and saw a man with rough gray hair and a glint of red in his eyes had come up to her table. She glanced around the room and noticed that it had gotten quite a bit fuller. Apparently, the musical entertainment in this specific pub was quite desirable. She nodded and returned her gaze to the musicians again. To her surprise and pleasure, the man simply sat down and enjoyed his drink while listening to the troupe.

Half an hour later, the musicians lined up and received applause from the onlookers before they walked around and collected donations. Ilea had thought she was a bit free with her money, but people here seemed on a different level altogether. Gold coins were tossed into the proffered hats, and even rings and likely expensive artifacts or monster parts were donated.

Must be quite the killing you make if you play here...

She tossed a bunch of silver coins into a hat as it was held toward her.

“Liam, there you are. Oh, found new company?” asked a woman as she sat beside the gray-haired man.

“Hey, Demora. I don’t know her actually, only free space I could find. You back already? I thought you’d go deep into Karth this time.”

“Yeah, that whole thing kinda fell short. We lost our tank to a shredder. Not a nice sight. He was pretty fresh, though. Was bound to happen with how brash he acted. And with the Elves attacking again, we decided to leave it there.”

Ilea leaned back and continued drinking from one of several mugs in front of her. The barmaids, all above level 100, had soon learned about both her ability to drink quickly and her generous tips.

“More attacks?” Ilea asked.

The woman glanced at her and considered for a moment. “Yes. A few small villages near Riverwatch. A few dozen dead, eaten. One clash between a Shadow team and a few Elves, two of the fuckers dead.”

Ilea raised her mug. “Good.”

“Javis wanted to go with a fresh tank?” Liam asked.

Demora confirmed, then shook her head sadly. “He was good-looking, too, the lad.” She motioned for one of the barmaids. “The offer still stands, you know. We’d love to have you on the team.”

Liam waved her away. “The answer’s the same, and it will stay the same,” he said, taking a sip of his drink. “And you should be careful with the Baralia jobs. Some of the nobles are getting desperate.”

“Suit yourself,” Demora said, ignoring his comment about Baralia. She stood and left the bar without another word, leaving an approaching barmaid stranded with two full mugs in her hands, which had clearly been intended for Demora.

Ilea, with her opportunistic brilliance, motioned to the woman, who seemed relieved that she’d found a home for her two charges. The mugs were placed on the table, and Ilea paid. It was ale, just like the one she had already been drinking.

Baralia. That’s north of the Empire of Lys, I believe, just south of the Northern Plains. She tried to get her geography right but found she just didn’t care too much. Exploring the wilderness and possibly finding dungeons felt much more interesting to her than dealing with supposedly desperate nobles.

Glancing over at Liam, she found him looking at her. Ilea nodded at one of the mugs and the man sighed before a silver coin appeared in his hand. He flung it her way.

She wasn’t quite sure if the coin had been summoned or if it was simply sleight of hand. Either way, Ilea continued to watch the patrons that filled the bar. Most everyone was above her level. Some were armored as heavily as if they planned to charge into an enemy line, others wore casual clothing, while still others were dressed in fine tunics and robes. The music had picked up again, though it was less of a show by now and more in the background.

“Never seen you before,” Liam said, breaking the silence they had maintained for the past minutes. “Level 201. Your first day here?”

She nodded slightly, though neither of them was looking at the other.

“Word of advice. Stay away from that woman I was speaking with,” he said, and he resumed drinking in silence. Ilea noted that and did the same.

“Now that I think about it, stay away from anyone that approaches you. Stick to your team, and you’ll be fine,” he added, glancing at various people in the crowd. Some returned the gesture.

He’s not one who trusts easily.

Eventually, she had drained all her mugs and decided the bar was getting too crowded for her liking. She left, nodding to Liam on her way out.

As she walked back up toward the exit to the small town of extraordinary adventurers, she thought about the impact a cave-in would

have on the overall forces of humanity in Elos. At least based on the reputation of the Hand. *Might just be really good marketing and they're not really as important or powerful as everyone claims.*

She smiled as she continued the cave-in idea and thought about her chances of survival. With her resistances, physical strength, and durability, she would probably make it. Getting out would be time-consuming but ultimately rather easy.

Not so much for some of the squishy mages or rogues... but then they could still have really high Vitality or shields of some kind.

Looking at some of the high-level adventurers, she realized that she was feeling a little more apprehensive. Besides their general Classes, she knew nothing about them, nor about how they fought, why they were here, or how they'd reached their current level.

I need some fresh air.

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THREE

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Evaluation

‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 7

Well hello there, Identify. Been a while since you last showed yourself. Must be because of all those people level 200 and above I’ve been using you on...

“So, what do you think?” she asked as she walked through the city proper, no longer inside the cavern town of the Shadow’s Hand. The air was fresher outside, and after all that musical entertainment, she was enjoying the relative quiet.

“It’s an assortment of powerful people. Compared to what I’ve seen of humankind through you. However, some of my memories make me think they’re nothing compared to Elven kind,” Aki said from his position on her waist.

“What do you mean? They’re all a bit above 200. Same goes for the Elves I’ve encountered so far...” Ilea said as she jumped onto a storage warehouse to get a better view of the city.

“Were they? Perhaps they were young. Or foolish. I don’t remember fully, but I do believe the most powerful in their Domains would not care to fight humans. They’ve held their positions for thousands of years, and for good reason.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows as she jumped from building to building, crossing merchant’s offices and carriage depots.

“Well, we don’t really have a choice but to try our best. Even if our adversary is thousands of years old and probably has just as many points in each of their stats.”

“I wouldn’t say you’re an adversary. Perhaps their youth enjoy fighting humans, but if you were the adversary of even one of their Domains...” Aki paused. “This city would not remain. From what I have seen, you humans tend to think too highly of your own species. Elos is vast.”

“I know that... I’ve known that from the moment I saw that Basilisk. Though, if anything, we’re persistent and good at surviving.”

“That you are.”

“You mentioned Domains?”

“Yes... it is a memory, though incomplete. I believe the territory of Elvenkind is divided into Domains.”

“Like countries? Or cities?”

“Perhaps. I’m not sure. I’m sorry,” Aki said.

Ilea wondered what it meant. The dagger obviously had a connection to the Elves in some way, used by someone imprisoned in a Taleen dungeon. His apology had sounded genuine, but there was more to it.

Don’t think pushing him would be helpful. I’m sure he’ll share what he knows in time. Don’t want to overwhelm him.

Ilea wandered around the city roofs for a while, enjoying the stars shining above. Even after close to a year here, it was still incredible to see them. A muffled cry a couple of streets over made her perk up, and she blinked toward it until she was close enough for her sphere to perceive the full scene.

Two men in armor were punching a young girl, ripping away her belongings. Ilea wanted to make sure this was in fact what it looked like before engaging. She continued watching, getting close enough to blink in and intervene.

She was activating her buffs and preparing herself when an eerie melody filled her ears. Someone was humming. Her head started throbbing hard as blood leaked out from her nose. She stumbled to one knee and closed her eyes as the hair on her neck stood up in alarm.

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 8

The melody changed its flow to a quicker one, and Ilea activated her Shroud of Ash, immediately increasing the power of her resistances. Her headache lessened, and the eerie melody turned into a faint humming. It was coming from a couple of streets over.

Just as she decided to head toward it, Ilea suddenly stopped in her tracks, realizing that the two men were in the process of killing each other. They were attacking with reckless abandon and no regard for their own safety as each one's weapon found the other's flesh. The humming stopped as both of them fell to the ground, their blood painting the cobblestones a tinge of red.

Ilea blinked toward where the sound had come from and saw a second woman running away. She followed her around a corner, where she found nothing. No smell or prints in the snow. Walking back to the scene of the violence, the victim had already run away as well. Saved by the strange magic. Ilea decided not to follow her in case the girl thought she too was trying to rob or kill her.

"What was that magic?" she asked, looking at the two bodies in the partially snow-covered alley.

"Mind magic, to be sure, though very subtle. I thought I'd lost you there for a second," Aki said. "To influence people to such a degree is no small feat, even if they were mere low-level humans."

Ilea grunted and left the scene. *Strange figures in my room, high-level people all around, and mind magic users killing thugs in the street. At least this place is interesting*, she thought with a smile.

She decided that she wanted to use her new bed again after all. One of them, at least.

* * *

Waking up after a full eight hours of unnecessary but very enjoyable sleep, Ilea blinked at the light coming in from the windows. The curtains moved a little as she turned over in her bed.

Warm...

She tried to get out from under the blanket – unsuccessfully. With a stroke of brilliance, the blanket vanished into her necklace.

"Better..." she said as she enjoyed the light breeze coming in through the windows. Outside, music was playing, and she could hear people bartering and laughing.

"Wait..." She opened her eyes again. "Where's the wind coming from? We're inside a mountain..."

She shrugged and stretched on her bed before summoning Aki and throwing him into the wall. She had decided not to have him anywhere stealable. Of course, she still had her necklace, but one had to actually touch her to remove it, and Ilea felt safe enough about that. With all her skills, she had woken up from much less.

“Just to be sure, I did leave the window open last night?”

“That you did,” the dagger replied.

Summoning her leather armor, she went into the bathroom and checked herself in the mirror. Her hair was a mess, and she didn’t even own a brush.

Wait, no, I do...

There was an assortment of tools in the bathroom, two of which were brushes. She picked one up, sat down on the bed, and started working – with her pain perception disabled, of course.

A few minutes later, she put the brush into her necklace and got up to get Aki. “Let’s go get some food. I’m starving.”

“You shouldn’t need that much food, so why do you continue to eat?” the dagger said while he was being sheathed.

“You’re supposedly influenced by me, are you not?”

“It’s a theory.”

“Then you should know why,” Ilea said and got a grunt in response. She smiled as she exited the building and walked up toward some of the food stands. They were selling all sorts of meat dishes, curries, and even kebabs, though sadly, none of that was eligible for breakfast in Ilea’s mind.

One of the merchants sold something that looked similar to donuts, though, and she decided one of those would do. Well, five of them would do.

How did I not get fat in my last life? I mean, one or two are ok, but five... for breakfast?

Then she remembered that her funds had been a bit too limited to eat five donuts every morning. Not anymore though, and with her newfound stats and skills that turned her body into something superhuman, a few more baked goods here and there didn’t really make a difference. Maybe she could even go for a second breakfast.

And then there’s all the fighting...

Ilea consumed her treats and then walked up toward the main hall. It was still a little early for the assessment, but she didn’t want to go into one of the bars – for the same reason, really. The hall was just as empty as it had

been the day before. One or two people would occasionally walk through, but the bulk of the members were either somewhere else or in the small cavern city.

Ilea walked up to the reception. Someone new was sitting there today. He had very pale skin.

[Mage – lvl 208]

“Hey, two questions,” she said, resting her hands on the desk.

The man just motioned for her to continue.

“What’s the town where members stay called? And where can I find information on available classes?”

The man scratched his stubbly beard and mumbled his response. “The city has different names, I think. Most refer to it as Viscera. You can find the list of available classes at the bottom of the town, near the elevators.”

“Viscera? As in guts?”

The man just grinned and nodded.

“Thanks,” she said, and he waved her away.

Viscera, huh? Seems a little too peaceful for that kind of name, but hey, what do I know? I’ve not been around for long.

She walked back into the town and down the winding road. It was getting close to noon, so she couldn’t afford to lose too much time. The classes could also wait until later, but she was curious.

Hmm, that’s a lot... Ilea thought once she was standing in front of the stone tablet that listed all the available classes and further information. *How do they update the carvings? Oh yes, magic...*

- *Alchemy I*
- *Alchemy II*
- *Alchemy III*
- *Astronomy I*
- *Astronomy II*
- *Algebra I*
- ...

Ilea read through the list and found it contained nearly everything she could think of. She had thought the classes would be more focused on fighting, but then again, something like the knowledge of stars or geometry might come in handy for some specialized Classes.

Why even have all these? Who teaches them? she thought as she listened in on the conversation two women next to her were having. Apparently, they weren't fully paid-up members and had to choose at least three classes in addition to the mandatory ones.

The privileged rich... though I don't think mandatory education is a bad thing exactly...

She made her way up to the main hall again, with different ideas for what she could learn spinning around her head. There were quite a few things that could be useful, but she could also lie in the sun and eat all the culinary creations this city had to offer...

* * *

Adam held his hands to his face to stop them from trembling. The runes hurt his mind, but he was more familiar with them now. He grabbed the paper in front of him and crumpled it up. Tossed it to the dogs as he had thousands before it.

He sighed and opened the bottle of liquor on his desk. Holding the cork in his hand, he looked straight ahead and put it back into the bottle.

If only there was more time.

He took in a deep breath and steeled his will.

The dogs were still munching on the paper when there came a knock on the door. Adam waited for the summoned animals to stop chewing before he made both of them vanish.

Getting up, he summoned his coat and notebook, its intricate patterns catching the light. He flipped through it as he approached the door of his office. The maroon wood grated a little under his boots as his finger came to a stop on a page.

Ah yes, the new initiate, he thought as the book vanished again and he opened the door.

"Elder Strand. The initiate is ready," the woman before him bowed. Her long dark hair was tied back, and her clothes were muted and professional.

He liked this one. She worked hard, level 139. It would take a while for her to reduce her debt to zero and reach the required level to become a member, but Adam was sure she could do it. She was a brilliant mage with marvelous Classes. It was good that he'd chosen not to learn her name. The closer he got, the more difficult it would become.

"I'm on my way," he said as he passed her with a slight smile and walked down the stairs.

The third one this month. Not nearly as many as last year. Elven attacks in the west, brewing civil war in Baralia. I do hope the Shadow's Hand is ready. For what's to come....

He focused on the task at hand. He always did, or he knew he would be lost.

Adam reached his destination fifteen minutes later as he descended one of the elevators at the bottom of Viscera. A tasteless name for something so beautiful and ancient, he'd often thought. Sadly, the Hand was not quite what it had once been, what history had told of it.

He walked out of the elevator and into the long corridor that held around a dozen large training halls. Enchanted long ago, just like the rest of their facilities. Arriving at the third one, he entered.

William was there, as he always was. *The man will become an Elder as soon as one of us is dead...*

Adam grinned and saw the other man nod at him, likely grateful that at least one of the Elders was in the city and took their duty somewhat seriously. The irony wasn't lost on him. He stood beside the others and focused on the evaluation.

Sidney was there as well and completed the requirement for three higher members of the guild to be present for an evaluation. *A good combination, too. This new girl will be pushed to the limit...*

He looked at the initiate. She was wearing leather armor and had black hair and blue eyes. Her slight grin told him that she was a little too confident, but then most initiates were. Anywhere else in the Plains, and she'd be respected or feared.

Yet her stance and the look in her eyes at least suggested that there was some experience there. So she wasn't a noble or someone lucky enough to find a dungeon suited for their Class. This woman had stared down death. Probably more than once.

She could've lived a happy life on some farm... He shook his head ever so slightly at himself. The farm wouldn't exist in the first place if it weren't for those who were prepared to fight. He wouldn't stand in her way. *Perhaps she'll make a difference.*

"I'll begin," he said. "I'm Elder Strand. Please, quickly explain your Classes, abilities, and where you would see yourself in a team of adventurers. Explain as freely as you can. Everything we learn here will stay in this room and will only be used to evaluate an appropriate team for you to join."

He could see she didn't completely trust his words, but she started explaining anyway.

"I'm mostly hand to hand. I can attack by pushing destructive mana into an enemy I hit. I can take quite a lot of damage as well, and I can heal both myself and others. Though my healing magic is apparently not quite as strong as the magic of a dedicated healer." She looked at them expectantly.

She identifies as a warrior. A battle healer, then? Hiding from her former Order? Or just an unaffiliated rogue healer?

"A battle healer... that's quite a rare Class, even more so at this level. Well, let's test the extent of your abilities then," Adam said. "We'll start with your defenses. Please stand a bit farther away. William here will attack you with increasingly powerful ice and water magic. Tell us as soon as you lose more than thirty percent of your health."

He motioned for William to start the first test for tank suitability.

"I just bought this leather armor..." the woman said, obviously a little attached to her garments. Sidney gestured to a corner of the room where some chests were sitting.

"There are some things in there. Please just put on some normal clothes. Armor isn't taken into account here," Sidney explained. The initiate nodded and went to change, and William summoned a wall of ice that would obstruct their view of her.

Unnecessary, Adam thought, though he didn't comment on it.

No complaints from her so far. It had been a while. Even initiates to the Hand generally didn't like to be struck by magic.

The girl changed quickly before going to the middle of the room, dressed in some very basic clothing.

"Let's start then," William said. With that, a number of blue runes appeared on the woman's body, followed by fiery red lines. Her eyes

seemed to become even brighter as a shroud of ash came into existence.

Ash... impressive. I suppose she's seen a little more death than I assumed. I do wonder what those runes are. Body enhancements, most likely.

The first ice attacks didn't even make the woman move.

Bigger and bigger blocks of ice hit the initiate, but she simply shrugged them off. The blocks turned into spikes and then into lances.

Finally, a massive lance managed to pierce the defensive shroud and impaled itself in the girl's chest. She barely winced, then ripped it out, the wound closing before their eyes.

William stopped for a second and blinked, but Adam just smiled. It was nice to see a new recruit with such durability.

"Continue. She hasn't said she's lost thirty percent."

After a moment, William nodded and summoned more ice lances, first bigger and then more numerous. They continued to pierce her, but the woman just shrugged off the wounds. Her clothing was torn to shreds as time passed and more and more lances were flung at her.

"That was thirty..." she said eventually, and William paused as the girl's healing went to work. "I'm back to seventy percent now."

Adam glanced over at William.

"That certainly qualifies as a tank role. I've seen tougher at your level, but combined with the healing, you're certainly up there. And I have the feeling you're more mobile. Try again, but this time, you're allowed to dodge," Adam said, and the woman nodded. He didn't miss the slight smirk on her face.

Oh. I see. Not confidence or arrogance. She just enjoys it. Verena might have competition; their kind is certainly rare.

William resumed where he had left off, and the woman sprang into motion. He wasn't surprised at her speed, considering the body enhancements. He watched as the stone hall was destroyed by ice. Not a single lance managed to hit the woman; she dodged them all at the last moment with minimal movements.

She's efficient too...

Adam motioned for them to stop. He didn't feel like having William run out of mana here. That would be an embarrassing sight, though it would have been a much more interesting battle if he had seriously tried.

Perfect against inexperienced mages of noble status. That Alymie brat will meet his match with this one.

“You’ve been fighting alone, haven’t you?” Adam asked. The woman didn’t respond, but he was sure. Rarely did body enhancers turn into such balanced fighters when they were in a team. Though he didn’t know about her destructive capabilities yet.

“Next up, technique. Sidney, if you would?”

“With pleasure,” the woman said and smiled as she grabbed two wooden swords. Then she hesitated, and the wooden ones were replaced by dull steel swords.

“Just try to dodge and attack without skills. To be safe, can you hit the ground for me first?” Sidney asked, twirling her swords.

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Excursion

Adam watched the woman nod at Sidney's words and punch the ground with a speed and strength that matched her previous dodging. Adam didn't feel any mana applied to the punch, so she was likely only using her base strength and innate skills. A slight crack formed in the stone floor.

Sidney's lips quirked upward, and she began to grin. "I can take a couple of those, but don't overdo it. If you even get in a hit..." she said, appearing next to the initiate in an instant.

Adam watched the healer duck and punch at Sidney, who in turn dodged the fist with a sideways twirl coupled with a backward step.

"You're prepared, I like that..." Sidney said as she attacked again.

The two women met in the middle of the room, exchanging punches and sword strikes. The better reach of her swords meant Sidney had the initial advantage though none of her swings hit; some were deflected by the woman's arms or hands, but most were simply dodged.

After fifteen seconds of trading attacks, the initiate finally managed to get in closer. Her fist was about to hit Sidney when the swordfighter vanished and reappeared five meters farther back.

To her obvious surprise, the initiate appeared beside her barely a split second later and finished delivering her blow.

She was waiting for the teleport to be used again to reveal her own... Adam thought as he watched Sidney cough up blood. Suddenly a reddish fire formed around Sidney as she winked at the initiate.

William walked up to Adam. "We should stop this so nobody gets hurt," he stated.

Adam knew the man was only saying this out of obligation to the Hand. He likely didn't care either way.

"I usually *would* stop this, but we have a healer present," he said, feeling a smile touch his lips for a brief moment. William simply nodded.

He knew the man agreed, but there had been too many serious injuries in the past. *Nobles, thieves, and opportunists. Too soft and inexperienced.*

Sidney's speed accelerated as her flames grew brighter, and with each blocked hit, the initiate was pushed back a little more. Bruises began forming where she was hit, so she switched to a more dodge-focused defense. Both started using their teleportation spells more frequently, disappearing and reappearing all around the room. Adam had no problem following them, nor would William, but Adam also knew that neither had the illusion that they could match this display of mobility. *Not like this, at least...*

The initiate started using her defensive shroud to reduce the impact of Sidney's hits, but still she was pushed back. Then one of Sidney's swings connected, thrusting her blade with full force into the initiate's torso. But the girl did not waste the opportunity; she held onto Sidney's arm and delivered her own punch at her opponent's chest, sending Sidney stumbling back.

Seemingly ignoring Sidney's attacks, the young woman started trading blows whenever possible, pushing the sword master to take up a defensive position. Soon, blood covered most of Sidney's face and torso. The initiate, on the other hand, didn't look any worse for wear. Everything except for her clothes looked as it had before the battle had begun. Sidney's garments were a little shredded in parts as well.

"Stop," Adam called out, and the initiate teleported backward ten meters, dropping her fists. Both combatants were breathing heavily, and Sidney dropped to one knee, grinning once again at her adversary.

Her teleportation is quick to recharge, and she's using it for offense too.

"Now you can show us your healing as well. Sidney, how injured are you?" Adam asked as he walked over to the swordswoman.

"I'm fine," Sidney said and spat out blood. The initiate appeared next to Sidney and looked at Adam.

"Go on," he urged, watching her intently. It wasn't every day that someone with such raw physical power also had the ability to support others.

Upon the girl's touch, mana flowed through Sidney and healed the wounds and bruises she had sustained. It took a while, but she was back to normal in under a minute.

"You have to touch the target?" Adam asked. The woman nodded in reply. He mulled it over. The touch requirement was a significant drawback for a healer, but still, it was more than balanced out by her mobility and offensive abilities.

"As soon as you're actually applying your healing spell, I don't think you're far behind a more dedicated healer. I assume you can only heal one person at a time, though the teleportation certainly helps with the touching requirement." He pointedly ignored the woman's hand lingering on Sidney's shoulder.

"How was her technique, Sidney?" He looked at Sidney, who slowly got up again, brushing the initiate's hand away from her shoulder.

"Adequate or better for her level. Fighting skills at least in the second stage."

Adam nodded at that. "You're certainly a balanced warrior. Believe me, though – even for people like you, a team is invaluable," Adam explained, though her gaze told him she knew as much already. That was good. Sometimes her type resisted teamwork quite stubbornly.

A hundred dead for one Verena or Pierce. At least this one had healing at her disposal.

"I'm aware," she said, confirming his feeling.

"Neither of you used your magic enhancements to your weapons. I would like to see yours," Adam said, looking at the initiate. She nodded as he gathered his mana and formed a magical construct. A second later, a fully realized level 50 Drake stood in the room with them.

Adam was confused at the wide smile the creature elicited from the initiate, but he focused on the task at hand. Soon, he would be back in his office. There was no question about her capabilities. A foregone conclusion.

"Kill the Drake. Use your full power, though only skills you can use several times in a row. No once-a-day abilities or things that take hours to recharge," he said, walking back to William with Sidney. He had a feeling this would be interesting.

The girl walked up to the Drake and looked at Adam. He nodded and watched as she petted the monster, then punched it. A wave of mana from seemingly both her classes went into the animal and tore its innards to

shreds. The beast exploded as blood and guts splattered on the ground, some of it decorating the girl in red drapery.

Mana intrusion on her ash, that's not a surprise. But the other spell. Intrusive anti-healing? That's unheard of. If she can land a hit with that, past defensive enchantments, she's even more dangerous than I thought.

"That's a five or six," William said, and Sidney nodded.

"Again, with something bigger..." Adam said, using more mana this time. A level 100 monster toad came to life a couple of meters away from him and lazily hopped toward the initiate. It was massive, so it would show just how far her powers would dig into an enemy.

This time, the woman didn't hesitate and attacked immediately. The frog survived the first hit and died on the second.

"Thanks, that's enough," Adam said, and the initiate walked toward them again. Only some tattered remnants of clothing still remained, and blood, little of it her own, now covered at least a third of her body. "You can get another set of clothing before bathing," Adam said, but the woman looked at William.

"You're ice and water?" she asked, and the man understood. He summoned his mana, and a stream of compressed water punched into the initiate, pushing her back a little. Her skin resisted the attack, but the blood and guts didn't. Nor did what was left of the clothes.

"Thanks," she said, going back to where she had left her leather armor without a care in the world. This time, William didn't feel the need to erect an ice barrier. Two minutes later, she stood in front of them again, fully armored.

"You're more than qualified and could fill several roles in several teams," Adam said. "Though I would suggest a tank and healer combination as your main role. Depending on the enemy, you can help attack or distract. Considering how little damage a lot of warriors and mages can take, I want to put that to use. Do you object?"

"No, that's alright," she said, and Adam nodded.

"Great, then thanks again for the demonstration. We will decide on your rating and put you into a team by tomorrow. You're a paid member, so you can refuse a team once, though I assure you there will be people you initially dislike in each of them," Adam explained. "At noon tomorrow, please come to the main hall again. An assistant will take care of you."

The initiate looked at them, nodded, and even winked at Sidney before leaving the room.

* * *

“She’s new to the city? No association with an Order?” Adam asked a while later in the warded room at the end of the training corridor.

“Yes, Elder. We cannot be sure, but I haven’t seen her magic before. Perhaps it’s a passed-down secret,” William answered.

“Resilience – 10, speed – 7, attack – 7, technique – 8. Do you agree?”

The two others nodded at Adam’s assessment.

“She would be a great member of nearly any team. Shit, even established teams would take a healer,” Sidney said.

“Well, three of the newcomers from recent months are without a team yet, and we still have to place that noble who refused his first team,” Adam said.

The others seemed uncertain.

“One attack mage, a trapper, and two influencers... They would need a tank and healer desperately,” William said.

“I would say two attack mages,” Sidney said. Only the evaluators had a vague idea of everyone’s abilities. To form teams, it was a must.

“It could work, certainly. So it’s decided. Team 34 then,” Adam declared. *Replacing those lost in Stormbreach.*

“William, can you handle the rest?” He phrased it as a question but ensured his tone left no room for further discussion as he got up from his chair. *Back to work then. No more distractions.*

* * *

“How do you think I did?” Ilea asked as she sat on her bed and ate one of several meals she had bought on her way back through Viscera’s markets.

“You saw everything, right?”

“Yes, thanks for the placement,” Aki said. “I think you did well, but that is no surprise with your experience against Elves and Guardians. Your defensive capabilities will come in handy, I believe. Too many focus only on their offensive magical prowess.”

“Something you’ve experienced?”

“I believe, yes. I—”

The dagger paused, as if he had lost his train of thought.

Ilea didn’t push him, falling backward onto the bed. The ceiling had a surprisingly intricate design for an underground town carved or built into the mountain.

And yet it doesn’t look anything like what the Taleen left in that ruin...

“You think dwarves built this place?” she asked, throwing Aki into the ceiling. She was getting better at throwing for sure, though she had still not received a skill for it.

“It’s certainly possible. A lot of underground cities were built by dwarves and then abandoned for one reason or another. What they build tends to last.”

The explanation from the ceiling made a lot of sense to Ilea.

“You were inside a Taleen city. What was your last wielder looking for there?”

“I do not remember how I ended up there. My last wielder, I believe, had something to do with the Guardians. He was... fighting them.”

“He died down there? It didn’t look that way, with all the gear propped up.”

“I’m... not sure. I remember battles... against the machines. Large ones. Green and silver,” Aki said slowly.

Ilea nodded as she lay there before blinking up to retrieve Aki. She noted his change of mood with his reminiscing.

Confused? Or just sad?

“We have a day to ourselves now, and I know just the place to visit...” she said, rushing out of the apartment.

She walked out of Viscera at a quick pace and reached Ravenhall in a couple of minutes before spreading her wings with a smile.

Let’s see what your referral is worth, Lorcan.

FIVE

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Iron

“Wow, that was good...”

A heavy breath left Ilea’s lips as she slumped back on the bench she occupied. The empty plates in front of her told a familiar tale. Whatever Ilea was known for, being a bad customer was not it.

She had finally arrived at her destination. Her travels through the snowy mountains had brought her past the city of Morhill, the only other settlement in these mountains beside Ravenhall equipped with both massive walls and enough buildings to house more than a few dozen people.

The guards had been helpful enough, one of them suggesting she would find the smith in the small village of Indur. It also had an inn.

Ilea quickly checked her messages, having used a few of her skills on the way.

‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 7

“Glad you liked it, lassy!”

An intimidatingly large and thick-muscled woman in her forties walked out from behind the bar to gather up all the plates left by her patron. Ilea was the only one there. It seemed as if people living in a small village didn’t have the luxury of frequenting the inn very often.

“I’ll pay now,” Ilea said, stopping a burp from escaping her highly feminine figure, accented by a now bulging belly that for once didn’t stand for fertility and new life. Though considering how many calories her body somehow managed to burn, she did have to ask herself if there wasn’t some

sort of alien inside her, benefiting from her frequent indulgences and ready to burst out at the most inopportune moment.

Ilea slid a little lower on the bench and enjoyed the rustic look of the inn. It was a mixture of wood and stone. The oil lamps gave the place a warm feel, though Ilea wondered if it weren't a little bit of a fire risk to install said facility.

Maybe the owner's a water mage...?

She couldn't quite get a feeling for the woman. She did have the mage tag, but that could range as widely as a person's personality.

"That will be eighty coppers," the woman said, and she received two whole silvers. The coins vanished too quickly for Ilea to change her mind, a testament to the innkeeper's abilities.

Everything's cheap when you have a dwarven treasury inside your necklace... she thought as she walked up to the bar.

"Can you tell me where I can find Balduur Birch?" she said, quite sure that the woman would be substantially more open about helping her after the generous tip.

"The smithy's three houses that way," she said, pointing toward the back of the inn. "To the right, though be warned. The man has a temper, and he only smiths for the village, 'cept for some rare occasions."

She smiled mischievously at Ilea. It was unclear if the smile was for her upcoming suffering or expected success. Ilea didn't mind either way. She left the inn and made her way toward the intended destination. The snow crunched under her boots as she walked down the dirt track.

The village only contained around twenty houses, though most seemed big enough to hold at least a family of five. There were very few people around, though. Ilea assumed most of them were out hunting, farming, or training. The innkeeper was above level 100, and the few people she had seen outside were close to that level too.

Perhaps life inside the city walls was why so many of the people living there didn't choose to become stronger. Not that Ilea judged them. They certainly didn't have to.

It's such a waste, though. Everyone should get to experience the joy of flying...

She opened the massive oak door that led inside the second biggest house in the village after the inn. The smithy. It was a massive stone construction with a huge chimney and well-polished wood furnishings.

“Anybody home?” Ilea shouted into the room, unsure whether she had intruded or if it was intended that customers should just walk into this place.

“Another one, how often do I have to tell you...” Ilea heard a grumbling yet loud male voice coming from somewhere downstairs.

Wow that’s quite a beard... she thought, taking stock of him with her sphere just before the man entered from a side room. He was large, burly, and had a beard as massive and brown as the front door. The arms didn’t disappoint either.

His eyes glared daggers at her as he came to a stop two meters away.

[Smith – lvl 181]

“What the fuck do you want?”

The shout was not really a shock, but nonetheless, it was unexpected.

“I just really, really need to use the privy,” Ilea said, smirking.

This, apparently, was not the right approach, as the man closed in on her much quicker than she had expected, his arm shooting out to hit her where she stood.

Her buffs flared up as she intercepted his hand with her arm, skidding a meter or so backward. She smiled, happy that she could match his strength so closely. Her grin betrayed her thoughts as the smith looked at the comparatively tiny woman before him.

He’s even stronger than he looks.

“Well, look at that. You’re strong, I’ll give you that,” he said, pulling his arm away. “Now begone with you, you’ll spoil my focus!”

“I’m a friend of Agor, who’s currently in Dawntree. He was the one who told me about you. After I inquired about his sword.” She smiled, deciding that she’d been fooling around enough. The house was nice, and it would be a shame if he threw her through a wall. He seemed the type to do so.

“Agor...” His voice changed a little. “So you’ve come to pay his debts? Finally!”

“Oh, that little shit...” Ilea muttered, clenching her fists. Of course he hadn’t paid his bill.

The smith laughed, making Ilea clench her fists even tighter. Eventually, she smiled herself. It was either that or immediately go out hunting for

Agor so she could give him a similar greeting to the one the smith had just given her.

“Now, tell me the man’s first name, and I’ll believe the story...” he said, quickly turning serious again.

“Tell me the first and last letters. It seemed important to him, and I won’t just give you something like that,” she said carefully.

He nodded, seemingly happy with her answer. “L as in lumber and N as in necromancer,” he said, giving her the correct letters.

“Lorcan,” she simply stated, and a small smile tugged on his mouth.

“I can see the lad liking you. Always has been one for the meatless. Now, follow me down.”

“Meatless... should’ve seen me in the inn...” she murmured as she followed before realizing that perhaps the innkeeper was what he’d consider somebody with enough meat on her bones.

They’d fit – in a cute and scary way...

Ilea was not surprised when they entered an expansive smithy at the bottom of the stairs, quite a bit farther down than a normal cellar would be.

There were several different forges, and various machines and tools hung on the walls or were strewn around on the ground. The weapons ranged from simple-looking swords to intricate war axes, similar to what a Norse god might bring to the battlefield.

“Well, this is one hell of a forge you have here,” she said, spotting dozens of runes on each machine and piece of equipment.

“Now, I have one rule, lassy. No matter how strong you are, you have to show me something interesting before I’ll continue this conversation, no matter whether you want a new weapon or just to use my privy.” He crossed his arms in front of him, the gesture giving him an even more imposing look.

“Hey, Aki, you want to introduce yourself?” she asked, confusing the smith. “Ever seen a talking dagger?” she asked as she drew Aki.

“Greetings,” said Aki.

“Er... hello?” the smith said, though he seemed more interested in seeing the dagger than in having a conversation.

“That interesting enough?” she asked in a level tone.

“It certainly is... this is dark magic, girl, something I haven’t ever seen before. May I see it?” he asked, and Ilea handed over the dagger.

“His name is Aki,” she said as the smith turned over the weapon.

“Any info on the quality? The metal isn’t something I’ve seen before either, and that certainly says something. It looks dwarven in design, but I can’t be sure.”

“Sadly not, can’t identify it. Though it’s apparently very, very old.”

The smith turned the dagger around a bit more. “Perhaps soul or death magic. I’m quite stumped. I don’t suppose you’re selling?”

She simply stared at him and held out her hand. The smith sighed and handed it back to her.

“So, you’re a friend of that useless adventurer. Name’s Balduur Birch,” the man said, holding out his hand. “What are you looking for?”

Ilea smirked a bit and grabbed the man’s hand, upon which her buffs activated, and a battle of grips ensued. Both parties used mana to increase their strength, and Ilea could only hold on as her reconstruction healed the damage as it was being done.

Ilea’s sphere told her that another person had joined them in the cellar workshop and was standing a couple of meters behind Balduur, but she chose to concentrate on the handshake while staring into the smith’s eyes. They looked at each other like predators fighting over a newly found hunting ground.

“Dad, you’re doing it again. Let the woman go,” the new arrival said in a raspy voice. The man’s grip didn’t soften at all as he continued putting his life blood toward destroying Ilea’s hand. The woman walked closer and shook her head.

“This one’s tough...” her father said, letting go of Ilea’s hand. She smiled as her cracked bones returned to their correct positions.

“She certainly looks it. No broken bones?” the woman asked, obviously surprised. “So she showed you something interesting then? May I see it too?”

“I’m Ilea. You’re this man’s daughter?”

The question elicited a scoff from the woman as she received the dagger.

“I am, I am, I believe the arms are not hereditary, though I guess it’s possible that I’m adopted,” the woman said. She looked the dagger over, her eyes glowing a dark blue. “This is... new... very interesting.” She paused for a long moment, then handed Aki back to Ilea. “I’m Iana, nice to meet you. So, we finally have a customer again. He’s getting more and more demanding.”

“People are getting more and more stupid and arrogant,” Balduur responded as he walked to one of the forges. “What do you want? I do hope you have the gold or something else to pay with.”

“I’d like to inspect your dagger for a while, maybe half an hour or so?” Iana said.

“For what?” Aki asked.

“It talks,” Iana said, her eyebrows rising. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m an enchantress and would like to study the runes set into your form. They’re far more complex than what I’m used to.”

“I won’t oppose,” Aki said.

“Feel free to check him out,” Ilea said and thought for a second. “Enchantments on one thing for free in exchange, maybe?”

The girl nodded and happily walked away, staring at Aki with her shining eyes. Her white braided hair swayed a little in the artificial airflow caused by one rune or another in the cellar.

Ilea turned her head to look at the smith, who was stacking metal ingots of differing kinds on top of a heavy steel workbench.

“Hammer, sword, shield? You’re strong enough to wield pretty much anything, and you look like you’re dexterous enough to wield whatever it may be efficiently as well.”

“I’m not sure, really. I normally just fight with my hands,” Ilea said, walking closer and picking up some of the ingots.

I have no idea what this is... she thought as she clanged two of them together lightly.

“Gauntlets, maybe? Or do you use magic that is unleashed upon attacking?” the smith asked, visibly annoyed at her messing with his things.

She stopped and put the ingots back down. “The latter. Most of the damage comes from the mana released. At least, I think so.”

Balduur nodded at that and raised his right hand to his chin in a thoughtful gesture.

“Well, in that case, the type of metal won’t help a lot. It might be useful in some cases, but generally speaking, direct contact is by far the best for skills like that. Still, perhaps I can make you something to be used whenever you face something where your skills might be ineffective. A heavy set for blunt damage, or something equipped with spikes or blades to pierce.”

Ilea nodded in response. “That would certainly be helpful. How about both?” She lifted some of the metal ingots. “What’s the heaviest you’ve got?”

Balduur smiled at the question. “Oh, I’ve always wanted to do something like that. The heaviest is black olvor from the north. If it’s ever used, which is only rarely, it’s as a counterweight. Though very durable, it doesn’t mix well with most metals and quickly breaks off anything you attach it to. I’ll make you a pair of gauntlets starting at the elbows. Come help me get the ingots,” he said, motioning for her to follow. “Did I mention it’s very rare and expensive as well?”

Ilea didn’t react. If anybody had the funds, it was her.

“What about the sharp ones?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Oh, I know what we’re using for that. And I have an idea for the form as well,” he said as they reached what seemed to be the main storage room.

Ilea couldn’t deny that the sight of all the metals and tools inside was both intimidating and incredibly impressive. There were all sorts of colors and different shines, and all of it was meticulously clean.

Using her sphere, she saw a lot of runes etched into the metal shelves and was sure they were responsible for the absence of dust in the room. It all looked new.

The smith led her toward one corner and motioned to the bars on the ground. There were eight ingots there that didn’t look particularly impressive.

“Try to lift one,” he said and smiled, though from an angle where Ilea wouldn’t have seen him had it not been for her sphere. She decided to play his game and grabbed one of the bars. The muscles in her arm strained to the max as she failed to move the metal from its position. She moved her body to have a better balance and tried again. This time the metal moved, though only by a millimeter.

State of Azarinth and Form of Ember came alive, their shine reflecting beautifully off all the metals in the room that allowed it, even though only her neck, hands, and head were exposed and thus were the only sources of light. As Ilea strained against the weight, she slowly lifted the bar and raised it until it was finally as high as her stomach.

She couldn’t help but be proud of the annoyed expression on the smith’s face. Using her other hand to stabilize the bar, the weight became

manageable, and she smiled at the man.

“Get two,” he said smugly and walked by her, a light glow forming around him as well, before grabbing two of the bars and lifting them. It didn’t look any less difficult for him than it had been for Ilea. She didn’t see it as a problem, only a testament to the metal’s quality and usability. She could already see its uses, though the viability of summoning her heavy weapons directly from her necklace would have to be tested first.

The two completed the journey twice to bring the eight bars to one of the biggest forges in the cellar. The magically created air certainly helped them not pass out on their short yet very difficult walk to their destination. Ten minutes later, the eight ingots were resting near the forge, ready to be smithed.

“You don’t have a storage item?” Ilea asked.

Balduur just smiled. “Some things have to be carried.”

Ilea tried to store one of the black olvor ingots and found it worked without issue. She summoned it back. *I see.*

He gave her a nod.

“Your hand, girl,” Balduur said. She proffered her arm, and he looked at it intensely, likely taking measurements for the gauntlets.

“What’s the other material?” Ilea asked, realizing that they had only gotten one kind.

“We’ll get that one now.... I hope there will be enough. Let me draw it out for you first, alright? Oh, and we’ll have to discuss the cost as well.”

By now, Iana had nearly had her half-hour with Aki, and Ilea planned to make use of her free enchantment – likely for the heavy gauntlets.

The two went upstairs again to a room Ilea hadn’t seen before, at least not with her eyes. Balduur moved plates and candle holders from the wooden table in the middle of the room and opened a chest nearby. He pulled out a roll of paper, which he spread out on the table to create a big space to draw on.

Ilea watched for the next ten minutes as the smith wrote down numbers and measurements. A little bored, she started playing with the candles, lighting one and burning one of the wooden plates the smith had moved from the table. As ash fell from the singed plate, she tried to lift it with her ash manipulation. It was fascinating to her, seeing the ash move a little into the air.

Balduur seemed to be done a couple of minutes later and looked at her. “Are you done burning my house down?” he asked with raised eyebrows.

Ilea nodded guiltily and put the plate down. “I am... man, Iana really is taking her time...” she said as she joined the smith next to his calculations.

“She is. Well, let’s start then. First, the materials. I assume you want all eight ingots to be used, that and my labor will come out at twenty-five gold coins. I’m aware that the price is rather high, but go and try to find black olvor and buy as much as is being used for your gauntlets here. The rest isn’t cheap either but definitely considerably less than the olvor.”

He paused for a second, likely to let the price sink in. Ilea was undisturbed though and simply motioned for the man to continue. Compared to the most expensive gear she had bought so far, his price was ridiculous, though not particularly surprising. Considering she’d had to show him something interesting for him to even consider making something for her, Ilea thought of him more as an artist. And, currently, she had the funds to play around.

“That’s just for the heavy gauntlets. The blue steel ones come out at fifteen gold as making them will be quite a bit more difficult. Materials are cheaper though. So we’re talking forty gold plus a five gold increase for the plate you burned.”

He said that last sentence as if he expected it to shock and dismay her, but Ilea didn’t react and simply nodded.

“I want half of that in advance and will need around two weeks to complete the requests. Any additional enchantments you want from Iana will cost too and might take just as long,” the smith finished. “I doubt you’ll get the gauntlets very far with your current strength though.” He smiled at her.

Ilea summoned twenty-three gold coins onto the table out of nowhere. The smith simply waved his hand over the money, making it vanish.

“Iana will want to see that storage item as well, she’s very good with them. I believe you’ve seen Lorcan’s sword? So that’s how you’ll get the gauntlets out of here then?” he asked, and she nodded.

She had to admit, she wasn’t sure how much space the gauntlets would occupy or how much mana she would have to use to summon and store them. They would be ridiculously heavy, after all.

“Rich adventurers... Now, I actually have to do some work. I’ll make some quick plans for the gauntlets for you,” the smith said as a pencil

appeared in his hand. He looked at her again, stopping his work when he saw she hadn't moved.

"Can you make me a bow as well? A heavy one with ridiculously huge arrows..." she asked, a little inspired by the ranger she had met in Salia.

"I can do something like that, sure. Will be another four gold, but you can keep the advance for now," Balduur said.

When Ilea finally left the room and allowed the smith to get to work, she used her sphere and saw him relax and don a focused expression.

Dedicated to his craft and already lost in his projects. I like that.

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Team

Walking back downstairs, Ilea found Iana still touching Aki intently and looking all over him. The dagger didn't seem to mind and was actually engaged in a conversation with the woman. She leaned on the wall and listened in.

"You believe me to be dwarven in nature?" he asked, and Iana grunted her confirmation.

"Yes, though you're nothing close to what I've seen before. Your very existence opens up the possibility of the Taleen having access to far more enchantment techniques and runes than we previously thought. Half of what I can see is attributed to other dwarves or even humans. I suppose they either stole Taleen designs or found the runes after the ancient dwarves. I can barely see through the complex layers at the top, but I'm keen on trying to decipher everything in time."

Ilea decided to join the conversation. "Like half an hour of time?" she asked, startling the girl with her sudden approach.

"Oh, yes, I've been keeping him longer than promised. Apologies," Iana said and quickly handed her the dagger.

"A second free enchantment, perhaps?" Ilea asked, getting a defeated sigh from the woman.

"I'll never be able to make a decent living with Dad refusing all customers and working for free for the ones he actually allows," Iana complained.

"Why not set up your own shop? You seem capable enough to be servicing any big city and its respective nobles and adventurers," Ilea

suggested.

Iana shook her head lightly. "It's complicated."

Ilea accepted the answer and sheathed Aki.

"That dagger is something else," Iana continued. "There are all kinds of tales around soul magic, necromancy, death magic, and other possible sources to trap beings into various artifacts, but nothing I've ever seen or learned suggests any of it is based on fact. Aki is an incredible find, and I'm very interested in seeing him again."

"How much more time would you need to decipher whatever you found?"

"Oh, I'll figure it out in time," she said, eyeing the dagger. "I have the outer layers in my head and will draw them out in the next hour. A helpful skill with enchanting," the girl explained, showing a beautiful smile.

"Perfect, then you'll get him again in a couple weeks when I come to pick up my things," Ilea said. "Before I go though, there's one more thing. Can you take a look at this?" she asked, holding her necklace out to Iana.

"Sure, let me see..." She leaned in, her eyes starting to shine blue. Ilea could make out complicated lines in her irises, almost like runes. "Interesting. Definitely dwarven – Taleen, if I'm not mistaken. Seems rather rare, another very nice find. Sadly, it doesn't seem like the work is much better than any modern enchantments. Very stable, though. I doubt anybody could weasel their way inside."

"Weasel their way inside?"

Iana nodded, confirming her statement. "Yes, usually you have to wait for the amount of time the item had been bound to someone by mana. There are certain very expensive and difficult ways to reduce that time or to get in earlier without killing the owner. Not usually worth it though, except on very rare occasions. Or simply for curiosity's sake. There are rumors that the current Empress of Lys rose to power by breaking into her brother's storage ring, though they're only rumors..."

"And you think that would be more difficult with mine?"

"Yes, nearly impossible. Even with the best enchanters and materials I've heard of. And it would take ages. So you're fine, as long as you don't die." The smile on the girl's face didn't quite fit the statement, but Ilea understood.

"Thanks. I'll be back in a couple weeks. We can discuss my enchantments then," Ilea said and nodded to the woman, who repeated the

gesture.

For a moment, she considered showing Iana the strange artifact she had found in the Taleen dungeon but decided against it for now. If only so she focused fully on Aki for the time being.

And I might get the wrong kind of attention if it's something important.

It had taken a ridiculous amount of mana to store the Tungsten Key in her necklace. That alone made her apprehensive about the thing.

Walking back upstairs, Ilea shouted close to the same thing to Balduur, who pushed his pencil a little too strongly into the paper in response. She smiled at his frown, which she only perceived with her sphere, before she left the house, blinking on top of it to begin her flight.

* * *

The suns were setting as she stood on the walls of Ravenhall, looking over the city before her. The guards who saw her didn't seem to mind much, likely used to such behavior from members of the Hand.

Doesn't seem like a very safe practice to ignore powerful folks... Ilea thought as she jumped down into the city, landing with a thud.

She walked through the city and visited every restaurant she could find to buy any meals they had that were already ready to eat or wouldn't need more than fifteen minutes to prepare. She was equipped with containers of soup, grilled meats wrapped in large leaves, and even a stew in a hollowed-out pumpkin.

Her necklace now filled with hot and steaming food, she hoped it would stay that way as she walked on. *Would be a mess if all of it got jumbled together in there... my armor would smell...*

Checking again just to make sure, she found that the contents were retaining their heat and had neither spilled nor mixed with anything else.

She reached the entrance to the Hand's main quarters another couple of hours later and walked, yawning, down the road to Viscera.

Closing the door to her apartment behind her, Ilea unsheathed Aki and threw him into the nearby wall before falling onto her bed. Turning over, she looked up at the beautiful ceiling.

"So tomorrow I'll get a team... What did you think of the weapon ideas?" she asked Aki.

“I was with Iana while you were discussing them... though I saw you carrying something that seemed very heavy...” the dagger answered from his place in the wall.

“Gauntlets, one pair very heavy. Made from black olvor or something, Balduur said. And one pair with blue steel. I’m assuming there’s gonna be spikes or blades attached somehow,” she explained.

“Hmm, yes. Those are good ideas, especially for enemies who have defenses against mana intrusion, which I believe your skills to be. Don’t start to rely on weapons too much, though. Your skills come first and will always deal the most damage... or they will if you hone them.”

Ilea turned on the bed to look at the dagger. “I’ll keep that in mind, thanks,” she said. “On another note, can you feel? Like, when you were lying on a cold workbench, did you feel it?”

“No, I don’t think I feel sensation in the same way that you do. There is magic, however. I do sense some of it, and I can gauge some of it. I can feel it when my connection with your magic is stronger. Being with Iana felt strange for a time.”

“But you weren’t uncomfortable?”

“No. I... I thought it was interesting. To hear her thoughts on me. I know I’m not a normal being.”

“Not that many talking weapons around, I feel.”

The dagger was silent for a long moment. “You don’t mind it?”

“Why would I?”

“That’s... I don’t know how to answer that,” Aki said before he chuckled from the wall.

Ilea blinked out of the bed and stretched. “I’m going to enjoy some live music. Want to join?” she asked, teleporting to the wall.

“Sure. You don’t want to educate yourself or train until tomorrow?”

“No,” Ilea answered. “I’m sure there will be plenty of that soon.”

“Then I won’t say no to some music,” Aki said as he was pulled out of the stone and sheathed.

Ilea spent the evening visiting another few inns. She found that Viscera had quite a bit of variety to offer; there was a wide array of music, food, and ale. However, she did come to the conclusion that Walter remained unbeaten in the last category – at least so far. She giggled to herself as she returned to her new apartment hours later. *The hidden master of brewing.*

* * *

“How long do we have, oh dearest clock?” Ilea asked, twirling Aki around in the air shortly after waking up.

How have I not gotten a twirl skill...?

Her thought was interrupted by Aki’s answer. Apparently, the scheduled meeting with her newly assigned team would happen in just one hour. Barely long enough to get something to eat. At least in Ilea’s opinion. She didn’t already want to use any of the meals she had stored, though, deciding to use the food stalls as long as they were available.

Viscera looked the same as it had the days before. The surprising part, though, was that the food being sold looked and smelled quite different today. Even the style of music seemed to have changed.

They really put a lot of money into this. Or maybe the members do, Ilea thought as she walked through the small town. She bought a meal consisting of rice and marinated pork. The spices here were a bit different than what she had been used to on Earth.

A lot of the food she had consumed so far had been a bit bland, but here in Viscera, it was quite the opposite. She made for the corridor leading to the main hall and ate from the bowl she had gotten with the meal. With her find in the dwarven treasury, money really wasn’t much of an issue. At least for the foreseeable future.

As long as I don’t become queen and have to finance my own country, I think I’m fine... Ilea thought as she walked past the numerous high-level adventurers with their fancy armor or robes. Again, she noticed very few people were wearing the shadowy black armor she had previously associated with the Shadow’s Hand.

The corridor and main hall were rather empty, and she reached Ravenhall within a few minutes. Her bowl was already a third empty, but she decided to get a better view before consuming the rest. Jumping up onto her usual tea house, her wings sprouted, and after a quick ascent, she was flying over the city.

The lake seems nice enough...

Ilea enjoyed the blue sky and snowy scenery so much that the hour passed in but a moment, and before long, she was making her way back to the Hand again. While she was waiting in the Hand’s main hall, which was

still quite empty, she tried to get a piece of meat out of her teeth. It was really stuck in there...

Just before she decided on simply removing her jaw with her pain deactivated, someone walked up to her.

"You must be Ilea," the man said, waiting for her confirmation.

"I am. You guessed right out of all ten people here," she said. The man looked at her a little annoyed, not missing the sarcasm but obviously not finding it funny. "I'm funny today, apologies. Lead the way."

Contrary to what Ilea had been expecting, which was a meeting in or near the main hall, the attendant led her through Viscera and down the same elevator she had used the day before.

"Here you are," he said, pointing to a large entrance to one of the training halls. He nodded and was quite visibly glad to see his job done. Ilea decided not to further annoy the man, lest her food be poisoned... again.

More poison resistance is never a bad thing though... she thought as she entered the rudimentary stone training hall.

There were magical lights at the top of the hall, and just like the one she had been tested in, this one had several chests on one side of the room. It was higher, though, with an arched stone ceiling. Stone benches had been added to some of the walls.

Ilea smiled as she walked toward the only person already in the room. A man, a little taller than her, his arms crossed. She didn't miss his gray eyes when he glanced her way for a split second before immediately breaking eye contact again. He continued studying the ground before him after that. However, it didn't feel like he wasn't paying attention.

Does he have a perception spell or something as well?

She felt he was kind of cute. He had an air of naivety about him. He was of average height and quite thin, perhaps a caster of some kind? Yes, he identified as a mage, just barely above level 200. His hair was black and medium length, which only served to further highlight his most attractive feature, his deep gray eyes. His clothes – a serviceable green vest with leather trim and similarly colored leggings – seemed more of an afterthought. They looked somewhat rough and perhaps self-made. Or at least not made by a master tailor.

"Hey, I'm Ilea," she said, at which he glanced at her again.

"Kyrian," he answered, with a sense of uncertainty.

Is he uncomfortable around me?

Ilea sighed, walking to the side of the room and sitting on one of the chests. She was just about to ask something when the door opened again and another man entered. He opened the door with both hands, swinging them wide and entering with a confident stride. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and solidly built, yet still moved with grace. His brown hair was impeccably groomed. Ilea was impressed by his clothing, a vest and a long red and black jacket that was both seemingly practical and beautiful.

His neutral expression turned into a frown as he approached Ilea and Kyrian. “You. What are your abilities?” the man said as he stopped a couple of meters in front of Kyrian.

“I... I use metal to...”

He was interrupted by the door opening again and two more people entering. This time it was a woman who looked to be in her thirties and a bald man with a serious expression. The woman wore her dark hair up in a bun, and her resting expression appeared to be a slight frown. She reminded Ilea of a librarian. The man looked far older and had an air of authority. Ilea couldn’t see his level. She waved lazily to the two as they approached, getting a smile from the woman and a glare from the man.

“Alright, everyone’s here. Eve, I’m assuming you’re present too. Come out, please,” the bald man said, taking charge of the group and getting an irritated look from the man in the red and black coat.

A chuckle could be heard around them as a young woman faded into existence right next to Ilea.

That’s new. Saw nothing in the sphere... Ilea thought, looking warily at the girl. She had blonde hair that was surprisingly well-kept, given she wore faded black leathers that had seen their fair share of use. Her smile was bright but somehow more off-putting than engaging.

“Alright, we can start. As you all know, this is the team you’re going to be in. Paid members have one chance to switch. And one only,” the bald man said, looking at the man in the coat. “This will be the team’s fighting class, and I will be your teacher or, rather, supervisor. Your Team Tactics teacher is here today as well, but I will let her introduce herself in a minute. If you kill anybody in your team or render them incapable of fighting ever again, you will be kicked out of the Hand, so try not to do that. We do have a healer, though.

“Now, I would like to hear about your capabilities in your introductions, please,” the man continued. “My name is Joseph Trail. You may call me

Joseph. I believe in a more practical approach to getting to know one another, so please just say your name and the role you see yourself filling in the team.”

He motioned to the man with the coat, who looked to be struggling to stay quiet.

“My name is Trian Alymie,” he said and looked around, seemingly proud of the statement until he sighed. “Hmm... is this really my last choice?” he asked Joseph, who just stared at him with cold eyes. Trian sighed again and continued.

“I was born in Virilya,” he said, raising his eyebrows as he watched the expressions of everyone there. “The capital of Lys. I was raised and trained there by private instructors. And I was taught by scholars from across the Empire.”

He paused, waiting for the words to sink in, when the doors to the room opened again. The roguish girl in faded leathers standing next to Ilea vanished, only to be replaced by that same girl walking toward them. She smiled and waved at them.

“Don’t stop, I’m here, I’m here!” she said. Ilea thought she was a similar age to herself, though her demeanor seemed a little more playful. But there was something a little off about her. Her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

Trian cleared his throat, which made Ilea chuckle. He looked at her, sighed again, then continued.

“I’m a lightning and vampyrist mage and, as you can see, the highest-leveled of you all at two hundred fifteen. I’ll destroy whatever stands in my way and will fill exactly that role in the team.” When he’d finished, he looked at Ilea again, who smiled back.

He seems charming.

“Name’s Ilea. I’m from nowhere special and mostly trained myself, with some adventurers and guards helping out here and there with their advice. I have some ability in healing, getting hit really hard, and hitting back.”

She looked from Trian to Kyrian, the challenge in her eyes vanishing when the latter looked at her with a slight smile.

God, his eyes are fascinating, she thought as she grinned at the slightly annoyed sigh from Trian that she heard thanks to her sphere.

The second thing that made her smile was that she could perceive the last girl with her sphere, meaning the one from before had likely been a mirage or an illusion.

Good. One less thing to worry about.

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SEVEN

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Class

Gray-eyes was the next to step forward, and Ilea had to admit she was intrigued by him.

“I’m K... Kyrian. I’m a metal mage and will be able to s... slow down the enemy,” he said softly before looking down again. His voice was barely above a whisper, though Ilea heard him clearly.

“Can you speak up?” Trian asked in a slightly annoyed tone, but he was ignored by the others.

Next came Miss Librarian.

“My name is Claire, I’m a rune and explosion mage, and I’ll be able to trap enemies. I’ll make sure we don’t get surprised. Additionally, I’ll be your Team Tactics instructor. Nice to meet you all.”

She bowed toward the others. Ilea smirked, anticipating at least another annoyed sigh from Trian about the fact that a team member would be an instructor, but to her surprise, he kept his mouth shut.

The last person to introduce themselves was the woman who had joined them mere minutes earlier.

“I’m Eve, and I’m an illusionist and singer. It’s nice to meet you all,” the woman said in a neutral tone.

Joseph clapped his hands together to get the team’s attention.

“Alright, I can see you’ll really need that tactics class. But now that we all know each other’s names, let’s *actually* get to know one another. You’re Team 34, currently the lowest-ranking team in the Shadow’s Hand, not that I or anybody here should care too much about that. Ilea,” he said, turning to

look her way, “how good is your healing? We’ll have to book someone for these training sessions if you’re not up to the task.”

“As long as nobody dies, it should be fine, though I need longer to heal others than a full-fledged healer at my level,” she said, and Joseph nodded.

“Well, let’s find out if it will be an issue. We’re going to do some bouts. First up is Ilea. Who wants to face her?” Joseph asked, looking around the group. Before anybody could say something, he pointed to the metal mage. “Kyrian. You two seem like you won’t kill each other immediately. Come on, show us what you have.”

Kyrian nodded and looked at Ilea, his eyes quickly sinking down to the ground again as he turned and walked to the middle of the hall.

“Don’t worry about destroying anything, I’ll be able to repair it. Ilea, I hope you know the limits of your powers. If you don’t think you can continue the fight, simply say so, or make a gesture if you can’t talk for some reason,” Joseph said.

Doesn’t seem very safe... Ilea thought as she joined Kyrian in the middle of the hall. She didn’t really try to hide the smirk on her face.

“Try not to go soft on me, I can take it,” she said as she switched into a fighting stance. The others walked around the hall either to get a better view or to sit down on one of the stone benches.

“I didn’t plan to,” Kyrian answered quietly, his usually timid bearing now one of determination.

“Ready? Start whenever,” Joseph said from the side.

Ilea watched as Kyrian focussed on her. The gray in his eyes seemed to intensify, and a needle-like object entered her sphere, making her move her head slightly to watch the projectile pass. Metal spheres, needles, and spikes came out of the man’s backpack, which he slid off his shoulders a moment later. The spheres started rotating around him as the needles and spikes hovered above and beside him.

He released the first spike, shooting it right at Ilea’s chest. She perceived that the needle from before was also coming at her back from behind. Something told her that she shouldn’t get hit by the pieces of metal, even though they seemed so small and non-threatening. With a quick turn of her body, both projectiles shot past her, producing an intrigued raised eyebrow from Kyrian.

My turn...

She advanced on the man with quick steps, dodging past the needles that shot toward her. Her pace slowed as more and more projectiles flew at her, and she moved to the sides and even backward to avoid them. As the needles became more distributed around the hall, it became harder and harder to simply dodge them.

Ilea decided to show her first card as ash extended around her in a cloud and took the view from anybody who wasn't able to perceive through the black dust-like substance. She was immediately sure that Kyrian had no way of seeing through it as his projectile attacks became less directed and more chaotic, random even.

It wasn't certain that Kyrian wasn't simply fooling her, but Ilea didn't have another choice but to advance further. More and more ash filled the hall around the two combatants as Ilea circled around the man. She had to admit that his control of the needles and frequency of attacks was incredibly efficient at keeping her at bay. If the goal was not to get hit at all.

At this point, there was ash all around the man, and Ilea decided to move in. A blink got her right next to Kyrian, and her fist shot out to punch him from behind. Pain shot through her arm as spikes extended from the closest metal sphere, cutting deep into her torso. Her destructive mana shot through him before she jumped away again, holding her side.

Kyrian had stumbled away, clutching at his shoulder while breathing heavily. Ilea, on the other hand, slowly walked backward into the ash. Her smile vanished. The cut on her side refused to heal, and she knew exactly what the cold feeling radiating from the wound meant. Her hands started to tremble slightly as she perceived the man slowly steadying himself, the pieces of metal that had fallen down around him beginning to hover again.

Acting on a whim, Ilea unsheathed Aki and cut into her side, through muscle and flesh, until she had cut out everything around where she had gotten sliced by the spikes of metal. Confirming her suspicion, the wound started healing again, albeit a little slower than normal. She had to dodge and heal for a while before she was ready to engage again, her hands still shaking.

Let's do this then... just a bunch of curses... nothing to worry about...

With Ilea still inside the ash, her shroud came to life for the first time in the fight. Jumping up, she spread her wings, blinking into melee range to deliver a kick at Kyrian's head. A needle scratched at her shroud but didn't

manage to get through, and a split second later, her foot connected with him heavily, knocking the man down.

She blinked away again before the needles and spikes shooting toward her managed to do any damage. Kyrian got up again slowly, coughing blood this time, but he didn't signal for the fight to end. He was tougher than he looked. Which only made him more interesting.

Ilea saw him focus, the pressure in the hall changing slightly. Suddenly the spheres of metal burst apart and thousands of needles flew toward her. There were too many and they were too spread out for a blink to really do anything, so Ilea simply held up her hands to try and minimize the damage.

Her shroud of ash fought against the onslaught of needles as more and more pierced her defense to try and get through her armor and skin. Some managed to get past, and the cold feeling of the now familiar curse spread from the small wounds through her body.

Half a minute later, Ilea lowered her arms and started to rip the needles out of her body. None had managed to pierce her too deeply. The ash around them had been disturbed enough by Kyrian's latest spell that she could now see the man panting before her, seemingly struggling to stay on his feet.

Used up his mana...

More and more needles clanged to the ground, the cold and numb feeling slowly leaving her body, though some of it remained even after the metal had been removed.

Not enough to finish me. Not then, not now, Ilea thought with a slightly strained smile.

Kyrian watched her and raised his arms before he opened his mouth.

"You w... win, I'm out." He nodded to Ilea. "Good fight. I'm sorry," he added, confusing Ilea a little. Until that moment, she hadn't noticed the tears on her face, nor her still-trembling hands. Her wounds slowly but surely closed as the curse was pushed out of her body.

'ding' Curse Resistance reaches lvl 4

'ding' Ash Surge reaches lvl 8

'ding' Ash Surge reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 18

“Not bad,” Joseph said as he slowly approached the two fighters standing opposite each other. He completely ignored Ilea wiping at her face with slightly shaking arms. The instructor likely had an idea of where it had come from. “So, Kyrian doesn’t seem to have quite enough power to push through a very agile and heavily armored target. You did manage to slow her down, though, and your defense was pretty good, considering her ability to teleport right next to you. The spiked metal spheres are very useful for defense and the last spell was impressive, but your mana ran out rather quickly,” Joseph finished, coming to a stop a little to one side of them.

The others had joined them in the middle of the room as well. Ilea breathed slowly, her eyes closed as she focused on her wounds, trying to push out the remaining cold.

“The ash was a problem, I... I had to keep her busy while not being able to see her.” Kyrian lowered his eyes again, as if apologizing to a teacher for having failed a test. “I used more m... mana than normal...” he mumbled. The scattered needles started to move toward him at a slow pace. Joseph nodded and was preparing to answer when Trian looked at Ilea.

“Why are you crying? I thought you said you could take a hit. You even won,” he said, more confusion in his voice than malice.

Ilea ground her teeth as a ringing filled her ears. She still had her eyes closed, but her hands were finally steady once again.

“Leave her alone, you stupid fucking idiot,” Eve said. Her face had lost all pretense of playfulness and humor. Her voice was like iron. Cold and hard.

“Now, now, stop this,” Joseph said in a tired manner that suggested it was not uncommon. “You’ll all get the chance to face each other every single day over the next few months. I’m sure she has a good reason for crying, Mr. Alymie. It is not for us to judge.”

He looked at Kyrian again.

“It was not a good matchup for you, that’s for sure. I think the offensive approach, even at the cost of a higher mana usage, was the right decision. Know that it is rare, but there are monsters out there that can heal, even against your type of magic. Additionally, try to be more mobile and get a bigger picture of the battlefield. The ash was not as spread out as you might’ve thought, and a simple sprint in one direction might’ve given you

enough vision to focus your attacks again. Considering Ilea's similarly offensive approach, there was little you could do, however. Get a skill to see through the ash for next time," he finished, and Kyrian nodded.

"How w... would I do that?" Kyrian asked, receiving a small smile from Joseph.

"Finally, a new member of the Hand willing to listen. Try to fight in the dark, train with a blindfold, or even pierce your eyes. We have healers that can deal with that. Fighting in a blinded state might at some point yield a skill for you to see with more than your eyes. A very valuable thing for everyone, but especially for someone like you who needs that much precision to make use of their full power." Kyrian nodded in response.

"I request to fight Trian," Ilea said after Joseph had stopped talking.

"Sure, you can go again so soon?" Joseph asked while Trian looked at her.

"Oh, I'm sure. Kyrian, can you remove it?" Ilea said. Kyrian nodded, and the final remains of the cold feeling inside her immediately vanished.

Ilea had barely gotten warm from the quick bout with the metal mage, and she wanted to see if Trian had anything to back up his arrogance. Either way, it would be a fun fight. Hopefully he wouldn't be able to curse her as well.

"Do you need healing?" Ilea looked toward Kyrian, who was rebuilding his metal spheres.

"He's fine, don't heal anyone if they're still able to walk and fight. It would be detrimental for us to need a healer to hand at all times for every little injury," Claire said from the side. Her voice was clipped and instructive, like a schoolteacher.

Considering Kyrian would likely have her back for at least the next six months, Ilea realized it made sense to let him self-heal where he could and build his recovery abilities. She decided to go with Claire's way and nodded, joining the waiting Trian in the middle of the hall.

The others walked back to the sides of the hall, and Ilea noticed the walls of earth and runed stones scattered on the ground next to the people who had been watching. The last attack hadn't injured any of them. It had been unlikely anyway, given how broad and chaotic it had been.

"Now, that was certainly an impressive shower of metal, but seeing as you'd be our tank, I'll have to test your defenses with actual power," Trian

said. “And I hope there really is a reason for your crying. Simply getting wounded should not elicit such an undisciplined response.”

“You’re talking a lot. Kyrian’s metal has a certain specialty to it that I’m sure you’ll experience soon enough. Come, then,” she said, activating her buffs and shroud.

Trian nodded as blue lightning sparked between his fingers. A sudden crack sounded through the hall as a bolt of lightning hit Ilea’s defenses with a loud boom, shredding through her shroud and rushing through her body.

“That’s it already?” Trian said as he saw his attack connect, though he prepared again quickly as Ilea’s smile didn’t waver even for a second.

“Isn’t that supposed to be my question?” she asked. The little damage he had done had healed near immediately, her lightning resistance strengthened by the shroud of ash.

Contrary to Ilea’s expectations, her opponent wasn’t tricked into any rash actions by her taunting; instead, he raised his eyebrows and smiled as he launched his next attack.

She sprang into motion and advanced toward him with unpredictable movements, lightning flashing past her. Some strikes singed her shroud or her skin, but none did any significant damage.

As she got closer, she noticed the strikes getting stronger and quicker in execution, the lightning manifesting closer and closer to her, leaving her with very little time to react. Though with her reflexes and speed, that time was enough to change a direct hit to a mere glancing strike that did little to stop her ceaseless approach. She didn’t want to use her blink quite yet, preferring to test his abilities.

Three more steps and Ilea was standing face to face with the man. Her fist advanced toward his sternum, but the mage vanished right before her strike reached him. Instead, she felt a pulse of electricity flow through her as a massive burst of power and heat flashed into her body, burning a part of her insides.

She turned again to face the man as Hunter Recovery repaired the damage. Half of it was already healed before she had even turned to look at him.

“You’re still standing?” the man said casually, though his tense stance and light panting betrayed his confident words. “That would’ve killed an ice troll...”

“If that’s all you have, you’re not going to win this,” she said, now completely healed and meditating in the moment of calm to keep her mana as high as possible.

A sudden pull caused her to blink her eyes in surprise. She had noticed that her mana was dropping ever so slightly. Faster than before.

“I’ve never seen this... what are you doing?” she asked, locking eyes with Trian.

“It’s a very rare class. And you will learn why quite quickly,” he said as more lightning materialized above Ilea. This time it wasn’t blue, like she had seen in thunderstorms, but red.

She dodged at the last moment but still felt a part of her power leave her when the next strike came down, too quickly to avoid.

You’re not going to win this... she thought and ran toward him.

Trian vanished again, leaving behind the same pulse of lightning as before, but this time she was prepared and blinked away as well, just before she was hit. A teleportation battle ensued as the two mages vanished and reappeared again and again in quick succession. At the same time, Ilea noticed a small amount of her power leaving her constantly, in addition to the mana required to maintain and use her skills.

Deciding to use a similar tactic as against Kyrian, she started using Ash Surge after every blink. She was rewarded by Trian trying to go to places where no ash was present, making him slightly more predictable. On the third blink, Ilea arrived a moment before him, and her fist connected with his stomach right after he appeared, her mana flowing into him and the hit pushing all the air out of his lungs as he was thrown backward.

Trian rolled twice when he hit the ground, hitting his shoulder hard on the stone before he skidded to a halt. Ilea appeared in front of him. The shock, coupled with the disruptive mana that had flown through him, meant his reaction time was a little slow when she grabbed his arm and squeezed, breaking the bone below his coat. Immediately, she felt a drain – and not just her mana this time.

She felt lightning surge through her and swung the man by his arm, slamming his body hard into the ground. The drain continued but became less strong. She landed on top of him and started punching. She landed three hard punches on his face before a massive burst of lightning exploded into her chest and sent her flying away, dragging more of her mana and life energy out of her.

She landed on her feet and looked toward Trian, who was rising with red lightning crackling around him, levitating him off the ground. His eyes caught the red light and seemed to glow.

“It’s been a while since someone pushed me this much,” he said, smiling.

Ilea couldn’t help but feel excited as well.

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EIGHT

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Vampyr

Fuck, he's going to get me if it keeps going like this... Ilea thought as she followed the teleporting mage just a moment too late to deliver another attack.

The lightning that coursed through her was a testament to her failure. The man was certainly dangerous. Without her Resistance skills, she would've likely been dead for quite some time already.

I need to grab him again... it's the only way for me to win...

His lightning attacks continued to disturb the ash she still distributed after every teleport. He had some way of seeing or sensing her, if only partially, but considering he tried to get out of the ash most of the time, she was sure it was troubling him at least somewhat.

Two blinks later, Ilea finally got her opportunity and grabbed his arm again. She noticed that the bone wasn't broken anymore and remedied that immediately. She was hit straight on by red lightning and the full force of his draining ability, but she simply smashed him into the ground again.

Instead of acting as she had previously, she used her legs to push her reversed Hunter's Recovery into Trian while punching him with reversed destruction. His drain was certainly stronger than hers, and by a large margin, but her powerful physical punches disrupted his concentration enough to make his spells a lot less effective.

He punched at her as well, lightning bolts striking her with each impact. Both of them were now too caught up in the fight to stop at that point. Ilea landed punch after punch on his face as bone cracked and Trian's control of his magic waned.

Ilea didn't look much better as she couldn't heal herself anymore with her reversed healing spell entering the man. More and more of her internal organs were being burnt up, and she felt her control lessen as well.

Just before she decided to jump away to save her life and heal herself, the man's attacks stopped. He lay there under her, unconscious and bleeding. His face was barely recognizable as Ilea's healing spell changed from destructive to constructive yet again.

* * *

She actually did it...

Joseph ran toward the two to stop her from killing Trian, if it weren't already too late. He should've stopped them earlier, but he'd been too caught up in the fight to react. The sheer raw power of these combatants had blown him away. It had been a while since he'd taught people who were this powerful right after joining the Hand.

Usually, he had to deal with people who had used some sort of trick to kill higher-leveled monsters quickly or with trained nobles who had rarely been wounded. Of course, he should've assumed the Alymie was different.

He reached the two but stopped himself from intervening as he watched the woman's burnt flesh rebuild right before his eyes. Both her burns and the wounds of the man below her healed quickly. He considered her ability to heal herself to be comparable to that of a healer in her level range. The Alymie boy was recovering. Not as fast as he could have, but it was serviceable. This group wouldn't need any other healers.

"You heal by touch, no other way? And is this the fastest you can go?" he asked Ilea.

She didn't look at him but answered nonetheless. Only a gargling noise came out, likely a result of one of Trian's attacks. She paused a moment, holding up a finger, then cleared her throat.

"Only by touch, yes. And that's the fastest I can heal others," she said before continuing to heal in silence.

The others were slowly advancing on the scene. A gust of wind pushed away the remaining ash, and Joseph nodded his thanks to Claire, whose glowing magical rune still hung in the air as she joined the group.

* * *

Ilea meditated as she healed the man in front of her. Her own wounds had been taken care of more quickly.

She had to admit that Trian's damage output had been incredibly impressive. More so than anybody she had faced before, except perhaps the Elves. Though she'd had an easier time dodging them – and, of course, a team from the Hand had helped her out. With his 'vampirism,' as he had called it, he had been much harder to take down than she had expected.

The damage she had inflicted slowly healed and his bones were set again before he finally woke, gasping for air and coughing.

"I lost," he said after a moment, then smiled. "How close did I get?" he asked, turning his head to look at Ilea. He didn't seem annoyed. Quite the contrary.

"Very close," she said simply, holding out her hand to help him up. He refused and got up himself, brushing down his coat. It didn't exactly help with the blood, but considering it was red and black, it wasn't much of a problem.

"Well, that was certainly an interesting fight. I'm sure I could take you down next time, knowing now of your abilities," he said with a confident smile.

"That is often the case, Mr. Alymie," Joseph said. "You both have impressive levels of strength and use your skills and resources very well. I'm afraid I won't be able to teach you a lot. As most of these classes will consist of spars, however, that won't be a problem. You'll learn from each other, advance your skills, and will have to get creative with using them. Now, who's next?" he asked, looking toward the two other women.

Ilea walked to the side of the hall and checked her leather armor. It was singed in a lot of places, but the lightning hadn't destroyed it as fire would have. She checked the notifications she had gotten during the fight and was quite happy with them.

'ding' Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 7

...

‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 9

***‘ding’ You have learned the General skill Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 1
Rare foes will have the ability to drain your mana. Either for their own use or simply to weaken you. Having encountered one such being, you have learned of its destructive effect. This skill will help you reduce the effect any mana draining abilities will have on you.***

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches lvl 2

***‘ding’ You have learned the General Skill Health Drain Resistance – lvl 1
Some creatures have the ability to drain your health. A rare and unsettling ability. You have had your very life essence pulled from you, yet you have endured. Now your body is braced for the next attempt. This skill will help you withstand such spells more easily and even turn the tables on your enemies.***

‘ding’ Health Drain Resistance reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 10

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 13

Quite the result...

Ilea smiled, though it was mostly at her win. It had been a good fight, and as much as she had gotten used to it, she felt good about how nobody had had to die this time. She would be able to raise her skills here, at least, no matter how the whole team thing went in the end.

He’s certainly more than just talk... she thought, looking over at the robed man on the other side of the hall. They locked eyes, and she felt his glare was more challenging than hurt or annoyed. A good sign for now, but she would keep up her guard.

Kyrian joined her, stopping a couple of meters away and leaning on the wall. He returned to looking at the ground. "Good fight, I... Ilea," he said after a while.

"Thanks."

The two watched the women on their team face each other in the middle of the hall. Joseph gestured for them to start, and they went into motion.

Claire dropped a bunch of stones on the ground and started painting into the air before her with her fingers. A shining rune appeared where her hand moved.

A moment later, Ilea heard a humming sound and started smiling. *So it was her.* Her head throbbed a little, but Claire was a little more unprepared.

Their tactics teacher suddenly slumped down to the ground, unconscious, and Eve tilted her head to the side lightly, a slight grin on her face. The sound of the hum remained in the hall, fading with every passing moment.

That's pretty scary...

Ilea looked at Joseph, who was walking toward the downed Claire. A splash of water magic to her face seemed to do the trick as she slowly opened her eyes and held her head.

"Care to try again? Or do you lack the runes?" Joseph asked as he helped her stand up. Her eyes focused as she looked toward Eve.

"Again. Give me a moment to prepare, please," she said, and Eve nodded.

"Sure. Tell me when to start then," Eve said with a big smile.

Ilea couldn't quite gauge her. *Did she break into my room too? Or was all that just a coincidence? Let's see how the next attempt goes...*

Ilea watched Claire draw several runes into the air. The shining manifestations stayed there and thrummed with power.

"You may start," Claire said.

The room quickly filled with sound again, pushing at everyone's minds. Ilea thought herself to be the most resistant to the magic, but she couldn't be sure. None of the others showed a visible reaction to the magic, though she was sure the power of Eve's spell was directed at Claire.

This time, Claire stood her ground. Her face was visibly strained as the runes before her started glowing brighter. Eve smiled again before she started walking toward Claire. Her body suddenly shifted, and her body

split into seven copies. The humming intensified, and more runes appeared in front of Claire.

Contrary to the likely defensive ones from before, these runes started glowing, and Eve immediately had to shield herself against the gale that started blowing her way. The debris still cluttering the training hall rolled toward Eve, and Ilea noticed with her sphere that some of it was a little different than mere stone and dust.

A sudden explosion ripped through the hall and the Eves were thrown backward, most of them vanishing immediately. The real one caught herself and skidded on the ground, her leather armor tearing in some places and drawing blood. She stumbled and fell to one knee.

“I give up. You win,” the remaining Eve said while holding one wound in particular. Ilea immediately appeared next to the woman and started healing her. Her right lung had been pierced, but Ilea quickly stopped the bleeding.

Eve coughed and smiled at Ilea. She didn’t seem bothered by the injury. Joseph and the others were walking toward them as Ilea turned and started healing Claire. Recent mind attacks were a part of her range as well.

“Alright, so I’m assuming this one-on-one style against a prepared enemy isn’t really your strength, Eve,” Joseph said and waited for her nod, though he seemed rather sure about his statement.

Or she’s not showing everything she can do, Ilea thought with a slight smile. *Guess I’ll have to push her a little.*

“We have another three hours today, and I’ve seen all of you fight at least once so far. Now I’ll suggest some ways for you to improve your abilities, and we’ll fill the three hours with those. We’ll have four hours of this every day for at least the next three months. After that, if none of you have died or decided to leave, you’ll start to do jobs together.”

He walked over to the side of the hall, and the others followed behind in silence.

“First, we’ll start the lessons with bouts. The first month will only be one against one. After that, we’ll see, depending on your progress and my judgment. Eve, I’m assuming you’re more about sneaking?” he finished, looking toward her.

He’s assuming a lot. The people at the evaluation seemed more knowledgeable.

“Yes...” the woman said.

“Good. Everyone will benefit from resistance to your mind magic. So use it often. That really goes for all of your magic. You have a healer in your team, which means injuries don’t matter quite as much, if at all.”

Joseph separated them into teams to fight each other. Trian and Eve went with Ilea.

“With you filling the tank and healer roles, I suggest you try and heighten your resistances. Slow and steady. It will hurt, so just stop when it becomes too much. And you two can try and level up your offensive abilities against her. Get used to each other’s magic first before you add movement and dodging,” Joseph said to them before moving over to Claire and Kyrian.

Ilea smiled at the comment about pain.

She looked at her practice partners. Trian raised his eyebrows and smiled, and Eve grinned slightly – but neither expression looked friendly.

This is going to be fun... she thought, only partially sarcastically.

Blinking over to the boxes, she looked through the contents.

“What are you doing?” Trian asked. Ilea ignored him and got what she needed from one of the crates.

Always questioning everything.

“Give me a minute to change,” she said, casting Ash Surge before removing her lightly singed leather armor to change into the Hand’s generic leather armor. It looked a little more used and had definitely been repaired a few times, but she found it to be of similarly high quality as her own. Then she walked out of the ash and faced her two waiting team members.

“I’m ready, go whenever. Eve first, please. Start slow and then go stronger. I’ll tell you when you’ve reached a manageable level.” She motioned to Eve, who smiled a far-too-excited smile and gave her a thumbs up. It felt like her first real smile.

“I feel like you’re going to enjoy this a bit too much,” Ilea huffed, eyeing the shorter girl.

Eve’s grin only got wider, which was an uncomfortable sight. “Your abilities are interesting. Let’s see how you hold up.”

“You can start now.”

The hum started, and Ilea felt her lungs restrict and her breathing quicken as an urge to puke formed in her throat. She activated her shroud, and the effect lessened considerably. Her eyes focused, and she looked at

the still-humming – and grinning – Eve, then also realized that Trian had moved a step or two away.

This is going to be a long session...

Ilea decided not to activate the second stage of her Pain Tolerance until it became absolutely necessary. Instead, she gritted her teeth, her grin reflecting Eve's, but her own was certainly more strained.

"Stronger," she said, and her headache increased. Her Hunter's Recovery kicked in, and the damage done was healed as it was incurred.

"Stronger," she said again, grinding her teeth, and she saw Eve scrunch up her face in concentration, her own smile now starting to strain slightly as well.

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NINE

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Team-building Exercises

Ilea healed the most recent damage after having just finished an extensive fight against both Trian and Kyrian. She spat out some blood and rolled her shoulders, ready to go on. Joseph had planned for them to only fight one-on-one but considering her healing, they made some changes.

The others seemed a little less enthused. Checking her mana, perhaps the time for another break had come.

Joseph clapped his hands together and spoke up. “That’s the four hours for today. Think about what you’ve learned. We’ll be back here tomorrow at noon.” He gave them a wave and left without another word.

The group stood a little forlorn in the middle of the hall after Joseph had left. They had fought each other for the entirety of the four hours with different setups and using their entire arsenal of magic. Ilea hadn’t even noticed that so much time had passed, but the experience of losing herself in battle wasn’t new.

Suppose it’s a good sign that they managed to evoke this state. I can see myself working with them if we get to know each other.

“What does he get out of it?” Ilea asked, looking toward where Joseph had left. She didn’t really see a reason for someone at his level to teach them. When she had identified him, she had only seen question marks.

“He moves up the ladder. Being higher up in the Hand will lead to more resources and influence. Without the added danger of getting them yourself,” Claire explained.

Trian nodded. “He’s not a great teacher. I’ve had a few that were worse, but those were let go rather quickly. The Hand isn’t what it used to be.”

“And you’re a few centuries old, then? Sorry, kid, but you don’t exactly talk as smart as you think you are,” Eve said with an edge to her voice.

Trian glared at her. “I would be a little more careful with your tone. If I was from another noble house in Virilya, that comment would’ve cost you your head.”

Eve started laughing. She shook her head, her smile gone in an instant as her eyes turned cold.

“You should shut your mouth from time to time and look around you instead of living in your own ass.” She took a step toward the man. “You are not in Virilya. Your family is not here. Your gold and your influence are far away, noble.”

“Cut it out,” Claire said, her tone casual. “We all signed the same contracts, payment sections notwithstanding. You don’t have to like each other to be professional.”

Eve looked at her for a long moment, then turned and walked toward the door.

Trian took in a deep breath and huffed. “Why is she so hostile? I just told her to be careful.”

“You’re acting like you’re something better than we are,” Ilea said. “You’ve been doing it since you entered this hall.”

He looked at her, opened his mouth, then closed it. “She’s going to get herself killed.”

“By you?” Ilea asked.

“No. I told you, I’m an Alymie. My family doesn’t solve problems in such a way. But others do—”

“So maybe you can trust that a level 200 illusionist can think for herself,” Ilea said. “And try to not be such an arrogant prick to the people you’re supposed to work with.”

He looked at her, frowned, then walked out, shaking his head and muttering to himself in an annoyed tone.

Ilea didn’t miss it when he instantly switched out his bloodied and damaged robe with a clean one. *Showing off his impressive storage item.* She smiled to herself. He really did seem quite immature.

“We’re getting along then, that’s great. Wonderful start, really,” Ilea said, looking at the two remaining team members.

“I don’t understand why they’re acting like this,” Claire said in a quiet tone, shaking her head slightly. “The Hand was supposed to train the most

powerful adventurers in Elos. Is this really going to be the team?"

"Power only means p... power," Kyrian said, looking at the ground when the others glanced his way.

"Fair. I mean, everyone here is certainly capable when fighting," Ilea said. "Once we get to kill monsters together, I don't think it'll be such a massive issue."

"You need to be able to trust your team. I don't trust either of them," Claire said.

Ilea shrugged. She had her healing, her shroud, her spells. Though she supposed she wasn't taking all of this quite as seriously as Claire. So far, she had found the whole adventure to Ravenhall very interesting, and she was learning more about the world, about different classes and abilities. She had already got a few new Resistances out of this – and plenty of new food options.

"We don't know each other, but we can change that," Ilea said. "You two care for a drink?"

"The Team Tactics class starts in ten minutes, and it's mandatory. If the others don't show up, I will report them as per article four in the contract," Claire said primly.

"Hey, hey, hey," Ilea said, walking toward her. She glanced at Kyrian on the way, but he was avoiding eye contact, his body language screaming discomfort. "Come on, Claire. We haven't even talked. Let's give it at least a week and see if we can't figure this out. We all have our quirks."

"There are *rules*," Claire said, glaring at her.

"Yes. But as you said, we're not children. We're adults who can make our own choices. Eve seems experienced and professional. Trian, while he seems to be pretty far up his own ass, does have a lot of education, and he's an experienced fighter. This place is full of crazy powerful adventurers, so I'm sure there will be issues with all of them. But that's the point of a team. Work together to reduce risks and all that."

Claire considered her words for a moment, then took in a deep breath. "I suppose we can have the class between the three of us. Though you don't seem particularly convinced with this whole team ordeal either."

Ilea smiled and moved her hands behind her head. "I like fighting alone. But I do see the point of having powerful team members nearby as well. And like you said, we all signed up, so let's at least try. I'm sure there's a reason the Hand has the reputation it has."

“We’ll be risking our lives. You’re entirely too casual about all this,” Claire said with a concerned tone.

That’s the whole point, Ilea thought. “Why are you here then?”

“I...” Claire’s voice trailed off, and she looked away. “Let’s just get to the lecture room.”

Ilea watched her walk away before she glanced at Kyrian. She couldn’t help but smile.

“Great first day.” She punched his arm slightly, and he flinched. *Oh.* “Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s a... alright. D... don’t worry,” he stammered, opening and closing his mouth again before he followed Claire.

Ilea remained in the hall for a few seconds. *That’s why doing things alone is just easier. But I said it myself – we all signed up.* She took in a deep breath. *So let’s at least try.*

* * *

The next hour passed in a flash. Claire was a good teacher and seemed well-informed when it came to tactics and the compositions of teams. She’d said she’d only cover some basics and explained the fighting strategies most commonly used among adventurers, city guards, nobles’ guards, and even some monsters.

Ilea thought the topic somewhat interesting, though she didn’t really see how it would apply to her or the team yet. They were quite specialized already, and all of them had at least some ability to defend themselves. While the roles made sense to a certain degree, they could all fight monsters, even alone.

At least she didn’t feel particularly ignorant during the class. Kyrian knew just as little as she did, which made her curious as to where he had come from. Back on Earth, most people in the developed world had at least some level of comparable education, and many also had access to the internet with tons of available knowledge.

Still, a lot of the lecture was new to her. Claire finished with the promise that they would go into more depth about their own team and their roles during the next day’s lesson.

“I think we’re out of time now, and the Monster Knowledge class starts soon,” Claire noted. “Any questions you might have, please ask me tomorrow.”

Ilea and Kyrian thanked her for the lesson and followed her to the next one. Claire seemed to be the only one informed about its location and their general timetable. She also seemed to enjoy leading the way and answering questions about the schedule.

Ilea had a strong suspicion that Claire had many notebooks. *Color-coded* notebooks. But she was fine with that. One more thing she didn’t have to worry about.

The three ascended another elevator after exiting into Viscera. Ilea quickly glanced at the wall with all the available classes and frowned.

“Claire, am I too late to apply for any other classes?” she asked, a little annoyed at the possibility.

“What...?” Claire said, looking toward Ilea while putting a small sheaf of papers away.

Had she been... studying?

“Sorry, I didn’t hear you there.”

Ilea repeated her question.

“No, you can apply whenever. Some classes aren’t visited often. I mean, what swordsman at level 200 would take a basic swordsmanship class? They’ll find you a teacher as long as you pay or if you have two other people with you,” Claire explained.

“Great, I’ll check them out later then. And I can cancel whenever I want, right?”

Claire nodded, and the group lapsed back into silence, ascending with the elevator that didn’t seem to have an end to its journey in sight.

“What are you g... going to take?” Kyrian asked, right as the stone platform came to an abrupt stop. Beyond lay a broad stone hallway with doors to the left and right. Various paintings were hanging from the walls.

“I’m not sure yet, to be honest. Probably archery at some point, that seems fun. Are you going to take any?”

“Fun? I d... don’t understand,” Kyrian said, shaking his head slowly. “I’ll take classes related to my magic... y-you know?”

Ilea nodded. *Maybe I should do that too, though I don’t see how that would help much. There’s not a lot to understand here. I punch things and they die.*

She shrugged, deciding at least to take a look at the possibilities. She could cancel them immediately if they weren't useful. With her money situation, she was in the opposite position to a debt-ridden student. She had options.

Claire walked up to one of the doors and entered. Following her in, Ilea saw the room had some carved wooden tables, sturdy chairs, and even an old blackboard.

"Are you the teacher for this one too?" Ilea asked.

Claire shook her head, brow furrowing in annoyance. "He's late."

She's going to have a meltdown, Ilea thought with a slight smile. She couldn't help but be somewhat amused.

She sat down leisurely in one of the chairs, resting her legs on the table, and a moment later, she saw Eve appear in the hallway. The girl entered the room without a word and sat down at the desk next to her.

"Welcome back, illusion girl," she said, not missing the slight smile on the woman's face. "When is the lesson supposed to start?" she asked, but then she saw someone heading toward the room through her sphere. "Never mind, someone's coming," she informed the others. A moment later, a man walked in, and Ilea immediately locked eyes with him. Red-tinted eyes.

"Hey, I know you!" she said. "I've forgotten your name. You're a teacher?"

"Indeed I am, the name's Liam. You're the new girl from the inn... with the impressive drinking capabilities." He smirked at her.

She smiled back. "I have a fast metabolism."

The others listened with varied levels of interest while Liam unpacked his bag.

"So I'm assuming you're Ilea, the tank?" he asked. "Claire's the tactician teacher, Kyrian's the support, and Eve's the illusionist. Got it right?"

No one spoke.

"You seem like a quiet bunch. The noble didn't choose to show up, huh? Well, it wouldn't be the first time for their breed. You're not going to learn about them in this class, though. This is Monster Knowledge."

He paused, turning around and writing the term onto the board. The chalk squeaked as one of the magical lights above flickered slightly. There were no windows, of course; the classroom was located inside the mountain like everything else in Viscera.

“Everyone here is level 200 and above, everyone here has a lot of fighting experience, and everyone here has probably killed or nearly been killed several times before. So, why is this a mandatory class? Any ideas?” he asked, sitting down on the table at the front of the room.

“Because we were probably lucky and didn’t do it by researching what we fought,” Ilea said, thinking back on her many encounters with different monsters and people. Had she encountered something with a magical shield like the Praetorian’s a little earlier, she probably wouldn’t be sitting here in this classroom.

The man looked at her with an understanding gaze and nodded. “You’re right. To put it in a different way, there’s a high chance that each of you has found a dungeon or other place to kill something your abilities allowed you to fight. I myself, having the ability to poison things, stumbled upon and poisoned one of the only water sources near the Isanna Desert. Near the village I lived in, at least. I did it at night, and nearly nobody from the village died.”

He got up and continued talking.

“Though many other things died over the years, and I got a massive boost at a rather young age. However, I’m here to teach you about monsters you might not be able to simply poison.”

TEN

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Yield

Ilea's mind was swimming with the names of different beasts, insects, and birds of prey when the class came to an end. She clutched the encyclopedia of monsters she had been given, ready to compare some of the beasts contained therein to the ones mentioned in the copy of *Magical Creatures* she had picked up in Salia.

She had certainly been lucky that she had gained a healing skill so early on, and given how many beasts there were with an ability to paralyze, mind attack, or poison you, she had lucked out with the Drakes as an early foe. She had also learned that someone like Eve would have had massive trouble against them as they were apparently rather resistant to mind magic.

The class ended with Ilea asking about a Shredder, which the woman who had been seeking Liam a couple of days ago in a bar in Viscera had mentioned. Apparently, it was a worm-like creature with advanced wind magic abilities that encircled its target and then attacked with small wind blades from all sides to shred the victim, as its name implied.

They had looked through the entry for the Shredder in the encyclopedia together. Liam asked them each to give a general idea of their abilities and then explained possible tactics for each of them against the monster. Additionally, he went into the possibilities of facing them as a team, to which Claire contributed. She had taken almost an entire book's worth of notes as well, seeming to record nearly everything Liam said.

"Alright then, time's up. We'll be continuing tomorrow at the same time. As a last thing before you go, the book I gave you is filled with rather common monsters. There are many, many more out there that we do not

know about, including variations of the ones we know about that have different abilities and strengths. Don't get overconfident when you see a monster that you think you know. Evaluate it and take it seriously. Levels matter, but abilities matter more. Most important of all, have someone have your back. If you came this far alone, then count yourself lucky. Most don't," Liam finished, closing his own copy of the monster encyclopedia before he packed his things and went to leave.

"Sooo, do you guys want to eat together later?" Ilea asked, turning to the others with a smile.

"I can't, I need to prepare for tomorrow, collate my notes, cross-reference a few things..." Claire responded, and while the activities sounded dull to Ilea, Claire talked of them as if she were about to embark on some grand adventure.

"Some other time, perhaps?" Claire added as she got up and made for the door. "See you all tomorrow."

They said their goodbyes, and Claire hurried out.

"I wouldn't mind," Eve said.

Kyrian looked conflicted. "Maybe, t... though later I have to train and study. I must not fall behind." He said the last sentence with no trace of a stutter.

"Sundown then? So you still have a couple hours of free time afterward?" Ilea suggested.

Kyrian nodded once to each of them, then left without another word. Ilea shifted in her chair to turn and look at Eve when they were alone.

"It was you, wasn't it? The humming out in Ravenhall. When the two guys were attacking the girl."

Eve looked at her, nothing in her expression giving anything away. She was perfectly calm, then smiled ever so slightly. "You'll need to be more specific than that."

"I need to what...?" Ilea said before she raised her eyebrows. *Does she just hang around out there, looking for situations like that?* "So it was you."

"Potentially. Is that a problem?" Eve asked as she leaned back slightly, her demeanor casual.

"Was there no chance of bringing them to the guard?" Ilea asked.

Eve smirked, laughed, then stopped and raised her eyebrows. "Oh, you're serious. And here I was, thinking you weren't the youngest and most

naïve one in this group. No, honey. The guard would've either let them go or killed them too. Are you noble-born?"

Ilea shook her head. "Healing Order, far away."

"You're a terrible liar," Eve said instantly. "But whatever. Try it yourself if you want. Find a criminal, a rapist, a thief, a murderer, and bring them to the guard. Any guard. See what happens," she said. "If you want something done, you have to do it yourself. And while we're at it, while I can handle the antics of noble pricks like that Aylmie spawn, you don't seem quite that experienced. Be careful not to offend the wrong people. They do what they want."

"Like you?"

Eve smiled. "Yes, more or less. Any problems with that?"

Ilea gave it a thought. She had killed quite a few people since coming to Elos. In some ways it was strange to wield the power that she did, to see how ruthless people were. She knew she had been privileged back on Earth, but that didn't mean her entire outlook on morality had changed overnight now that she was here.

But did she have a problem with Eve's actions? She found that she didn't. Ilea would've interfered in Ravenhall had Eve not shown up. And she didn't know what would've happened if she had.

"I don't. Suppose we're a team now though, so let me know if anything comes up. Can't be perfectly safe to go around at night looking for encounters like that. And maybe I can try to find a different solution if I'm there."

Eve's eyes widened for a moment before her expression returned to the neutral one she'd had before. "I'll consider it."

Ilea had no idea if she would or not.

"Where are you from yourself?" Ilea asked instead.

"Lys. A small farming village near Myrefield," Eve said, looking at Ilea for a few seconds. "I traveled around a lot, then decided to join the Hand."

"Any specific reason?"

"Why did you join?" Eve asked instead of answering.

Ilea smiled. "Just seemed fun – and rational. I've been fighting alone for a while, and I suppose a team of capable people sounded like something nice to have around."

"You and I are more similar than I thought," Eve said and smiled back, resting her chin on her hand. "The Hand provides a lot of interesting and

lucrative jobs. It's way more stable and far-reaching than conventional adventuring guilds."

"Fair. I'll be interested to see the jobs they offer."

"We'll get there soon enough. If we don't kill each other before that happens." Eve stood up. "I'll see you at sundown, then?"

"Sure," Ilea said.

"I wonder what she'll do before then," Ilea murmured, now the only one remaining in the classroom. "What do you think?" she asked as she unsheathed Aki and got up to close the door. She was sure people would throw her out if they needed the room.

"I think she is the one I saw in your room two nights past," the dagger said, breaking his six-hour silence.

Ilea raised her eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"No. Her abilities are confusing to my perception. Your team is capable, though it's true that you might have issues working together."

"I wouldn't be too surprised if it was her, though I don't really know why. Have I made any enemies? She would've attacked me already, wouldn't she?"

"Who knows. I don't think she's after you specifically, but you should keep your guard up."

"I'm doing that anyway. There are so many powerful people here."

"You are? Like drinking ale and sleeping more than you need to? Offending nobility? Asking people to attack you with all their magical power so that you can level up your defenses?"

"You can stop."

"I don't have to continue because you won't listen anyway," Aki said.

Ilea smiled. "First reasonable thing you said."

She got up and left the room before walking toward the elevator. "What do you think of them otherwise?" she asked Aki as they descended toward Viscera.

"The noble is strong and experienced. As much as you, if not more so. The rune mage has a lot of book knowledge and potential, so she will be invaluable to your team. The other two are interesting. Their magic is already quite rare, I believe. Just be wary of the illusionist. They all need time and training. If you manage not to kill each other, you might become quite the deadly group," Aki finished right as the elevator came to a stop.

“I feel the same. Now then, what additional classes should I take?” Ilea asked as she walked toward the official Shadow’s Hand building near the elevators. Inside, she found benches and chairs for people to wait and attendants directly conversing with the members. She noticed more people here were wearing the Hand’s black armor, wisps of shadow emanating from the fabric and metal. All of them were above her level, many only showing question marks.

She was quickly shown to one of the counters, where an old woman answered her questions. Archery was there, of course, and she asked the elderly woman how to join a class.

Apparently, there were zero people attending the basic archery class, so a teacher would have to be found first. The price would depend on the teacher, but it would likely not extend beyond a few silvers per hour.

“I’ll join then, please find me a teacher,” Ilea said to the attendant after leaving her name and team number. “Oh, and the class should be after the Monster Knowledge lesson I have every day.”

“Of course, dear, that can be arranged,” the woman answered, writing some things down.

Ilea returned to reviewing the list. “A lot of these seem interesting... hey, lesson woman, put me down for Advanced Healing and Hand-to-Hand Combat 5 as well.” Both were the highest available classes related to her abilities.

“Will do, dear. The name’s Shawna, by the way. Both will need teachers as well, but we should be able to find some by next week. Shall we schedule these after Archery?” she asked, and Ilea nodded.

There’s nothing on other planes or other worlds. Lots of classes on summoning, but I’m not sure that will help me in any way...

Ilea decided to seek out the library and perhaps an expert on the subject before randomly joining more classes. Having made enough selections, she nodded again to Shawna and turned around to walk back to her apartment. It was a short journey, and she was soon jumping into bed and throwing Aki at the ceiling.

“What other classes do you think I should take?” she asked the dagger.

“Hmm.” Aki paused. “Well, you seem to like eating a lot.”

“An eating class? I’m not sure that exists,” she answered, her leather armor vanishing as she crawled under her blanket.

“You know very well what I mean.”

“I don’t think I’m particularly interested in cooking lessons.”

“She just wants to eat, not to cook,” the dagger murmured.

“You’re not wrong. Let’s see what the training today did,” Ilea said, checking the notifications she had ignored for most of the day.

‘ding’ Azarinth Hunter Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 13

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 4

‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 11

...

‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Body Heat Manipulation reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 18

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 9

...

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 10

...

‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches lvl 3

...

‘ding’ Mana Drain Resistance reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Health Drain Resistance reaches lvl 3

...

‘ding’ Health Drain Resistance reaches lvl 5

With that done, she moved on to check her current status.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0

Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 201

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 1***
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 14***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Hunter’s Sight – lvl 3***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 13***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 17***

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 194

- Active: Shroud of Ash – 2nd lvl 4***
- Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 11***

- **Active: Ash Surge – lvl 13**
- **Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 2**
- **Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 1**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 16**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – lvl 13**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 18**
- **Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 18**
- **Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 13**

General Skills:

- **Elos Standard language – lvl 5**
- **Identify – lvl 7**
- **Meditation – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Poison Resistance – lvl 17**
- **Heat Resistance – lvl 17**
- **Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Mental Resistance – lvl 13**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Water Resistance – lvl 5**
- **Wind Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Lightning Resistance – lvl 12**
- **Ice Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Crystal Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 5**
- **Corrosion Resistance – lvl 3**
- **Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2**
- **Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Curse Resistance – lvl 4**
- **Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 5**
- **Health Drain Resistance – lvl 5**

Status:

Vitality: 575

Endurance: 223

Strength: 137

Dexterity: 168

Intelligence: 536

Wisdom: 529

Health: 5750/5750

Stamina: 2111/2230

Mana: 5047/5290

One hell of a yield. And luckily no level-up for Ash Wielder yet. I hope I can get the skills high enough for the lvl 200 change to be good... if there even is one. Another question for the library...

Ilea decided it was a good time to eat, partially to celebrate the excellent progress she'd made. Summoning her leather armor again, she left the apartment for Ravenhall and found her usual spot outside the city.

"Didn't you plan to eat with the others?" Aki asked while Ilea was chewing on some bread and meat she had summoned. The suns were still up, illuminating the city of Ravenhall a couple of kilometers away.

"This is pre-eating, Aki. And yes, I'll meet them to eat *again* later... Wait, we didn't specify a place!" she said with a laugh. "A shame Claire couldn't come. I'm sure *she* wouldn't have forgotten."

Ilea finished her meal and enjoyed the sight before she sprouted her wings and decided to fly around the nearby mountains for a while. It didn't seem like a bad idea to familiarize herself with the surroundings of the city that she'd be staying in for a couple of months at least.

The higher areas, including Ravenhall, were covered in snow. Of course, at this time of the year, that was the case even for the plains below. Dawntree, Salia, and Riverwatch were covered as well.

Ilea quickly found that, as with the wilderness outside of Riverwatch, there were awfully few people out here. Not a single soul could be seen more than a couple kilometers away from Ravenhall.

She had landed on a cliffside overlooking the sea and was enjoying the quiet when she heard nearly silent steps some distance behind her. She turned to find a tiger-like creature advancing on her. Upon being discovered, the creature raised itself from its crouched position and growled at her, revealing long, serrated teeth.

Ilea checked its level and found it to be quite a long way below her own.

[Swordmouth Tiger – lvl 143]

Liam's words rang freshly in her mind as she prepared to face the beast, though she doubted it had any capacity to hurt her seriously. There was enough space to fight on the clifftop, and if there was any real danger, she'd simply blink or fly away.

"Do you really want to do this?" she asked the tiger, who only growled at her again, louder this time. "I'm going to stay here and enjoy the view. Go back to your cave," she said, looking behind the beast to see an opening in the mountainside. Ilea turned around to face the sea, and, as she'd expected, the tiger took this as its opportunity to strike.

The cat rushed her and pounced at an incredibly high speed. The pace was not on Ilea's level with all her buffs active, but certainly close enough. She whirled around and moved her torso while blocking the beast's paw with her arm. Its claws bounced off her black armor, which apparated onto her body, and Ilea grabbed the creature's hind leg before throwing it back toward the cave.

It hit the ground a few times, and one of the bounces was accompanied by a crack that Ilea only picked up with her enhanced hearing. Both her sphere and State of Azarinth told her of the creature's injury before it had even come to a halt.

She looked at the creature as it slowly got up again and slipped on an obviously broken leg. "Come on, stop it," she said, but the cat advanced again. This time it seemed a little unsure and circled her slowly.

Another pounce and Ilea stopped the monster in its tracks, grabbing both its outstretched paws with her hands before headbutting it on its snout. She didn't use any skills with the attack, and the monster was simply thrown back again.

Ilea watched it through her sphere as she summoned her encyclopedia to look for the creature. She flew up as the tiger tried to get at her again, quickly getting out of its range.

Swordmouth tiger... here you are, she thought. Usually resides in a cave or somewhere else dark and shaded. Avoids conflict at all costs and even allows trespassers into its territory. Ignore as a low threat, but do not show your back to it. Its high speed can be dangerous even to higher-leveled adventurers. Warning: do not get close if you see any cubs. It is highly aggressive when nursing...

Interesting, so maybe there are baby cats somewhere... Ilea thought, and she smirked at the beast.

“Are you hiding snacks from me?” she asked, advancing back down toward the growling and still disoriented monster.

“You want to eat its spawn?” Aki asked from her belt.

“I’m joking, little dagger,” Ilea answered drily. “I just ate, didn’t I?”

She flew right over it and toward the cave. On entering, she found what she had been looking for rather quickly. When she saw the four sleeping kittens, Ilea couldn’t help but give a soft ‘aww.’ They were beautiful, sporting the same striped white fur as their mother.

The tiger had apparently found her bearings again, and Ilea sensed with her sphere that it was advancing at the highest speed possible toward her. She simply stood where she was before turning around and catching the cat in a grip like iron.

“Unlike the Basilisk, you haven’t killed any of the people I was traveling with...” she whispered as her healing mana flowed into the creature, mending its broken bone and bruised head. The beast stared at her angrily before Ilea threw her toward her kittens, though softly enough for the cat to land safely between Ilea and its young.

It growled at her before she slowly walked out of the cave, stopping again on the platform overlooking the sea. It was a nice place. The cliffside was jagged, and several hundred meters below were rocky outcrops sprouting from the waves.

The suns were slowly setting on the horizon as Ilea turned around to look at the tiger, which was standing defiantly at the entrance to its cave. Ilea smiled and waved at it before her wings sprouted again and she flew into the air, looking at the rather sizable ledge on the cliff and the small cave where it met the mountain.

I like this place...

On a whim, Ilea landed again and activated Blink’s third-tier ability. Perhaps not the most thought-out action, but she figured she had to try it at some point. She liked the view, and it was far enough from any settlement she could find where she wouldn’t be bothered, except by someone who was specifically looking for her.

And finally, it reminded her of a now seemingly faraway place she had vacationed. A place on Earth, near the sea. Though this time, she felt much safer so close to the water, with her wings and teleportation abilities. Her apartment in Viscera or perhaps the Vultures’ den were good options, but this felt right. A good place to get away.

She breathed out and touched the ground before her, the magic instinctively leaving her body.

You have set the destination for Blink. You may change the destination again in six months.

Ilea got up again from her crouched position and smiled at the tiger, which was still looking at her.

I just need some nice tables and a mini fridge...

* * *

Edwin rested against the wall as Fel's wind magic cut down the last of the guards. He took in a deep breath and steadied himself. They weren't done.

"Brother, are you alright? You're bleeding," Felicia asked, touching his arm.

"I'll be fine," he replied. "Let's find her and leave this place."

He glanced at Felicia's yellow eyes for just a moment. She looked scared. To be here. To see him like this. He turned away and focused, gritting his teeth as he stepped over the dead.

Dull green light shone down from above, a reminder of the ancient history of the ruin. He passed rows of empty cells, checking left and right until he froze.

There she was. Lying on the stone floor, clad in rags. Her arms looked frail, thin like twigs, her face sunken and half covered by gray hair.

Did we come too late?

"Maria, are you still there?" Edwin hissed.

Her eyes opened in an instant, purple and bright. She opened her mouth but couldn't speak.

Felicia walked up and cut through the iron grates with her wind magic.

Edwin stopped her from walking inside, pointing at the walls, which were covered in runes.

"Destroy them first."

Felicia did so, the mana-draining enchantments fading quickly after the spells cut through the runes.

Aliana joined them. Food and water were summoned as she crouched near Maria. The woman accepted everything without hesitation – but took small, measured bites and sips to avoid nausea.

Methodical and calm, even in this state, Edwin thought with a smile. They had failed to break her. The last piece that Arthur had on him.

“It’s good to see you, old friend.”

Maria coughed and tried to stand up before falling back into Aliana’s arms.

“To... took you long enough,” she murmured quietly. She took a deep breath before looking at him. “Get me out of here. And get me some fucking clothes.”

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ELEVEN

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A Fine Establishment

Flying toward the city again, Ilea felt a little melancholic, nostalgic even. Choosing that oceanside clifftop for her blink ability had felt right to her, and she wouldn't leave the barren ledge as it was. There was enough space to make something, build something. A place to rest and to recover, should that time ever come again. It had built-in pets too.

Ilea reached Ravenhall half an hour later, flying up and through the mountain range at her top speed. The suns had nearly set when she reached the entrance to the Shadow's Hand.

Now let's see how useful the skill really is... she thought as she concentrated on Hunter's Sight. Immediately, Ilea found herself able to focus on a specific smell. She was sure it was his, and she quickly followed its trail. It seemed obvious to her where the smell had lingered longer.

The trail led her out to the streets of Ravenhall and beyond, into the forest she had walked through when she had first arrived. Deeper and deeper she went until she finally found him.

Kyrian was standing in the middle of a glowing circle of magic. Trees had been cut down, and the snow below his feet was disturbed. Intricate patterns were drawn into it, and magic pulsed from what looked like runes, all illuminated with a sickly green light. Sweat covered his brow, and she watched as the light got brighter and brighter before, with a flash, it vanished.

Kyrian was thrown back a little and wobbled on his legs before he gathered himself.

“Nice show. Need a healer?” Ilea called from the side of the circle, startling him enough that he jumped.

“I t... thought you were a beast still deciding whether to a... attack,” he said after a moment.

“Best moment to blow your magic and cripple yourself then, smartass,” she said as she walked closer. Stepping into the circle, she felt an ice-cold sensation seize her insides and the weight of powerful curse magic settle upon her. She backed out of the circle as if she’d been burned, the smile on her face vanishing.

Kyrian winced. “I k... know, though the effects s... should linger for a while, which provides a certain safety. As you j... just found out,” he said, looking at her for the first time. “Are you ok?” he asked, concern in his voice. The curse’s effects vanished instantly after he closed his eyes in concentration.

Ilea closed in to touch and heal him but hesitated, reluctant to enter the cursed circle again.

“I don’t n... need healing,” he said, walking closer to her and leaving the circle behind.

I can’t hesitate like that whenever I get cursed...

“Y... you seem worried.”

Ilea looked up and smiled. “Oh. Yeah, sorry about that. I experienced some pretty bad curse magic a while back. I still react to it strongly. I mean, you saw me earlier.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking down.

Ilea laughed. “It’s not your fault, Kyrian. You have powerful magic at your disposal. I guess it’s a good thing to be able to train with you. Next time I encounter those machines, they won’t even get past my resistance.”

“I s... suppose.” He smiled lightly, looking directly at her.

Ilea’s heart skipped a beat.

Really? Now?

“Where did you learn your curse magic?” she asked, mostly to distract herself, but she was also interested in the answer. “You asked some questions in Claire’s lesson. Not a noble, then?”

“I’m n... not. No. My...” He stopped, straightening his back and meeting her eyes again. “I d... don’t want to tell you,” he said, metal spheres floating around him as the circle illuminated with dull green light again.

“That’s okay,” Ilea said casually, ignoring his strange reaction. *Ready to fight when I ask about his magic? Or is it just the fact that he doesn’t want to tell me? I suppose there’s a reason why he’s so anxious.*

He looked at her, the magic still going.

“You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to tell me,” she said and smiled. “I sure as hell won’t answer every question you ask.”

He was silent for a few seconds, then spoke. “Really?”

Ilea spread her arms. “Any reason I’d lie?”

He seemed to think about it for a while before he shook his head. “Sorry, I... I...”

Ilea turned toward the city and started walking.

“We wanted to get food, right? Let’s look for Eve. I have a feeling she’s somewhere in Ravenhall and not Viscera.”

A flash of movement made her buffs flare to life, and she blinked away, though it wasn’t long before she recognized her ‘assailant.’

“What the hell? You dipshit!” Ilea shouted as Eve started sniggering and then outright laughing. She saw Kyrian smile in her sphere.

“You’re already dead,” Eve said, though the smile on her face seemed genuine.

“You sent a clone after me?” Ilea asked as she walked closer to Eve and Kyrian.

“They’re illusions. And no, this is me,” Eve said, waving.

I should maybe be more careful about what I talk about with Aki.

“I can’t perceive you,” Ilea said, trying to see the woman with her sphere. There was nothing there, no presence and no smell. She couldn’t even hear anything but her voice.

Eve locked eyes with Ilea, smiling again. “I think I’ve figured out your detection skill...”

“Still doesn’t mean I’m dead. You’d have to kill me for that to happen,” Ilea said, still focusing on the place where her eyes told her the woman was standing. She strained her enhanced senses, looking for any sign of the girl’s presence.

Slowly she realized something. Though her skill couldn’t see Eve directly, she noticed the airflow was different around her. There was a very slight weight pressing down on the snow beneath Eve’s feet, and while there was the smell of trees and snow around her, there was nothing where

Eve stood. It was hard, but she could detect the ‘hole’ in her senses if she focused on it.

God, now I have to focus on things like that too... Ilea sighed and shook her head.

Eve’s smile turned into a frown. “You found a way to see me?”

Ilea shook her head. “It’s more that I can see the absence of you, if that makes sense. Maybe you should try to blend in better. Be invisible yet without leaving a void. Like a chameleon,” Ilea explained, asking herself if helping Eve was a good idea.

“What’s a c... chameleon?” Kyrian asked, but Eve seemed to have understood the meaning.

“I’ll try that against you, but I don’t think it’s worth the effort, generally speaking,” Eve said. “Perception skills like the one you have are pretty rare, and even you missed me when you didn’t know I was there.”

“Let’s go eat,” Ilea said. “I’m tired of being cursed and sneaked up on.”

Eve raised her eyebrows and then glanced at Kyrian, who scratched the back of his neck in response.

“Hmm, playing in the forest. Are you sure my presence is wanted?” Eve asked.

Ilea smiled at her as she walked past. “You’re the one who sneaked up on us. Let’s go.”

Eve joined them.

“Ravenhall okay? I have some restaurants I like already, but I’m open to suggestions. Haven’t tried all of them yet,” Ilea explained as the three walked out of the forest and toward the city.

“How long have you been here? I’ve found a really nice place,” Eve said.

“I... might n... not be able to come if it’s e... expensive,” Kyrian said in almost a whisper, looking at his feet again. He seemed to withdraw further into himself the closer they got to the city.

Ilea frowned in an exaggerated manner. “First off, I’ve only been here a couple days, so it’s only reasonable that I haven’t tried all the restaurants, Eve. And Kyrian, how the fuck do you not have money for food? You’re level 204; you probably get paid more for a single day’s work than most people in the city get in a year.”

She knew he likely couldn’t pay the Hand and was now a little in debt, but this was *food* they were talking about. She was highly offended. He

looked at her, almost stunned, opening and closing his mouth before he spoke.

“It’s m... more a saving strategy. I’d rather not w... waste money on l... luxuries and be done with paying my debt earlier. I don’t r... require much, and I like foraging.” He waved fondly at the forest they were now leaving.

Ilea nodded, seeing some sort of sense in his actions. She, for one, would never try to save by scrimping on food, though remembering her solo days on Earth without the financial support of her family made her question that position.

Wait, foraging in winter? Like for nuts?

She decided not to ask.

“It’s my treat then, and I won’t accept no for an answer, so don’t try,” she said. Kyrian met her eyes, looking at her briefly with consternation. “I said no. N. O. Saving on food when I can pay for it? Ridiculous,” Ilea said, spelling it out for him.

He closed his mouth and cast his gaze back down again as they continued in silence. Using her sphere, Ilea caught a confused expression on Kyrian’s face.

“So, how’d you guys get here? How’d you get to level 200?” Eve asked as they approached the city gates.

Ilea handed the guard a few silver coins as they reached the gates, getting another look from Kyrian.

“Let’s hold off on the socializing until I have food in front of me, okay?” Ilea replied as Eve began leading them to her restaurant of choice.

It turned out to be an incredibly high-class place. The building itself was more lavishly decorated and the design styled more intricately than most buildings in Ravenhall. There was even an outside section with what appeared to be a garden, which was currently covered in snow.

The inside didn’t disappoint either, though Ilea wasn’t sure if she’d arrived in a restaurant or an art gallery. There were paintings on every wall and even some sculptures behind barriers. Magical ones at that. Heavy velvet curtains lined the walls, and not a single sound from the city reached the interior. Quiet orchestral music emanated from the polished wooden stairwell leading up.

“I like that piece,” Eve said, commenting on an abstract-looking sculpture that had caught Ilea’s eye. To Ilea, it looked like several miniature metal beams had been melted into some sort of star.

“I don’t get art,” she whispered to Eve.

The woman looked at her, then snort-laughed before catching herself.

“Let’s just eat. Food can be art as well,” Ilea mumbled as an attendant approached the group.

“Aaah, Miss Aillan! I’m glad to see you back, and you’ve brought... company.”

The last word was laced with contempt, though as Ilea looked at the man, she was convinced he didn’t mean to attack them. It was just a simple fact to him that Ilea and Kyrian were lesser beings.

How could we possibly invade this place with our ragged leather armor? And dirt on our boots?

Ilea smiled at the man. She noted that Eve was quite amused. And Kyrian? Well, Kyrian just seemed to be anxious. Neither better nor worse than usual.

Eve drew herself up and spoke in a way neither of them had heard before.

“Filemon, my dear. I apologize terribly for their attire, though it couldn’t be helped. I’ve joined the Hand now and they were assigned to me. I will do my utmost to teach them the ways of the world. Do not be concerned.”

Eve walked around the man while she spoke and winked at her two companions. Filemon, meanwhile, seemed torn between pity and sadness as he looked at the guests.

“Alright, alright. Follow me, please. Your usual space?” he asked, and Eve assented with a gesture.

“He’s very sensitive,” she whispered to Ilea and Kyrian.

Filemon led the group upstairs and then toward a corner of the room. Their table was set a little higher than the center of the room, which was free of furniture, though Ilea wasn’t sure for what. A dance floor, perhaps? At least they could see the whole room and all of the art spaced around it and on its walls. She had to agree that it looked nice.

“How’s the food?” she asked, looking at Eve, who was whispering and giggling with Filemon.

“The food is exquisite, my dear warrior,” Filemon said as he turned to her, bowing slightly.

“I’d like to start with something you would suggest then. To get a taste.”

“With refreshments, then?” he asked the whole group.

“Yes please. Some whiskey and ale as well, if you would,” Eve said, and Filemon nodded to her.

Ilea considered the place to be a little empty – only a few tables were even occupied. All the other patrons were dressed in what looked like well-made attire and were dining in relative silence.

“How does this place stay afloat?” Ilea asked, a little confused at what an establishment like this was doing in a rather rough city up in the snowy mountains.

“The Hand has some very rich members, and the few who appreciate service and art like this finance the place themselves,” Eve explained, relaxing in her chair.

Well, let's see how the nobles eat then. I've been wondering...

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Dinner

“You’re one of them? A benefactor of this place?” Ilea asked.

“I’d love to be, but I’m indebted to the Hand now,” Eve said. “I have enough saved up to indulge here and there but certainly not enough to finance the place. Though I hear Wallace Urn frequents it as well, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Who’s that?” Ilea asked, and Kyrian seemed to have the same question on his mind.

“You don’t even know the Elders of the Shadow’s Hand? Well, he’s one of them, and he’s wealthy. Not your average levels of wealth.”

“Who are the others?” Kyrian asked.

Eve raised an eyebrow. “First, there’s Adam Strand. He manages the administration, many of the evaluations and team set-ups, and I’m sure he’s got some other duties. Next is Verena Quil. A bit of a mystery. She’s supposedly one of the most powerful Shadows. She has a lot of influence and is well-respected when it comes to policy changes. She’s probably the most important Elder alongside Strand, but she’s often not even in the city. I’ve heard she likes going out into the wilderness alone to fight powerful monsters.”

“Sounds like my type,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Yes. You do strike me as someone who enjoys fighting a little too much.”

“I’ve seen your smile,” Ilea replied, leaning back. The cushions were very comfortable, she had to admit.

“Fair. The last two aren’t particularly well-known. The first is someone who calls themselves Dragonkiller. Quite ridiculous. Everyone I found who knows anything at all about her had something negative to say. And the last is called Lucas, though I don’t think he’s been in Ravenhall for years, maybe decades.”

“You know quite a lot about them,” Ilea said. *I guess my room isn’t the only one she’s snuck into.*

Eve just smiled.

“Do you think this Dragonkiller killed an actual dragon?” Ilea asked.

“I don’t even know what a dragon really is,” Eve said.

“L... legends,” Kyrian began, then closed his mouth.

“No, tell me,” Ilea said. “I want to know what you know. If you’re okay with sharing.”

He gulped, then nodded. “There a... are legends in A... where I’m from. Stories that to the north, sometimes, winged monsters fly. Larger than anything else. Flying through the storms.”

“There are a lot of monsters out there,” Eve said flatly.

“You don’t seem particularly interested,” Ilea said. She herself had leaned forward when Kyrian had been talking.

Eve opened her mouth but closed it again.

“What h... have you fought?” Kyrian asked, glancing at Ilea. He held eye contact for an entire second this time.

“A bunch of things. Started with wolves and Drakes. Nazarks. Even saw a Basilisk. That wasn’t pleasant.”

“A Basilisk... and y... you survived?” Kyrian said, his eyes wide.

His follow-up question was interrupted when Filemon returned to serve drinks. He also placed a ridiculously large plate with a small amount of food in the middle of it before Ilea.

What is that supposed to be? Is this supposed to fill me up? Ilea thought as she looked at the artistically pleasing potato gratin with a crust of cheese on top and several herbs placed in a likely highly time-consuming fashion.

She took a fork and ate half of it in one bite. All eyes turned to her when she closed her eyes and gave a low moan. She swallowed and slumped back in her chair before shivering a little.

“Oh my God, this is heaven. What did you do to this food?” Ilea asked Filemon, opening her eyes again to find a smug expression on his face.

“We have a rather high-level cook. I can’t overstate how incredibly rare such talents are these days,” he explained as Ilea finished the plate of food.

“I will be back shortly with today’s menu,” the waiter said, but Ilea shook her head.

“No, no, none of that. I’d like to order everything. Twice.”

The waiter blinked. She seemed to have burnt his circuits. A short reboot of his brain later, he smiled.

“You are aware that an order like this will cost two gold and fifty-two silver?” he asked, his expression impossible to read.

Ilea quickly got her pouch from her backpack and handed over three gold coins. “Yes please, and I’ll pay for the others as well. Drinks to be refilled whenever, of course,” she said.

Filemon nodded and took the money.

“As you wish, Lady...?”

Ilea considered the question, then smirked. “Lilith.”

“Lady Lilith,” he said with a considering look. He left them, taking the empty plate with him.

“Well, now we know who’s swimming in money,” Eve said. “Are you nobility? Or perhaps you’re a thief trying to hide in the Shadow’s Hand? Hmm?”

“Not noble. I’ve spent my time killing monsters and exploring dungeons,” Ilea said, sipping on her drink and trying to seem mysterious.

Eve rolled her eyes. “You had a lucky find. Or a few. Good for you. I suggest you don’t flaunt it too much, lest some interested parties try to lessen your... burden.”

Ilea leaned forward with a grin. “Oh? There are people like that? Stalking in the shadows? Stealing from hard-working monster killers?”

Eve sat back in her chair and sighed, then laughed.

Ilea refilled her glass.

“Wish I found gold. All I got was slime,” Kyrian murmured to himself.

“What led you here?” Ilea said to Eve, waving at the finely decorated tables. “You’re the one who chose this place.”

“Killing monsters. Exploring dungeons,” Eve said with an innocent smile.

“I’m sure,” Ilea said, shaking her head slightly. *Stealing from the rich, I’d wager.*

“What about you, Kyrian? Where are you from?” Eve asked after emptying her glass.

“I’m from Asila,” he answered.

Eve raised her eyebrows. “That’s pretty far north. Near the sea. Why join the Hand?”

Ilea doubted Eve would get a lot out of the man, but she couldn’t deny her own curiosity. They would be her teammates, after all.

“I reached level 200 quite quickly, and people told me I could learn and join a t... team in the Hand... with other freaks...” He said the last part with a slight smile, which grew slightly after he checked how they reacted.

“I’ve been called mad plenty enough. Welcome to the team,” Ilea said, raising her glass.

“Quite the common story then. How’d you reach level 200? Found something you could use your curses on without retaliation?” Eve asked as she filled her glass with whiskey again.

Ilea hadn’t planned to get even a little drunk and had Hunter Recovery running constantly at a small burn, but she did like the taste of the whiskey.

“I t... traveled alone. Found many beasts too dangerous for m... me to fight, but my curses last a long time. So, if I could h... hide or climb something, I c... could kill higher-leveled monsters. B... bought information on nearby dungeons as I traveled. It only took a f... few for me to get to this level.”

“Take you long to kill some of them?” Ilea asked.

He smiled. “Yes.”

“What was the highest level difference?” Ilea asked out of curiosity.

“M... me at 50, they were 180. Slimes. I stayed in that dungeon f... for months, leveling up. Though my s... skills leveled slower than my Classes.”

“You’ll need every bit of experience you can get then. We’ll help you out. Right, Eve?” She glanced over at the other woman.

Eve sighed and shook her head. “Sure. I’ll help out.”

Sounds like his experience with fighting monsters wasn’t that different from mine. In some ways, at least.

“What were they called? The slimes,” Ilea asked, thinking of checking her encyclopedia.

“Dream slimes...”

Eve’s glass shattered in her hand, spilling whiskey all over the table.

“Ah shit,” she grumbled, using a napkin to dry her clothes and the table.

“Was the thing in the forest for skill-leveling too?” Ilea asked, ignoring Eve’s reaction.

“Yes. But it’s hard to do on snow... Still lots of work on anything else too, though, just less.”

“Speaking of his curses, what was with your reaction today, Ilea? There’s a story there, I’d wager, if you’re willing to tell it,” Eve said, just as Filemon arrived at their table again.

“Miss Eve and Mr...? Will you be having the standard seven-course menu? The order of the Mistress is nearly ready, and I’d like to serve you all at the same time,” the waiter explained.

“Yes, that will be fine. Thank you,” Eve said and focused back on Ilea expectantly.

“I was cursed in a fight and nearly died. Nothing more to say. At least for now,” Ilea said, and she was glad that Eve simply nodded, this time drinking from some ale that had also been poured for the table. It was then she noticed that Kyrian had touched neither whiskey nor ale.

“You don’t drink?” she asked.

The man shook his head.

“I can heal its effects,” Ilea offered, but Kyrian seemed skeptical. “Here, look.” She smirked and touched Eve’s foot below the table, using Hunter Recovery to remove the intoxicating effects of the beverage in the woman’s body.

“What the hell are you doing? Stop that!” Eve exclaimed and skidded back in her chair, looking appalled. It was the most genuine expression Ilea had ever seen from the woman, and she struggled not to laugh at the sight. She likely would have responded the same way if their roles were reversed. “Great, now the buzz is gone. Fantastic job, healer girl. Wow.” She clapped sarcastically, and Ilea decided not to get up and bow for the ‘fantastic’ use of her abilities.

“See, it’s alright,” Ilea said, but Kyrian shook his head again. Ilea looked at him for a moment and then dropped the subject. He likely had his own reasons for not drinking that he preferred not to share for now. Just like her and curses.

“What about you, Eve? Where are you from, why are you here, and how did you reach level 200? Answer me or you die,” Ilea chuckled, pointing her bread knife like a sword.

Eve was filling up her glass again, still grumpy at the loss of her intoxication.

“Stronger than you have tried,” she answered, slightly squinting her eyes before she continued. “I’m from a village in Lys. I was actually doing adventuring and other jobs here and there until, lo and behold, I reached level 200. I didn’t like any of the other possibilities then, and the normal adventuring guild is nowhere near as profitable when you’re level 200.”

She drank her whole glass in a single motion, then filled it again. She emptied that one as well before she continued talking.

“As to how I reached level 200 specifically, well, as mentioned before, many things don’t have mental resistance or a good enough perception skill to find me. It’s as simple as that,” she said, smiling.

Killing monsters and exploring dungeons. I’m sure there’s nothing more to it, eh? If anyone’s hiding a dark past, it feels like it would be her... and still, I can’t help but like her.

Ilea immediately forgot everything when she saw and smelled the incoming feast. Similarly to the appetizers, huge plates were placed in front of all three of them. Ilea also asked for some water for Kyrian, which he seemed grateful for. He was clearly not keen on talking to waiters. Or anyone, really.

Eve and Kyrian talked about this and that, but Ilea couldn’t help but be completely mesmerized by the dishes that came and went. Exotic foods with tastes she had never experienced – bits of strange beasts and spices that made colors dance in front of her eyes or warmed her to the soles of her feet. Some dishes held seemingly ordinary things that had a twist to them she didn’t expect. One piece of simple beef was somehow sour on the outside, spicy halfway in, and sweet in the middle. She ate and ate until finally she found herself sitting in front of the potato gratin once again.

“I’m done... for now. That was the whole menu. Once,” she said, looking up at the other two. Kyrian had been talking about how best to prepare a river fish for cooking without wasting anything, though Eve looked too drunk to really comprehend anything he was saying.

“Welcome back I... Ilea,” Kyrian said, smiling a little as he looked at her.

“Oh, this is only temporary... I’ll be gone again soon. Are you done eating already?”

He shook his head. "I think we're at four out of seven dishes. They've paced things well, despite how f... fast you eat. It really is an experience to dine here. I would like to talk to the c...chef later."

"Oh, I'll join you there... I have to kiss that man – or woman," Ilea said as she focused on her plate again.

Round two...

* * *

Two hours later, all of them had finished their meals. Eve was drunk throughout the latter half of the dinner, though Ilea couldn't help but notice her quick glances at some of the other patrons from time to time, and she had mostly stopped participating in the conversation.

Is she just pretending? If not, why did she get so annoyed when I healed her?

"So, what about it?" Ilea asked, looking at Kyrian.

"Sure, I'll j... join your attack sessions, and you can level your Curse Resistance. I can remove it at will, so you'll just have to tell me when it's t... too much," Kyrian said.

"I see you're done. How was the food?" Filemon stood next to their table, looking at Eve's drunken state with a slightly complicated expression. Two parts concern, one part amusement.

"Absolutely bloody amazing. Best I've ever eaten, I think. Though the portion sizes are questionable," Ilea answered.

"I'm glad to hear that. Though the portions aren't negotiable."

"We'd like to meet the chef if possible. I want to thank them personally."

Filemon shook his head. "I'm afraid that is not possible. She is very busy at the moment," he said, though Ilea could perceive the light gulp and the sweat that appeared on his brow. Now she was even more determined to see the chef. A woman, apparently.

"Of course, I understand," Ilea said and sat back.

"You don't seem disappointed," Kyrian said after the waiter had left again.

"Oh, that's because I'm going to go meet her anyway," Ilea said. She smiled at him before she vanished, appearing in the empty apartment above

the restaurant.

She blinked around and tried to find the kitchen with her sphere. Three teleports later, she found it and, inside, something peculiar.

Interesting...

She blinked right into the kitchen.

“Hello there,” she said, taking in the view of a startled chef raising a knife and aiming it at Ilea. “Wow, you look cool, like a dragon or something.”

The woman was covered in scales and had reptile-like eyes that glared at Ilea. The knife came flying her way, and she caught it by the blade. The dragonlady was a level 162 cook, something Ilea now knew was rather rare.

“Some of our kind would kill you for saying that,” the woman said, crossing her arms.

“Well, you did just throw a knife my way. Sorry for insulting you. This is my first time seeing one of your kind,” Ilea said, putting the knife down on a nearby table. “More importantly though, you were the one preparing the meals? The two menus?”

“You mean you’re the one who ordered the whole thing... twice?”

“Yes, exactly. Absolutely amazing. You’re a magician, an artist. I think I love you, but I’d rather watch you make food and eat it than do you,” Ilea said with a grin.

The cook’s snout-like mouth opened, and she barked a laugh. “You’re a peculiar one for this establishment. Not that I dislike that. My name is Keyla,” the cook replied.

“Keyla, then. What would it cost me for you to prepare those meals for me? Specifically the potato gratin, the fish with white wine sauce, the one with the green fruits and red meat, and of course the hummus-like paste thing with the spicy-yet-sweet flavor? I would like you to prepare bigger quantities than those small plates though. Is that a possibility?” Ilea asked, her words flowing out of her mouth as fast as she could think them up.

“You know what? Your enthusiasm is more recognition than I get from most. Okay, not a word to the rest of the staff or the owners though.” She paused and grinned. “After all this time, they still try to keep me hidden away. Why not do some side business?”

“Great. Make as much as you can of all that, then. I’ll come daily before sundown to pick it up. How does that sound? Try to make more than I can

eat. I'll pay you directly," Ilea said, whispering as if she had just started the world's most secret conspiracy.

The woman chuckled. "Why more? It would be sad for the food to go to waste."

Ilea simply summoned a plate of food from one of the restaurants she had visited in the days prior. It was still as hot and steamy as the moment it had first been stored.

"It's fresh... a storage device then. I get it. Okay, we can do something like that. It's going to cost you though. Less than the restaurant asks, but the ingredients are rather cumbersome to get, and my time plus the experience and my level raise the price as well, of course," Keyla explained.

Ilea summoned five gold coins and put them on the table. "Don't worry, I'll inform you when money becomes an issue. This is an advance and a show of trust," Ilea said solemnly. "This is important to me. Don't disappoint me, Keyla."

The woman nodded slowly, probably asking herself if this was a good idea.

Ilea blinked away and watched Keyla lean back on the counter she was working on before shaking her head and retrieving the money. *Got her*, Ilea smirked.

She appeared next to Kyrian again and sat down, taking a sip of her whiskey with a winning smile.

"You met her?" Kyrian asked.

She just winked at him. "Do you know where Eve lives?" Ilea asked, but he shook his head.

"I can take care of myself," Eve said, her voice slightly slurred but her eyes not nearly as unfocused as Ilea would've expected.

"Some more healing?"

"I'm quite fine," Eve said. This time, she didn't slur her words, but there was a cold edge to her voice.

"Anything wrong?"

Eve waved her off, downed her glass, and smiled.

"Not at all. It was quite a nice evening. Have a good night, you two," she said, her voice perfectly calm, the cold edge gone entirely. She stood up and yawned. "I'll see you tomorrow," she added as she left.

She doesn't seem drunk anymore either. At all. So, she has a way to get rid of it too?

“She’s quite abrupt,” she murmured.

Kyrian was silent for a moment. “I think she l... likes you.”

“Think so? I can’t place her yet.”

Kyrian didn’t comment further.

She smiled to herself, still glad to have found this restaurant.

“That was nice. Should we go then?” she asked Kyrian after a few moments, who nodded in turn.

The two bade farewell to Filemon and walked out into the cold city, the snow crunching under their boots.

“Thank you for the food. I will l... leave now too,” Kyrian said.

“Sure. Have a good night, and see you tomorrow,” Ilea said, stretching as she watched him amble off toward the Shadow’s Hand.

Ilea smiled as she watched his lips twitch upward several times before he left her sphere of perception. Then she blinked twice and landed on the roof of the restaurant.

“Not the worst view,” she said, looking out over the many stone rooftops bathed in moonlight. Beyond, she saw the mountains wreathed in a pale light.

Aki spoke after a while. “The food did look quite appetizing. But there was not enough meat.”

“Daggers like meat, I guess,” Ilea murmured, shaking her head slightly.

So I'm joining a mercenary adventurer team in Ravenhall, of all places. What a stupid city name. But I guess I'm starting to like it.

THIRTEEN

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A Knowing Trade

“Your votes have been received,” the voice from the shadows said.

Baltimore did not react while he sat at his desk, the office cast in dim light. The paper in front of him crumbled to dust.

“Good. Leave then,” he said, getting up. He heard his servant approach well before the door was opened.

“My lord, you have a visitor. I must apologize, but I found it impossible to gather a name,” the servant said, but Baltimore didn’t react to this either. The apology was simply a formality. Few of his acquaintances would mention their names.

“Main hall?” he asked, and the servant nodded. A feeling of annoyance settled over him as he walked through his perfectly decorated mansion. The main hall was located in the east wing and was big enough to host a whole kingdom’s nobility for dinner, not that that ever happened.

Baltimore opened the door and stepped inside, finding a man who justified the hall being built in exactly this way.

“Baltimore. It’s good to see you,” the man said, clad in casual clothing made from expensive silk.

“Don’t flatter me, Michael. Why are you here?” Baltimore asked, different thoughts and possibilities swirling in his mind as he waited for the man’s response. Michael wasn’t the kind of person to play the games of schemers, not that one upside made him any less dangerous.

“I’m here to talk. Didn’t my attire suggest such a thing?” the man asked. “You seem annoyed. Are you that busy?”

Michael's demeanor betrayed the plainness of his brown eyes and hair. Were it not for his clothes and aura of power, combined with the question marks above his head, Baltimore might've mistaken him for a mere peasant.

"I am indeed *busy*. Aren't you as well? What with all the refugees from the west, I'm surprised you have time for visits. Or have you learned a copy or illusion spell?" Baltimore asked, walking over to the buffet. He hadn't eaten anything in at least two days, and this talk was useless enough for him to fill that need in the meantime.

Michael laughed as Baltimore grabbed a piece of bread and sausage with a fluid motion, betraying the tension building up inside him.

"Opportunities abound, but that's not why I'm here," Michael said.

"Then get to the point."

"Not one for conversation? Fine," he stated flatly. "Your protégé has appeared, taken Maria Acantha, and left behind at least thirty dead in the hidden prison of Arthur Redleaf."

Baltimore raised his eyebrows as he focused on chewing and swallowing.

Edwin was back? And he had broken out Maria.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"Recently," Michael said. "A week ago, perhaps?"

Yet I only learn of it now. And through Michael, of all sources.

He ground his teeth, knowing that Arthur was already out to kill the boy. He had hoped Edwin and Felicia would leave to find a better life elsewhere. Deep down, he had always known they would return, but he had hoped never to face this day.

He took in a sharp breath. "Why tell me?"

"Arthur asked for assistance to deal with the situation as fast as possible."

Michael gave him a long look.

A chance to solve this without bloodshed. Perhaps I misjudged you, Michael.

Baltimore dreaded the price he would have to pay for receiving this gift of information. And knowing Edwin, the chances were slim either way. If Maria was free, then there was nothing left to stop him. Still, he had to try.

"It's in your hands now. The hounds have been sent," Michael said and exited, leaving Baltimore alone.

Another problem added on top of everything else. He finished chewing on his bread and meat and summoned his armor, reminiscing about the past few years when it had been calm in Virilya.

* * *

Ilea couldn't sleep for quite as long as she wanted that night – there was too much to think about from the past couple of days. Lying in bed, she smiled, glad to have found some people she could perhaps stay with for a while.

"I think I like them, Aki," Ilea said to the dagger stuck in the ceiling.

"I think you liked the food the most."

"Ah yes, that as well. What a magnificent cook. You know anything about her species?"

"No, I have not seen anything like her before."

"Interesting. I'll definitely ask the others to do some more training after class too. Kyrian agreed, but maybe some of the others will join as well. Maybe even that noble. He seemed to enjoy the bouts."

"I think he tried to kill you."

"Even better. Means there's actual danger. I didn't necessarily try to kill him myself, but I did punch him into unconsciousness in that first fight."

"So this is the fabled 'battle mania'... I think I've heard of your kind, but I don't remember any of my wielders so far being quite the same," Aki commented.

"Really? Not a single one? I would've assumed Elves would be exactly that, considering the ones I've fought so far."

"I assume you have fought younger Elves – impulsive, uncontrolled, and angry. I remember it usually changing over time. A little, at least. Though, looking from a human moral standpoint, I suppose they don't necessarily become much better."

"Humans aren't exactly the pinnacle of kindness and progress either."

"True, though I have seen only very rare occasions of Elves treating someone or something weaker with anything but disregard. There are some humans who are different. At least from what I've seen," Aki continued as Ilea got him out of the ceiling. "Where are we going? It's hours until noon."

"I'm not tired, and I can't go train. Maybe some music?"

“Whatever you like,” Aki answered, though Ilea just held the dagger up to her face.

“What do *you* like, Aki?” she asked and waited for a response.

“You’re asking your dagger what it likes?” the piece of metal replied.

“Yes, I am. Done weirder things since I arrived in Elos. So, what’s it to be?”

“Since you arrived in Elos? What do you mean?”

“I’ll come to that at a later time, ok? So, what do you want to do?”

Ilea didn’t mind much that Aki now had an idea that she was from somewhere other than this continent. He had probably assumed as much already.

“How about books?” Aki said after being quiet for half a minute.

“You mean you want to read them or stab them?” Ilea joked.

“You know the answer, girl...” the reply came as she opened the door.

Of course she knew that Aki wanted nothing more than to stab a good book.

Time to go...

* * *

The library was not the easiest place to find, but when she did locate it, she wasn’t disappointed. The lobby alone was immense, though the librarian was perhaps more so.

“Ilea Spears? Yes, you had quite an impressive evaluation. I believe you had your first classes yesterday?” The man sitting behind the table in front of her had a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles perched on an impressively bulbous nose and wore light brown robes that barely covered his massive frame. “You are a paid member, so you have full access to the base level of the library. Any specialized information will cost you extra.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Ilea said, walking around the room.

The stone was dark, quite unlike the white stone most of Viscera seemed to be cut from, and there was furniture and even statues in the room made from the same material. A multitude of angled blue-tinted windows let in some of the magical light from the elongated cave that was Viscera. The library itself was above the small town, the windows built into the cavern wall where the tunnels led toward the various elevators.

“I am not talking about gold, Miss Ilea,” the man said, his gaze hovering a little above his spectacles. “I am talking about knowledge.”

“Any kind of knowledge? I have some stuff, though I assume an oral testimony won’t be enough?” Ilea asked, getting a slight smile from the man.

“No, quite so,” he said, putting down the pen he was writing with and leaning back in his massive chair. Ilea could see the leather and wood strain as it kept his weight at bay. She smiled, knowing that she wasn’t talking with the average librarian. The question marks she’d found upon identifying him underlined that thought.

“And what about the knowledge I get? How do I trust that you’re not going to tell other people what I might ask?” Ilea said, walking closer to the table.

“That is knowledge as well, my dear. And for the right price, one might acquire it. Though depending on what you have to share, I can ensure you will get a one-year period where your questions remain private. For anyone but me.”

From the way he talked, Ilea was sure there was no way to haggle with the man. His word was final.

“Interesting. Well, for now, I’m here to say hello. You already have my name, so what will yours cost?” Ilea said, smirking at the man. She was quite happy to find he mirrored the gesture.

“That is free. I am Dagon Keywire. Humble librarian of this fine organization. Head librarian, I might add, though it does not matter. We are in the pursuit of knowledge, and such titles hold little meaning. I am happy to welcome you to the Shadow’s Hand.”

Ilea glanced his way before walking toward the windows at a leisurely pace. “I quite like these windows, Head Librarian Keywire. Where might I find the maker?” Ilea asked, touching the glass.

“Dagon is quite alright. Another free piece of advice, Miss Spears. In Viscera, asking for a name is usually no issue. Though be careful with members of the Hand you encounter in the wild. They might... take offense. An outdated and unreasonable tradition some hold on to, though many enjoy the reverence with which they are viewed. An image, nothing more,” Dagon explained. “I would have to search for the maker of this glass. What piece of knowledge or artifact will you trade for a name and location, should the being still exist?”

“I was told that about the names before. Doesn’t seem to have been an issue so far, though,” Ilea said as she walked back to the man. “You take artifacts as well then? Is that the reason why you welcome me so warmly? What exactly do you know about me?”

“That is another piece of knowledge. I have yet to receive any compensation that might enable a reply, Miss Spears.”

“Ilea is quite fine on my side as well, Dagon. Now, how much is the knowledge that I own a storage item worth?”

“Not a lot.” He paused and looked at her in an evaluating way. “You are in Viscera. There’s a high chance many others have the same. Though it is a piece of information I have yet to see proof of.”

Ilea checked with her sphere but found nobody else within range, so she summoned the damaged Legate Guardian helmet she still held in her necklace and placed it on the table.

“This item is of little use to me anymore, but it *is* an artifact. One likely over a thousand years old. And with it, you have proof of my storage necklace. I intend to have the year of silence about its existence as well.”

Dagon extended his large hands and grabbed the helmet from its place on the table. The man examined the piece of armor and then grunted approvingly.

“Yes, it’s real. Quite a find. I’ve only ever heard of the rank Legate, so to have found a piece of armor... quite exceptional. The Taleen are still rather shrouded in mystery, and I find it infuriating how little of the knowledge hoarded elsewhere is shared with the Hand,” he continued as the helmet vanished.

“The library’s silence is, of course, guaranteed for a year. Nothing longer than that can be bought. Not from me, at least. The maker of the glass lives in Ravenhall. Elvon Isar. Quite a nice glass mage and artist. I am an opportunist, and yes, the chance of you finding knowledge is a big part of why I welcomed you. Though I am not here to deceive you. I trade knowledge for knowledge, simple as that.

“The artifact you gave me is rare, but its historical value far exceeds its quality as a piece of equipment. You may still ask some questions. The year of silence is guaranteed for anything you may ask. Though the answer might cost more.”

“I may come back with more,” Ilea said, twirling her dagger in one hand. “Library over there?”

He nodded.

“I look forward to your next visit!” he called after her.

* * *

“Do you think I can trust him to honor his word?” Ilea asked while turning the page.

They were in a small booth, her sphere active to check for anyone in the vicinity. She could already tell how fast Aki read. Ilea wasn’t particularly interested in the topics herself, but the dagger couldn’t exactly turn the pages without her help.

“Every man has a price,” Aki said. “Though he seems to be very open with his. The question is whether the year of silence is anything to trust. Though who would want to know about your secrets? What will you ask him?”

Ilea stayed quiet for a while before answering. “There’s not a high chance of anybody caring, but I tend to overshare and trust too easily. I at least want to ask around a little before I attempt some of the riskier questions. Especially with a shady librarian working for a guild of high-powered adventurers.”

“They’re mercenaries. You’re a mercenary.”

“It’s basically the same thing,” Ilea answered, turning the page.

Who should I ask though? There’s nobody here I really trust...

When they were done, Ilea found she could take some of the books with her without an additional fee – as long as she brought them back the next day.

She returned to a few of the pubs she had already visited, talking to various random Shadows about Dagon. It seemed his services were well-trusted, no matter who she asked.

She went back to her apartment to continue turning pages for Aki. They had a few books to get through but after several hours, she was getting bored. History was fine but when it was just this House did this, this House did that, it really got stale. She missed the adventure of an actual novel.

“I need a break,” she said as both her clothes and Aki vanished into her necklace. The next hour was quite a bit more enjoyable, though she did miss the convenience of batteries.

Maybe there's a magic wand for that... she thought, lying happily in her bed once she was finally done. The last ten minutes had felt more frustrating than anything else.

Ilea summoned her clothes onto her body and the sentient dagger into its sheath as she got out of bed again.

"I know what you did," Aki said.

"Don't tell me you have a libido. Should I ram you into the wall repeatedly?"

"Hah."

Aki's answer didn't quite resolve the mystery, but Ilea had other questions to ask. And not to her magical dagger.

She thought about leaving him in her necklace when she spoke to Dagon again, but in the end, she didn't think it necessary. Despite all the people she'd encountered so far, he hadn't revealed himself once, and he'd been providing advice and answers while being a dry, sarcastic little shit.

Of course, for Ilea, that wasn't exactly a negative.

FOURTEEN

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Questions

“So she returns. Did you find me trustworthy after all?” Dagon asked, looking over his glasses at Ilea.

“Well, I seem to be the only one around here, so I’m not so sure anymore. A lack of customers isn’t encouraging,” Ilea said as she walked through the empty entrance hall.

“It’s been a slow week. I presume it has to do with the Elven attacks. Many are out there fighting. Nearly all who remain are new members of the guild, and Viscera has draws that many deem more engaging than a library or the trade of knowledge,” Dagon explained.

“Yes, those. Well, I have some questions. I assume people can’t listen in?”

Dagon snapped his fingers, and Ilea was immediately on alert as her sphere cut off on the edges of the room.

The librarian smiled. “Not anymore.”

Ilea looked at Dagon and considered her first question.

Will have to be them, I suppose.

“Felicia and Edwin Redleaf, tell me about them.”

Dagon gave her a long look. He didn’t seem particularly surprised. If anything, he seemed amused.

“The banished Redleaf children. Or the runaways, who really knows?” Dagon said. “House Redleaf, led by Arthur Redleaf, is one of the most influential noble Houses in the capital of Lys. Supposedly, Edwin kidnapped his sister, defied his family, and left Virilya. That was around eight years ago, I believe.”

Ilea considered his words. He seemed interested in what she knew, about why she had asked about them – she could see it in his eyes.

One of the most influential Houses in Virilya. Judging from the way they acted, Edwin didn't kidnap her.

“Supposedly?”

Dagon smiled ever so slightly. “Supposedly. There were voices that asked questions, some outright claiming Arthur had them killed, but I believe it all died down rather quickly. Big news in the imperial court for a few days at most.”

“So, what happened?”

“What goes on behind the closed doors of the high nobility, especially in Virilya, is not shared with mere librarians like me. But, well, I might have been asked about these two before. And I heard the security around Arthur Redleaf has increased dramatically in recent years. One might come to some conclusions.”

Something made them leave, but the family didn't like it. And Arthur is scared they're coming for him? Was that the reason Edwin was so driven? But why go into the Taleen dungeon? Why look for that teleportation thing?

“I would trade quite a bit of information for anything recent that you have on those siblings,” Dagon said.

Just as she had thought.

“Can you tell me who asked about them?” Ilea asked, ignoring his request.

“Of course. They even requested I inform people about them. There's quite a bounty on anything recent about the two, though that's not well-known to anyone besides information brokers.”

“That why you asked me to share what I know?” Ilea asked, eyebrows rising skeptically.

“I trade in information and historical artifacts, Ilea, not in gold.”

“You can use gold to get those.”

He smiled. “It's more a consideration of principle. I have certain personal rules that have helped me succeed over the decades, and I don't intend to break them. I am interested in what you know. But I can tell this is not something you will negotiate on. If you find more and resolve whatever this is, I will be here, willing to store the knowledge. Once it is no longer relevant to you.”

“I'll think about that,” Ilea said. “The names?”

Dagon started writing on a sheet of paper that had appeared in his hand. “The names and locations of those who were looking for them. But I can tell you already that they’re associated with the Redleafs themselves.”

Guessed as much. So, if they’re working against their House, I won’t find anything there. But I suppose it’s a clue about what their goal was. Getting involved in major politics, the imperial court. That sounds like a really fucking bad idea.

She had come to care about the group, but this seemed like a situation where she’d be well over her head. For now, at least.

I’ll have to find out more, maybe travel to Virilya. But I have to get stronger first, or I’ll just cause more issues – for myself and everyone else.

Ilea considered, then summoned the rest of the damaged Legate Guardian armor.

“The entire set! Marvelous!” Dagon shot up from his chair, eyes wide as he inspected the ancient armor. He glanced at her and quickly made the whole thing vanish before she could change her mind.

“There was one last question regarding the Redleafs,” she said, and he sat back down before gesturing for her to continue. “What could Edwin and Felicia want with a Taleen teleportation platform?”

“No wonder you have Taleen artifacts,” Dagon said with a grin. “As to your question, many in the history of humanity have tried to decipher the mysteries left behind by the Taleen. Supposed long-range teleportation gates. Machine armies. Technologies that could change the entire landscape of our world. And everyone – so far – has failed. I hear that Arthur Redleaf is still quite invested in teleportation technology, though. He has been for at least a century. That is the only reasonable connection that I can suggest.”

Long-range teleportation. So they could be anywhere, but the connection is still Arthur. Confirmation, if anything.

“Wait. A century? He’s that old?”

“Of course. He is above level 200,” Dagon said. Then he smiled. “Oh dear. Well, I suppose you wouldn’t know. Once you reach level 200, aging is not nearly as noticeable. Better keep that in mind, especially when you see influential people who look young.”

Shit.

Wait. Does that mean I’m not aging as fast anymore? Hmm, I’ll shelve that one for now.

“Thank you. There are more questions I have...” she said, letting the comment hang almost as a question itself.

“I’ll let you know when I require additional payment,” Dagon said, amused at her tentative demeanor. He summoned a cup of steaming tea and sipped at it.

“I would like to know about other realms. Worlds here but not here. I’ve talked to a man who claimed to be from a different land, where magic was non-existent, there were no levels or stats, and machines and technology ruled everything. I found it intriguing, but when I looked for him the next day, he had vanished. I am good at finding people, but he was utterly gone. The thought of traveling through realms has never left me since.”

She was rather proud of her made-up narrative. Perhaps he would see through it, but then again, perhaps he wouldn’t.

Dagon scratched the short beard on his chin, looking deeply into her eyes. “There are stories. A lot of stories. Both about other realms and realm travelers. Demons summoned are supposedly from one such realm, but scholars still debate its existence. There are stories of a realm of the dead, and even realms of Elves and dragons.

“Some humans in recorded history have claimed to be from other realms, but without proof or a way to travel to such a realm, it cannot be confirmed. It is intriguing, and with all the knowledge I have, I find it unlikely that no other such realms exist, though how they manifest, I don’t know. The magic schools of space and void may offer some answers, but practitioners are rare, and most every scholar hoards their knowledge.”

He was still scratching his beard.

“The realm you speak of is intriguing. Levels and magic are ingrained in all of existence, or so I thought. It’s a completely abstract idea, but certainly interesting. I can see why the topic didn’t leave you. There are non-magical ways to power machines, but they are inefficient compared to mana. The equality in a society without magic would be astounding, however,” he said, but then he shook his head.

“No, better armor and gold would simply become much more influential when personal power is equalized. Though without magic and levels... yes, I can see how it could work. An amusing thought. Thank you for sharing this,” Dagon finished.

Great. I elicited a philosophical consideration instead of getting any useful information. Realm travelers are a thing, I guess, which makes me

possibly not the first. And so are other realms. Supposedly.

“Do you have records from the people who claimed to be realm travelers? Locations where I could find them?”

“Records, I do have,” he said, and he wrote down a few numbers on a piece of paper and held it out. “Locations, I do not.”

“That’s a shame,” Ilea said, taking the note. “I appreciate the info you shared, Dagon. And it was nice to make your acquaintance.”

He gave her a nod, the spells surrounding the room vanishing an instant later, and a stack of books appeared in front of him.

Ilea left Dagon with his books and went back into the library to find the records that matched the numbers she had been given. This time, though, she didn’t just turn the pages but read with Aki.

* * *

“This place does yield a lot,” Ilea said to Aki when she was lying in her bed. Not the bed provided to her but the one she had specifically bought. The Drake feathers were incredibly comfortable, but Ilea questioned the quality difference compared to something much more affordable – like bird feathers.

She couldn’t say the same thing about the gourmet food Keyla had managed to whip up, but maybe there was no level 160 bedmaker out there.

The stories and records on supposed realm travelers were interesting. Those who had made such claims were incredibly diverse in how they acted, where they claimed to be from, what they revealed, and what they managed to contribute.

The only connection between them was that they each claimed to have come from another realm entirely. None claimed to know how they got here, but the phenomenon, while rare, was not unheard of. It still left Ilea without a real answer to her questions, but she did feel a little more at ease, knowing there had been others like her. And that there could be other travelers somewhere in these lands, even now. Maybe even from Earth.

While the phenomenon would likely not spark an intense reaction in many, there had been a few stories where people had been imprisoned or worse for not letting go of their narrative by healing orders, religions, and

governments. Their reactions seemed as diverse as the origins the realm travelers claimed to have.

I don't think many would call me a demon or something, but I should probably keep it to myself for now.

"How long until the next team fighting class starts?" she asked absentmindedly.

"A few hours," Aki answered. Ilea still wasn't sure if the dagger somehow had the ability to know the exact time at all times or if he was just guessing. So far, he'd been accurate enough that she had decided to trust him.

"This other realm you spoke of. Is that where you're from?" Aki asked suddenly.

"I don't feel like talking about that yet. Is that okay?"

"There is no rush. I am a dagger. I won't run away."

"Thanks," she said, and she soon fell asleep, bound by the charms of her comfortable bed.

When she finally woke from Aki loudly pronouncing it was time for class, she felt rather dazed as she put the bed back inside her necklace and Aki into his sheath.

Good nap. Definitely worth the gold...

Ilea walked out of her apartment with Aki, and they made their way over to where Team 34's group fighting exercises had been held the day before. Ilea walked down the corridor and quickly blinked inside.

"Hey!" she shouted to those already present. Everyone was on time – except for Eve.

Kyrian nodded at Ilea, as did Claire. Trian didn't so much as turn toward her, but Ilea was sure he was *thrilled* to see her. His outfit was impeccable once again, putting everybody else to shame with their plain, serviceable gear.

Claire had a mix of robes and armor on today – no doubt she'd optimized her gear after seeing each of their fighting styles. It looked heavier than what both Trian and Kyrian were wearing. Ilea wasn't sure this was their best equipment though. She expected Trian at least had better gear stashed away.

He does have a storage device... one of the few things we seem to have in common.

Joseph was nowhere to be seen, and the team seemed to be unsure of how to proceed.

“Should we start?” Ilea asked, taking the initiative. “Me and Trian, Kyrian and Claire? Until the others join us?”

“Perfect. As much as you’re irritating, you do get to the point. I can respect that,” Trian said. He teleported away, appearing again and activating his skills. Ilea waved to the other two, who seemed a little overwhelmed, and then blinked away as well, State of Azarinth and Form of Ember coming to life before Shroud of Ash enveloped her.

They continued where they had left off, with Ilea attacking, ash surging in all directions as she tried to disturb his vision. The first bolts of red lightning landed around her as she ran through the mist of ash, a big grin on her face, her black hair pushed away by the explosions of stone around her.

* * *

As Edwin looked through the documents stored in the hidden vault behind the now bloodied painting, a soft gasp came from the room beyond, followed by the sound of something hitting the floor. A shiver ran down his back as he made himself concentrate on the documents again.

“Found anything?” Maria asked as she stepped into the room, her clothes clean and her expression neutral. Edwin locked eyes with her for a moment.

“Yes, finally something useful. They’ve expanded into whoring now, and it seems they’re financing the production of enchanted weapons for Baralia,” he explained, handing over some of the documents.

“Treason then? Can we make a case with the Empress?”

“You didn’t learn a lot about politics in your time as a prisoner.”

“I didn’t, no,” Maria said, her tone neutral as she left the room again.

Edwin continued his work. They had limited time. Soon the pattern would be uncovered, and hunters would find them. At least so far, their capabilities had been grossly underestimated, but he didn’t doubt the competence of his enemies.

The distraction of Baralia’s stewing preparations was of little help to his endeavors, but he’d finally found a town lord stupid enough to document

every unnecessary detail. He would've died either way, but at least one of the bastards had helped them out.

He gathered the necessary documents and stored them in Aliana's ring.

"Come now," he said to Maria, who was waiting outside, well within earshot, before the two jumped out an open window and into the fields beyond.

They were getting closer to the capital with every passing day. The goal that had seemed so unreachable for years was now closer than ever. He allowed himself to smile a little as he dashed toward their hideout, his childhood friend following quietly behind.

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Vampire?

Ilea closed her book on monsters and sighed. There were so many strange creatures floating around in her mind. She really needed a punching bag.

“Would any of you like to continue sparring? Maybe make it a regular thing? I don’t need a lot of sleep, and while I’m here, it seems like a good way to spend the time.”

Kyrian nodded. “I t... train in the woods where you found me yesterday most days. You can join if you like,” he told her.

Eve frowned. “Maybe I can come join you sometimes. You’re both easy enough to find,”

Both Kyrian and Ilea looked at Claire.

“I... train alone, whenever I’m not studying...” She scratched the back of her head and let her gaze drift to the floor.

“Perfect. I assume you won’t argue against the increased efficiency of training together then?” Ilea asked.

Claire shook her head and then looked at Ilea, her eyes brightening.

“Actually, maybe we could train in Eregar’s Haven, but we’d need the whole team for that, I think. We’re a new team, after all.” She put her hand to her chin.

“Eregar’s Haven?” Ilea asked.

“It’s a place below Viscera. I’ve not been there, but I hear it’s massive. Magically constructed and self-sustaining, with different environments. There are monsters too. We could train to fight them as a team,” Claire replied.

“Could put some of that monster knowledge to use,” Ilea murmured.

“Free stuff to kill? Sounds great. Didn’t know the Hand had their very own dungeon,” Eve asked.

“And all monsters are close to level 200. Meaning it’s most useful to newer teams. I have a theory that the Hand’s level 200 requirement is there in big part because of Eregar’s Haven. The Elders really want to keep it the way it is,” Claire explained.

“Would be a nice change of scenery from the stone training halls,” Eve said and made a puking gesture.

“They have regular tournaments there as well. For Shadows to compete against each other, to see where they stand.”

“T... tournaments?” Kyrian interjected.

Claire sighed and rolled her eyes. But Ilea also saw her lip curve up slightly.

“Yes, it’s part of the rankings. Finished jobs and the power of killed beings are the biggest parts of the calculation, but bouts against other teams and their members help as well. It can get very messy though. That’s why they’re only held once every year or so. Many teams aren’t even around and even fewer participate, but it’s a good way to see people on our level fight. All Shadow teams near Ravenhall at least come to see the fights.

“And apart from all that, you can challenge anybody else in the Haven at any time. It has no impact on the rankings and everybody can refuse, but it’s an easy way to fight people on your level without them killing you. Because that isn’t allowed,” Claire finished.

“So that’s where the middle elevator goes?” Ilea asked. She had been wondering about that.

Claire nodded. “Yes, exactly. There’s just one problem with all this. We need the entire team, otherwise we’re not allowed to go down there. We’re new members, after all.”

“Could we just sneak in?” Eve offered.

“The point is that we train as a *team*,” Claire said.

Eve sighed.

“I’ll talk to Trian, find out why he’s always so busy after our classes,” Ilea said.

“Need help finding him?” Eve asked.

“I’ll try on my own. Will let you know if I need assistance,” Ilea said with a smile.

* * *

Ilea had her target in mind and went back to the training hall. She activated Hunter's Sight and looked around. Trian's smell was easy enough to identify, and she quickly followed the trail out of Viscera and into Ravenhall. She quickly found herself passing the innermost walls of the city and into its very heart.

The buildings here were more lavishly decorated; banners and beautifully carved doors stood out compared to what she had seen in the outermost parts of the city. Apparently, though, the city didn't allow the rich and powerful to get a lot of space; the luxurious-looking stone structures were placed in close proximity to each other, just like the buildings in the rest of the city.

Ilea blinked inside the building where Trian's trail had led and found herself inside a beautifully furnished room. Comparable to the Forkspear estate in Dawntree. There were paintings on the walls, and a fire burned in the hearth. The room was empty.

The smell was especially nice to Ilea's enhanced senses as she took everything in. Something akin to cinnamon. Ilea sensed with her sphere that a man dressed in fine clothing was approaching the door from the other side, so she blinked below. Her sphere only told her that there were more floors underneath her. It seemed like an excessive number of cellars.

She soon found the trail again, but it was isolated and weak. *He probably teleported down here as well...* she thought, considering it to be the only explanation for the sudden reappearance of his smell.

A couple of levels further down, she finally found what she had been looking for. And it certainly wasn't an important meeting of nobles. Admittedly it wasn't an orgy or blood sacrifice either, which one might have expected from a nobleman calling himself a 'vampyr.' Whatever that truly meant.

No, it was something quite simple. It was also something Ilea had somewhat expected. Trian was working on his skills. In an expensive and very haute couture way. Ilea stayed in the room above him and perceived him and his assistants through her sphere.

Trian stood in the middle of the room and proceeded to drain the ten people arrayed around him, occasionally pausing for them to be healed.

Considering the pain on their faces, Ilea thought he was alternating between mana and health-draining skills.

Quite efficient, kind of fucked up too...

Still, judging too fast could lead to misunderstandings. So far, at least nobody had died. And it wasn't like Ilea really knew any of the people there. Maybe it was just a job anyone could be hired for? Maybe they volunteered? Ilea surely wasn't the only one in Ravenhall looking to improve her resistances, after all.

The session continued for quite a while until one of the healers collapsed to one knee.

"Are you alright?" Trian asked immediately as another healer went to check on the woman. He sighed as he watched.

"Yeah, she just needs a while to recover some mana," the man who had checked on her said.

"Good. Get her to a bed, and then we'll continue. Take a couple of minutes, everyone," Trian said, using a towel that appeared in his hand to dab away the sweat on his brow.

Ilea decided it was a good time to go and say hello, so she blinked down into the room.

"Hey there," she called as soon as she appeared. Her voice was louder than she had expected in the underground space. Everyone tensed up as magic flared and weapons were drawn. The only one who stayed calm was Trian himself, and he quickly motioned for everybody to stand down.

"Ilea. Well, I did kind of expect somebody to invade my privacy at one point or another. Didn't think it would be you though. What is it? I hope you're not here to waste my time."

"We missed you in class. Again," Ilea said as she started walking around the room. The other people were focused on her but seemed to have calmed down now that they saw she was familiar with their boss.

"It's a waste of my time, as I explained to you before. Please don't tell me you're *that* stupid."

"We want to train. In the Haven. And we need the entire team."

"That's not my problem."

"So you'd rather stay down here, draining your slaves or whatever the fuck this is? Wait... *are* they slaves?" Ilea asked, checking everyone's reactions. Most of them just looked to Trian. A few even seemed angry at her accusation.

“They aren’t slaves. The resistances being built – and the available healers – aren’t easily acquired. Everyone, please give us some privacy.”

He gestured for them to leave, and so they did.

“So... they’re employees?” Ilea asked, walking around the room and picking up a staff from a nearby weapon rack.

“They’re employed by my House. In sought-after positions, in fact. It’s not cheap, but it’s efficient. Having more than one target is better for these specific skills. That’s why I’m doing this, and why I’m not with you.”

Ilea twirled her newfound staff around.

Trian’s eyes followed her movements. He appeared vaguely amused. “Hmm... Don’t tell me you would’ve actually attacked me if they *were* slaves?”

Ilea simply held his gaze. Trian blinked first.

“Well, look at you. A righteous hero, are we? Are you going to declare war on three entire nations then?”

Well, that’s new. And fucked up. Suppose it makes sense with how power works in this world.

“I’m not strong enough to declare war just yet, but who knows, maybe I will at some point,” she said, more to mock his attempt at provocation.

He just laughed. “You silly, country healer. When I’m done at the Hand, I’ll go back to my House and be part of the court of Empress Alyris. You’ll just be a Shadow, killing monsters in bumfuck nowhere.”

Ilea grinned. “Perfect. Sounds exactly like my plan. So, until then, you can join us in the Haven. You’ll have more than one target there, and we can actually fight back. Or is the noble boy scared of getting hurt?”

He smiled. “Your provocations are wasted on me.”

“Then at least listen to reason. Most of us don’t need a lot of sleep, and we’ve been working together to improve our skills. We need a full team to do that. I can see how this kind of training is efficient for you, but that’s what? Two skills? I doubt they can take a full-on attack from you or have the ability to match your speed.” Ilea smiled, still absently twirling the staff.

Trian sighed. In a very exaggerated manner. “Alright.”

“Then, follow me, Sparky,” she said, blinking upward. Trian first teleported to a side room and informed his training staff about his plans, reassuring them they would still get paid for the whole session. She heard him with her enhanced senses and was slightly impressed he didn’t just bail on them without a word. He appeared next to her moments later.

“That wasn’t cheap,” he said in an annoyed tone. “Well? Go on...”

Ilea smiled and blinked upward again until they were standing on top of Trian’s mansion. The weather was nice. A few clouds dotted the horizon, and a cool winter breeze flowed through her hair.

“Can you fly?” Ilea asked. Trian jumped off the house, and red lightning erupted from his back, sparks moving to imitate the shape of wings. The energy somehow kept him in the air. She activated her own wings and followed.

“I’m jealous. Those look fancy,” she said as she hovered next to him.

“They’re too bright, but it’s what I have. Not good for sneaking up on anything.”

“I don’t think sneaking fits you in any way, noble boy,” Ilea said before she accelerated toward the forest, where the others would be training already.

The wind blew through her hair as she smiled at the joy of flying. She laughed as Trian tried hard to keep up. He didn’t seem to be quite as fast in the air as he was on the ground, where he matched her well enough.

“Huh, you actually did it,” Eve said, walking up to Ilea and Trian as they landed and their wings dissolved.

“Illusionist,” Trian said with the barest tilt of his head.

“Noble,” Eve answered, with a similar tilt and a mocking grin on her face.

“Hey Eve, where are the others?” Ilea asked, looking around.

“Follow me. They started discussing runes, and I got bored. I take it we’re going to the Haven?”

“We plan to, yes.”

Eve nodded lightly at Ilea’s remark and led them to Claire and Kyrian, who were sitting over a bunch of papers and sketching out various runes.

“Mr. Alymie,” Claire said without looking up. “I see you’ve joined us.” Kyrian seemed fascinated by the contents of the paper and didn’t look up from the sketches.

Ilea couldn’t make much sense of them. They looked somewhat similar to the runes that glowed on her skin, but then again, so did all runes she’d seen so far.

Another language...

Languages weren’t her best skill. If she hadn’t gotten her Elos Standard language skill when she’d arrived, she would’ve been truly lost.

Claire stood up and smiled. "To the Haven then, Team 34."

Ilea laughed at the frowns on both Eve's and Trian's faces.

"To the Haven!" she yelled and raised her fist. "Hey, which of you can fly? We'll be faster if we fly. Trian and me, obviously. Eve?"

"I hate flying," Eve said.

"What?" Ilea asked in disbelief.

"I said, I hate flying," Eve repeated.

"No, I mean, I understood what you said," Ilea said, twirling her index finger while pointing at her temple. "It just makes absolutely no sense."

Eve rolled her eyes. "Can't do it anyway."

"Me neither, sadly," Claire said. "But I'm sure I'll figure out some rune usage at some point. I think I'm pretty close, but it's not really flying yet."

"That's nice, it'll be good to have more people capable of flying at some point. Kyrian?" Ilea said.

"N... no, I have ideas like Claire but n... nothing yet." He looked a little sad about it, so Ilea gave him an encouraging grin.

"Alright, well, let's add a new formation to the team tactics training then. Eve, come hug me," Ilea said.

Eve just gave her a look and crossed her arms.

Ilea sighed. "Come on, it's far more efficient and something we might need to learn if we have to travel long distances for a mission."

Ilea spread her wings behind her and held out her arms, ready to embrace the beautiful yet terrifying Eve. The idea was equal parts efficient, fun, and – if Ilea was honest – revenge for the sacrilege of not enjoying flying.

Eve relented, but she did roll her eyes two more times in the process.

Ilea started flapping her wings and found Eve's weight to be nothing more than what she'd consider a small backpack. It was a little more uneven, but with her buffs, it wouldn't be much of an issue.

Ilea hovered and held out both her hands. "Come on, hang on, guys," she said, looking at her other two teammates.

Claire and Kyrian looked at each other skeptically but, in the end, each of them held on to one of Ilea's arms. She grabbed them and started to ascend. It was much easier than she had expected.

A human shouldn't be able to fly at all, let alone carry three people with a wingspan of less than four meters. I like this magic business...

Ilea nodded to Trian. The noble had been waiting to one side, and his electric wings had melted the snow and singed the wood around him. He looked at her with a blank expression before he shook his head slightly, sighed, and took off toward the city of Ravenhall.

Ilea followed. At first, she had to concentrate to keep her balance, but after just a minute, she found her groove. Moments later, she smiled at Trian, who had to work hard to stay ahead.

Eve swore the entire way, eyes screwed tightly shut.

When they reached the buildings in front of the Hand's headquarters, Ilea landed and let go of her two arm passengers. Eve was staring right into her face with a frown and a murderous glare.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" Ilea said as the woman pushed away and hissed. "Like a bird, set free," Ilea continued, her voice growing louder as Eve walked off toward the entrance. "Floating in the air!"

She didn't miss the smile on Trian's face.

"I thought you hated us, Sparky?" Ilea asked.

"There are no traders in the Haven," Claire said, interrupting any retort from the noble as they entered Viscera. "Let's stock up on food and supplies before we go down there. The monsters are below level 200, but it can still be dangerous."

"I can carry most of it," Ilea said, tapping her necklace.

"We shouldn't rely on storage items," Claire said.

"Why not?" Trian asked, his confusion apparent.

"This isn't an actual mission. We are here to train, and this will help with organizational skills, with rationing, and it will add another layer of challenge and planning. Not everyone here has a storage device."

"You mean I'll actually have to think about what to put in my pack?" Ilea asked.

Claire gave her a weary smile. "Yes, Ilea. Thinking is often useful, as a matter of fact."

SIXTEEN

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Workaholics

Ilea didn't spend particularly long on throwing some rope, a hunting knife, and a spare set of clothing into her pack. With her healing, there was no need for bandages or the like. Given her ability to fly, she wondered how helpful this whole exercise really was for her, but she kind of saw Claire's point. She filled the rest of her pack with dry foods – jerky, dried fruits, and nuts.

She joined the others with her lean backpack and smiled at Claire's heavy gear.

"Do you really need a tent?" Ilea asked.

Claire looked at her with some confusion. "How have you survived until now?"

It didn't sound like an accusation but a serious question.

"I can heal. And I have resistances. Vitality takes care of the rest, I think."

"Sleeping in the wilderness really shouldn't be a problem for you," Eve said, giving Claire a look. "No offense."

"I... I just try to be prepared," Claire said, shifting her massive backpack, a slight flush to her cheeks.

"That's what this exercise is for," said Ilea. "We're not the only ones who can learn from this. I'm sure there's some useful stuff in there, but there's no way you need all of it. Plus, it will kill your maneuverability and make stealth far tougher."

"Lean packs have their advantages," Eve nodded. Her own pack was smaller and colored in such a way that it blended in with her leathers.

Claire didn't seem particularly happy about it, but she took some notes. Kyrian and Trian joined then a few moments later, and the group set off.

It wasn't long before they reached the central elevator. A Shadow stationed at the entrance confirmed that their entire team was present, and they were let through.

They entered a vast corridor lit by magical lamps that led them to the elevator, and after a two-minute descent, one of the walls fell away to reveal a vast underground landscape beneath them.

It was breathtaking.

There were trees of differing kinds, lakes, and even mountains. The cavern ceiling was so far away and the walls so distant that Ilea thought they had come out into an open valley on the other side of the mountain.

All of it was illuminated by a blazing sun in the distance. It was nowhere near as large or bright as the suns in the real sky, but compared to the magical lights Ilea had encountered in the Taleen dungeon, it provided quite a bit more illumination, though the temperature hadn't really changed.

"They made a sun?" Ilea asked.

"Don't be silly," Trian said.

"Runework," Claire said with a proud smile.

"You know how it was made?" Ilea asked.

"I have no idea, but runework is involved, I know that much."

"Is that a desert?" Eve exclaimed, pointing.

Ilea squinted her eyes and saw what Eve had spotted. A section of land covered entirely in sand. Several kilometers' worth. The entirety of the Haven was many times larger than Ravenhall itself.

They have all this down here?

"The diversity here is fabricated," Claire said. "No natural space would be like this."

"The floating orb of sunlight hovering at the back kind of gave it away," Eve said.

It really does look like a sun, but it's not as bright, Ilea thought, though she still had to look away after staring at it for more than a few seconds.

The lakes looked real enough. They reflected the light and were surrounded by forests of fir trees. Other sections were all birches, and yet other sections were covered in rocky hills. A few rivers flowed through the entirety of the Haven. There were no clouds above, but the cavern ceiling

was covered in magical lights and blue crystals that added to the illusion of a sky above.

The descent with the elevator took another several minutes, letting them take in the sights.

“How are they powering all of this?” Ilea asked.

“It was created millennia past. It’s covered in runes and is intricately balanced,” Claire said.

“That doesn’t answer the question,” Eve said.

“I don’t know. I don’t know if anybody does, not really,” Claire said.

“And the Hand refuses to let scholars of Virilya have a look. It’s arrogant. Their research has yielded so little,” Trian said.

“But didn’t the Hand build this place,” Eve said. “Why research it?”

“It’s *Eregar’s* Haven. He was supposedly an ancient Elder of the Hand, but he’s shrouded in mystery,” Claire said. “They don’t know how this place was built or why.”

“That’s what they tell everyone,” Eve said.

“Exactly,” Trian added.

The sound of the platform stopping interrupted the conversation, and everyone stepped out of the half-open elevator shaft and onto the gravel.

The smells of different vegetation, the blinding sun, and the birds singing made Ilea think that spring had come.

She closed her eyes and breathed in and out several times. Her wings spread behind her, and she shot into the air. The view changed as she flew up, and the vast landscape dropped away before her again, her vantage point now even better.

There was a forest to the left, with lakes and even a marsh in between. Two immense mountains could be seen in the distance.

This is crazy... Ilea thought as she descended again, her mind rejecting the truth of this place. She considered the possibility that they were in some sort of pocket dimension, perhaps something like her storage device.

“Is this real? No illusions?” Eve asked as Ilea landed.

“I believe there are some illusions at play, but it’s mostly to do with lighting to obscure the cavern walls. Most of what you see is real,” Claire answered.

“The metal is singing to me,” Kyrian said with a rare smile. “There’s so much of it here, below the ground. The runes carved inside are strong and... old,” he added, walking in a circle, eyes wide.

“Good place for a winter vacation,” Ilea said, which got a chuckle from Eve. The illusionist rogue was leaning against the rocky wall they had just descended, eying the scene ahead. Evaluating.

Ilea looked at the high-reaching trees a few hundred meters ahead. To the left were grass-covered hills. She could even see a few deer moving in the distance.

“Eregar, huh,” she murmured.

“I don’t expect he built all of this himself,” Claire said.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he just found it. An ancient ruin or something, left behind, that he claimed as his own creation,” Eve said with a scowl.

“This is impressive, but it’s nothing compared to Virilya,” Trian said with a proud smile.

“I’m just glad they added forests and natural light instead of the monotone green that the Taleen use. This is quite an improvement,” Ilea said.

The words produced a side glance from Trian. “You’ve been inside a Taleen dungeon?”

“Yeah, it’s how I leveled up so quickly,” Ilea answered and started walking up a nearby slope covered in tall grass.

“Against Taleen Guardians? Well, there are certainly easier ways to level up. They’re pretty much the most dangerous things we know of at level 200, at least when it comes to monsters without specializations,” Trian said. There was a hint of respect in his voice.

“You know they’re not monsters, right? They were made by the Taleen Dwarves. At least, that’s what I assume.” Ilea stopped and looked around. “Just like this was made by humans...”

“Well, let’s hope there aren’t any Guardians here then. Let’s find a place to stay for now.” Claire said, joining Ilea at her side.

Where’s the wind coming from? Ilea asked herself, watching the high grass sway and ripple across the plains.

“I think something near the mountains would suit us best, but let’s move around a little,” Ilea said. She started walking again and saw with her sphere that Eve and Trian were close behind, followed by Claire and Kyrian.

After the grassy hills came a section of forest with some low-level boar-like creatures. None of them chose to attack, and neither did anybody on

their team feel the need to bother them.

Claire explained what she knew of the Haven's creatures as they walked. There were rules in place, and the possible repercussions weren't usually worth whatever sadistic tendencies the person would satisfy by killing low-level beasts for sport. There was a whole world filled with monsters out there, after all. Plenty down here too.

After around an hour's travel at a brisk walking speed, the forest opened up to reveal a small lake, reflecting the artificial sunlight coming from above. Ilea saw entire swarms of fish moving inside the lake. It really was the largest cavern she had ever seen.

If we really are in a cave...

The group walked around the lake, entering rocky terrain covered in cave entrances and boulders that Ilea thought would be useful as cover. Scorch marks and chipped edges here and there suggested she wasn't the first to consider it.

"Something like this?" Claire shouted from her position at the back of the group.

"Looks good," Eve said. She immediately dropped her pack and stretched.

"This should serve well as a training ground. What's the plan?" Trian asked. He cracked his neck, looking toward Claire, who faltered. She seemed surprised that he would consult her.

"We should warm up first. Ilea, you're supposed to be the one who'll take the brunt of enemy damage," Claire said, glancing over at her.

Ilea smiled and teleported a little distance away from the others. She activated her buffs and raised her right arm, gesturing for them to come at her.

"Let's get started."

Trian was the first to respond, his lightning flaring up before he sent a bolt at her.

Ilea didn't dodge it, feeling the lightning's energy spread over and through her ashen armor.

Kyrian glanced at Claire, hesitant to engage.

"You let us know when you're about to die, honey," Eve said and vanished.

"If you get me that far," Ilea murmured, trying to make out any changes in her sphere. She stepped aside as another bolt of lightning burned through

the ground and ripped into a boulder behind her.

“So we’re dodging now?” Trian asked.

“We didn’t really discuss any rules, did we?” Ilea replied before she appeared in front of him.

Ilea spent the next half hour running and flying through the vicinity, spells exploding behind her as her entire team hunted her. They exchanged blows here and there, but the others soon started to work together a little more efficiently, covering each other to counter her teleportation.

When she ran out of mana and was left only with the option of running, they split into teams to have bouts.

Ilea first faced Claire, who was already setting up her runes. Trian was confronting a now invisible Eve, sending broad arcs of lightning around him in an effort to locate her as Kyrian watched on with his metal floating around him.

Let’s hope they don’t kill each other.

“Are you sure you don’t need to recover more mana and health before we begin?” Claire asked.

Ilea still had the taste of blood in her mouth, and she had only recovered a third of her mana. But if anything, that made her want to fight even more.

“In a real fight, you don’t always have that luxury.”

Claire nodded. “I understand.”

Ilea squinted at her slightly. *Do you now?*

She didn’t wait for a signal to begin and instead teleported close. An explosion lit up next to her, making her step aside. She skidded on the dirt and continued toward her target, her punch slamming into a barrier that flared beneath her fist.

Ilea punched again and saw her Destruction burn into the translucent magic. Another punch and the magic shattered. An explosion blossomed right in front of her, roaring through her ash armor and searing her body. She grinned and teleported through the damaged barrier and next to Claire.

As her fist landed on the woman’s chest, she heard bones cracking. She landed another punch on Claire’s raised arms before an explosion sent her skidding back slightly.

“Stop,” Claire hissed.

Ilea was about to rush her again when her eyes widened. Claire had fallen to one knee, her right arm limp and bloody at her side. She coughed red droplets onto the dirt.

“Oh shit! Sorry!” Ilea said, hurrying next to her teammate, healing magic immediately flowing into the woman. Ilea set Claire’s bones and healed her bruises.

Claire took in a shuddering breath. “It hurts...”

Her voice was strained. Quiet.

Ilea smiled. “Yeah. That’s part of the gig. Want to take a break? I c—”

Claire grasped her arm. “Stop the healing.” She looked up, wiping her eyes before she stood up. “We go on.”

“Claire, your hands are shaking. Two of your ribs are still broken.”

“We go on,” Claire said, but she didn’t sound quite as convinced as before.

Ilea stepped aside. She looked at Claire and saw both determination and fear in her eyes. “I’ve seen stronger explosions from you. You could’ve stopped me.”

Claire’s eyes widened slightly.

“You’re with the Hand now. And I’m your tank. There’s no need to hold back.”

“You might get injured, you’re not full on mana...” Claire said, refusing to meet Ilea’s eyes.

Ilea smiled. “So?”

“I don’t think it’s effici—”

Ilea rushed toward her, raising her fist and slamming it into the barrier that appeared. Her second punch left cracks as destructive energies spread into the magic.

Claire took a step back and nearly stumbled.

“Fight me!” Ilea said. Her next punch shattered the barrier, and she rushed in, but when she locked eyes with Claire, it felt like time had stopped.

She’s terrified.

Then she felt pure, bright-hot energy.

Her ears rang as she hit the ground, rolling, fire clinging to her armor. Ilea coughed up blood, reforming the damaged ash as she pushed herself back up.

She turned to see Claire stumbling back, her eyes wide.

“I’m s... sorry,” she whispered, half to Ilea, half seemingly to herself.

Ilea cracked her neck, her wounds healing as she spread her arms.

“More of that,” she said, walking toward her. “I *liked* that.”

Claire looked at her with fear and confusion, her brows drawing together as she struggled to analyze the situation. She shook her head, finally coming to some sort of conclusion. Then she started laughing, tears in her eyes.

Ilea teleported closer. "You're still in a fight. Focus."

She tapped Claire gently on the forehead to make her point, then teleported back to her starting position.

Claire wiped her eyes and then took a deep breath, her gaze locking with Ilea's.

"Again."

Ilea raised her arms in a fighting stance. Her grin was wide as she sprinted forward.

* * *

"I need healing," Eve said from the sidelines, her teeth gritted, burns showing on her arms and neck. Their respective fights had been going on for some time.

"Break?" Ilea asked, glancing at Claire before she teleported to Eve and started healing her.

"Already giving up, Eve?" Trian asked in a mocking tone. "And here I thought nobles 'wouldn't stand a chance' against your skills."

"It's a one versus one bout, you stupid fuck," Eve said, her tone more annoyed than usual. "You know I'm here. If you didn't..."

"We all have to adapt," Trian countered, as if he were explaining it to a child.

Eve glanced at Ilea and shook her head. "Sure, sure. He can 'adapt' to a dagger in his neck when he's sleeping," she muttered.

"I..." Kyrian said from nearby.

"Don't start killing people. We're finally all training together," Ilea said with a smile as she touched Eve's shoulder. Then she spoke up. "What is it, Kyrian?"

They all focused on him. Claire looked exhausted, and her nose was broken. Trian had a winning smile, but he wasn't walking quite straight and was holding his side, unable to conceal the blood. Eve just looked angry, but Ilea's healing was letting her know how injured she really was.

“I c... c...”

“Stop stuttering,” Trian spat, crossing his arms.

Ilea was about to say something when Trian sighed and continued more softly.

“Breathe. Breathe and close your eyes, then open them and speak.”

Kyrian seemed unsure, but then he did just that. He closed his eyes and breathed, then opened them and spoke.

“I c... cooked. Something. If y... you want to take a b... break.”

Well, that didn't work...

Ilea smiled. “Food sounds lovely.”

“Monster,” Eve grunted, not even looking at her.

Ilea grabbed her arm when she tried to walk away. “I’m not done with you.”

Eve glanced back, her eyes narrowing. “I’m fine.”

The others went to join Kyrian as Ilea inspected Eve. “You’re in a team, and I’m the healer. Let me do my job.” She glared at her charge, daring her to try and get away.

Eve sighed, then her eyes softened. She looked at the others before her gaze moved to the glittering lake. “You might just be the most annoying one,” she murmured.

Ilea kept her hand on the woman’s shoulder and smiled. “Mission accomplished.”

Eve grunted.

“So, you have second-tier pain tolerance?” Ilea asked.

Eve gave her a look but didn’t reply.

“You know your bones are still broken even if you can’t feel it.”

“Are you done?” Eve asked, though her voice lacked the same bite.

Ilea focused on the last broken rib before she turned toward the food. It smelled like fish.

“Now I am,” she said. “Did he hunt that while we trained? Impressive.”

“Falling for the first man who hunts you some food?” Eve teased. Her fake smile was back, but it looked a little less forced than usual.

“Hey, don’t act like I’m *that* easily impressed,” Ilea said, glancing toward Kyrian. “He cooked it too.”

Eve took a deep breath and sighed, but Ilea didn’t miss the hint of a genuine smile on her face.

Ilea sat down on a rock and watched the lake. Her gaze wandered to the distant magic on the other side of the body of water, beams of light flashing where another team of Shadows was training. She smiled and thanked Kyrian for the freshly caught and cooked fish.

I think I'll enjoy this.

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SEVENTEEN

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Rarities

It was only their third day down in the Haven, and she already needed a break. Nonetheless, Ilea stood behind the tree and waited for the signal.

Can't believe this is the third attempt, she thought with a sigh.

When she felt a pulse of mind magic, she rushed forward. Runes glowed in the sunlit clearing, their prey staggering as Eve's mind magic took effect.

Claire had suggested they try and hunt a verot, one of the more elusive monsters that lived down in the Haven. The creature's height reached Ilea's waist, its thin and wiry limbs were covered in gray rock, and two emerald eyes were set into its horned head. It was something like a cross between a goblin and a gargoyle.

It dodged aside as she reached it and Trian flashed past it too, brushing against her arm in his attempt to grab the monster. Kyrian joined from the side, reaching out to snare its legs but instead receiving a slash to his stomach from its clawed arm.

Next, Claire's barrier flared to life around them without warning, causing both Ilea and Trian to crash into the golden light and fall in a tumble of limbs.

When Ilea turned around, she could see the creature already tunneling back down into the earth. They had failed. Again.

She gritted her teeth and blinked next to Kyrian, touching his stomach to heal him, fresh blood flowing over her hands.

Trian appeared next to the creature and managed to grab its disappearing tail, but it lashed out with one of its stony, clawed legs,

breaking free of his grip before burrowing deeper.

“Fuck!” Ilea exclaimed.

As Claire’s barrier came down, Eve appeared in one of the trees, jumping down with a frown.

“What the fuck was that?”

“She got in my way,” Trian said.

“I got in the way? I nearly caught it!” Ilea said. “Can we go back to fighting each other?”

“We could’ve just killed it.”

Claire sighed. “You know that’s not the point.”

“It’s an arbitrary challenge,” Trian said.

Ilea was annoyed that she agreed with him. They could be leveling their resistances or skills. She saw the point in trying to improve their teamwork, but why did it have to be with an annoying challenge like this?

“This is very much a situation we might have to deal with in the future,” Claire said, her voice that of a beleaguered schoolteacher who knew her words would have little impact. “Catching a person or monster without being able to just blast it away is a common problem for teams. We—”

Claire stopped herself. She closed her eyes and sighed.

“You know what. I don’t want to explain this again. If you want to just kill it, go ahead.”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but it’s gone. Past *your* barrier that didn’t cover the ground,” Trian said.

“I think we s... should take a b... break,” Kyrian offered.

“Agreed,” Ilea answered. Bashing each others’ heads in was one thing, but while they were already learning to better defend against each others’ magic, they had yet to figure out how to work together. And she didn’t feel like figuring that out today.

“Can’t you make your armor stronger with your metal, by the way?” Trian asked, looking at Kyrian. “You can’t be getting seriously injured by every level 200 creature we fight.”

“I d...” Kyrian’s voice trailed off as he looked at the ground.

“You got injured too, you shit,” Ilea retorted, glaring at Trian. She shook her head. “Let’s take a break before we kill each other. We’ll meet here again tomorrow morning, yeah?”

“Works for me,” Trian said before he flew off in a shower of sparks.

“We’re supposed to stay down here for a week at least,” Claire said.

“He’s already gone,” Ilea said.

Eve sighed and vanished.

“Her too. Will she come back tomorrow, do you think?” Claire asked.

“I guess we’ll see,” Ilea said.

Claire closed her eyes for a long moment, saying nothing and taking deep breaths. Then she abruptly turned in the opposite direction and walked off, leaving Kyrian and Ilea alone.

Ilea sighed at Claire’s back and looked over to see Kyrian staring at the ground nearby.

Why are you so fucking lost?

She wanted to just leave him there but stopped herself.

You are frustrated. And annoyed.

“I need some actual training. Do you want to level up your curse magic?” she asked.

She saw his face light up and sighed.

This team shit can be fucking annoying too. Bunch of stubborn idiots.

* * *

Alright, here goes nothing...

Ilea took a step into the circle. The familiar cold feeling immediately filled her stomach, and her body started to feel *wrong*. She found herself gritting her teeth and clenching her fists hard enough to break the skin. Still, she persevered and closed her eyes, steadying her breathing.

It was hard. One of the hardest things Ilea had ever done.

Memories of the Taleen dungeon filled her mind. How weak she had been, all those she had failed to save. But she pushed them away, pushed through the pain. Sweat drenched her brow, and droplets of blood decorated the ground as she healed, clenched her fists, and healed again.

It was harder than killing her first Drake, harder even than killing her first human. The weird pain and coldness throbbed through her in waves, and it didn’t get any easier as time went on. Only the sudden noise in her head made the ordeal a little easier.

‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches lvl 5

More useful than hunting a fucking verot.

She had decided not to use her shroud as that would intensify the curse's effect. With the level up, she took a slight step further into the circle to continue her resistance training at the same degree of intensity as before.

To distract herself, she used Ash Surge and tried to manipulate the ash around her. The curse certainly didn't help, but she found that concentrating on the ash made it easier to bear the cold feeling that felt like needles piercing her very soul.

She wasn't sure if seconds or hours were passing. The curse distorted her perception, sucking her back into unpleasant memories and forcing them to play out again and again. At times it felt like she had been in the circle for days. But she held on. This was simply another fight to be won.

Ilea became one with the curse and ash as a slight whirl of the gray and black particles around her started to form, taking shape as she flexed her will. Only a sudden absence of wrongness broke Ilea out of her reverie.

"W... what?" she exclaimed.

She found herself looking straight into Kyrian's worried eyes. The ash around her fell down in that moment, covering the runes and ground with a dark gray smear.

"Are you alright?" Kyrian asked.

"Too close..."

Ilea pushed him away a little and breathed out. She looked down at her hands and saw they were bleeding. The ground was covered in her blood. It had formed a trail from the outer part of the circle up to nearly halfway toward the center.

"I'm fine."

"Alright. Maybe we should switch it up for a w... while. It's been three hours, you know?"

"Three...? Oh, um, yeah, what did you have in mind?"

Verots and curses. Anything's better than that...

Ilea trained with Kyrian for another few hours before they left the Haven, where they split up as she headed toward Ravenhall. Now that they had decided to take an early break, she wanted to check in on a deal she had made with a certain cook.

* * *

“That’s impressive,” Ilea said, looking at the storage room full of dishes that Keyla had prepared. Ilea walked past the shelves and made everything vanish into her necklace.

“I’m glad you actually came by,” Keyla said while drying her hands with a towel.

“Why do you think that, and what do I owe you?”

“You seem like the kind of woman who suddenly vanishes for a month after making a weird deal with a cook. That’s two gold coins. Your advance is already included.”

“Sounds good,” Ilea said, summoning the coins. “If that ever happens, give the food away and I’ll still pay. It’s too delicious to waste,” she added in a serious tone, getting a solemn nod from the cook in response. “I’ll be back again in a few days. Is that alright?”

“Sure, the place is pretty slow most of the time,” Keyla said.

Ilea smiled and waved at the cook before blinking away with her treasure safely stored in her necklace.

She flew through the city before landing on one of its many roofs and leaning back against the stone.

Fuck not using my storage item, fuck trying to figure out shitty teamwork, and fuck deliberately setting up traps.

She grinned to herself and started eating. Once she’d finished, Ilea didn’t go to her room or the forest but flew out of Ravenhall and around the mountain. Some overzealous guards tried to shoot arrows at her, but she simply ignored them. None of their attacks even managed to reach her.

Clouds had taken over the evening sky, and a light snowfall started to cover gaps on the ground that had been revealed by the suns or sentient activity throughout the day.

Ilea found a spot between some high-reaching rocks and checked her surroundings for a couple of minutes.

Let’s see what happens then...

Ilea mentally activated the third stage of Blink and gasped as the mana started flowing out of her. She knew instinctively that she could stop the skill at any time but decided to go for it.

Her mana left her steadily as the light of the blue runes on her body intensified, even shining partially through her clothes where they weren’t covered by her leather armor.

Instead of the quick escape she had hoped for, the spell took a while to activate. Entire minutes. In the end, Ilea vanished just like when she blinked normally before appearing on the cliff above the ocean, exactly where she had set her marker.

“Awesome...” she whispered as she touched the ground.

She heard a growl from near the cave entrance, but the tiger quickly quieted once it realized who the visitor was.

So I can come here from wherever? And it takes a few minutes and over half my mana... including mana regenerated. I should use Meditation next time while the spell channels.

The view comforted her as it had before. The suns were nowhere to be seen, but without the high amount of light pollution she was used to on Earth, the stars illuminated the ocean in a spectacle of nature. She felt childish at how she and the others had handled their earlier training. *Three days and we get pissy at each other.* She thought it silly now. *I'll do better tomorrow.*

She walked toward the ocean and sat down with her legs hanging over the cliff. It felt like her whole being was slowly calming down.

I could just stay here and live off the gold I've already found.

She smiled. It wasn't the idea that brought the smile but the simple fact that she felt free to choose what to do.

Ilea liked the new team of mercenaries she had found herself in, and she enjoyed their training sessions as well. Most of them, at least, including the change of pace they brought with them.

But part of her was itching to get out there again.

Finding Keyla had been a blessing as well. She summoned another one of the meals prepared by the woman to enjoy it with the marvelous view, thankful that she had stumbled upon the Azarinth temple what felt like so long ago.

* * *

Another week came and went, filled with training in the Haven and various adventuring classes. They even managed to catch a verot, though Ilea didn't want to think about how many attempts it had taken in the end.

She found some use in her additional courses as well, archery especially being a nice break from her other obligations.

It was exactly two weeks since Ilea had ordered the weapons from Balduur, and so she flew once again toward the small village of Indur. Having already eaten enough for a group of four, she decided not to visit the inn and made directly for the smith.

She blinked inside the house and then down to the smithy, where she saw Balduur working on something. Iana was there as well, looking over her father's shoulder.

"Hey all. Your favorite customer has returned," Ilea exclaimed.

"We were alerted when you teleported inside," Balduur said without looking toward her. "Without knocking. Without permission."

Iana was smiling, though, and Ilea threw Aki toward her.

"Thanks! You'll have him back soon!" Iana exclaimed. Her eyes took on a blue glow, strange runes visible within.

Aki remained quiet, making Ilea unsure of how her companion felt about this arrangement.

He should learn more about his own nature through this, she thought as she walked up to Balduur. He was completely focused on a small strap of leather. Ilea watched him, and after a minute of silence, he looked up at her.

"There you are. The girl without manners," he said, walking away from the workbench and motioning for her to follow. "Your gauntlets are done. They were easier than I expected, and to be frank, moving the ingots was the hardest part."

He laughed and stopped in front of the forge they had placed the ingots on two weeks prior. His cheerful behavior was a little confusing to Ilea, but it was certainly preferable to his previous grumpiness.

"I'm glad to hear they're done. The bow as well?" Ilea asked, excited to see what the smith had produced.

"Yes, the bow as well. And I made some custom arrows too. Quite a fun idea, I have to say. Bows of this size are usually only used in defense of cities or specialized monster hunts, but it's too expensive for most to do anything this unique."

He motioned for Ilea to come closer, behind the workbench he was standing beside.

"The black olvor gauntlets are down here. I'd be surprised if you could even lift one of them, but give it a try. It's what you wanted, after all," he

finished with a chuckle.

Ilea didn't pretend and activated all her buffs before grabbing one of the massive black gauntlets with both hands. The gauntlet didn't move at first, but then she lifted it from its place. It took thirty seconds, but to Balduur's surprise, Ilea managed to place the heavy piece of equipment on top of the workbench. The second gauntlet followed soon after and was set down with a heavy thump.

"You've improved your strength, I see. Or were you just fooling with me last time?" the smith asked, looking at her skeptically.

"No," Ilea said, wiping sweat away from her forehead. "I've been working like a madwoman the past two weeks and plan to be able to wield these bastards in a couple months."

She tapped the weapons. They were made from the same matte black metal that had been in the form of ingots merely two weeks ago. They were cool to the touch, and she realized the simple gauntlets would fit her hands perfectly.

He only held my hands once last time, and this is what he achieved...

She noticed the fingers weren't movable as they were set in the form of a fist, but that was perfectly fine. There was no reason to bend a hammer either. The heavy weapons seemed to suck in the light; no glint or reflection showed on their surface.

Rather than being rounded, each edge was a somewhat sharp line, giving them a more jagged look. It was like giant chunks of stone had been formed into fists. They tapered at the wrist and would cover up to her mid-forearm with smooth black metal.

She touched the gauntlets and identified them.

[Heavy Olvor Gauntlets – Rare Quality]

Storing them inside her necklace used up four units. Two for each of them. Her whole bed only used one.

"They seem nice, rare quality as well," Ilea commented.

Balduur just smiled, arms crossed in front of his massive chest. "Try them on."

Ilea made the gauntlets appear on her arms. Both immediately clanged onto the workbench before her, leaving her no choice but to store them again.

“I like them. Thank you,” Ilea said, making them appear again and trying to lift them up. In the meantime, Balduur went to get a new pair of gauntlets that looked a lot less stiff than the olvor ones.

“It was fun to make those. I just hope you reach a level of Strength at some point where you can wield them efficiently. These ones here are the blue steel gauntlets,” Balduur said, placing the second pair of gauntlets in front of Ilea, who made the olvor ones disappear again.

The blue steel weapons looked a lot more usable as actual gauntlets. She grabbed them and pulled them on, finding them more comfortable than expected. The fingers could be moved if needed due to multi-segmented knuckle joints. The gauntlets’ main feature was, of course, the blue and silver blades that jutted out. Each was about the length of her forearm, similar to the blade of a curved shortsword.

Ilea lifted her right arm to see one of the blue blades a little better. It came out of the gauntlets as if it were a natural extension of the item itself and not simply attached to it. Balduur must have formed the gauntlet around the blade and not the other way around. It looked sharp and, most importantly, durable.

One blade extending out of the hand and wrist section of the gauntlets curved back and along the arm, nearly reaching Ilea’s elbows. The ends of the forward-facing blades reached slightly past her fingers. Combined, the weapons reminded her of police batons she had seen on TV before – just bladed, pointed, and fixed to her arms.

Like fist daggers combined with blade arms, she thought and smiled, wondering if she could essentially fight the same way as always with them equipped. *Hmm, maybe not. I’ll have to try and hit with my elbows instead of my fists.*

“They’re great as well. Nice work, Balduur. Did you make the blades first and then the gauntlets?” she asked while she identified the weapons.

[Blue Steel Gauntlets – Rare Quality]

“I formed each at the same time. I have quite a lot of experience working with blue steel but have never made actual gauntlets out of it. I think they should be viable though. Do report your findings to me,” Balduur responded with an eager gleam in his eyes.

“I will, I will. Now, I’ve joined an archery class, and boy do I hope you’ve got something cool for me to show the teacher.”

“You’ve joined... an archery class? I thought you’d actually put this to use. Oh well, whatever you do with it, it was interesting to build. Come, it’s not here.”

“What do you do if you’re not working for somebody?” Ilea asked as she joined Balduur in a storage room to the side of the main smithy.

“I try things out, try to improve my smithing. Just like you train your fighting skills, I have crafting skills to hone.”

Ilea nodded, understanding the sentiment completely. “Seems safer than my hobby of fighting murderous monsters and machines.”

“Mine is dangerous as well, trust me. I have several resistances in the second stage already.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows a little. She definitely appreciated his hard work, being one of the benefactors of his suffering, after all. Perhaps he had Pain Tolerance in the second stage as well? It would make being a smith a lot easier.

Or would that actually be worse because he’d get injured without noticing the pain of getting burnt?

“Here it is,” Balduur said, motioning toward an absurdly large bow hanging on one of the walls in the room.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Ilea asked, a big smile spreading across her face as she walked up to the mobile artillery device that would be her new bow.

The thing was made of some kind of dark metal, and the string had a blue color. It looked strong. Its nearly black sheen gave it an elegant look, and Ilea found herself touching the weapon with a reverence she hadn’t shown the gauntlets.

“Of course she likes the bow the most...” Balduur mumbled from behind her.

“Well, my fists are already my main weapons. I haven’t had a bow yet, so it’s something new. Trust me, I appreciate the gauntlets,” she said with a grin.

“Whatever. Either way, you owe me 26 gold coins. Check out the arrows too,” he said, leaning on the door frame as Ilea inspected the bow.

[Heavy Dark Steel Bow – Rare Quality]

It's more like a Heavy Ballista, Ilea thought as she looked at the arrows below the bow. Grabbing one of them, she found it relatively light, but it still looked more akin to a spear than an arrow.

"Those are the normal ones. They shouldn't break, but you can get more made by any smith you find, at least if they're reasonably decent at the craft. I used a strong and light alloy, so as long as you don't fire them into pure steel, you should be fine reusing them. There's thirty of those, ten silver each. So that's three more gold if you want them all," he said as Ilea moved on to the next batch of arrows.

"Runes are engraved on those for lightning, explosion, fire, and ice. More exotic ones can be prepared upon request. Each arrow is twenty silver. Ten of them each for two gold coins. So eight gold coins for all of them."

"Twice what the bow itself cost?" Ilea asked, a little doubtful. "Can they be reused as well?"

"It's the quantity that makes them expensive. And yes, as long as the runes don't get destroyed and are recharged."

"Great," Ilea said and handed over thirty-seven gold coins, paying for everything.

"Where the hell did you get so much gold to spend?" Balduur breathed, but he took the coins nonetheless.

"None of your damn business. Can you make me a hundred more normal arrows? For eight gold?"

"Sure, I'll need a couple hours though. Maybe go check on your dagger until then," Balduur said.

That meant Ilea would miss the start of her class, but Martha, her archery teacher, had mentioned before that she'd be there as long as she was paid. And considering the new bow that was nearly as big as Ilea herself, she was sure Martha wouldn't mind.

Stashing the bow and arrows in her necklace, Ilea left Balduur to make her additional ammunition. She had a feeling she would lose at least a few in her training sessions.

Upon going downstairs, she found Iana standing over a workbench, eyes glowing a bright blue, wholly absorbed in her studies.

Aki had been placed on the bench, and it looked like several different magics were being used on the dagger. They were mostly types of floating runes, but there may have been other invisible types of magic at work too.

“How are you doing, buddy?” Ilea asked, standing opposite Iana and looking at her companion.

“I am lying here. Have I mentioned before that I’m glad you’re not an enchanter?” Aki asked.

“Why, does it hurt?”

“No, it’s just very boring.”

“Mhm. Iana, how’s it going? Found out anything interesting?”

“Honestly? No. Nothing. At first, I thought I could work down the layers and unlock each of them, but this is something I’ve never seen before, not remotely. I’ve worked for a full two weeks based on what I discovered during your first visit and can’t even grasp the first levels. The runes I know, at least some of them, but the connections...” Iana’s voice trailed off. She looked completely lost.

“I can bring him around more often if you like? Would that be alright with you, Aki?” Ilea asked, looking down at the dagger on the workbench.

“To find out more about what I am? Of course,” the dagger replied. “Even if it’s boring.”

“I’ll bring him over whenever he feels like staying for a bit. Iana, do you have a couple minutes for enchantment questions?”

The unnatural blue glow in Iana’s eyes faded before she spoke.

“Sure!” The enchantress smiled and removed her gloves. “I saw your weapons are done, do you want anything on them?”

“Well, the question is, what can you do? I have a storage item, but I really liked the way Agor’s sword could be summoned from his bracelet. An increase in damage or weight would be good as well. Maybe something for the bow that will make its arrows fly faster. Is any of that possible?” Ilea asked, feeling like her lack of knowledge about enchanting was quite obvious.

“I’m good with space enchantments, so I could certainly get all your weapons into some kind of bracelet or earring. Or a ring, of course, but considering you fight with your hands, that might not be the best idea.

“I suggest a wind enchantment for your bow. It should vastly increase the flight speed and distance of your arrows. You won’t be able to shoot as stealthily due to the increased sound and visibility, though given its size, I’m not sure if stealth is a concern in the first place.”

“More speed and power for the bow sounds perfect,” Ilea said with a wide smile, even though she hadn’t actually tried the weapon yet. “What

about these?” she asked, summoning her two pairs of gauntlets onto the workbench before her.

“Well, they’re heavy, meaning the impact will be massive – if you manage to use them at all. Cracks and damage will accumulate fast, so I suggest enchantments to prevent that, or at least to slow that down. That should allow them to serve you much longer before any repairs are required.

“As for the bladed ones, I assume they’re made for cutting, so magical sharpening is a must. Any enchanted blade will cut more reliably due to less chipping, and you won’t have to think about sharpening it in the future as long as the enchantments stay intact. If you’re not looking for anything more specialized, that’s what I suggest.”

“You’re the enchantress, so I’ll trust you,” Ilea said, summoning her bow onto the workbench as well. “Can the enchantments be removed again, and can others be added? And can you both do the bracelet enchantment and the durability and sharpness ones?”

“With the quality of these, yes. I can remove and add different enchantments. As for your second question, yes, the runes are different enough so that they won’t overlap. I can add all of them. Do you want to bring me the items at a later time, or should I work on them immediately? I’ll need around four days for everything.”

“Work on them now, I’ll get them in a week. It’s not very far if I fly at top speed,” Ilea said. She could always leave the training sessions a little early to visit Balduur and Iana. It felt like a nice change of pace. Their workspace had something calming about it.

Iana agreed and put away the bow and blue steel gauntlets. The black olvor ones had to stay on the workbench as she was unable to move them.

Ilea continued to talk about enchantments with Iana for a while, but she found the possibilities to be much less impressive than she had initially thought. In a close battle, having enchanted armor might just make enough of a difference to save your life, especially when things were going down to the wire and every second mattered. But in a fight where you were already outmatched or overwhelmed, no amount of enchantments would change the outcome – they simply weren’t powerful enough compared to the skills and levels a person or creature might have.

She wondered if her thinking was mainly due to the fact that she had mostly faced monsters of a far higher level than herself. A slight edge

against people or creatures close to your own level would surely be more relevant to people who fought things that didn't far exceed their own power.

Balduur was still working on the new arrows, but a glance at the man revealed that he was already done with a sizable number. Ilea switched her leather armor with her Elven Juggernaut armor, eliciting a quick gasp from Iana.

"W... what is that?" the girl exclaimed, immediately closing in on Ilea and touching the armor. "This is amazing... brilliant workmanship... the layers are beautifully done... Ilea, this is Elven! Where did you find this?"

Iana's reaction was a little more extreme than Ilea had expected.

"Found it in a dungeon. It's Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor," she explained.

"Now *that* is a beautiful set of armor," Balduur said, having seen the change. "Elven – and it's actually made to last. Can I see?"

Ilea just nodded, switching back to her leather armor and placing the Juggernaut armor on a nearby workbench.

"Knock yourselves out. I'm going to take it with me as soon as you're done with the arrows though," Ilea said.

Five minutes later, Balduur said, "It's good. As good as if not better than the best armors I've worked on. I'm unfamiliar with the metal, but it seems to be an alloy of black mithril, drakken ore, and something else. Impressive, to say the least, and expensive. You're wearing a suit of gold, Ilea," the smith said, holding up a bracer.

"The enchantments are pure durability," Iana said, eyeing the armor. "Several layers and beautifully intertwined. I've rarely seen anything this resilient that can actually be worn. Given the metal combination, I think it's mostly good against physical damage. Right, Balduur?"

"Right. So the wearer better have elemental resistances. Something tells me this lassie here does," Balduur chuckled. He put the armor down, walking back to his workbench.

"So, no way for you two to make it any better?" Ilea hazarded.

Balduur ignored the question, and Iana shook her head. Ilea stored the armor inside her necklace again, feeling good about her equipment.

"I'll see you in a week then. Make sure the bracelets aren't destructible either," Ilea said as she waved farewell.

"Don't die out there," Balduur said.

"Sure you don't want a pretty necklace or earrings for the weapons?" Iana asked, but Ilea shook her head. She simply wanted functional, tight-

fitting bracelets to store her weapons in. She did decide to pay Iana in gold for at least some of the work, even though she had found an easy way to exploit the enchanter by allowing her to study Aki.

“Bracelets are fine,” Ilea replied, summoning ten gold coins before handing them to the girl.

“I’ll make them extra nice,” Iana said, smiling and giving a small wave.

Ilea smiled back and blinked out into the winter air. She was already late for her last class, so she activated all her buffs before spreading her wings behind her. A second later, she was on her way back to Ravenhall – and to an angry archery teacher waiting for her only pupil.

* * *

“And you will fly us there?” asked the woman, a level 85 mage, looking to Ilea for confirmation. She was middle-aged and a little chubby, her red hair drawn up into a messy bun. Overall, she looked more like a housekeeper than a magic wielder.

Ilea nodded, activating her wings.

“I’m really not sure about this, Lars,” the woman said, looking at her colleague. Her partner was as thin as she was large, looking like a coat rack draped in dark robes. His bald head only added to the contrast between the two.

“I can wait outside if you want to discuss it,” Ilea said, but the man was already shaking his head.

“Our usual rate is ten silvers per hour. I’ll consider the job for twice that, no less,” Lars said. His eyes held the gleam of greed, which Ilea figured made this a done deal. His words obviously annoyed his compatriot, and she drew herself up with a sharp intake of breath.

Ilea didn’t miss the chance to interject.

“I’ll make it thirty per hour. We can only work on it for two hours every day, but we can do the planning here, of course,” Ilea said, and now even the woman seemed to be considering the proposal.

“We’ll have to see the place first. You’ll only take me for the site visit while leaving a deposit of two gold coins with Merina here,” Lars said.

“Lars, are you sure about this?” the woman asked.

“It’s alright.” He went up to her and continued in a whisper at what he likely assumed was a safe distance from Ilea. “If this works out, it’s going to secure our shop for the next two years. I’m sure she’ll want some extravagant ‘money is no object’ things as well.”

As he finished, his greedy gleam seemed to have spread to his partner.

“I’ll leave five gold coins as a deposit, and we leave right now. You can take a look, and we’ll be back in two hours. If I break my word, the gold is yours,” Ilea said, placing five gold coins on a nearby table.

“If I’m happy with the finished job, I’ll pay you the agreed sum on top of the deposit,” she finished, quite tired of the conversation. They had been the only reputable architects willing to even see her, and she wanted to move on.

The flight from Morhill to the cliff she would have them build on was pretty safe. Sadly, most of the people capable of building houses in both Ravenhall and Morhill had “concerns” about “security” and “wildlife.”

“Alright, let me get ready, and I’ll be with you in five minutes,” Lars said, obviously trying not to stare at the gold now sitting on the table.

The power of gold...

Ilea suppressed the smile that was attempting to steal onto her face, knowing it could be interpreted as something else.

Lars was ready in two minutes and reemerged in leather armor and a heavy coat that would protect him from the cold weather outside, something Ilea had stopped considering because of her resistances and high Vitality.

“Ready then?” she asked, watching the man wrap a thick piece of cloth around his head. It had been one of her requirements. Ilea knew they could probably guess the location of her cliffside, but having them cover their eyes on the way would help at least somewhat with keeping it secret.

Ilea let the two builders say their goodbyes and then wrapped her arms around the man below his shoulders.

“Just tell me if I have to stop. I’ll heal you on the way if needed, so you should be fine,” Ilea said as she started climbing into the air.

Lars tensed up and didn’t calm down throughout the trip, but he never asked her to stop, nor did her healing skill tell her about any damage he was taking. Perhaps he had decent ice and wind resistances?

The two landed safely on the cliffside just under an hour later. Ilea would be late for her archery lesson again, but that had already happened a couple of times now, and Martha didn’t seem to be bothered. Quite the

contrary, really – her mood seemed to worsen whenever Ilea actually arrived for her scheduled lesson.

“We’re here,” Ilea said, setting the man down. He stumbled a couple of times on the slippery stone and gripped his coat with both hands to pull it closer to his body. His teeth were chattering as Ilea removed the blindfold from his face.

“You alright?” she asked.

The man nodded slowly before a low growl made him tense up again.

“S... s.... swordmouth...” he stuttered, staggering backward and losing his footing while Ilea walked up to the tiger, shushing it away with an absentminded wave.

“Shoo. Shoo! Go back to your cave,” she said.

The tiger listened, but only after pausing to glare at the new human.

“Don’t worry about the locals, I’ll be here to protect you while you work.”

Lars slowly got up again while shaking his head.

“T... this is ridiculous...” he said. His face was growing red from more than just the cold now; he appeared on the verge of panic.

Ilea walked over to him. “As I said, I’ll be here. Trust me, I can handle that little cat. What do you think of the place? We don’t have long before we have to leave again.” She could probably take at most a day off from training with the others to let the duo work on her project.

Lars seemed to calm down a little. He dabbed his sweat-moistened scalp and breathed slowly with both eyes closed. “Alright, alright. I’ll take measurements and check the stone. Then we’ll figure something out when we’re back in Morhill.”

“Sure, knock yourself out,” Ilea said, taking some food from her pack and sitting down in front of the cave, not letting the tiger out of sight of her sphere.

* * *

“That should be doable. We’ll figure out some concepts, and I’ll draw up some plans for you. How long should we invest in the planning phase?” Lars asked, and his partner nodded at the sketches he’d produced.

“Until we find something I like,” Ilea responded. “I’ll be back tomorrow to take Merina to the location like you suggested. After that, you have a week to plan some things out. Go a little crazy with the designs. I’ll pay 30 silver per hour you two invest in this as discussed.”

Ilea placed the silver for the time already invested in travel and evaluation on the table. The gold deposit was still there, but she made no move to take it back.

“If you need help from somebody else or materials, just inform me, and I’ll try to get them for you,” Ilea said while getting up. She had decided to skip the archery lesson today to finish up with the two builders.

“That’s very generous of you. We won’t disappoint, don’t you worry,” Lars said, and Merina nodded from the side.

“Great, see you tomorrow then,” Ilea said before blinking out of their beautiful house in Morhill.

The place had caught her eye from above as it had been constructed in a series of overlapping hallways and rows of rooms, such that the roofs appeared as a set of gentle waves. The woodwork was exquisite, perfectly curved and rounded as if the house had grown out of the ground itself. It wasn’t gaudy, with no gold or marble or large decorative features. Just a simple, well-crafted home that, even from the outside, looked like it would be comfortable to live in. It reminded her of some of the best beachfront architecture she had seen on Earth and was one of the reasons she trusted the two with her own future home.

* * *

“We’d better not disappoint that one,” Lars said to his wife and colleague. Merina nodded and went to take the money left behind by their customer.

“Let’s get to drawing then. At least we know this one won’t bail on paying like the ones before.”

Lars had a sad look on his face, remembering the debacle. That was one of the problems with working for people independent of any guilds or cities. And with this one. The flying black-haired warrior could simply leave once her requests were fulfilled. Or kill them as soon as the work was done.

Lars and Merina hadn’t come as far as having their own house and business in Morhill without having to deal with those kinds of people.

Background checks were already being paid for with the advance the woman had left behind.

“I don’t think she’ll try to screw us over or attack us,” Lars agreed.

The water in front of him started boiling as he activated the rune below the kettle. Merina really liked her tea when she was working. ‘It gets the mind running’ is what she usually said. Lars found himself agreeing as he added dried leaves to the boiling water, filling the room with a beautiful and fresh aroma, quite contrary to the bleak weather outside.

“She seemed nice. And honest. But you know just as well as I do that there are good actors out there,” Merina said as she prepared their worktables and rolled out sheets of paper. They would analyze their customer’s requirements and then discuss some basic ideas.

“She’s not a mage, at least,” Lars commented as he got two cups from a nearby cupboard. Warriors tended to be easier to deal with in Lars’ experience. Merina grunted at his comment and went to get some pencils.

“We have the requirements. Did she mention a budget?” Merina asked, her hand hovering above the paper.

Lars would’ve liked to hug her, but he needed to keep powering the rune below the boiling tea with his mana.

“I mentioned some estimates, and she just nodded. I don’t think there is an upper limit, dear.”

“Then it shouldn’t be as hard to make something outstanding. How was the flight, by the way?” the woman asked as she started to draw.

“I think she flew slower than she normally does. She can heal as well. Other than the cold, it was quite comfortable. An efficient way to travel. To think we’d have to join a caravan for dozens of silver just to get to the next city while this woman can just fly wherever she wants to.”

He shook his head and let go of the rune. The tea would continue to boil for a little while until the aroma mixed perfectly with the water. Something he’d learned in the past five years while working with Merina.

“I’m sure she’s suffered enough to get those wings. You can go out there too and prove yourself.”

Lars just grunted at her response and finally hugged her.

“What do you think her level is?” Merina asked with a smile.

“I don’t care,” Lars said, kissing his partner on her neck.

* * *

“That’s quite troubling news, Dagon.” Adam scratched the stubble on his chin.

“It is. We have to act now if we wish to stop him, or it’s over for the Hand as we know it. Wallace Urn is betraying the very basis this guild was built on, and if we let him gain more favor and influence, it may soon be too late,” Dagon spat.

The Head Librarian was standing in Adam’s office, though he was quite unhindered by his large proportions.

“Dagon, I trust you beyond even the other Elders. Do you believe a forceful removal is the only option left to us?”

Dagon frowned. “He has too many members on his side already. His pockets are deeper than I thought.”

“Baralia,” Adam said, grinding his teeth.

“We don’t know for sure. There are other powers that would be interested in disrupting the Hand.”

“It won’t be a quiet removal, even if the other Elders agree.”

Maybe this creates an opportunity. A chance in the darkest hour. It might work, Adam thought.

“Verena will be persuaded easily enough,” Dagon muttered. “She cares about the guild as much as I do. The other two won’t even know what has happened until a few months or years have passed. When was the last time they were even here?”

Dagon’s concerns weren’t unfounded. Adam didn’t even know if the two missing Elders – Pierce and Lucas – were still alive. But something told him they were, and while someone like Wallace Urn was playing political games, they were out there fighting monsters well beyond what the man had ever seen. Well, so far, at least.

“We need a team of members we can trust. Strong enough to deal quick deathblows to other members. Contact all your sources and collect favors where you can. I will lend you what I have. We will need to act fast and remove him from the Shadow’s Hand in a single, brutal strike. Wallace has to be removed, as do his most fierce supporters,” Adam said. His eyes felt cold as they bored into Dagon’s.

“What do you have in mind?”

Adam smiled. A bitter smile, not bothering to hide it. The meaning would be the same either way. He stood up and walked to one of his bookshelves.

“I need time to prepare. Runes and ingredients to make sure I have enough monsters to summon. The next tournament in Viscera should be suitable. Fleeing from the Haven is not an easy feat, not with Shadows hunting you down. I won’t let him escape.”

The Hand gathered in Eregar’s Haven. It will be the best chance they’ll get.

“I will stand by your side, Adam,” Dagon said, a fierce look in his eyes. He went to the door and glanced back. “Elder,” he said as he left, closing the door behind him.

Adam sighed deeply as soon as the door had shut and the protective enchantments around his office activated again. He had deceived one of his oldest friends, had used his desire to save the Hand to hide his own intentions.

Still, Octavia was more important. She always would be.

Perhaps the Hand would prevail. Should they manage it, they would come out stronger than they had ever been before. There was doubt in his heart, but it also burned with the same hope that had kept him going for years. It burned not only for his daughter but for the Hand as well.

EIGHTEEN

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Survival

Snow was falling heavily now. Winter had come to Elos in full force, and the Empire of Lys was covered in white. Sulivhaan stood on top of a mountain overlooking the city of Ravenhall.

It has been some time.

The defenders at Dawntree had managed to lure some of the Elves inside the city and finished them off, but at great cost. None of the highest-leveled people in Dawntree nor his squad of the Hand had suffered any losses, but high-level battles inside a populated city weren't pretty.

The remaining Elves had left weeks prior, sparking immediate discussions among the nobles of Dawntree as to why the Elves had attacked in the first place, what their objective had been, and why they had left once more. Sulivhaan had kept out of it, knowing that the Elves had likely just grown bored.

Young creatures from the Fire Wastes or Verleyna, he was sure of it. Yet there remained the question of why they had attacked in such numbers, decimating the western cities of humanity. It had almost looked coordinated.

Perhaps one of the Monarchs.

He dismissed the idea. He had too little information. Again, all he could do was react. React and try to save as many as he could.

He was tired, tired of fighting an enemy that seemed unbeatable. Not even the Shadows were taken seriously. And why would they be?

He sighed. With the infighting and squabbles over land and policy that colored the lands of humanity, it didn't come as a surprise that there was no

real resistance. Sulivhaan was sure that most people would sell their neighbors to an Elf for a single silver coin.

He stopped that train of thought and forced himself to smile. He was home, and though many of the surviving Elves remained inside human territories, it would only be a matter of time before they were hunted down by elite forces from the Hand, the adventurer's guild, and the kingdoms and empires looking to improve their soldiers and standing.

Many had declared the destruction of the western cities as unprecedented, but Sulivhaan was more surprised an attack like this had taken so long to happen in the first place. To think humans would dare settle inside the Navali Forest, east even of Karth. But he also knew humans would always find a way to expand, and had it not been for the western towns acting as a buffer, who knew how far the Elves would've traveled into the Plains.

"There she is."

Rock had finally climbed the last bit of the mountain and was now standing next to the squad leader, looking down at the city in the valley below.

Sulivhaan was glad that he had his squad to rely on. Even the new member who had been added to their team before they had last left Ravenhall had grown quite substantially. The rogue was standing quietly nearby, a quality she had learned from Navalis, to be sure.

The ranger was nowhere to be seen, but he knew she was close enough to fire an arrow, should it be necessary.

"Let's go," Sulivhaan said and started flying toward the city, his squad members following behind on the ground.

Back again for the next mission.

* * *

"Do I h... have to?"

The pleading eyes of his daughter didn't dissuade him.

"This is part of getting strong, Lily. I'm truly sorry that you have to do this so early, but it's the only way we will survive."

Roland was holding down the dying beast he had fought for the past twenty minutes. It wasn't usual to get a Class before the age of sixteen, but

Roland had heard of enough cases to try. It was cruel, he knew, but he felt it the best way to prepare his last surviving daughter for her life in this world.

After Salia and their journey eastward, they had been let into one of the westernmost cities in the Kroll kingdom. Luckily the refugees hadn't been robbed immediately, mostly thanks to Valery and, of course, the hundreds of other refugees flooding the town. Salia hadn't been the only city that had been attacked, nor was it the only city that held survivors. Survivors who hadn't quite felt like staying in their now monster-infested homes.

"Do it, Lily. It's a monster, and it would do the same to you in a heartbeat, if it could."

He appealed to the girl with logic and was glad to find she followed through. The blood colored her black dagger a deep crimson. The iron smell of blood lay heavy in the air. The beast continued to struggle, but he didn't let it slip from his hold. The thrust had been deep, and the level 90 horned lion would bleed out in mere minutes.

Roland would find a safe place for the girl to sleep soon, and then he would hunt more of the lions. They would survive. Even if she didn't get a Class early, he could teach her to hunt, to fight, and to survive. Killing was simply a part of the process. Staying inside a city filled with refugees with inflated prices for even the most basic of goods wouldn't be very helpful for her.

Roland slowly released the dead monster and closed its eyes. Removing the dagger from its neck, he cleaned the blade on the beast's fur before handing it back to Lily. The girl was still staring at the dead animal with slightly teary eyes. The experience would stay with her, but it was a necessary one.

"You did well," he said.

It was a gift from Ilea. He didn't know if they would've died of starvation and disease inside that hideout or if a stray Elf would've hunted them down were it not for Ilea and that squad from the Hand.

He saw this as another chance. To make things better, to not live in as carefree a way as he had before, traveling around while his family was safe behind distant city walls.

An illusion, he thought.

"Dad?" Lily asked.

He looked up, realizing he had been spacing out again. He stood up and ruffled Lily's hair.

“Let’s go.”

* * *

The metal shaft of the spear-like arrow lay cold against Ilea’s hand as she carefully pulled the string of her massive bow backward, focusing on the moving targets before her. As the last bit of breath left Ilea’s mouth, she let go, and the wind enchantment of her bow sprang to life at the last moment, giving her arrow just a bit more speed.

She watched it fly and punch through three targets before the metal arrow buried itself deep in the training hall wall. The dull *thwump* echoed, and then silence returned to the hall as Ilea breathed in again.

“Passable, at best,” came the harsh verdict from her teacher. Ilea smiled brightly as her bow vanished inside one of her bracelets, and she went for a big hug. Martha’s dodging skills weren’t quite up to dealing with Ilea’s agility, and she quickly found herself caught in her pupil’s embrace.

For the first time in months, Ilea had been deemed passable. Sadly, she still lacked any archery-related skills, but regardless, it was a big achievement for the healer-turned-warrior.

“Thank you so much for teaching me!” Ilea exclaimed, finally letting go of Martha, who was already gasping for air. Their sessions had been fun for Ilea. Next to her more serious and demanding training for her other skills and learning about monsters living in Elos, she found archery a surprisingly fun pastime. Additionally, it would add a somewhat dangerous ranged attack to her arsenal, though she didn’t have any related skills to enhance it.

“Don’t get so excited,” Martha said. “You still lack any skills. Why are you even focusing on this? It’s a waste of your time.”

But Ilea wasn’t listening. She left Martha to her negative blabbering to wait in another hall for her team fighting lesson.

Tomorrow, they would get their first mission.

Ilea summoned one of Keyla’s meals and started eating. The cook had explained that due to her high level, everything she prepared would hold a certain edge that others wouldn’t have. The dishes didn’t improve one’s stats or skills, but Ilea believed a happy belly was a happy and focused mind. And a focused mind won battles.

She was halfway through her dish when the first of her team arrived. Kyrian was clad in his newly forged full plate spike armor that had extensions and separable parts complimenting his growing control of metal. Both his defensive and offensive capabilities had skyrocketed since he had got this armor, made by Balduur, enchanted by Iana, and paid for by Ilea. It had taken nearly a week for her to convince him that she would be paying and another week to convince Balduur to actually produce the thing.

Kyrian nodded at Ilea, and she waved back at him with her spoon. One of Kyrian's conditions for letting Ilea pay was the addition to the armor of a cape weaved with metal. That was the main reason Balduur had been so hard to convince, but Ilea was glad her teammate got his armor in the end. Both his armor and cape were made with a high-quality alloy giving both durability and penetrative offensive power.

The armor's weight had been a detriment for Kyrian at first, but mobility wasn't one of his strengths anyway. It was a good way for him to train his body as well.

His gray eyes shone through the slit in his helmet, contrasting with the otherwise dark, nearly black, color of the armor.

"Nobody else here yet?" he asked as Ilea put down her bowl and got up from her sitting position.

"Wanna start?" she shot back, her wings forming behind her as she smirked. Both Form of Ember and State of Azarinth came to life as Ilea released a burst of ashen mist that quickly twirled down and around her.

"Sure," Kyrian answered. He walked toward the middle of the hall. The quiver-like metal object strapped to his back moved a little as dozens of metal spheres flew out to circle around him.

Four of the spheres splintered to become tiny floating needles. Contrary to Ilea's earliest encounters with him, Kyrian's needles now flowed downward and in a circle around him before scratching into the stone floor, producing a cacophony of scraping sounds.

Ilea was wearing the Hand's standard leather armor as she had for the past three months. Many sets of training armor hadn't survived their bouts, and today's would likely struggle to hold up as well.

She flew upward as the ash swirled around her, and an additional and much denser shroud formed around her just when the scraping came to an end and an eerie chill filled the hall. A dull green light began to leak from

the scratches on the floor around Kyrian. Mana flowed into one of Ilea's bracelets, and her bow appeared in her hand with an arrow already nocked.

From her position in the air, she looked down on the beautiful runework on the floor and drew her bow, aiming for Kyrian's head. She drew the spear-like arrow all the way back to her ear before she let it fly.

One of Kyrian's spheres flattened into a disc and intercepted the attack, deflecting the spear just enough for it to miss him. The sound of metal upon metal signaled the start of their training session, both combatants' eyes focused and bodies tense.

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NINETEEN

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Mission

A cold wind flowed through Ilea's hair as she stood on top of the wall near the north gate of Ravenhall. The guards nearby seemed to avoid looking at her, likely due to her black elven armor.

Her head was covered fully by the black helmet, complete with small metal horns that protruded a little to the side and then out toward the front, similar to those of a bull. The armor was heavy, but Ilea didn't notice much of a difference compared to her usual leather armor. She felt safe, safer than she had ever felt before when going out into the wilds of Elos.

Ilea quickly checked through her skills and stats as she sat waiting for the others. She was ready to focus on her Classes again, and, if she was honest, she was itching to finally get back to some real action. They'd all had a lot of close calls in their bouts, but there was something exciting about the unknown that simply wasn't there when fighting against her team members.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Unspent 3rd tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0

Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 203

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 2

- **Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20**
- **Passive: Hunter's Sight – lvl 18**
- **Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl 2**

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 199

- **Active: Shroud of Ash – 2nd lvl 10**
- **Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Active: Ash Surge – 2nd lvl 4**
- **Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 12**
- **Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 3**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 9**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 2**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 12**
- **Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 11**
- **Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 4**

General Skills:

- **Elos Standard language – lvl 5**
- **Identify - lvl 7**
- **Meditation – 2nd lvl 15**
- **Poison Resistance – lvl 17**
- **Heat Resistance – lvl 19**
- **Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4**
- **Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 8**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Water Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Wind Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5**
- **Ice Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Crystal Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Corrosion Resistance – lvl 3**
- **Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2**

- *Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18*
- *Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Blast Resistance – lvl 12*

Status:

Vitality: 590

Endurance: 223

Strength: 137

Dexterity: 168

Intelligence: 546

Wisdom: 539

Health: 5900/5900

Stamina: 2230/2230

Mana: 5390/5390

The big changes since she'd last checked were, of course, the new second stages for Azarinth Reversal and many of her Ash Wielder skills.

Blink no longer requires you to touch the ground between activations.

Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 1:

You have mastered the basics of Azarinth magic.

When activating Destruction, you may choose to send a part of the struck enemy's mana into yourself. When doing so, no mana will be released on impact, reducing Destruction's offensive potential to zero.

When activating Reconstruction, you may choose to send a destructive force of continuous channeled mana into yourself or an enemy you touch. When doing so, the healing aspects are reduced to zero.

2nd stage: You may have both the reversed and normal aspects of each ability activated at the same time.

Category: Body Enhancement

Ilea had already tried this, and it effectively meant that she could drain a small amount of mana with every attack using Destruction. Additionally, every prolonged touch would lead to destructive mana being forced into her opponents without having to consider stopping her ability to heal herself. The skill became something she'd started using in every single fight instead of being an occasional surprise for her enemies, as it had been before.

Active: Ash Surge – 2nd lvl 4

Create a wave of ash and ember with you at its center. Distance, density, and speed depend on skill level and mana invested (max 60 Mana).

2nd stage: Focus the direction and density of the surge.

Category: Ashen Magic

The second stage of Ash Surge added surprising diversity to the spell. Ilea could now summon ash in a controlled manner in front of her or beside her and manipulate it. Additionally, she wouldn't blind her teammates whenever she used the skill. The addition of density to the second stage made it usable as a distraction even in the last moment of an attack. There was little reason for Ilea to hold back on using the spell, except for the mana cost.

Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 9:

Your control over ash and embers increases dramatically. Bend it to your wishes and shroud the path before you.

2nd stage: Ash and embers have become your allies. Your control over them increases greatly.

Category: Ashen Magic

Ash and Ember Manipulation was a little strange to Ilea. Even before it reached the second stage, she wasn't sure if it was a viable skill to have. It had come from Fire Manipulation, which she had gotten with her Fire Mage class. Since it reached the second stage, she had been in much more control of any ash she summoned through her Ash Surge or even through her wings.

Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 2

Your understanding of Ash Wielder allows you to form wings from ash and embers. Strike your enemies from above and close the distance to deliver your wrath.

2nd stage: Your wings become denser and more tangible, able to help you defend and attack.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

This was perhaps Ilea's favorite change, as she could now slap people with her wings. Considering her overall power, it was a force to be reckoned with. Not remotely comparable to her fists coupled with her intrusion spells, but certainly helpful. The defensive capability the wings added wasn't too shabby either, allowing her to block smaller projectiles, like Kyrian's needles. The two wings were like an added layer of Shroud of Ash, and although they were defensively much weaker, they weren't affected by curse attacks.

Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 12:

Increases your perception by 45.5% when fighting without a weapon [Effect after bonuses – 182%].

2nd stage: The effects also apply to weapons. Opportunity calls, and you notice enemies' possible critical weak points more easily.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 11:

Increases your reflexes and speed by 45% when fighting without a weapon [Effect after bonuses – 180%].

2nd stage: The effects also apply to weapons. Your instincts sharpen, and your ability to avoid damage to your vitals when dodging increases.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

The second stages of both Body of Ash and Eyes of Ash removed the skills' previous limitation to unarmed combat. She wondered if the change was random or somehow connected to her commission of gauntlets and a bow. Joseph had suggested that future skills and evolutions were influenced by one's actions, so she assumed either was possible.

She had become more efficient in her fighting due to the upgrades, but these went hand in hand with all of her other skill level improvements, making it difficult to discern how much each individual ability contributed to her overall progress. Ilea found it mattered little as long as she got better.

Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 4:

You are familiar with the fighting style of ash. Damage inflicted with your own body and while shrouded in ash is 61.5% higher [Effect after bonuses – 246%]

2nd stage: Shroud your weapons in ash to produce various effects.

Shrouded weapons deal additional damage. Affected by Ash and Ember Manipulation.

Category: Body Enhancement

Ilea was a little hung up on Ashen Warrior's second stage. Azarinth Fighting had given her a reaction time bonus of 40%, which was ridiculous. But with time, she had learned to value the new addition to Ashen Warrior. As Ash and Ember Manipulation continued to level up, it was a simple thing to shroud any of her weapons in a dark mist of ash. Luckily, her hands and feet counted as weapons, though sadly not her head or her knees.

The part about various effects was great as well, letting Ilea produce small spikes to increase armor penetration or even blades similar to her Blue Steel Gauntlets. They weren't close to being as damaging as solid weapons, but it was something. Most of all, it looked impressive, and Ilea couldn't stop herself from giggling whenever she combined her Ash and Ember Manipulation with her newly shrouded hands and elven armor. It made her quite the spectacle.

The stat points Ilea had gotten had gone into her usual attributes, and to round it all off, Ilea's resistances were growing fast. At least to the main magic types used by her teammates, Some of them had even reached the second stage. Contrary to Pain Tolerance, the other resistances didn't completely nullify the damage taken, but it still felt like she had received a massive boost to all of them.

Mental Resistance now reflected a part of the damage done to the attacker, making it much harder to attack Ilea that way. Lightning Resistance let her body harness some of the energy used in the attacks to fuel her Mana and Stamina. This was especially useful when fighting

against Trian. The pauses needed by each of the fighters were now close to even.

The last resistance that had reached the second stage was Curse Resistance, and the upgrade simply halved the duration of any curse's effect on her. The result was much more noticeable than she had anticipated at first. Kyrian had explained to her that a curse's main strength came from its lasting effect. One of his Class attacks on Ilea was basically now half as effective as before.

All in all, it made Ilea question why more people didn't level their resistances. Either there were no healers available, or people simply weren't willing to go through the agony of the process. Pain Tolerance in particular wasn't easy, but it made leveling the rest much simpler. As long as a healer was present.

Where once she had calmed herself with the knowledge that she could probably flee, now she was confident that she could at least give her teammates some time before they had to retreat, maybe even against something like the Basilisk.

Her level was, of course, nowhere near a monster like that and she had no illusions about killing one, but her reflexes, perception, and resilience had all improved drastically. All that added to the rare juggernaut armor made Ilea feel like she made quite the convincing member of the Shadow's Hand.

She looked down at the shadowy wisps moving in serene patterns over her armor, a visual effect added by an enchanter of the Hand the day prior. An enchantment she could deactivate if need be, and one that would identify her as a member of the Shadow's Hand.

A dark rogue with a black face mask landed softly next to her.

Eve had painted a white smile on the mask, and Ilea couldn't discern any holes or a slit for her eyes. She wore black leather armor with metal pieces guarding vital points, but she was certainly geared much lighter than Ilea. The same black wisps moved serenely over her, clinging to the armor as if they were a part of it.

Both carried a small backpack that had also been dyed black. The light equipment they took with them was a testament to their enhanced bodies, which needed little to no sustenance to work for days and weeks.

Claire and Kyrian walked up to the gate, the metal-wielder wearing his heavy spiked armor, now completely dyed black, and the guards stepped

aside as the Shadows passed through.

Claire was wearing a set of armor Ilea hadn't seen her in before. It looked somewhat heavy and had a long, armored skirt that fell below her knees. With her sphere, Ilea could see the skirt had a lot of hidden pockets for runed plates, disks, and stones. Her pack was the largest of the team's, likely holding similar items within. Claire's head was covered by a dark hood and a piece of cloth that hid her face, revealing only her eyes.

The last to arrive was Trian. He couldn't resist putting on a show and flew high above the city with his bright red wings of lightning, landing next to Ilea and Eve in an exaggerated pose that wasn't really necessary. But though Ilea knew that, the guards didn't, and she heard them whispering about him being the team leader while wondering exactly who they were.

The noble wore a well-made set of black half-plate armor that seemed both light and sturdy. Perfect for his high mobility, but it was more geared toward defense than Ilea had expected. His helmet was black as well and reminded Ilea of an ancient Greek warrior. Wisps of black smoke came out of the slit for his eyes as he moved himself to an upright position. Ilea would've made fun of his dramatic entrance, but she had to admit that he looked annoyingly impressive.

She couldn't help but be a little proud of the whole team. They actually looked like a team now, and she couldn't wait to get some shit done with people whose abilities she trusted. Knowing that someone had her back... felt quite nice. The many classes and not-all-too-life-threatening training with the Hand had felt like the break she'd needed after everything that had happened in Salia and Dawntree.

But now, she was ready to go out there once more. To find the next metaphorical Drake to fight.

Ilea looked at Trian and couldn't help but chuckle. He had actually gone and put blood on his armor to give it a red hue. *We're not even on the mission yet...*

"I can smell you," she said to the noble, pointing at the blood. "I hope you wash that off as soon as there's nobody around to see you anymore." She looked at Claire, who had just joined them on the wall. "Where to?"

"West and past the mountains of Ravenhall until we come out into the Isanna Desert. As soon as we meet the next range of mountains in Kroll, we'll have to slow down to find the specific town. The job is a simple monster extermination in a silver mine north of the Isanna Desert. About

three weeks travel westward with a caravan, but I'm sure we'll be there much faster," Claire explained.

"Is that all we have to go on?" Eve asked.

"That's more than many usually work with, apparently. The Shadow's Hand isn't called for a weak or known enemy," Claire said, unrolling a piece of paper. "Four teams of adventurers have already gone in, and none have come back. One of the teams was twenty people strong, their leader at level 150."

"Ready for that flight? How long do you think we'll take?" Ilea whispered to Eve.

She got a *probably* playful punch to her side and ignored the whispered threat of murder.

"We'll be careful, and if we can't handle it, we can just leave again or get reinforcements. Pay happens after completion," Claire continued. "It's quite a long way though, so let's do our best to complete it on the first try. I hope you're ready for a long flight, Ilea."

"I'll let you know when I'm about to collapse," Ilea said with a grin. She cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders.

"Let's go then," Trian said and started hovering.

"How's your flight, Kyrian?" Claire asked him.

In response, four metal spheres hovered out of the quiver hanging next to his pack. Two of them formed disks, which he stepped onto, while he grasped the other two with his hands. Slowly, he started hovering as his magic control pushed him upward.

Ilea wondered why he didn't just control the metal in his armor. She knew it was metal he had 'bonded with,' as he called it, so she assumed it had to do with stability or speed.

Kyrian quickly flew to where Trian was waiting and twirled around in a practiced manner, showing his hard-won new expertise.

"Alright, you two?" Ilea asked and extended her arms a little.

"This shit is so embarrassing..." Eve muttered as she looked at one of Ilea's arms. Claire stopped next to the other and nodded to Ilea.

"Then try to get a flying skill. Though it's actually pretty rare to have three people who can fly in a single team," Claire said as they grabbed Ilea's upper arms. Dark gray ashen wings infused with trails of red embers formed behind her and began to flap.

"Don't you dare go too fast," Eve hissed, an iron grip on Ilea's arm.

“Of course not, Eve. Of course not,” Ilea said with a grin as she started flying westward, her speed increasing steadily.

The mountain range both Ravenhall and Morhill were built on was left behind just two hours of flying later, and a rocky but much lower terrain opened up before them. The barren hills and rocks went on for another hour until they were slowly replaced by dirt and sand. Ilea could now see the mountain range in the distance, but it would take a while for them to reach it.

The team was mostly quiet during the journey. They had joined the Hand, had gotten to know each other, and were now on their first mission. Ilea glanced at each of them. Trian seemed confident, though he didn't say a word as he scanned the barren landscape. Claire occasionally checked her pouches while holding on to Ilea, Eve gripped Ilea's arm and breathed steadily, and Kyrian seemed focused on keeping up with the others.

Ilea was excited. All they had fought so far were each other, some other teams in the Haven, and weak monsters. Now she was back in the wild. And she found that she had missed it.

* * *

Three hours later, the team finally reached the mountain range in Kroll and paused to eat and drink. Eve was already a little green in the face when they landed, and hours in the hot sun had not improved the smell emanating from the pompous noble.

“I'll clean it off when we're there,” Trian said after Eve made a pointed gagging noise in his direction. Her face darkened after he blew her off, and several illusions of her appeared menacingly around Trian. His response was to make some red lightning spark in her direction.

Ilea decided to intervene. “Keep the heat for your actual enemies, Sparky.”

Claire distracted Eve in the meantime, offering her some herbs she had brought that helped with nausea. She seemed surprised everyone hadn't brought travel medicines. Kyrian stood helplessly to the side, watching the exchange.

We haven't even encountered a monster and they're already fighting...

“Let’s just move on,” Ilea said. “I’m sure you have water with you and nobody in that mining town will even know your family, so give it a rest. The smell of blood on you could become a problem, and you know it.”

Ilea had learned that Trian responded best to logic and reason – especially if it could be phrased as necessary for team performance. Trian duly summoned glass bottles of water and a cloth to wash off the blood.

At least he was smart enough only to put it on the metal parts...

The heat had increased a lot in the time they had traveled. It wasn’t an issue for any of them, Heat Resistance being one of the skills they had all worked on at least a little, but it was still noticeable.

“The town is near the fourth mountain from here. We should be able to make it in half an hour or so,” Claire said, resting one of her hands on Eve’s shoulder.

There came some aggressive chewing sounds from behind Eve’s mask, but her body language looked a little more comfortable and calm.

Ilea couldn’t see below any of their helmets, even with her sphere.

“Several weeks by cart, and we can make it in less than half a day,” Kyrian said.

“Flying is a useful tool,” Trian said as he wiped away a few remaining specks of blood.

“And you were worried about making it back for the tournament,” Claire said.

Ilea smiled but didn’t comment.

They moved on with Claire’s guidance, and before long, they were all slowly landing.

At least we’ll get something to fight soon enough, Ilea thought as she eyed the town in the distance. It was located in a valley between two mountains, surrounded by rocks and sand. Barely any green was visible from their elevated position.

“That the town?” Trian asked.

As Eve touched the ground, she whispered something to herself, then stretched her arms and legs. “Back on the ground. Thank fuck.”

“It should be. Let’s find out,” Claire said, jumping down the slope and speeding up into a run. The others followed quickly, forming a vague formation with Claire at the front.

The walls of the town weren’t very high and looked flimsy compared to Ravenhall’s. The guards visible on top of the wall formed a line, with a few

more appearing as the group got closer to the settlement.

For a couple of hundred meters around the walls, there was nothing but sandy rock. Claire slowed down to a jog, and they stopped around fifty meters before the town, all clearly visible to the guards.

“They’re afraid,” Kyrian said with some confusion.

“Why? We’re here to help them,” Ilea said.

Ilea’s question got a condescending chuckle from Trian, but he said nothing.

“Inviting high-level mercenaries to your town can bring all sorts of trouble. I’ll go talk, and you wait here. If anything happens, wait for my signal to intervene,” Claire said before slowly walking toward the town gate, hands held high.

“What’s the signal?” Ilea whispered to Eve, who was standing next to her.

“An explosion and flying body parts, I assume,” Eve answered while twirling a dagger in her hand.

The team watched as Claire approached the gate and came to a stop around ten meters in front of it.

“The captain will be here soon. Wait until then.”

Ilea could make out the words of one of the guards even from this distance.

“What are they waiting for?” Trian asked, obviously impatient. “They should be happy to receive us, for fuck’s sake.”

Ilea tended to agree, especially because the town had sought help from them and should know about it, but then she remembered her first encounter with mercenaries from the Hand in the forest outside Riverwatch.

“They are and they aren’t,” Ilea said, getting a quick look from Trian.

“Don’t talk in riddles,” the noble said with a calm voice.

“The Shadow’s Hand appearing anywhere near you means they’re needed there. It’s a bad fucking sign,” Ilea said. Trian frowned and shut up.

Two minutes of waiting later, another armored man appeared on top of the walls and promptly jumped down, landing in front of the gate and walking up to Claire. He shook her hand and talked too quietly for Ilea to hear.

Claire nodded a couple of times before they shook hands again. The captain walked back to the town, and blue fire exploded below his feet,

propelling him back to the top of the wall, while Claire ran back to her team.

“Another team of adventurers went in two days ago, but they haven’t heard anything from them since. The mine is in that direction and up the mountain. We just have to follow the rails,” Claire finished, motioning toward a mountainside.

Ilea couldn’t see any rails or any other signs that there was anything nearby, but she nodded nonetheless. No one else asked any questions, and the team started running toward the indicated spot.

A while later, they came upon an iron railway, likely used for transporting material from the mine with a cart or something similar. Dust and sand were disturbed as the team ran up the slope, following the metal tracks until they passed through a narrow valley toward an opening in the mountain. The sun was high and burned down on their armored backs.

“Let’s get some shade...” Trian said and took the lead, walking into the mine.

“What’s he doing?” Eve asked.

“Trian, let Eve scout ahead! You’re here to deliver lightning and death, not die by going in alone,” Claire said, impressing Ilea with her subtle manipulation of complimenting his skills. He did in fact stop and motioned to Eve.

The rogue walked up to the entrance as several illusory copies of herself came to life around her and ran into the mine one by one. The rest of the team closed in on her and strained their ears to hear anything inside.

“Stop the shadow enchantment,” Claire said. Ilea had found Claire became far more talkative when she took the lead.

“The cavern is huge... I haven’t encountered anything so far, but the illusions have had to split into three different tunnels. Not a single torch is lit... and it’s cold inside. Very cold,” Eve said as her illusions advanced through the tunnels, going deeper and deeper.

“Dead end on the left... wait, what’s that?” Suddenly there was silence as Eve shook her head. “There’s a corpse. A man. He’s facing the exit with a grim expression on his face. He’s armored, no weapon to be seen. He’s curled up as if he’s in pain. I’ll go further in...”

A few more moments passed in silence.

“Death...” Eve said suddenly and staggered back a little. “My illusions in the central tunnel have faded. The last impression of death was all I

got...”

“Explain,” Claire said.

“My illusions were spotted and attacked by something that caused death. I have no idea what it means, I’ve never encountered this feeling. It’s... odd.”

“Only one way to find out,” Ilea said and grinned, looking at the others before she walked into the mine.

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TWENTY

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Death and Ash

Ilea felt her magic flow through her veins as they slowly advanced through the mine. She was ready for a fight. Kyrian was carrying a lit torch to provide light. Ilea, shrouded in ash, was taking point with Eve close behind. The rest of the team formed a line behind them, with Claire in the middle.

The mine was dark, and even the flickering flame of Kyrian's torch seemed to be swallowed up by the looming blackness. It was the deep, oppressive blackness of being surrounded by literal tons of rock. It reminded Ilea of the tunnels under Dawntree – and not in a pleasant way. The air was dry, and every step stirred the dust from generations of laborers digging into the rocky walls, leaving behind countless layers of debris. Some of it had already been disturbed by the footsteps of the adventurers who had come before them. But those too were faded.

They continued in silence.

A few minutes later, they came upon the corpse Eve had talked about. It was a man who looked to be in his thirties, lying dead on the ground with an anguished expression on his face. The corpse was clad in leather armor, but there was not a single weapon on him.

“No blood...” Claire whispered as she turned the man over, checking for any obvious wounds. “No injuries either. Looks like one of the adventurers.”

Claire was right, Ilea thought. Apart from his positioning and facial expressions that suggested he died in agony, there were no signs of damage, or even a fight, of any kind.

“Death or mind magic?” Eve suggested.

“Spirits, perhaps?” Kyrian said.

“It’s possible. Stay focused,” Claire said.

Another tunnel later, the group came into a natural-looking cave system. The man-made timber bracings fell away, the carefully tunneled avenues became jagged, and far less detritus covered the floor. They had reached a section it seemed even the miners had avoided.

Ilea could see a little further than the others with her sphere, an advantage she still held even after all the training they had gone through.

“We’ve got more corpses,” she hissed. As soon as the comment left her mouth, she felt an instant pressure in her mind. A headache bloomed, and with it came blurred visions of death and murder. Nothing was quite clear enough to leave a lasting impression, but her mind was overwhelmed by screeching chaos.

Ilea fell to one knee, the walls spinning. Hunter’s Recovery flared to life and slowly pushed against the mental attack. The intensity was somewhere between the mind demon’s and Eve’s attacks. In her state of painful introspection, the slap caught Ilea off-guard.

Then there was another slap, hitting the other cheek this time. She caught the third one in mid-air, still on one knee, and as she did so, her surroundings became clearer and the cavern stopped spinning. Her feeling of vertigo was amplified a hundredfold due to the perception of her sphere. Maybe that was something to turn off when a mental attack managed to confuse her senses.

Ilea focused and breathed out, letting her resistances and healing power flow through her mind. The attack continued, but she kept her focus, breathing slowly as she got used to the pattern of the mental attack.

“I didn’t know you were into that, Eve,” Ilea said, glancing at the woman who had slapped her and got her to focus again.

She gritted her teeth against the strange sensation of the powerful mental attack. There was a faint sound too. Eve was humming. The mental attack didn’t cease, and Ilea continued to heal herself. Deactivating her sphere helped a lot, but it felt wrong; the enhanced perception was something she had gotten far too used to.

“Let. Go. You’re breaking my arm,” Eve growled, interrupting her humming for a few seconds. Ilea saw her eyes were focused and slightly twitching.

“Oh...” Ilea said, looking down at the arm in her grasp that was slowly being bent in the wrong direction. She softened her grip and focused some healing power into the cracked bone.

Looking up, she was still a little disoriented. There was no enemy to be seen, but her head was still pounding. Still, the discomfort became less and less as she got used to the mental attack.

The other members of their team were lying on the ground nearby, eyes closed, shaking violently. Ilea’s blood ran cold at the sight.

“Well,” Ilea said as she stumbled up from her kneeling position – which turned out to be a bad idea. She decided to go back on all fours and crawl to the others, grabbing them one after the other and moving them closer to Eve.

“This is bad, I think,” she mumbled as she finally had them all huddled together.

Touching them all at once, she started pushing out as much healing power as she could, including into herself and Eve. She focused on their heads, specifically their brains, as she had with Celene after she had summoned the demon.

Slowly, she felt each of them get better, especially herself and Eve. Her health had already dropped a sizable amount though, even with all her resistances.

“What the hell is going on, Eve?” she asked a couple of minutes later. Her teammates weren’t spasming anymore but remained unconscious.

“Death Spirits... below our level... they’re all around us, Ilea...”

Eve’s voice was strained. She was likely defending the group and counterattacking as best she could.

“Should we flee? How long can you hold out?” Ilea asked, using her meditation skill to keep the mana cost for healing at a minimum.

“I can hold... for a while... they’re simple and crude but... many. I’m getting better at dealing with them.”

The response calmed Ilea down a little. They wouldn’t be overwhelmed immediately, but the others were still out. And nobody knew what else was lurking in this cave.

The first to wake was Trian, but as soon as his eyes shot open, he was pushed down again by Ilea’s hand.

“Easy there, mate. Rest and wait till Claire wakes up,” Ilea said. She was shocked when he actually listened to her, closing his eyes again and

calming his breathing. Claire came to a minute later but continued lying still.

“You’re awake,” Ilea said. “Good. Apparently, we’re surrounded by Death Spirits. Strong mental attacks but as long as I keep healing your mind, you seem to be mostly alright. Eve’s defending us too.”

Claire put a hand to her face and then carefully sat up, removing the pack from her shoulders and opening the whole thing up sideways. It looked more like a suitcase when it was unfolded this way, and Ilea saw it had many different sections with stones and plates strapped in.

Claire chose a bunch of them and started throwing them around their position, some farther, some very close and in a circle around them.

“I need a moment...” she said as Kyrian came to. After another minute passed, Claire was sitting up properly.

“A...” she started, then coughed. “Ilea, you keep healing. Eve, you keep defending. Both of you inform me when you hit twenty percent of whatever resource you need to keep it up.” She held out her arms and closed her eyes. “Kyrian, curse Needle Storm in all directions around us, placed beyond my runes. Wait for my signal.”

Kyrian had had barely any time to recover, but all his metal spheres sprang out of his pack and started hovering around the area. A dome of light suddenly formed around them, the plates Claire had placed flaring up with magical power.

“Now.”

Ilea watched the metal spheres crack and splinter as she had seen many times before, and quickly after, a storm followed. Thousands of needles flew through the cavern and impacted both the walls and the spherical shield around them.

Sudden shrieks of dozens of screaming voices resounded all at once as some of the stones placed by Claire started glowing to reveal faceless creatures of pure shadow. They screamed, their limbs shaking, affected by the curse.

“Trian, give them hell.”

The dome lowered at Claire’s command as blue and red sparks flashed around the lightning mage before arcing toward their foes.

Ilea focused on one of the amorphous creatures and tried to glean more information.

[Death Spirit – lvl 148]

She could identify the creature now that it was visible. It hurt her head to look at its form, a shifting, writhing shadow that seemed to defy physics with its shape and movements. The thing had an aura of *wrongness*. Knowing they had been surrounded by these creatures without realizing – and might be again – made Ilea shiver involuntarily. The darkness of the cave was suddenly far more threatening.

As such, she happily watched the spirits' energy snuff out as they were hit by Trian's potent magical blasts of red lightning, a terrifying light show that didn't end for a whole minute as dozens of creatures were destroyed by the surging magic.

Ilea activated her sphere again when only five of them remained and found she could only see the visual fluctuations if she looked at the physical space the creatures occupied with her actual eyes. With just a few creatures left, the nausea didn't get worse, the attacks no longer potent enough.

The last few were snuffed out as four more lightning bolts burned through their hovering forms, followed by a shout from Trian.

Ilea started laughing, and Eve fell to one knee. Kyrian sat up, and the metal in the room slowly reformed into spheres.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Death Spirit – lvl 148]

'ding' Your group has defeated [Death Spirit – lvl 152]

...

The messages went on for quite a while and Ilea just skipped through to the end, finding a single level up to her Ash Wielder Class. Her Mental Resistance had leveled once as well.

'ding' Ash Wielder has reached level 200, 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' You have reached level 200 in your Ash Wielder Class. Third-tier skills are now available.

‘ding’ You have 1 skill point to bring a skill into the third tier.

Ilea quickly checked on the others and found them recovering, while Kyrian seemed to be busy reading his notifications.

“Get close and touch me if you need healing,” she said. “I need to check my messages.”

Level 200 – time to evolve a Class...

“Anything else nearby?” Claire asked, looking at Eve.

A few illusion copies fanned out. “I’ll find out. We’re good for now.”

Ilea kept up her Hunter Recovery and started reading.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: Ash Wielder becomes Ashen Warrior. No current stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable:

You have fought and killed at least a hundred enemies while in the Form of Ember. You have Ashen Warrior in the 2nd stage. You have the Ash Wielder Class at level 200 or higher.

The Ashen Warrior has embraced ash and uses it to confuse and fight their enemies.

Would you like to evolve [Ash Wielder] to [Ashen Warrior]?

Ilea just skipped through the rest of the text, uninterested in the low requirements and the name of the Class. She had a skill with the same name. All in all, it looked more like a downgrade. Getting a few more achievements had been the entire point of postponing the evolution.

‘ding’ Requirements met for Class evolution: Ash Wielder becomes Bound Ash of Kroiin. No current stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable:

You follow the path of Kroiin, the Great Calamity. You have Ashen Warrior, Form of Ember, and Eyes of Ash in the 2nd stage. You have the Ash Wielder Class at level 200.

The Bound Ash of Kroiin is frenzied by battle, the path of death and destruction following them to all places. As the great father of Kroiin has

foretold, his sons and daughters will bring death to all those living, returning all to ash.

Would you like to evolve [Ash Wielder] to [Bound Ash of Kroiin]?

A strong feeling of wrongness immediately filled Ilea's gut, and she decided not to choose that one. Whatever the other choices were, even Ashen Warrior would be a more acceptable Class. She didn't like the mention of a great father, and following some unknown figurehead gave her cult vibes.

Not going there, even if it's just a Class description... Ilea thought. I have one cult Class already.

'ding' Requirements met for Class evolution: Ash Wielder becomes Inheritor of Eternal Ash. No current stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable:

You have followed the path of Ash. You have Shroud of Ash and four other Ash Wielder skills in the 2nd stage. You have fifteen or more Resistance skills, three or more of which are in the 2nd stage. You have the Ash Wielder Class at level 200.

The Inheritor of Eternal Ash has chosen to shroud themselves in the powerful and eternal ash. Many have tried to end them, and just as many have failed. They march onward, stronger and calmer, but the Ember deep below burns fiercer than ever, waiting to break out of its protective shell.

Would you like to evolve your class [Ash Wielder] to [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]?

There it is, Ilea thought with a broad grin as she accepted the last available choice for her Class evolution. Inheritor of Eternal Ash sounded right up her alley, especially with the resistances listed in the requirements.

Class change: Ash Wielder becomes Inheritor of Eternal Ash

Vitality +30

Strength +10

Dexterity +5

Intelligence +15

Wisdom +15

Body enhancement magic is improved by 200%

All fighting styles using hand-to-hand combat are more refined

Your control over ash is enhanced greatly

Skills changed by Inheritor of Eternal Ash:

[Shroud of Ash] becomes [Veil of Ash]

Active: Veil of Ash – 2nd lvl 10

A thin mist of ash forms around you to protect you and attack nearby enemies. You are in full control. The veil increases your resilience by 74.5% [Effect after bonuses – 372.5%].

2nd stage: Your resistances also benefit from the Veil of Ash's bonus.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

The base level of the skill had gone up from 50% to 60%, which Ilea found made just as much of a difference as the added 100% to Body Enhancement magic.

So the higher my level gets, the more the base of the skill will make a difference...

[Form of Ember] becomes [Form of Ash and Ember]

Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 14

Ember glows within you, raising your resilience, speed, strength, and dexterity by 51.5% [Effect after bonuses – 257.5%].

2nd stage: The longer you fight while in the Form of Ash and Ember, the deeper it roots. Each minute of fighting adds 15% to the bonuses, with a maximum of 150%.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Ilea had to read the description twice to realize that Strength had been added back into the mix. It would make a noticeable difference and might finally enable her to use her heavy gauntlets.

[Ash Surge] becomes [Ash Creation]

Active: Ash Creation – 2nd lvl 4

Create ash in a radius around you. It can be used as a surge to blind or as a shroud to hide.

2nd stage: You can control the density of the ash to an extent.

Category: Ashen Magic

Ilea wasn't quite sure how versatile that skill would be, given she also now had Ash and Ember Manipulation, but she certainly felt like trying it out.

"Shall we continue then? I feel like we can handle them now if an ambush like that happens again. Nearly no experience though," Eve commented, taking Ilea's focus away from the messages. She looked around and found everyone on their feet again, preparing to continue, except for her and Kyrian.

"Class evolution?" Claire asked intuitively, checking on her runes that were still distributed around them. "We can wait a couple more minutes, no need to rush. Eve and I will prepare in case anything comes close again. It's a miracle nothing has after the noise caused by the fight."

Both Ilea and Kyrian nodded and continued.

[Body Heat Manipulation] becomes [Embered Body Heat]

Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 12

Regulate the heat in your body to protect yourself against harsh climates or even blend in with your environment.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

Nothing had changed with the skill description, at least as far as Ilea remembered. She was also pretty sure that the spell hadn't been Ashen Magic before, but it didn't matter much. It was one of the few skills she hadn't focused on heavily in her training, hoping it would be replaced in her Class evolution. Sadly, though, she hadn't unlocked a single new skill through her new Class.

Ilea breathed out and focused on her surroundings again. Kyrian was still occupied, so she tried out the changes. The added Strength from Form of Ash and Ember combined with a high amount of her skills gaining

another chunk of power from the higher Body Enhancement bonus would be felt quite a bit upon its activation.

Mana flowed through her veins, and the blue light of State of Azarinth came to life below her heavy elven armor. She noticed that the red glow from Form of Ember seemed to be absent, but upon further inspection of her hands, it was simply much more subdued than before.

Trying out her new Ash Creation skill, she focused on the space before her, and a mist of dark gray matter formed with her expended mana. She tried to move it and found the process easy, natural even. The ash spun around her as if it were a familiar bound to its master, expanding and then forming into a ball.

Ilea tried to make it as dense as possible and found the mist that had at first expanded to around two cubic meters could be pressed into a ball the size of her fist. It was hard, not quite as hard as rock, but getting there. She focused on her magic and made the sphere fly at Trian's head.

Lightning flared and destroyed the ball before it even hit. He glared at her, his lip curling with both annoyance and confusion.

"Stop fucking around. We're on a mission."

Ilea felt a little embarrassed. He was right, of course, and she knew as much, but considering the gains she had just gotten, coupled with the adrenaline from her first truly dangerous fight in a long while, she hadn't been able to resist.

"Apologies," she whispered.

The others were on edge, she could tell. But Ilea was in her element, fighting strange, powerful creatures. High likelihood of death or injury? Awesome new abilities? It was like coming home.

She could feel the added Strength flowing through her, and combined with all the other skills, she felt wonderful. It wasn't as huge of a change as when she had gotten Ash Wielder in the first place or even Azarinth First Hunter, but she still felt it.

Ilea kept summoning and moving ash before forming a spherical shield around her, but she found it used up quite a bit of mana and time. *Walls instead, maybe.*

Attacking with the ash was also a possibility, but Ilea was more intrigued by tripping her enemies or having them walk into a newly formed wall.

Crouching to the ground, Ilea summoned her black olvor gauntlets and found she was able to lift them. It was an ordeal, to be sure, but not an impossibility anymore. Moving around with the gauntlets on proved difficult, but slowly she got the hang of it as she swung the heavy weapons around, the weight pulling at her body with each swing.

Fantastic...

She smiled as the gauntlets vanished into their bracelets again.

New toys to play with.

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TWENTY-ONE

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Lost Wanderer

Ilea was sure, after getting used to the new weight and her newfound strength, she'd be able to use the gauntlets like a heavy, slow troll would use its massive fists – well enough for the purpose they had to fulfill.

On checking the third-tier skill point, Ilea found it was only available for the Inheritor of Eternal Ash skills and not for her Azarinth ones. After focusing on it more, she also found that none of the skills were ready for an upgrade, though that wasn't a surprise as none were at 2nd level 20.

"How did you reveal them? I could only feel their presence," Eve said, glancing at Claire.

"The runes reveal certain hidden enemies, though only if they're wounded or damaged. Hence the needle storm," Claire explained, nodding at Ilea as she approached them again, having moved a few meters away to test her changed skills. "Ash Creation, hmm? Not bad. Weird for a close-combat fighter to gain the highest form of manipulation in an element."

Claire looked toward Kyrian, who was apparently still reading, then stepped closer to Ilea and dropped her voice a little. "Trian was right, by the way. Try to focus on the mission, alright?"

Ilea was a little surprised. *Did she really just scold me?* She smiled at the unexpected feedback. *This girl is more of a hardass than I expected.*

"Eve and I *did* just save your asses... but you're right, of course," Ilea said, forming another sphere of ash above her palm. "I'm aware of the stakes."

Ilea looked at the tunnel ahead, thinking back to the Taleen dungeon. To Salia. One mistake and people could die. She knew that very well, yet she

found it difficult not to enjoy it all. Despite the tension she could feel from the others, she really hoped for another battle. One even more dangerous than the one they'd just experienced. Wasn't that what the training was for? To survive dangerous situations?

Claire hesitated, then nodded slowly. "You did save us, thank you. That's why we're all still here, together."

"Relax, you two. Trian, don't you want to collect the dust you made? It's quite valuable, I hear," Eve suggested, then walked up to Kyrian and waved her hand before his face. "Shit, Kyrian, are you sure you can read? Hurry up!"

"Isn't this what staff are usually for?" Trian grumbled as he walked around the cave to collect the dust that remained of the Death Spirits with his storage ring.

Ilea tried out her new body heat spell as she waited for Kyrian and Eve, who had now been joined by Claire. Apparently Kyrian was having some difficulties understanding parts of his new class evolution.

First, she dropped her body temperature, and her body went cold the same way as before until she was indistinguishable from one of the corpses in the room, at least temperature-wise. When she tested it the other way, it felt a little different as the heat in her body increased further and further. Ilea checked her health and found nothing wrong, but she could feel her armor heating up. Some of the rocks on the ground started to sizzle slightly from the heat she exuded.

Certainly makes the skill a bit more interesting. She was actually curious about its second stage now.

Finally, Kyrian was done, and as Claire called out to Trian, "Alright, bring it in, time to move," Ilea summoned a bit of jerky and started eating.

"So, further in?" Eve asked, looking toward the only other exit from the cavern – a dark passage leading deeper into the mountain.

"Yes, there are only seven corpses in this room. Not enough to account for all the adventurers that came here," Claire explained. She looked at Ilea, who shrugged and walked onward, activating her new Veil of Ash. Compared to the more chaotic-looking shroud, the veil was a lot thinner and slower moving. It lay closer to her armor too.

The tension in the air was palpable as they continued. Having nearly been wiped out by a group of enemies fifty or more levels below them, the team was on high alert.

That would've been something. On the first mission. That's why I have all those resistances... One moment of bad luck or a lack of a healer and you're dead. Even against something that should be weaker.

She couldn't help but smile.

Good thing I am the healer.

The problem, of course, had been the sheer number of enemies the team had faced and the mind attack bypassing most of their defenses. It was fortunate their team actually had a mind mage; it was no surprise that so many adventurers had died in this death trap.

"Stop..." Eve whispered behind Ilea, and she crouched a little shy of the next open cave. "Something's in there, I can feel it... it's weird," Eve continued, adding nothing but confusion for Ilea, who just wanted to walk in and find out.

"Explain. We have time," Claire said. Everyone looked toward Eve, whose head swiveled back and forth like she was struggling with something.

"It's like there's hundreds of them in there... some sort of magical creature... I can feel some of their emotions, they're angry and scared. There's something else too. It's not quite sentient... I've never felt anything like it before."

"Well, that's all fascinating. Can we go in now?" Trian asked, but Claire held up a hand to silence him, her glare fierce. And it worked.

Eve calmed down a minute later.

"Are you alright? Can you send an illusion to check?" Claire asked, and she smiled when Eve nodded back at her. Something had obviously overwhelmed the illusionist a little, and Claire wouldn't ignore that.

Ilea found herself impressed by how calm the rune-wielder was under pressure, considering the fear she had regularly shown at the start of their training.

All those battles left an impression, I suppose.

An illusion sprang to life next to the group and quickly vanished into the open cave.

"There's a glowing stone of some sort... I believe that's the source of the weird feeling... there's something there..."

"Eve, tell us what you see." Claire's voice was steady – soothing, but strong as steel.

“I can’t use Identify, but it looks powerful. Some sort of thin, black creature with a silver skull. It seems to be attacking a glowing spot... not the rock... something else... on the ground. I can’t make out exactly what it is.”

“So, we go in, smash the skeleton, take the glowing ground thing, and recover the also-glowing weird stone. And blast whatever else is in there,” Ilea summarized. The others stared at her.

“What she said,” Claire confirmed.

All of Ilea’s skills flared up, and she felt magic surge behind her as well, even without using a mana perception skill. The team followed her into the cave, and the scene Eve had described came into view.

A bright blue crystalline stone shone from its place in the wall; it gave Ilea a headache when she looked at it. Close by was a massive spindly creature with a silver skull resting on top of its entirely black body that consisted of three legs and four arms. All of its limbs looked more like the branches of a black tree.

The monster was releasing streams of black fire toward a shining light on the ground. With her sphere reactivated, Ilea could see some other guests in the room avoiding the conflict, instead gravitating toward the shining blue stone.

“More Death Spirits,” Ilea said as Claire threw runes all around them and the room. Trian started glowing red as he powered up. Dozens of needles filled the air too, creating circles of runes that came to life a moment later with a flash of green light.

Illusions of Eve faded into existence and rushed through the room as Ilea summoned a thick cloud of ash around her position, from where she could easily reach out and touch each of her allies to heal them, ready for whatever would come.

Her headache returned as screams from cursed Death Spirits echoed through the room. Made visible by Claire’s runes, the monsters advanced on them but were quickly dealt with by Trian’s lightning. They were slightly fewer in number than those that had overwhelmed them in the cave before.

The spindly skeleton-like creature stopped its black fire attack and turned its head toward the intruders as lightning flashed around the cave, highlighting its large silver skull, reminiscent of a canine.

“Whhh... whh... wheereee?”

A sinister voice forced its way inside Ilea's head, and she fought with all her power against the opponent's assault on her mind. As Eve's illusions were extinguished, a globe of light appeared around the team, Claire's runes forming a barrier against the pressure.

[Lost Wanderer of Elysium – lvl ??]

The creature was advancing on them now, and Claire's shield shook under the mental assault.

"Do we have anything on it?" Claire asked, but no reply came. Ilea was sure the name hadn't been mentioned in any of her monster books, and Liam definitely hadn't talked about something like this either.

After a moment with no response, Claire cursed. "Alright, it's an unknown. Blast it with everything you have, Eve and Ilea, try to distract it. If it hits for more than half your health, Ilea, we're out of here."

Ilea smiled brightly. "I'll distract it alright," she said as the beast slowly stalked toward the shining dome of silvery light.

"Focus and move out as soon as the shield breaks," Claire said, laying out a half-circle of runed plates. Ilea moved next to it, ready to blink away as soon as the shield was broken.

The Wanderer stopped and lifted its four spindly black arms. Mana formed a pulsing black sphere between them before a roaring dark fire was unleashed onto the dome. It broke in just under two seconds, and the team of mercenaries jumped into action.

Ilea blinked above the creature and kicked its silver skull with full force and all her destructive spells activated. The mana left her leg on impact, and a loud noise rent the stale air as her ash-covered armor collided with the creature's head. Neither gave, but one of the creature's arms whipped toward her, forcing her to fly back.

A loud crack sounded as a massive bolt of lightning exploded into the Wanderer from above, while runes formed by metal needles appeared on the stony ground below it. A moment later, the runes came to life, and the creature wailed in pain as the curse took root.

More and more lightning scoured across it while Ilea blinked in and out to deliver her attacks. The mental pressure from the monster was weighing on her, and she felt herself getting slower, but soon after, the second stage of Form of Ash and Ember kicked in and counteracted that.

Eve was standing between the others with outstretched arms and closed eyes as she protected the group from the mental assault. Claire's new barrier shook as she threw out runed stones toward the monster. Just as the creature used its arms to cut through the runes on the ground, dispelling them, there was a massive explosion as the ground the Wanderer was standing on was destroyed. Ilea narrowly avoided one of its arms with her next attack as the monster fell and sank into the ground up to its waist.

"Ilea, to me!" Claire shouted as Trian cast more lightning at their foe. Blinking next to Claire, Ilea understood immediately and took a load of runed stones from Claire before blinking back above the confused Wanderer and dropping the payload into the hole.

An arm whipped out and brushed her leg, but though it broke through her veil, it was unable to penetrate her elven armor. Ilea landed as a massive explosion tore through the space behind her.

More lightning flashed as Ilea moved all the ash she had created toward the Wanderer and surrounded it, forming small walls around the broken-in section of the cave floor to make it even harder for the beast to escape. Its wails increased in intensity, and the mental pressure from it lessened. Lightning, explosions, cursed needles, and spears rushed in to rob the monster of its life force.

Ilea stood back and activated her wings to avoid getting caught in the now constant barrage of spells, choosing to summon her bow to shoot some ice arrows at the creature's torso and arms, hoping to make it even harder for it to move. She was flying now, only seeing the Wanderer through her sphere as a massive cloud of ash and fire was obstructing the physical view. Nobody relented with their attacks, even when the beast started throwing black fireballs around the room.

When Claire's shield went down, Ilea blinked in front of her and formed walls of ash while trying to block the explosions of dark fire with her own body and wings, and the others joined them behind her defenses. With her armor and veil, the damage was manageable thanks to Hunter Recovery.

In the midst of it all, she could hear Claire's concerned voice, but Ilea just gave her a thumbs-up, letting the rune mage concentrate on her explosion magic. Claire made the Wanderer fall deeper and deeper into the newly formed pit, being very precise with her spells, and Kyrian's needles were constantly cutting into the creature as he formed and reformed curse runes around the walls of its prison.

Ilea managed to check on Eve in the middle of the assault and shouted for Claire to activate her shield again before she healed the illusionist, removing a large part of the mental pressure she was under.

Two minutes later, Eve nodded again, and with the shield down again, Ilea went back to her defensive role. The encounter, now under control, went on for another tense few minutes until they finally received a message.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Lost Wanderer of Elysium – lvl 262]. For killing an adversary fifty or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 204. 5 stat points awarded.

***‘ding’ You have learned the General skill: Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1
You have stood against a being of true darkness. Its magic was unable to pierce your defenses, and you survived to tell the tale. This skill will help you repeat such actions.***

Trian and Claire collapsed, having spent most of their resources. Ilea rushed to check on them but found them exhausted rather than injured.

“Better than the first encounter,” Eve murmured, touching her head.

“Only one level-up for that. What the hell?” Ilea murmured.

“Welcome to the 200s. I didn’t get a single one. Plus, you’re in a group now, don’t forget that,” Trian said, but he didn’t seem annoyed. He would’ve died against the Death Spirits had it not been for the team, and Ilea knew he was aware of that.

“What’s that?!”

The sudden exclamation from Eve made everybody look up as she advanced on the still-glowing spot on the floor.

“Ilea, come here!” Eve called. “We need your healing magic!”

Ilea quickly blinked next to her and saw a tiny figure on the ground before her. A black silhouette of a six-winged creature with a vaguely humanoid shape. The creature was shaking slightly but looked up a moment later and met Ilea’s eyes.

[Fae – lvl 83]

“It’s dying,” Ilea said as she started pouring magic into the creature. Her attempts were blocked by the shining white light glowing around the Fae, making the magic almost look like fire.

The Fae’s head was round and held no discernible features other than two white eyes set into its pitch-black head. Ilea felt a pull on her mind and smiled as the creature didn’t recoil. It hadn’t been an attack, otherwise her second stage of Mental Resistance would’ve produced feedback.

Ilea smiled at the Fae as she kept trying to reach it with her hands and healing magic. Suddenly the light opened up to let her through, reaching the creature a moment later, allowing her to perceive its confusing physiology with her healing magic.

She didn’t know what to heal or where the damage was, so she simply continued to pour in mana.

Here goes nothing...

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Mission Accomplished

Though the Wanderer's silver skull lay inside the smoking hole in the ground, the sense of *wrongness* had not ended with its death. Nobody wanted to touch either the skull or the stone shining from the corner of the cave.

Ilea was still healing the Fae when the light around it suddenly vanished and the being flapped its wings. It flitted upward and bopped both Ilea and Eve on their noses. Its eyes were now full of joy. Or at least as far as Ilea could tell with such an alien thing. Then the creature flew at top speed out of the cave.

"There it goes," Eve said, awe and wonder in her voice. Ilea had never seen her emote so strongly.

Well, not positive emotions anyway.

"You let it go? Do you have any idea how much a living Fae could be worth? I haven't heard of a sighting for over ten years!" Trian complained.

"The fuck? Why would you capture such a beautiful creature?" Eve retorted with a deadly glare.

"Why are they worth so much?" Ilea asked. She had killed plenty of living beings, but the Fae had seemed more intelligent than the Drakes. It hadn't attacked her either, so she'd had no reason to fight it.

Trian seemed perplexed by the question. "I have no idea. Because they're rare?"

That got a laugh out of Ilea. "I didn't think you'd be the one worrying about money. Maybe we can sell the skull? Claire, how do we distribute

what we find on missions?” Ilea asked as she walked over to the rest of the group, who were standing above the crater.

“It’s not even slightly damaged...” Kyrian said as he looked down at the silver skull.

“Well, let’s see what it is,” Ilea said, blinking down toward it.

“If she’s the one getting cursed...” Trian said, then shrugged. Claire didn’t intervene as Ilea touched the skull.

Ash flared to life around her and shook as Ilea screamed and fell to her knees. She clutched the skull tightly as another scream escaped her lips. Eve rushed toward her, and Claire threw runes into the crater.

But Ilea couldn’t keep up the screaming any longer, and her shuddering quickly turned into gales of laughter. The others halted mid-rescue as she got to her feet and waved at them, skull in hand.

“It’s alright, it’s just a spooky skull!” She held the thing in front of her face as Eve skidded to a halt in front of her, slapping her hard across the mouth.

“You little shit,” she said, stomping back out of the hole and toward the glowing stone, muttering something about immature idiots.

“That was in poor taste,” Claire said with a sniff as she slowly descended into the crater and collected her runes.

“Welcome to Ilea’s wild ride,” Ilea said and flipped the skull around in her hands, looking into its empty eye sockets.

[Skull of the Wanderer – Rare Quality: ‘A lost soul wails for salvation’]

“Well, that’s helpful,” Ilea said, throwing the skull to Claire, who caught it with both hands.

“Yeah, we can sell that. Or we can get info from Dagon. Can you store it, Trian?” Claire asked, walking toward him and carefully handing him the skull.

“Hey, worst case scenario, at least we can play ball now,” Ilea said as she blinked out of the crater toward Eve. “What is it?”

Eve glanced at her and continued to focus on the stone. Ilea identified it with a quick flutter of her eyes, not enough to get a headache from it.

[Soulshard Ore]

“Soulshard ore. Well, look at that, another thing I’ve never heard of,” Ilea said as she rejoined the others.

“My God, can you fucking shut up for once?” Trian said in a tired voice. “We nearly just died.”

“Exactly,” Ilea said, but she could tell the others weren’t feeling the same as she was. She rolled her eyes, crossing her arms.

Great. Now I feel bad.

Ilea summoned one of Keyla’s meals and found herself a comfortable rock to sit on.

“Wasn’t this mission supposed to be easy?” Kyrian asked Claire, who was staring at Eve.

“Evaluations aren’t always accurate. I’ll start writing the report as soon as we’re back. To answer your previous question, Ilea, whatever we sell is split five ways. If we find anything that can help one of us in particular, that person gets it through voting. The others get nothing in such cases.”

Ilea just held up a thumb to the people behind her. The food was excellent.

“Can you collect the corpses with your storage item?” Claire asked, getting another thumbs-up in response.

Trian sighed and summoned some food as well, teleporting to the other side of the crater and sitting down to eat.

“Got any more?” Claire asked him. Her stomach growled at the question.

“Sure. But don’t expect me to carry food for everyone going forward. Take this as a thank-you for getting us out of here alive,” he said before nodding at Ilea. “I’d share with her, too, if she didn’t have her own supply.”

Ilea grinned. “How valiant.”

Claire sat down next to Ilea after receiving a piece of artisanal bread and fancy-smelling cheese from Trian, pulling down her hood and the cloth over her face to eat. Kyrian went to join Eve for her inspection of the soulshard ore.

“That was pretty good teamwork today,” Claire commented. “Looks like we survived our first mission.”

* * *

They didn't spot any more enemies in the mines. Eve had the theory that the soulshard ore had been uncovered by the miners and attracted the Death Spirits and, ultimately, the Lost Wanderer.

Ilea closed the eyes of the last dead adventurer before her and stored the body in her necklace, closing her eyes for a moment. Kyrian watched her in silence from a few meters away until she opened her eyes again.

"What did that mean?" he asked her a minute later as they cleared out the rest of the cavern, moving toward the exit.

"A gesture. To send them off," Ilea said simply.

"The corpses? Send them where?" The question sounded curious rather than insulting.

"I don't know. Wherever their souls go, if they go anywhere at all."

"You don't know, and yet you still do it? Why?" Kyrian asked as they reached the entrance of the mine.

Ilea considered. "I suppose it's a way to respect the dead. There are many ways to do it. Do you not have similar customs where you're from?" Ilea asked as she rested against one of the mining carts in a shaded part of the small valley.

"I... I don't know," he answered. He looked a little uncomfortable, averting his gaze more than usual. Even for him.

Ilea smiled. The simple answer was enough for her as the two waited for the others in silence.

When the rest joined them, they learned Claire and Eve had managed to remove the soulshard ore, which Trian stored in his ring. They assumed the mine would be safe for the time being. There was, of course, the question of whether more soulshard ore was to be found inside – but that was not their worry.

They returned to the town and, this time, were let in immediately.

Claire went with the captain to discuss both payment and the circumstances of the mission as Ilea returned the recovered bodies of the adventurers. When she was done, Ilea leaned against a wall of the guard station and removed her helmet.

"You're not supposed to reveal your face," Kyrian said. "I heard a senior member talking about it."

Ilea looked at him. "We're not fighting anymore. And it's hot."

A few of the guards started to identify the corpses, covering them with white sheets of cloth.

“What happens if the team of Shadow mercenaries doesn’t come back out?” Ilea asked as she watched on.

“Plenty of places where Shadows get lost. Just considered dead. And if whatever’s in there comes out, the settlement who hired the Shadows either gets decimated or is relocated,” Eve explained, looking at the bodies solemnly.

“Monsters like that are rare,” Kyrian said, likely thinking about the strong mental attacks that made it almost impossible for anybody to flee in the first place. A quick reaction wouldn’t be enough against a near-instant shutdown of one’s brain.

“How long do you think she’ll take?” Ilea said. No one answered.

Seeing the bodies was bringing back unpleasant memories for Ilea, and it seemed like the others weren’t in the best mood either.

“Screw this. I need a drink,” Eve said eventually.

“I could use one as well,” Trian said.

* * *

The four were soon sitting at a table outside the guard canteen, shaded from the suns and supplied with ale and a local potato dish with goat cheese. Ilea was pretty sure the kitchen was closed at the moment, but being part of the Shadow’s Hand brought some special privileges. It wasn’t like any of the canteen’s occupants looked very busy anyway.

“Could’ve been us,” Ilea said as she sipped at her ale.

“But it wasn’t,” Eve said and raised her mug. “To Team 34. We survived our first mission.”

Kyrian raised his mug, and Ilea smiled.

Trian looked at his food, then stared at Ilea.

“What is it, noble boy?” she asked, happy for the distraction.

“We really did come close to death,” he said, his voice quieter than usual.

Eve smiled and leaned forward, her mask now resting on the side of her head.

“Surprised at what you signed up for?” she asked teasingly.

Trian leaned back, not shooting back immediately. “We’re not a bad team. Thanks to the two of you, we’re still alive,” he said, raising his mug

before downing the entire thing. He sighed, then he smiled. "You're still just worthless lowborn wretches, of course."

Eve frowned, but Ilea started laughing and slapped the mind mage on her shoulder.

"Oh superior being, you got any cool noble society tales for us lowborns then?" Ilea asked.

Trian was playing with his mug, then summoned a bottle and refilled it. He glanced at the others and poured a round, including for Claire, who joined them as he did so. She had a notebook in hand as she dropped a small bag of coins on the table and started counting, laser-focused on the gold before her.

"I'm not sure what you want to hear," Trian said. "I know you're not of noble blood, but what would interest you?"

"Did you attend any balls? Any interesting marriage proposals?" Ilea suggested.

He smiled, leaning back in his chair. Was that a blush?

"Oh, so that's a yes, do tell. Did she look horrible? Was it a guy?" She leaned in and continued in her best conspiratorial voice. "You loved her, but the House wasn't powerful enough... your parents said no. Tragic, so now you're here to gain strength so that you can finally be with your true love."

She sat back proudly, finishing her bowl of potatoes and cheese before she glanced at a nearby guard, gesturing for more.

Trian just stared at her.

"But oh woe!" Eve joined in. "She was captured and is held now by your father! And the only way for her to be released is for you to marry someone else..." She sipped from her drink. "This is good. Appreciate it."

"Only the best," Trian said with a roll of his eyes and sarcasm in his tone. "It's not great, really. My uncle made a bad deal, now we're stuck with barrels worth of this stuff. Entire family is sick of it. Drink to your heart's content."

The guard returned with more food, including some cold cheese, olives, and grilled meats. Ilea summoned a few silver coins and handed them to him.

"I disliked the balls," Trian continued. "You wouldn't believe how many people there hate dancing. They still do it, but you can tell. Stiff and boring. It's all a political farce, one person trying to impress the other. It's a

game that everyone plays. Almost like they're blind to what's out here," he said, glancing toward the guard station.

"The courts of the nobles don't care for the woes of the commoners," Eve said, eating an olive.

Trian glared at her. "You don't know everyone there. *I* don't know everyone in every House. But I know there are good people who do care – not just about their own and their coffers, but about the Empire and its people. Alyris has done a lot of good."

Eve rolled her eyes.

"Are we really going to talk about politics?" Ilea groaned. "I wanted some intrigue, not sobering realism."

Trian raised his eyebrows. "Fair. I suppose I was annoyed about going to the Hand. Thought it was stupid that my parents requested I serve my time as they had and as their parents had. I think I'm starting to understand it more now. Hiding behind walls is a waste when, out here, we can do something."

"Most people prefer the safety of walls," Eve said, flipping an olive into the air and catching it with her mouth.

Ilea tried as well. She did not succeed until attempt number three.

"Most nobles prefer that safety as well. Killing captured animals to gain levels and classes at an early age. A disgrace. They..."

Trian stopped, looking around to see if anybody was listening. Eve and Ilea had started something of a competition, and the olives flew higher and higher.

"Well, you're already doing a good job of being out here. I'm sure a couple people that saw us will become adventurers soon," Ilea said, activating her buffs to catch the latest olive.

"And die like the ones in that mine..." Eve said. "Walls aren't bad, and most people don't want to fight every day of their bloody lives."

"I don't get that though. It's fun, and you can get wings if you fight," Ilea said, taking the last olive and throwing it up. She had to blink to catch it.

"We're all Shadows," Eve said. "We all have our reasons to be here."

"Yes. Wings," Ilea said as she sat back down. She decided to change the topic. "Gold all fine, Claire?"

"Yes," Claire said. "The amount has been paid in full, plus a bonus. The mission is fulfilled, and the mine is back in the town's control."

Ilea glanced at a nearby guard engaged in conversation. She saw the man glance their way before he gulped and approached as Trian poured another round.

"I... You're the Shadows who... who cleared out the Halbrook mine," he said haltingly. "Thank you."

"Interesting creatures in there," Ilea said with a smile. She didn't care to hide her face from the man. Neither did her teammates.

The guard took out a small pouch and offered it to her. "My brother went in and fought them. He was among the dead. He... he would've been glad... to know they were cleared out."

Ilea smiled and pushed the pouch back. "We've already been paid. I'm sure he fought like a madman."

The guard smiled. "Probably shat his pants."

"What was his name?" Trian asked, summoning another cup before filling it.

"Rorgue," the guard said.

"May he find rest," Trian said and raised his mug.

Ilea handed the man the sixth cup and raised hers.

"To Rorgue," she said.

* * *

The group decided to remain in the town for the night. It was getting dark, and flying back at night was an unnecessary risk.

"Meet back at the gate we entered tomorrow at first light," Claire said after they had decided on staying. "Good job today."

"Same. Good calls in there, Claire," Ilea said. She wondered if their brush with death had settled some of their minor differences.

"You weren't half bad either. No idea how I would've gotten these fatasses out of there without your help," Eve said and smiled.

"I'm medium weight at most," Trian said.

"The armor is *very* heavy," Kyrian whispered, touching one of the spikes protruding from his shoulder.

TWENTY-THREE

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Another Settlement Needs our Help

The team's return to Ravenhall went without incident. Ilea had hoped for some monster attacks, but none had come to pass. They were now sitting at an outdoor table in one of the city's many courtyards, discussing their next move.

"Think we can get another mission done before the tournament?" she asked, looking at Claire. The battle with the Wanderer coupled with her evolution made her want more.

"We have nearly two weeks," Claire said. "The mission was a success, and we're now all considered full-fledged members of the Shadow's Hand. I think we'll get badges, but Joseph will have to handle that. Honestly, I didn't think you'd want to get another mission so quickly."

Claire checked the paperwork she had received and looked around at all of them.

They had received a total of eight gold pieces for the mission, one gold piece and sixty silver for each team member. They had decided on selling the skull and soulshard ore at a later time.

"Only took us a day to finish that one, why not get some more? You guys need the money, right?" Ilea said, getting a chuckle from Trian, though he didn't seem to disagree.

"Sure, m... might even be better to fight together more before the tournament," Kyrian said with a slight smile.

"Hopefully you won't get knocked out again," Eve said.

Claire seemed conflicted. She looked down, then sighed and met Ilea's eyes. "It would help, I can't deny that."

Ilea wasn't quite sure if everyone thought of her as the de facto team leader yet, but Claire was definitely the team manager already.

Thank fuck for that... she thought, looking at the stack of papers Claire was carrying in her arms.

"I can look for anything located in the southern parts of Lys. Maybe we can get something that isn't too far away," Claire said.

"Get more than one mission," Trian said. "Grab three or four in the same general area, then we don't have to travel back every time." He turned to Ilea. "Care for a bout until she's done?"

"Maniac," Ilea said in a mocking tone, getting a smirk in return. It was getting harder to annoy him every day. Maybe he'd got a direct resistance to her dry comments, or perhaps it was classified under Mental Resistance. Either way, it was a mystery that Ilea likely wouldn't be able to solve anytime soon.

* * *

Claire pointed at three specific points on the map laid out in front of her. "These are the locations of the three missions I could get. I get the feeling we won't be getting a lot of info on any of these though.

"The first one is a village nobody has heard from for three months. Some people and adventurers went to investigate, but they haven't returned. Right here." She pointed to an indistinct part of the forest a couple of hours of flying time northwest of Ravenhall. "The second one is likely a Harpy Queen near Damwell. The adventurers who were sent didn't manage to advance past the cliffs but reported the high-pitched cries of Harpies, indicating a nearby queen. The Empire apparently doesn't want to send personnel, so the city sent a request our way."

This time, Claire pointed to a small city painted on the map with the name Damwell underneath in neat handwriting. The city was by the sea, so it was quite a distance from the first mission. Considering their ability to fly, though, it wouldn't be as much of a travel nightmare as it would have been for most people.

"The last one is a newly discovered ruin near the coast, here..."

Claire pointed to the map, but it didn't show anything but water.

"In the water?" Ilea asked. She didn't like that one bit.

“Possibly, but there are massive rock formations in the ocean. Caves, most likely. Water might be an issue, but I have some runes to deal with it. Trian should be quite effective too. Apparently, there are a lot of traps inside. None of the adventurers who’ve gone in have managed to find even a single monster. Over twenty have died already, so Virilya’s adventurer guild sent the Hand a request to minimize further casualties.”

Having finished explaining, Claire rolled up the map before putting it into her pack. “There are no time limits or anything, but the sooner we leave, the sooner we’re back.”

“Well, let’s go then,” Eve said, shouldering her pack. They were all still in the same gear they had arrived in just hours prior and were now well-rested and itching for more.

Ilea was glad she wasn’t the only one who wanted to keep going.

* * *

“The village over there? Is that it?” Ilea asked, looking at the houses in the distance, surrounded by trees.

“Should be where the contact the Empire has listed is. Or it’s the abandoned village already,” Claire said, but as they got closer, Ilea could see people moving about.

“They don’t look like monsters,” Eve said, clutching Ilea’s right arm as tightly as ever.

* * *

They’re getting suspicious of me, Sally thought, spotting at least two people looking at her from the comfort of their homes.

The village had treated her as an outsider since the first day she had arrived, and it was bloody miserable. They wouldn’t sell her any of the good food, and her lodgings were laughable compared to what she was used to in any town with more than a hundred inhabitants.

Sometimes this job sucks...

Sally pulled her coat a little closer to her and looked around. The suns illuminated the simple snow-covered wooden houses. Some minor damage was visible from past monster attacks, but that was nothing remarkable in a

village without walls. Everyone here would be familiar with the nearby monsters, and while high-level incursions were a rare occurrence, they were certainly not unheard of.

The inn was by far the village's largest building, two stories high and built with thick, sturdy logs. It didn't provide quite the same comforts as a town, let alone a major city, but it was serviceable. The smell wasn't up to her standards, but sitting outside didn't bother her much. At least her room didn't have the same issue.

She grabbed the mug of ale sitting on the table next to her. At least they had alcohol here, and a somewhat steady supply of goods.

"How ya doin', Sally?" the innkeeper asked, coming out into the cold air to talk to her – as he had many times before in the past weeks. "Still nothin'? Adventurers stopped comin', eh?"

It had been six days since the last group of adventurers tried their luck, but nobody had returned. Neither she nor the Empire could stop them from trying. After all, the pay went up after every failed attempt. Sally couldn't care less about who managed to find out what happened to that godforsaken village; she just wanted to leave this place.

The gold she carried didn't help in the least to make the uneasy feeling go away. The villagers likely wouldn't try anything, but she wouldn't be the first official to be murdered in their sleep. Why they stopped sending them out in teams was a puzzle to her, but then again, having one person murdered instead of two was a smaller loss.

Budget cuts, she thought, questioning whether a guard position wouldn't have been the safer bet. She sighed and finished her ale, handing the mug to the innkeeper, whose name she didn't care to learn.

The next moment, a group of armored adventurers landed in the middle of the square, causing snow and dirt to billow up from the meteoric descent. Sally gulped as she looked at the team of high-level mercenaries slowly rising from their crouched landing positions. They were checking the village – and *lightning* crackled around one of them.

Here we go. They're just another group of adventurers. Nothing special...

Yet this was the first time members of the Hand had shown up for a job assigned to her. So far, the others had been various mercenary groups, independent adventurers, or even squads of imperial soldiers.

“That’s probably her, she’s the highest level around,” a hooded woman said while nodding at Sally. She gulped again and slowly got up.

They’re just like anybody else... she thought, looking at the question marks above the people’s heads and feeling the hair on her neck stand up as a cold wind flowed through her hair.

* * *

Ilea looked around the village and locked eyes with at least four people trying to get a glance at the group from behind their barred-up windows.

“Are they hiding?” Ilea asked, honestly confused. The villagers likely hadn’t known about the group’s impending arrival, which made the whole thing a little suspicious.

“Well, apparently there’s something bad happening in the nearby village, so it’s only reasonable for them to be on edge,” Eve said as she followed Claire, who was already advancing on the woman sitting outside the inn. She seemed to be an imperial official. Their contact for the job.

Ilea followed Eve, and Trian and Kyrian did the same, the noble’s lightning still crackling.

Is he trying to impress the people here, or send a warning? Ilea didn’t comment on it. As long as he didn’t outright murder random people, Trian could do whatever the hell he wanted with his lightning.

The official had gotten up but looked a little shaky on her legs. Ilea wondered if she was drunk as she looked at the numerous empty mugs on the table next to her.

The woman had short black hair and wore a gray coat that nearly reached the ground. A few red emblems were stitched into her vest that suggested either a military rank or something similarly official. Two shortwords were strapped to her belt.

“Greetings. Shadow’s Hand, Team 34. You’re the contact, I assume?” Claire said in a formal tone.

“Greetings. I didn’t expect a Shadow squad, mistress.” The woman even bowed her head to Claire before continuing. “My name is Sally. And yes, I’m the contact, if you’re here regarding the reports from the village to the west.”

Ilea chuckled at the respect with which the official treated Claire. *Guess we're a big deal now.*

"Can we talk inside? And may I see your badge for confirmation?"

Claire stood there and followed the woman inside a moment later. As the rest of the team made their way in, Ilea stopped by the door and looked at a stout, aproned man who was trying to make himself invisible, though not quite as effectively as Eve.

"You the innkeeper? Do you have food and drink?"

The man nodded, and Ilea got a couple of silver coins out of her pack and handed them to him.

"For everybody, if you would," Ilea said before going inside as well.

The inn was illuminated in a warm light by the hearth on the left side of the room. There were only a few tables, but all of them were made of dark, polished wood. There wasn't really anything else as far as interior design was concerned, but it still looked cozy enough.

Claire was already talking with Sally about the circumstances of the village they were currently in and the one they had lost contact with. The wooden floorboards creaked as Ilea walked to their table and sat down next to Kyrian.

Removing her helmet, she thanked the innkeeper as he put down a couple of mugs of ale and some water.

"We're not going to be here for a long time, you know?" Trian said, but he still grabbed a mug for himself. Her healing would deal with any eventual inebriation.

"None of the scouts who went in to investigate returned? No survivors came back?" Claire asked Sally at a table nearby.

"I like the rustic feel of this place," Ilea said.

"It's dirty, and it stinks," Trian said.

"That's just part of the charm," Ilea said, taking a deep drink from her mug.

Kyrian looked around. "It's pretty clean," he said in a quiet tone.

The innkeeper arrived with some food then – bread and warm soup with potatoes and meat, likely bacon, judging by the smell.

"Wonderful, thank you," Ilea said, smiling at the man, who returned the gesture.

Ilea noticed in her sphere that two villagers had stopped outside and were now leaning against the wall, trying to listen in on the conversation.

At least, that was what it looked like. Maybe they were just lovers of stone walls, or maybe they'd found a rare insect they had to inspect with their ears.

"What about this village? It's by far the closest settlement," Claire was saying. "They must have at least known some of the people. Did anybody from the other village come here?"

Ilea blinked next to Trian and leaned in close to his ear, whispering, "Look there. Exactly behind that wall. Two people listening in. Let's get them and bring them inside. I'll go for the one on the left. On three..."

Counting to three, Ilea appeared behind the villagers outside. One wore rather dirty robes that might have once been red, and the other – a woman – wore hunter's leathers and a fur cap.

[Mage – lvl 72]

Ilea's hands reached around the robe-wearer before she clamped one over his mouth. He immediately tensed up and tried to look about as floating red orbs formed around him, but Ilea just held him there.

"Think twice before you do something stupid," she said in a quiet voice. The magic vanished again and, with it, the heat coming from the red orbs, which slowly dissipated.

Trian grabbed the cap-wearer.

"Now, why don't we have a quick word inside?" she said. "You try to run or shout, I'll smash your skull in, alright?"

She smiled at him as she let go of his mouth, and he turned to look at her with fear in his eyes. Ilea motioned for him to walk around to the back of the building, where she had seen another door with her sphere. Trian and the cap-wearer followed.

"Please open the door," she said to the mage, who shot a glance at Trian and gulped before opening the door.

Claire instantly glared at them.

Their whole squad was standing and ready to fight but quickly calmed down as they saw Ilea and Trian bringing in the two people. Ilea noticed the innkeeper swallowed hard but kept quiet otherwise. The official mainly seemed confused.

"These two were spying on us. I'd like to know why," Ilea said as she pulled back a chair and sat the man down before sitting down herself and

continuing her meal.

Trian sat the woman down at a nearby table, but all eyes were on Ilea as she slurped her soup. She stopped and looked up.

“What are you looking at me for? I suck at interrogating.”

She continued to eat while checking the surroundings with her sphere and listening closely to everybody in the room.

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TWENTY-FOUR

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Don't Fear the Old Blood

Ilea ignored the forlorn and exasperated glances from the rest of Team 34 as she continued to devour her soup. Glances were exchanged before Claire was left with the task of leading the interrogation, apparently a burden of being the team manager.

“Any reason for spying on the Hand?” Claire asked the mage without preamble.

“We... we’re sort of the guardians of the village... me and a couple o... others...” the mage managed to stutter, not looking at any of them.

“We’re here to find out what happened in the village nearby, not attack you,” Claire said. Her voice was more confident than before, seemingly now committed to the interrogator role she had been pushed into.

“H... high-level adv... mercenaries like you c... can be a threat...”

He was sweating now, answering the question but shaking while doing so. Ilea realized the guy was even younger than she was.

“Why would we be a threat to a village in the Empire?” Claire asked, leaning toward him.

By now, Ilea had finished her soup and held up the empty bowl to the innkeeper, who was watching the exchange intently. He noticed her and nodded before he came and took the bowl away.

“Th... there are rumors... about the H... Hand, I mean,” the man said, shivering a little.

“We won’t hurt you if you just tell us why you were spying on us,” Eve interjected in a calm tone.

“I... I s... said already...”

“This is useless,” Eve said.

“Can’t you do something with your mind magic?” Trian asked.

Eve stared at him and looked like she was about to say something snide, but she swallowed whatever retort she had planned and shook her head.

“You should know better. It’s unreliable and destroys the brain most of the time. People have tried. People still try, and it’s fucking disgusting. I swear, whenever I hear somebody say it works, they’ve destroyed so much that whoever they’re interrogating just isn’t there anymore. So no.”

“I didn’t know that...” Trian said, looking a little bewildered.

A long moment later, he looked at Ilea and Eve before he whispered. “This feels wrong. Something’s wrong here. Gut feeling?”

Ilea definitely agreed.

“The Hand has a reputation, but I’ve never heard of it having a bad one. High-level people can certainly be problematic, but there’s something going on for sure,” Eve said, whispering even more quietly. “I’ll see what I can find,” she added as two clones of her appeared and ran out of the door.

“I’ll check around too. Back in fifteen minutes or so,” Ilea said and put on her helmet, the shadowy wisps moving in slow patterns around her.

“I’ll stay. Shout if you need something blown up,” Trian said with a focused expression while pushing his mug of ale away.

Eve’s clones were quickly out of sight, but Ilea didn’t waste any concentration on tracking them. She simply looked about and felt her surroundings. Both Hunter’s Sight and her sphere let her perceive irregularities, hidden traps, and pathways, but nothing had come up since the hidden library sector in Salia.

The village consisted of less than twenty buildings, all mostly wooden. The majority were covered in snow – at least to an extent. Ilea walked through the streets while the inhabitants went about their usual business, her plate boots squashing deeply into the slush.

Everyone who came across her path tried very hard not to stare at her, but they turned their heads or glanced at her whenever they thought she wouldn’t be able to spot them. Ilea did see them, however, and she tried to read their expressions and what they meant.

After walking around for a while, Ilea had checked every single house, but none of them showed anything out of the ordinary compared to what one might expect from a home in a village like this. Hearths, food, and beds mostly. Tools for farming and some simple weapons.

Nor did Ilea's senses alert her to any hidden pathways, but she wasn't sure how that part of the skill really worked. Hunter's Sight was amazing at finding people, but it wasn't particularly good at finding something unknown.

Ilea made her way back to the inn to check in with the others. The suns were high above the horizon now, the temperature nowhere near as cold as near Ravenhall.

Winter was rather long here, but it was nothing extraordinary compared to the ones she had experienced on Earth. She took a deep breath of fresh air and thought about spring.

I wonder if the southern mountains will stay covered in snow.

Ilea reached the inn a few moments later and blinked inside to find everybody sitting at the same tables. The two people they had caught sneaking around were nowhere to be seen.

Kyrian looked at Ilea and gave her a nod.

"So, everybody's back then. Did you find anything, Ilea?" Claire asked.

Ilea shook her head.

"Same as everybody else then. Something's going on, but I think it's most efficient if we go to the affected village directly," Claire said, getting up.

Ilea noticed that the innkeeper wasn't around either. The lack of food was a shame, but his absence had probably been instigated by one of her teammates. The official couldn't be seen either.

"Some more information would've been helpful," Trian said and sighed, getting up. "But you're right. Let's go."

"Eve, can you scout it out with your illusions?" Claire asked. "Let's take some time to make sure we're not walking into a trap."

The group prepared to leave and stored their packs at the inn. At least, everybody but Claire. Ilea couldn't see anybody near the windows, and the villagers walking around were avoiding even glancing at the group.

"Let's go on foot. This way," Claire said, nodding toward one of the dirt roads leading out of the village. The others followed as they walked, and then ran, along the road. The team's slowest members, Claire and Kyrian, ran on the road itself, while the others hid themselves a little in the forest next to it.

Sometime later, they could make out houses in the distance. Claire stopped them with a gesture, and they met at the side of the road. At this

point, the road was so narrow that the trees above touched.

"Ilea, take us up. We'll get an aerial view first. Eve, send in some of your clones. Try to check everything you can."

Two copies of Eve appeared as Claire stopped talking before making their way through the forest and toward the village. The team flew upward and out of the trees to get a better look at their target.

Coming out of the forest canopy, the suns painted a clear picture of the small village, which consisted of only five houses. One was rather large and built mostly from stone instead of wood.

"Is such a small settlement even sustainable?" Kyrian asked.

"As long as they get necessities from the other village or farther out, they're fine. Not like these forests are very dangerous," Eve explained.

"I thought *any* forest was dangerous..." Ilea mumbled.

"If the villagers go out alone and unprotected, then maybe. Most monsters around here wouldn't enter a human settlement. And if they do, then they'd do it at night. Right, I'm entering the village now," Eve said, relaying what she saw with her clones. "The wall is similar to the one in the other village. Houses are barred, and I can't slip in anywhere."

"Can't you open the doors?" Trian asked.

"No, I can't go through solid objects, and I can't interact with them either. The door of the main building is open though, I think I can get through the crack..."

She paused. Ilea tried to spot what was happening in the village, but the entrance of the stone building in the middle wasn't visible from this angle.

"Alright, I'm in... there are corpses here. One... two... five or six. Deep and wide wounds. I'd say caused by a clawed beast of some kind. Looks too messy to be a human with a blade."

Ilea glanced at Eve, who was holding onto her arm, and then looked back toward the village.

"Found a somewhat hidden pathway to the cellar. All the doors were open. Pure stone at this point, and a lot of runes on the entrance. I assume the... wait, they're activating. The runes are glowing red. I think I triggered something."

Just then, the air around the stone building started shimmering a little.

"What's that?" Ilea asked.

"A barrier of some kind," Claire answered. "Are the clones still there?"

“They are, I’ll go further in with one. The other clone is hiding upstairs. Maybe I can find out more if whatever is in there comes up. The barrier seems to be around the whole building.”

As Trian flew a little closer, his eyes started glowing red. “That’s blood magic.”

Ilea didn’t know what that implied. Kyrian didn’t react, and neither did Eve. Claire gulped.

“How is that relevant?” Ilea said.

“It’s magic fueled by mana, blood, and life energy. Generally frowned upon but somewhat common in the noble circles. I assume that’s why it’s not completely outlawed. You can use your own blood, but you can also use that of others to fuel spells and rituals. Less effective, but if you have enough people or creatures...”

“It goes pretty deep, it’s not just a hidden cellar or anything. There are several levels,” Eve chimed in again. “Oh, that’s disgusting...” she added in a neutral tone. “Yeah, someone’s been rather liberal with their sacrifices.” Her voice turned cold. From analytical to something else that Ilea couldn’t quite place.

“Animals and people, at least a dozen in total. Still no enemy in sight. There are cages, but all of them are open and empty. Down another level... oh, here we are... okay, that’s one clone gone. There’s some sort of wolf and human abomination there. Can’t use identify with the clones, so that’s all I got. It was fast, but it took a while for it to notice me even though there was only one way to go and it was looking directly at me. Wait... there’s more than one. They’re already in the main room upstairs. Furry, around two meters tall, long arms with clawed hands. They’re trying to sniff me out. Good luck with that.”

“Beastwolves?” Trian asked.

“No. We might have already been dead before we got here if it was a B... Beastwolf. They’ve not been seen in groups either. This is something else,” Kyrian said.

“Scouting done then,” Claire said. “Let’s go and find out what else is in there before anything escapes.”

The others nodded, and the group flew into the village, landing in front of the large building.

“They heard us and went down again. Wait, let me check...” Eve said as the group approached the barrier around the house.

“Should I crack it open?” Ilea asked, raising her fist.

“I wouldn’t do that, we have no idea how it will react,” Claire said. She unslung her pack before she looked through her runed plates. “This one, maybe...” she muttered, but then she put it back again. “Blood magic...”

Claire took out a bunch of plates and handed them to Ilea. “Distribute these evenly around the house, please. First a circle of these and then, farther out from the barrier, these six.” She showed her the different plates and Ilea nodded, taking them and blinking around the building to place the runed plates as instructed.

When she returned to the group, Trian gave her a look. “Gotten faster? From the mine yesterday?”

“Yeah, hit 200 in my second Class. You’re going to be fucked in our next spar,” she said with a wink.

“Congratulations. I won’t have to hold back anymore then,” he replied.

Ilea was quite sure he hadn’t been doing that, except maybe for some big spells that he thought would’ve endangered her.

“Believe what you want, Sparky,” she said as another barrier thrummed to life around the large building. This one was near-white in color, though it had a slightly golden hue. One of Claire’s defensive barriers.

“We have to get in, you know, not make it even harder,” Ilea said jokingly, smiling in anticipation of what was to come.

A dull thrum resounded from between the two barriers as the space was filled with fire. Another one followed, and then a third.

“How do you know yours won’t break but the blood magic one will?” Kyrian asked, looking at their rune mage.

“I have preparations for different magics. I know my own explosion magic best, so my barriers against it are the most effective,” Claire said, distracted by her spellcasting.

A last explosion roared before a strange sizzling noise could be heard.

“It’s down. Let’s go and find out if we can take them down. I’ll keep the barrier ready, and if they overwhelm us, we go out and close it,” Claire said as Ilea walked toward the door, kicking it open with one smooth movement. All her buffs were active, and Veil of Ash formed around her.

The stench hit her immediately, and the downright shredded people were not a pleasant sight. She stopped for a second and swallowed some rising bile before walking onward, her smirk vanishing. She could perceive the way down into the cellar perfectly and made her way there, the team

following in formation. After descending the white stone staircase, she came out into a room painted in red.

She didn't have time to really take in the view as two massive werewolves rushed her. Ilea walked toward them, waiting until the closer one slashed at her with its broad, clawed arm. She blinked between the creatures at the last moment, grabbing their arms and stopping their movements.

She felt her muscles tense and ground her teeth, straining before she pulled hard and rammed them into each other. Trian teleported further into the room while the others spread out as well. Ilea started pumping destructive mana into the beasts, eliciting pained howls.

[Blood Claw – lvl 183]

She didn't let go of the animals even when they started clawing at her with their free arms, ripping into her ashen veil, unable to get through. Two large spikes of metal punched through the creatures' chests before lightning came down, burning through fur and skin.

Ilea let the corpses fall when the kill notifications appeared. No level-ups to any skills or Classes, but that was expected. More importantly, Ilea perceived something else in the room.

"Someone survived," she said, blinking toward a pile of flesh and corpses. The stench was overwhelming, but Ilea pushed through, grabbing one corpse after another and moving them aside.

TWENTY-FIVE

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Cleanup Crew

The team watched as Ilea moved the corpses of animals and humans aside before pulling something out of the pile. It was a human, wearing rags and covered in blood, dark eyes locking on to Ilea's.

Ilea removed her helmet to try and avoid scaring the child any further. No Class showed when she identified the kid, and she moved her hand to push the hair out of the child's eyes.

"We'll get you out of here," Ilea said. She failed to put any warmth into her voice, and she clenched her teeth at the realization.

"They must've not smelled it under there," Eve commented.

Trian puked.

"She, it's a she," Ilea said as Kyrian walked up to the girl with a flask of water and cloth that he used to clean the child's face of blood and grime. Ilea thought she was around six or seven years old, with black hair and black eyes.

"Can you make her sleep?" Ilea asked nobody in particular.

Eve walked up to the girl and started humming a slow, quiet tune. The girl's lips stopped quivering, and as her eyes shut, her form slumped into Ilea's arms.

Ilea poured healing into the girl.

"She doesn't look injured," Eve said, scanning the room. "She's lucky she wasn't found."

Ilea glared at her. "Lucky? She was under a pile of corpses, for fuck's sake."

She focused her healing on the kid's head, hoping she could at least deal with some of the trauma. As she did so, she looked around, her vision blurring a little as the smells hit her more intensely.

Kyrian touched her shoulder and slowly took the sleeping child.

Ilea had to steady her breathing. *The smell*. Her vision blurred.

She thought of Lily.

"I need some fresh air," Ilea said.

"We're not done here," Eve said. "Get a grip, everyone."

Ilea took another breath and shuddered, rubbing at her eyes before she looked at the others. Claire was standing near the exit with wide eyes, Trian was still retching up the ale he'd had earlier, Kyrian was walking back upstairs with the child, and Eve was scanning their surroundings.

"I need you to focus," Eve said to her in a calm tone.

Ilea pushed healing into her own mind and breathed more slowly. Then she then walked over to Claire and focused healing on her mind, then did the same for Trian. She stopped near Eve, but she just shook her head in response to the unspoken question.

Kyrian returned soon after. "I put her to bed in one of the houses and closed the d... door."

"Thank you," Ilea replied, considering if she should heal him as well, but Kyrian looked as calm as Eve.

Ilea took another deep breath and cracked her neck. Eve was right. They weren't done here.

"Let's go," she said before continuing further into the underground complex.

The room where Eve's first clone had apparently vanished was now empty, revealing a staircase leading down. Ilea walked a couple of meters in front of the others in case of traps.

Sure enough, she saw spikes and crossbows hidden in the walls of the staircase. She simply punched through the stone with her ash-covered hands to rip out the weapons and tossed them to the ground, not slowing down in the process.

At last, they came into a round hall with runes painted in blood on the ground. There were corpses here as well, one of which was still being worked on.

A pale, bald man wearing padded leather pants turned around to look at Ilea. His eyes were blood-red, and his body was cut in dozens of places. A

blood-coated altar sat in the corner, covered in arcane symbols. Other than that, the room was bare, apart from a few shelves and other spartan furnishings.

“Ah, more have arrived. Come in, come in, you are ready for the feast. All my children, come and join your maker,” he said in a calm and collected tone, as if he were inviting his family to dinner.

[Mage – lvl 202]

The air in the round stone hall was pungent, the smell of blood and rot mixed with wet fur and sweat.

Ilea didn't answer and instead rushed toward him.

Blood swirled around the mage but splattered to the ground a moment later. Ilea looked on with confusion until Eve appeared behind the man.

A dagger had been stabbed deep into the mage's neck. He convulsed, opening and closing his mouth as blood ran down his chin.

Eve left the first weapon inside him and produced another dagger, holding the man's head with her free hand. Black veins formed around the first dagger's wound as he tried to reach her with his arms.

The blood on the ground was slowly starting to levitate again when Eve stabbed him with the second dagger, sinking it deep into his neck on the opposite side. She ripped out the blade and stabbed down again. His arms flailed weakly at her as his blood joined the pool on the ground until, with a last deep cut, his head came loose, and his lifeless body fell onto the stone floor with a wet thud.

Eve tossed the head to the side before she bent down to collect her other dagger. When her eyes briefly locked with Ilea's, she saw she looked calm.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Follower of Blood lvl 202 / Beast Summoner lvl 192]

“This place is foul,” Eve said, searching the man's pants before she moved on to the altar. She looked up and noticed the rest of the team watching her, their eyes wide. “There might still be traps. Search the place. We may find out who's responsible for this.”

“I think you just killed him,” Ilea said, but she used her skills to try and search the room anyway.

“It’s rarely that simple,” Eve said, her voice quiet.

“There’s a hidden shelf here. Claire, can you check for runes?” Ilea said, squinting at the wall before her.

Claire gulped, her eyes focused solely on the shelves before she walked over to the wall. She painted a rune into the air, and when she activated her magic, the compartment in the wall sprang open.

Ilea saw needles fly out and instantly blinked between them and Claire so they bounced harmlessly off her veil. She picked one up and inspected it.

“Coated in something,” she said, but Claire grabbed the needle from her hand.

“Thank you for that, but don’t even think about testing that poison. We’re still on the mission.”

“I wasn’t going to stab myself with it,” Ilea murmured. *Not now, anyway.*

Claire tossed the needle to the ground before investigating the shelf. On it were some gold pieces, three books, and some letters. Claire took all of it and handed everything to the group, who were now waiting in the middle of the room.

“Store these for later,” she said as she started to draw runes on the walls and the ground.

“Can we talk about what the fuck this place is?” Trian asked.

“You should be the last to act so surprised,” Eve said as she checked the walls.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Not here, not now,” Ilea said.

Trian glared at her.

“Please,” she said.

His eyes softened before he nodded. “Do I have to stay here? I can wait upstairs.”

“We can go check on the child,” Kyrian suggested.

“That would be good,” said Claire, who was focused on the runes she was drawing.

While Kyrian and Trian headed upstairs, Ilea made sure to check for survivors. Just in case. She found nothing.

Ten minutes later, Claire told them to move a floor up, and she continued to draw more runes there. They only emerged from the stone building when Claire was done with everything.

Ilea used her sphere to locate the building where Kyrian, Trian, and the girl were waiting, and the rest of the team headed inside. Trian was sitting in a chair in the corner of the dark living room, his helmet off. Kyrian was next to the bed where the young girl was still asleep, her breath weak.

Claire sat down at the table in the living room. "The books and letters we found?"

Ilea summoned them wordlessly.

Claire started reading the first one, occasionally taking notes in her notebook.

Ilea moved over to the girl in the bedroom and started healing her mind again.

"Is she still injured?" Kyrian asked.

"No," Ilea said. "Not physically, at least."

He nodded, understanding.

"Think a fire is safe?" Trian asked from the other room.

"I checked the rest of the village, we should be done," Eve responded.

"Kyrian should search for tracks," Claire said.

Kyrian got up and went to the living room. "I'll have a look."

"I'll come with you. We'll give the other houses another sweep," Eve offered.

"No fire then?" Trian asked.

"Not yet. There's an oil lamp over there," Claire said.

Ilea stayed with the girl until the others came back. She barely noticed the minutes passing.

"So, what do we have?" Eve asked, looking at Claire.

Ilea listened but continued her work on the girl.

"The letters are from nobles in Lys. No names are mentioned, but it's clear from the writing style," Claire said. "They were asking for experiments to be performed here. There are mentions of funds to be transferred as well. It reads like this wasn't the first time, though the scale had shifted. More gruesome than usual."

"This book is about rituals for summoning," she said, raising one of the books. "Blood magic generally uses corpses and life energy to create some sort of abomination."

“And this is a diary,” Claire added. She opened it carefully and began to read.

“Day forty-seven. The village elders have finally agreed to the deal. It seems the gold was too tempting to reject. Dorothy even asked if we could do more experiments for more gold. I’m glad that woman is one of the elders. Truly a visionary like myself...”

“Day one hundred and three. I have gained another twelve levels, and my skills are skyrocketing. Two of the experiments have been a complete success. I have to push on. Get more people. The villagers in this small part of the world won’t be missed. Who would care about such a small, isolated place? Soon enough, I’ll come to a greater understanding. A breakthrough is nigh. I can feel it...”

Claire looked up from the book. “I’ve not got through all of it, but that’s the general idea so far.”

“Seems like a mostly isolated situation then. It’s good that we got here in time,” Eve said.

Sparks arced from Trian to the nearby wall. “What do you mean, in time? There were dozens down there!”

Eve looked at him, then smiled as if she were looking at a child throwing a tantrum. Trian opened his mouth to speak but then stormed outside.

Ilea walked over to Kyrian. “Can you stay with the girl? I need some fresh air as well.”

Kyrian gave her a nod and went into the other room.

Ilea blinked outside and onto the roof, removing her helmet and breathing in the cool air. She closed her eyes and thought about what she had seen inside that cellar. It would haunt her for some time, she was sure. She summoned some of Keyla’s food, but today she found it bland and tasteless.

And what the fuck is Eve on about? She sounds like she’s seen this kind of shit a hundred times before. There were dozens of corpses.

It felt different this time, compared to what had happened in Riverwatch, below Dawntree, and in Salia. She knew there were monsters out there, creatures that could kill a dozen humans in the blink of an eye. But everyone here had been human. Blood rituals conducted by the man Eve had killed, requested and paid for by nobility somewhere in the very Empire they resided in.

She took a deep breath and sighed.

It's really no surprise, is it? You just hadn't stumbled upon it yet.

She smiled to herself, feeling a little ridiculous. Of course there were blood mages sacrificing people for money and power. And now she knew there was probably worse out there too. From the way Eve had talked about nobility, she had experience of whatever that was.

Ilea cracked her neck and stood up. She wanted to cry, or to punch something. Looking around, she saw the distant crackle of lightning. It seemed like she wasn't the only one who wanted to let off some steam.

She found Trian in the forest. He glanced at her and then toward the sky. He puffed, a slight smile on his face. It didn't reach his eyes.

"I guess we did sign up to kill monsters."

"And we did," she said, ash spreading to cover her form. "I feel cold. Come on. Let's fight."

A burst of red lightning broke through the wall of ash as Ilea blinked toward Trian, who quickly teleported away. Her fist continued through the tree behind him, breaking it in half, then a flash of lightning advanced on her. Another blink and she was gone, creating and spreading ash around her as best as she could, obscuring herself and trying to catch him off-guard.

Ilea felt both faster and stronger than she had before her evolution. She was keeping Trian constantly on the defensive, and he was relying on his flight and teleportation more than usual.

She appeared at the same time as him and grabbed his arm, his lightning coursing through her as she smashed her other fist into his chest. She didn't use her intrusion spells, just as he didn't use his enchanted armor.

Ilea punched again, hearing bones crack as she gritted her teeth against the surging lightning, the surrounding trees already singed by the sparks. She finished with a kick that sent him flying into the closest tree.

Ilea smiled, and her breathing slowly calmed. She could feel the lightning coursing through her as she healed. Cracking her neck, she watched Trian stagger to his feet.

He spat blood on the forest floor and grinned back, his teeth red. He took in a deep breath and coughed.

"I think that's as far as we should go. Still technically on a mission."

"I do feel a little better," she said and teleported close, reaching out to him before she started healing the damage. A few broken ribs and a lot of bruises. Not much in comparison to their many bouts in the past months.

“Your evolution is showing,” he muttered. “I’ll have to work harder.”

“You’re plenty strong,” Ilea said.

He was right, of course. She’d noticed the differences after getting the Inheritor Class, but fighting Trian really brought home how much her magic had improved.

“What good am I if I get outdone by someone without noble blood?” he asked with a smile.

“Might want to start questioning that line of thinking,” Ilea said.

“I already have.”

They left it at that.

Ilea gulped as they started walking back to the tiny village, the adrenaline of the fight leaving her as she remembered the ghastly scenes they had encountered.

And dealt with.

It’s part of it now. You actually made an impact. That girl is alive because of your team. And that madman won’t kill anybody else, she told herself. Even so, she’d need some time to process everything.

“So...” Trian started. “Can you use those gauntlets now?”

Ilea summoned them and lifted them up slowly. “Yes, but I’m much slower with the weight.”

Trian glanced at the weapons and grunted. They remained silent as they walked through the village and returned to the house.

Claire had a bunch of notes on some paper next to the diary. Eve was sitting next to her and helping her make notes. The two were nearly done with the whole book.

Ilea looked toward the open door of the other room. Kyrian was still with the girl, who Ilea noticed was now awake. She stored her helmet and walked to the door, leaning in to see Kyrian sitting on the floor some distance away from the bed, his helmet off as well.

“Can I join?”

She directed her question at the girl, who raised her blanket closer to her chest, her dark eyes widening.

Ilea waited.

The girl nodded.

Ilea smiled and joined Kyrian on the floor. She wasn’t about to get too close to the girl. She was probably very afraid of the strangers in armor, especially after everything she’d been through.

Ilea summoned a meal and some water, then glanced at Kyrian. He took the hint, and a metal sphere floated out of his quiver before it formed into a disc, soon delivering the steaming meal to the girl.

“You should eat and drink,” Ilea said.

“Has she talked?” she whispered to Kyrian, monitoring the girl in her sphere while her physical eyes were turned away. The girl looked suspicious for mere seconds before she started devouring the food.

Kyrian watched the girl, then glanced at Ilea. “She didn’t even touch the trail rations we offered her.”

Ilea grinned. “I have a special supplier.”

He looked at her, then narrowed his eyes. “You hired her. I knew it.”

She smirked.

Ilea tried to talk to the girl but didn’t push her when she wouldn’t respond. After they reassured her that they would bring her to safety as soon as they could, Ilea and Kyrian joined the others in the living room.

They left the door open. No one was wearing their helmet, which Ilea found she quite liked about their team. Sulivhaan and his Shadows had never taken theirs off, but perhaps that was simply because Ilea had been there. She didn’t know how they interacted when nobody was around.

The house was still dark and cold, only a small flame burning over some runes Claire had placed on the table to make reading a simpler task. Around ten minutes later, she stopped writing and sat back in the chair, her armored skirt producing a metallic rustling from the movement.

“How does it look?” Ilea said, looking at Claire.

“It looks like we’ll have more than just money to collect in that village.”

TWENTY-SIX

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Everyday Life

Sally had watched the Hand squad leave the village quite some time ago and now felt many gazes upon her. For once, it didn't feel like the people watching her were after the money she hid in her heavy coat.

I hope they come back alive...

She turned to grab her drink. She had left the mercenaries to interrogate the two people they had found spying on them and returned to the inn as soon as they were done.

The innkeeper was acting a little tense now after the squad had come and gone, but if it weren't for the constant feeling of unease she had in this village, she would've attributed that to simply being in contact with a Shadow squad.

I need to get the hell out of here...

She had hardly finished her thought or her drink when a group of villagers burst into the inn. Some of them glanced her way, but they didn't seem too concerned by her presence. She was a couple of dozen levels higher than anybody in the room, but it would be a difficult fight if they ganged up on her.

She read the mood and respectfully departed the common area for the top floor and her room. What the group downstairs probably didn't know was that Sally had exceptional hearing due to her second, more stealthy Class. Standing near the top of the stairway, she strained her ears and listened in, if only to be able to get the fuck away should the need arise.

"...they've entered the main hall," one of the men said in a hushed but aggravated voice, clearly not handling the stress as well as he should be.

“So? Many have done the same, and so far, nobody has returned. Trust in the Maker.”

Sally found herself a little surprised at the innkeeper’s words. Except for a little tension, she hadn’t felt anything from him.

A good actor. And certainly involved.

Sally wondered how the Empire had even been notified about the missing people in the first place. Then she shelved the thought for now. She was in danger, and the only reason the villagers likely hadn’t come for her already was the bigger threat of the Shadow squad.

“They broke the barrier, Hollum!”

Even someone without enhanced hearing could’ve heard that outburst. It was the same man speaking, but more people were talking over each other now, trying to get their opinions in.

“It was a mistake, a big mistake... I’m gonna leave. You do whatever you want,” one said. There was the sound of heavy footsteps storming toward the door, but the man was stopped by one of his fellows.

“Don’t get the shits now, we’re in this together, Karl.”

Then the room fell quiet as the door opened with a creak. Sally heard someone step in. Quietly. She could feel shivers run down her back, activating her skills as she waited at the top of the staircase.

“Welcome back. So, have you found the...” the innkeeper started, but he was interrupted by the sound of someone humming.

Sally moved back one step and then two as she listened to the eerie tune. The sound of a blade cutting through flesh came next, followed by heavy objects falling to the wooden floor. Not a single word was uttered by anyone downstairs until the humming stopped.

Sally had her hands on the handles of her swords when the same voice that had been humming came from below.

“No need to be afraid, officer.”

It was one of the mercenaries.

Sally found herself unable to let go of her weapons. Concentrating on it, she finally released her tense hands but kept up her spells.

No stupid moves now, or you’re dead... she thought as she steeled herself and slowly walked downstairs.

Seven people, including the innkeeper, were lying on the floor, unmoving, blood pooling below them, coloring the wood a dark shade of

red. One of the mercenaries was standing in the middle of the room, clad in her dark armor, her face covered in a mask that showed a white smile.

The woman was staring at the ceiling but turned toward Sally as soon as she set foot in the room. Sally readied her resolve and all her skills to react in an instant, should the mercenary find a reason to attack her.

“Relax.”

The word came from the door as another of the mercenaries entered. The woman who had found the spies and was constantly eating. She was giving off a different feel now, clad in black full-plate and a horned helmet, all covered in blood.

“We found and killed those responsible. Turns out most of them were from this village. You get all of them?” she asked, directing the question at the masked mercenary.

“Seven here. There should be five more,” she said. As she walked toward the door, she vanished before Sally’s eyes.

“Good hunting,” the other woman said and turned her gaze to the scene before her, the look on her face hidden behind her helmet. She then walked up to each corpse and closed their eyes, a strange gesture.

Then Sally’s eyebrows shot up as the first corpse vanished, then the second, then the rest before the woman walked out the back door. No other words had been spoken.

Sally’s curiosity won out, and she followed the mercenary. She found her outside, where she grabbed a shovel before moving on. A couple of dozen meters behind the inn, right at the start of a snow-covered field, she stopped walking and started digging.

Graves...

“There you are.” A new person joined the solemn scene as the mercenary team leader walked up to Sally. “Would you please come with me to discuss the report?”

Sally found herself nodding along, following the team leader to the sound of a shovel hitting cold dirt.

At least now I can leave this wretched place...

* * *

Ilea finished the last grave and summoned the corpses from her necklace to fill the holes. She felt a slight disturbance in her sphere but continued her task.

“You think they deserve that?” Eve asked as she appeared a couple of meters away from Ilea. “After what they’ve done?”

“Maybe not, but we don’t have to become them,” Ilea answered,

That produced a slight chuckle from Eve. “I murdered them all in cold blood. And you would have done the same, had I not asked to.”

Ilea stayed quiet, knowing there was some truth to what her teammate said. Still, she refused to give in completely. Foolish, maybe, but something inside her didn’t want to let go.

Eve soon left and brought back the other five bodies. She didn’t help, but she stayed and looked out over the fields.

Ilea saw a few metal orbs hover into her sphere as Kyrian joined them without a word, his metal magic quickly filling the remaining graves.

* * *

“You stopped something before it got dangerous. Thank you,” Sally said, retrieving a pouch from her coat.

“It was plenty dangerous for everybody who died already,” Eve said coldly.

“O... of course, I’m sorry... I meant for the Empire itself.”

Ilea watched, enjoying one of Keyla’s meals, before she looked over to Claire, who was counting their reward. The official and Claire were taking a while to finish up.

I suppose paperwork is a monster of its own.

Trian sat down next to Ilea and tapped the table. Then he got up again and walked behind the bar.

“What are you doing?” Claire asked without looking his way.

He grabbed a bottle and opened it, sniffing the contents before he poured himself a drink.

“I’m sure the late innkeeper won’t mind.”

Ilea stood up and sat down at the bar. “Pour me one too, will you?”

Eve joined them, followed by Kyrian. Claire received a drink as well, but she left it mostly untouched as she and Sally continued their

discussions.

An investigator would be sent by the Empire to determine the involvement of the village in the killings. The evidence combined with some last-minute confessions made for a compelling argument, though Ilea still had some qualms about being a vigilante murderer. Even though those people had deserved it.

She did find it bothered her much less than the first time she had killed, and she was sure it would bother her still less next time.

She drained her cup. *I'll have to visit a priest or something. Wish there were some psychiatrists around for some therapy...*

Eventually, Claire and Sally were done, and they were ready to go on to their third mission.

The girl they had found turned out to be related to some of the villagers, who had believed her to be missing in the nearby forest.

"Are you sure we should just leave her here?" Ilea asked as Eve reluctantly took her position and grabbed onto her arm.

"Her mother cried when she saw her," Eve said. "And I made it clear that I'd be back to check in on the village."

"You really plan on going back?"

"I keep my promises," Eve said, her eyes on the sky.

Ilea looked at her before she turned toward the snow-covered houses. It felt peaceful, the tension gone from this place. For now, at least.

She could see her companions in her sphere, occupied with their own thoughts as they waited. Ilea couldn't help but smile, thinking back to her first few days at the Shadow's Hand.

She was glad she had joined.

Claire bade farewell to the official and grabbed onto Ilea.

"Ready when you are."

TWENTY-SEVEN

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Wings

The team was flying eastward toward Damwell, one of Lys' cities by the sea. The journey would take up much of their day, but Ilea felt more than content just flying. After everything she had seen, she needed some time to process things. And she was glad the next mission was supposed to be a simple monster extermination.

She was quiet, and so were the teammates she carried through the Empire's lands. The Plains, she thought, reminded her of her early information gathering in Riverwatch. Various human kingdoms and Empires split this region between each other. And still, looking down on the vast landscape, she couldn't see a single city. Nor a single road. There had to be some, she was sure, but most everything here looked like wilderness. Meadows and rivers, small copses of trees, and distant forests.

After some time, Ilea noticed that she felt calmer. Time and distance from the recent villages let her think of other things. She enjoyed flying. And now that she had a more fixed goal with the next missions, she could also appreciate how efficient the mode of travel was. It allowed them to avoid forests and rivers, let alone all the creatures living in the woods or hidden in the wild grasslands.

She thought back on the caravan she had taken to reach Salia, and a part of her missed the prospect of such a long journey in itself. But then again, she had wings now, and she wouldn't trade them away for anything.

Plus I can still choose to travel on foot or in a caravan. Might even be more fun to know I could just fly. She smiled at the thought and pushed on, hardly noticing the two teammates she carried.

It took hours to reach Damwell, and the suns of Elos were slowly starting to set on the horizon by the time they arrived. A dirt road led toward the city's stone walls. Ilea could see the ship masts in the distance, their tied-up sails illuminated by the warm evening light. Damwell wasn't quite a city, but it wasn't a small town either. Much of it was made up of its extensive port.

Ilea thought of fish and then of dinner as the group landed near the gates and joined the few other travelers nearby, most of whom were adventurers or merchants being escorted by guards.

They did get a few looks but considerably fewer than on their first mission. This changed quickly upon entering the city itself, where most people weren't part of one adventuring guild or another. One of the city guards escorted the group toward the station where they would be further instructed on the job.

After the initial mention of a Queen Harpy, no other adventurers had even tried to venture onto the cliffs. The monster was too dangerous a prospect.

They waited while Claire quickly finished up with the city official. Ilea was getting a little sick of the constant attention they were getting due to the black wisps over their heavy armor.

I could switch to my leathers... but the others would still be here... eh.

Ilea sighed and summoned her monster encyclopedia, looking for the Queen Harpy entry. She found it a moment later.

A Queen Harpy appears in a Harpy nest around every other decade. Usually, these monsters fly toward a high mountain or an isolated cliffside to build their new nest. When a Queen appears, the Harpies around it grow more defensive and ultimately aggressive toward the neighboring species.

The monster itself usually reaches a level slightly above 200. No notable capabilities besides the purely physical have been reported.

"So we go there and kill the birds..." Kyrian said, glancing over at the open book.

"They're, like, half human, right?" Ilea asked as she looked at the sketch of the monster before the book vanished from her hand.

"They're monsters. Can't talk, can't write, can't think," Trian said from the side, looking around at the guards who threw occasional glances at their group.

Claire joined them and briefed the group on the new information she'd received. There wasn't a lot, other than the increasing number of Harpy attacks near the southern fringes of the city. Fishermen and adventurers were avoiding parts of their usual routes and hunting grounds because of it.

"We could stay the night and start our hunt refreshed in the morning?" Claire suggested.

Ilea rolled her shoulders. "I was kind of hoping we could get a bit of fighting in. The second half of that flight got a bit boring."

"You really aren't one for patience," Eve murmured.

Ilea smiled.

"I suppose there's enough light for scouting, at least," Claire said.

"Then let's not waste more," Ilea said and spread her wings.

They flew over the southernmost section of the walls and along the high cliffside above the ocean. The Harpies had been seen around a two-hour walk from the city. A short flight for the team of Shadows.

Ilea landed when she heard the first screeches in the distance, looking up at the cliffs with a smile.

Definitely better than a strange abandoned village.

"What's the plan?" Eve asked.

Claire opened her pack and got out the notice. "The city has paid for the Queen Harpy extermination only. There will be hundreds of the beasts protecting her. So, with your abilities, I suggest you and either Ilea or Trian sneak inside and mask them somewhat. The rest of us will distract the other Harpies while staying mostly hidden and behind my barriers. Explosions will rile them up."

"What happens to the Harpies after we kill the Queen?" Ilea asked.

"They'll go c... crazy," Kyrian said.

"And attack us?"

"They'll become even more aggressive," Trian said. "I don't understand why the city didn't just pay for an extermination of the entire nest."

"Shadows are expensive," Eve said, the annoyance in her voice more than obvious.

He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. "Right." He paused, then glanced at Ilea. "I hate to say it, but I agree with Ilea. I was looking forward to letting loose a little. If we're here anyway, we might as well clear the entire nest, no?"

"More experience," Ilea nodded.

“It will d... draw out the Q... Queen as well,” Kyrian said.

“It will be riskier,” Claire grumbled. She saw the team looking at her and sighed. “Alright. But we’ll use one of the formations we tried in the Haven. Formation six.” She looked at them, then sighed again. “I’ll explain it again. In the meantime, Eve, can you go and scout out the location? We’ll need cover and a safe way to retreat.”

Eve nodded and vanished.

* * *

Ilea clenched her fists, both covered by the blue steel of her bladed gauntlets. She surmised that the winged and supposedly rather thin Harpies would be susceptible to her gauntlets’ sharp curved blades.

She stood hidden behind an outcrop of rock at ground level. The cliffside above them split where a single canyon-like extension led inward. Far above, she could see dozens of small cave entrances, movements of feathered wings occasionally visible. The screeches were more numerous now. They knew there were dozens, if not hundreds, of Harpies up there.

Around her and between the small rocks and pebbles, she could glimpse the occasional metal needle, some reflecting the late evening sunlight. There were runed stones throughout the area as well.

She couldn’t see any of her teammates. Eve was hidden somewhere between the rocks, ready to strike at the Queen as soon as she appeared, and Trian was somewhere closer to her, his task the same as Ilea’s.

They were ready.

Ilea waited another minute before she heard an explosion close to the stony beach. The screeches immediately intensified as the first monsters flew out of the many cavern entrances.

“It begins,” she murmured with a smile on her face. She spread her own wings before flying up onto a rocky outcrop, where she waved and shouted, “Hello! I’m here! Tasty, human meat!”

Dozens of Harpies immediately turned and rushed toward her. She could see their broad gray and brown wings and beaked, near-human heads, out of which grew two small horns. Their legs ended in bird-like talons large enough to punch through an adult human’s chest.

Her smile faded as she watched more and more of the creatures fly down toward her.

“More meat here!” Trian shouted from a few dozen meters away, his declaration splitting the swarm.

Ilea felt magic flow through her body, waiting for the last moment before she flew inland, still shouting to get the attention of more Harpies.

The creatures snapped at her, some crashing into each other to get at their prey, black eyes fixated on Ilea’s flying form. They were all below level 200, many even below 150.

She dodged and spun through the onslaught before she landed near the back wall of the canyon.

Trian appeared next to her, the entire swarm of harpies close behind and ready to crash into them. His lightning charged and flashed up toward the sky.

The signal for the others.

Ilea grinned when she saw the slight green glow from between the rocks. A moment later, the familiar storm of needles rushed through the broad canyon, cursed steel shredding through the screeching monsters. Their cries were drowned out a moment later by the runed stones placed by Eve exploding on the cliffsides, sending shrapnel of stone and shock waves through the confused and crazed swarm.

Dozens fell in a mere moment as Ilea prepared. She could see Trian in her sphere, a smile on his face as his lightning crackled.

Let’s start.

Her wings moved and she rushed forward, hitting the first Harpy, bladed gauntlets slashing into its chest before she pushed past, twirling in the air to join the confused and screeching chaos.

Ash exploded outward to add to the confusion, lightning flaring as dozens of creatures were seared by Trian’s spells. Ilea flew on, focusing on making slashing motions instead of punches as she tried to get used to her gauntlets.

On the third try, she managed to cut through the tendons of a winged creature. After ten, she could already target her cuts. The added blades felt intuitive. Being so close to her arms, she essentially had to act as if she wanted to hit something with her elbows.

She twirled through the chaos as more explosions ripped through the monsters, the needle storm gone now that Kyrian had likely used up most of

his mana.

Ilea kept crashing into clusters of Harpies before she unleashed her blades, both her veil and her armor below it protecting her against most of their wild counter-attacks.

She spun and saw a larger bird fly toward her in a straight line. It had four wings instead of two, and the horns on its head were much more pronounced.

[Queen Harpy – lvl 205]

Just like in the monster book...

Ilea smiled and flew backward and down toward the ground. She landed between two outcrops of rocks and looked up at the fast-approaching beast. The beast slammed down a moment later, its claws scraping past her veil as she dodged to the right.

The creature drew itself up and snapped at her, screeching a moment later when Eve appeared beside it, slamming a dagger into the monster's neck.

Ilea jumped back between the rocks and vanished yet again as blood spurted from the deep wound on the monster's neck.

Ilea smiled and blinked close to the beast. Ash surged around her, staining the ground black and gray and filling the air with a mist of the magically created substance. It twirled around her as her wings moved.

The Queen Harpy was gurgling and screeching as it tried to remove the dagger from its neck, black veins slowly forming near the blade. It was striking the space around itself with wild attacks when Ilea slammed into it, bladed gauntlets cutting into the other side of its neck.

She twirled around and grabbed onto the monster's back. Holding on with her legs, Ilea slashed down into the back of the creature's neck with both blades, the blue steel digging deep. The impact forced the monster down onto the rock. Another cut slashed through its neck, and the Queen Harpy's head toppled off and fell to the ground with a wet thud.

Its death was followed by loud screeches all around, lightning and explosions cutting through the noise as the battle continued.

Ilea looked for Trian in her sphere and soon found him working his way past the Harpies and toward the beach. She joined him, her bladed gauntlets slashing into the creatures aiming for his back, and his lightning flashed out

at the monsters coming for her. There were still dozens of monsters following them out of the canyon toward the rest of their team.

I hope that was enough time...

Ilea found Claire and Kyrian waiting behind some larger rocks. She flew toward them with Trian by her side, splitting up again and flying past the two mages as explosions and a rush of needles flashed past them.

She turned to see winged bodies slapping against Claire's bright dome-like barrier, the few survivors scraping their claws against the defensive spell before they were cut down one by one.

Eve appeared with a jump and stabbed her dagger into the back of the last flying monster, bringing it down before the barrier fell.

Ilea laughed and fell down on her ass, watching the barrier slowly dissolve into thousands of bits of light as she looked through the messages.

That was fun.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Queen Harpy – lvl 205]

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 5

“Well done. You actually listened,” Claire said.

Eve ripped her dagger out of the last Harpy and put it away.

“Nice gauntlets,” Trian said.

Ilea smiled. “Thanks. I commissioned them myself.”

* * *

“It’s barely been two hours... did you find the location of the Harpy?” asked the guard captain, a grizzled old man. A level 130 ranger, according to Ilea’s identification. Claire gestured outside, where they’d left the carcass and head of the creature.

The man was cursing with delight as he exited his office.

“You damn motherfuckers! Great job. You cost a damn lot, but it’s worth it.” He touched the body with glee in his eyes. “Damn monster, that one. Over 200?”

Claire nodded to his question as he let go of the corpse. “We cleared the nest as well.”

He blinked his eyes. "You... cleared the nest? All of it?"

"There may be a few survivors we didn't immediately alert, but you'll find the site covered in corpses," Claire said as a matter of fact.

"That is... well, great! Come then, we'll pay you, and you can be on your way. Of course, we can also sort out lodgings if you want to stay in the city? I'm sure a lot of adventurers would gladly thank you for your service."

He grinned at that, but for once, Claire and her group didn't show much of a reaction, stoic as the reputation of the Shadow's Hand.

Ilea was mostly just looking forward to the next job. The suns had set, but the sky was clear, and they could probably make it to the next location in less than an hour.

"Two done, one to go. And it's still the same day," Kyrian said as the group waited for Claire to finish the paperwork again. This time it didn't take quite as long, likely because no execution of a blood magic cult had taken place.

Ilea hoped the same would be true for the last mission.

* * *

Should've taken those water fighting lessons... Ilea thought, a little worried as the group flew over open water near the coastline. *I wonder if Aki is bored...*

Eve started humming as she clung on. Ilea didn't know the tune, but it had a bit of a happier tone than her usual musical renditions. Maybe she was excited at the prospect of exploring a newly discovered ruin.

Nonetheless, it was nice to have something else than the waves in her ears, a constant reminder of the unending depths below, just waiting to swallow her. Being right next to the coast was fine, but they were getting farther and farther out. She gulped and concentrated on the song.

"I think that's it. See those formations over there? They fit the description," Claire said as the group hovered over the hundreds of rocks creeping out of the water a couple of hundred meters away from the shoreline. There was no city or village anywhere close by.

"You mean those several hundred gray rocky ones?" Ilea asked with an exaggeratedly excited tone.

Claire nodded slightly, the sarcasm shooting right over her head.

“Claire, I have no idea where you mean – please just guide me,” Ilea said and started flying again, following her teammate’s hand gestures.

“I can see movement,” Eve said as they got closer to some rocks that looked quite similar to everything else Ilea could see.

Soon enough, though, she saw it too – a bunch of people moving about a platform of rock, supplies and tents dotted around them. There was neither a fire nor any boats, making the place a little harder to find.

The group landed a couple of dozen meters away and approached the adventurers’ camp. It seemed in good shape, and at least some of the people there had noticed the newcomers, shouting to get the attention of the rest. A line quickly formed as magic flared up.

“They know who we are, don’t they?” Kyrian asked Claire, who was walking closer to the adventurers while the others stayed back. It was the general approach they had settled on, given the rest of the team was too socially inept to make first contact with a giddy group of dangerous warriors.

“We’re a bunch of people in black armor, approaching in the middle of the night, could be anyone really. Dunno if they know about a hired squad from the Hand making an appearance,” Ilea said, spinning Aki around to make sure he wouldn’t suddenly doze off. She wasn’t sure he’d even been alert most of the time in the past days, but he did like it whenever there was action.

With raised arms, Claire walked closer to the adventurers until there were only a couple of meters of water between them. Ilea noticed a lot of the adventurers were relaxing already, some even leaving the formation.

“We’re Shadow’s Hand, we’ve been hired to help with the exploration.”

There were still some doubtful faces ahead of them, but Claire calmly moved her backpack around to her front before she got out a piece of paper with the guild’s seal. It was an additional document they had gotten when receiving the mission.

Even the last adventurers now seemed more relaxed upon seeing the seal, and Claire soon waved the rest of the team over after she’d jumped onto the rocky plateau where the adventurers had made camp. Compared to the stares they had gotten in Damwell, Ilea noticed a lot more respectful nods coming their way in addition to some smiles and relieved expressions.

It seemed to Ilea that the exploration was going as well as the guild had described, and a female ranger from the group confirmed her hunch.

“Yeah, we’ve lost two more since the request went out. Didn’t know a Shadow squad would be hired, but the report we sent to the guild was quite detailed. I assume you read it?”

“I did. Poison, arrows, rusty spike traps. No monsters discovered so far,” Claire summarized. She had talked a little more about the report on their flight here, but it didn’t seem that dangerous to Ilea.

“So how will you go about it?”

Claire just motioned to Ilea. “Are you sure about this?”

“Oh yes, I’m the Trapbuster 3000,” Ilea said solemnly before a veil of ash formed around her. She then put her pack down unceremoniously and took out a piece of paper and her pen to draw a map.

Eve smiled, and Claire shrugged as Trian sat down on a stone nearby.

“Don’t take too long, and come get us if you find anything interesting. Don’t touch anything,” Trian said to her, making Ilea grin from ear to ear.

“I’ll touch everything... all of the things...” she giggled, then vanished into the cave.

* * *

“Y... you sure she’ll be alright?” the ranger asked Claire, obviously not intimidated by the prospect of a Shadow squad. Not surprising, given she was level 160.

“She’s quite... durable,” Claire said as she retrieved some documents from her backpack, ready to start writing the report for this mission. It was something she could focus on and something she knew she was good at.

They had been successful on their missions so far, but she couldn’t help but be afraid of what the next one would bring. Despite her rigorous training and all of her preparations, given what she had seen in that cellar and the way her team fought, she couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed.

Just stay calm and do what you can.

* * *

“Are you serious...” Ilea muttered as a bunch of poison darts flew her way, their short flight interrupted by the ash flowing around her.

She kept herself over the water with her wings or simply by grabbing onto the rocks. The traps were well hidden; without her sphere, Ilea would’ve been quite surprised by some of them. Even then, none were capable of injuring her in any major way. Most of her time was spent drawing the ruin, which at this point was essentially a long cave with hints of symmetrical influences.

The rooms were dilapidated and eroded due to the presence of so much water. Many areas were flooded, but it was unclear if this was by design or down to the passage of time. The walls were smooth as if carved by sentient creatures, and some design features were hinted at by the left-over nubs and swirls of rock. Still, little remained that had not been built to last.

A sudden rock slide above her made some large stones tumble toward her, threatening to push her onto the spikes in the water below, but with a well-timed blink, Ilea simply stood on top of the traps.

Compared to the Taleen dungeon, this seems like amateur hour...

Even so, considering the traps here were mainly based on mechanical finesse rather than runic magic, it was all certainly impressive. Ilea saw the spikes bite into the stones as they fell, speaking to the quality of the metal used.

All that for a lousy trap, she thought as she continued onward.

An hour of trap deactivation turned into two as Ilea let the mechanisms spring more often than she tried to dismantle them. Unlike the Taleen creations, the ones here didn’t reset.

The caves ran rather deep, and Ilea was glad she could blink through water as many sections were flooded or even held traps that achieved the same result. Finally, Ilea came upon a massive round stone door with runes carved into it. There was still no sign of life inside the ruins.

She couldn’t see through the door with her sphere, nor could she blink inside. The attempt even released some poison darts from the door that managed to pierce her Veil of Ash.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by ???: -100 HP/s -100 Stamina/s for the next ???

Yeah, I can see this dungeon being deadly to people without healers or poison resistances... she thought, smiling and activating Hunter Recovery.

The notification didn't say how long the poison would last, and the Stamina part made her a little anxious. Ilea quickly retreated and found a space between a couple of rocks to hide and wait out the poison in case something came up while she was healing and out of Stamina.

The poison took a total of ten minutes to completely wear off. Tens of thousands of health points were lost and regained as Ilea waited, nearly paralyzed by her lack of Stamina, a state she rarely reached during conventional training and fighting. The idea of getting a Stamina drain resistance and perhaps a drowning resistance became quite important to her as she struggled to avoid falling into the water below.

With the combined effort of Meditation, Poison Resistance, Hunter Recovery, and Veil of Ash increasing the effectiveness of her resistances, Ilea fought off the poison and removed it from her body. Ilea didn't think even Trian would've survived that one, not even with her help.

What the hell... some bloody poison darts killing a literal thunder vampyr? That would just be sad. It seemed wrong to her. *Maybe we should get a full-time healer in the group to make sure something like that doesn't happen.*

She slowly got up and out of her hiding spot, stretching every limb of her body until she felt capable again of fighting off some poison darts.

This is turning out to be nearly as dangerous as fighting the fucking Praetorians...

She chuckled as she touched the round stone door. Trying to blink inside again didn't release any more darts, but she still couldn't get past it. She didn't want to force her way in as that would likely cause other problems, problems that now weren't just her own anymore.

Ilea checked the room for any hidden traps she might have missed and only found two more dart traps that she destroyed without issue. With no way to continue safely, she made her way back to the adventurer camp with the map she had been adding to continuously. There were a lot of side tunnels, but all of them ended in traps. Whoever built this place definitely didn't want anybody to find a safe place to rest – at least not until the traps had been activated.

Nearing the exit to the cave and hearing the sound of magic and explosions, Ilea sped up. She came out to find her team and most of the

adventurers engaged with some kind of stone creature.

[Stone Guardian of Karul – lvl ??]

“Oh shit... but also... yes!” she exclaimed and activated all her buffs, jumping into combat with a smile.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

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Origins

The creature was at least two stories tall and looked somewhat like a medieval knight. Its limbs were smooth, as if any decorations not magically protected had eroded over the years.

Ilea blinked into the magic-laden air and grabbed onto the guardian. It was made entirely of stone but must have been much more durable than ordinary rock, considering the magic that was continuously raining into it.

After a couple of punches, Ilea noticed that neither of her mana intrusion abilities worked. Her fist even bounced back when she tried to use Wave of Ember and Destruction to damage the creature. She didn't take any damage herself, but she was quite sure the golem didn't even notice her strikes.

Ilea found she was the only one actually on the creature; all the other adventurers had formed lines of defense with mages behind, attacking the golem from a distance. It would sometimes shoot a lance of stone toward them, which the first line tried to block or deflect. A couple of adventurers showed wounds or broken limbs, but nobody appeared to have been killed so far.

The adventurers had a few healers with them, so she felt her abilities would be more useful on the offensive. The creature was riddled with Kyrian's needles, but they had barely managed to pierce its stony shell – if there was something other than more stone inside.

The Guardian was slow and under constant bombardment, so Ilea decided to try and get its attention away from the mages and toward the fly that was crawling on its face. Arrows and bursts of fire and lightning

warmed her armor, barely missing her, as she blinked toward the monster's head, summoning her black olvor gauntlets in the process.

The golem was too slow to do anything as Ilea's fist connected with all her buffs behind it, adding an inhuman amount of power to the already heavy gauntlets. Pure physical force smashed into the Guardian, but its only reaction was to bob its head slightly to the other side. The head was chipped a little, but it didn't seem like any substantial damage had been done.

Not the head then...

Ilea blinked downward as another barrage of magic hit the creature. She was now standing below its massive legs, several meters in length and over one meter thick. Its arms and legs tried to smash her while stone lances emerged from near the golem's head, which it launched at the adventurers around her.

Ilea's speed was reduced by the weight of her gauntlets, but her enemy's slow movements allowed her to dodge it easily nonetheless. Some of the other adventurers who saw her display joined in and danced around the monster's legs, dealing physical damage while the mages worked on its torso.

Soon, the monster shot some of its spears at the people attacking its legs. One of them would've hit an axe-wielding warrior right in the chest were it not for Ilea appearing in front of him and deflecting the spear enough with her hand so that it glanced off her shoulder and into the water a dozen meters behind them. She continued her assault, appearing and disappearing, chipping away at the enemy's legs, hoping to topple the creature.

Nearly all of Kyrian's metal had dug into the golem by that point, and combined with the many other mages near the ruin and their spells, the enemy had been slowed to a crawl. Still, its spears were dangerous, and if any of its limbs hit their target, the force was considerable.

The monster raged on, but the group of warriors and mages fell into a routine, resting and fighting in groups, healing the injured and meditating back their resources at a safe distance.

"How long do you think that thing will hold out?" Ilea asked Trian, who was standing next to her, replenishing the mana they had used up so far.

"You touched something, didn't you?" He smiled as he spoke and puffed out a tired breath, sitting down on a rock behind him.

“You know it. I’m not sure it was me though. There was a massive door that nearly poisoned me to death. Maybe me interacting with it made the thing appear?”

“Hm,” he grunted. “Ready?”

Ilea’s gauntlets appeared again, and she grinned below her helmet and blinked back into combat.

A couple of minutes later, the creature suddenly stopped shooting spears and retracted its attacking arms back to its side. Most of the close-combat adventurers pulled back while the mages’ attacks continued.

Ilea watched as the golem’s outer shell – what might’ve been its armor, were it a real knight – crumbled and fell, creating a cloud of dust and a thunderous boom. Some of the stone fell on her head, but she simply ignored it, continuing her assault. This time, her fist seemed to have a much bigger impact as the now much thinner leg of the creature nearly buckled under her attacks.

She felt the heat in the air rise as she looked up, and her eyes widened as she looked at what had to be the monster’s core, which was glowing a deep red below its cracked stone mantle. It was pulsing.

Oh, come on... Not again!

She blinked on top of the Guardian, shouting to the people around her.

“Into the water! It’s gonna explode!”

Her words only reached a few who were nearby, but the news spread quickly as the first adventurers spread out, either jumping into the water or running along the platforms to shield themselves behind stone outcroppings.

The Guardian’s arms and legs started moving again as it rumbled, at a much quicker pace than before, toward the largest group of people still attacking it, as well as two of the healers taking care of those who were too badly injured to run.

“I don’t think so...” Ilea said as she appeared right before the monster’s chest and delivered a flurry of punches with the full force of her heavy gauntlets. It slowed the creature down considerably as the adventurers got up and fled.

With the fifth punch, the monster tried to grab her. The heat was still increasing around her, but Ilea blinked behind one of its legs and punched at its knee. Another two punches and the leg buckled, dropping the monster to

one knee. Ilea blinked to the other leg and continued her work while she avoided its arms.

She saw with her sphere that Claire was running around her position, distributing runed plates while Trian flew above her, vast amounts of lightning gathering around him. Four big spikes of metal entered the monster's legs as Ilea delivered a last punch – not onto the creature but onto the spikes, driving them further into the ground.

Exchanging a look with Trian, she disappeared and reappeared right next to Claire before watching the light show around the vampyr gather and concentrate in his hands. The flashes of light were so intense, Ilea could only see them with her sphere. But even so, she watched as the lightning burned Trian's hands with sizzling fury until he released a massive gout of magical power.

It flew like an arrow, pulsing and undulating, a cascade of light and power. The barrage hit the creature right in its core. The last of the attack entered the monster as a bright yellowish shield formed around it, closing barely a meter above its head. A moment later, Ilea blinked in front of Claire and Kyrian, summoning as much ash as she could to shield them. A blinding light followed, and a dull explosion resounded as the creature's core burst.

The rune shield gave out, and a wave of heat and fire burned over the ash before Ilea, Claire, and Kyrian. The fire reached Ilea's veil, but no further.

An eerie quiet came over the area as the sound of waves slowly came back to Ilea's ears. She coughed and cracked her neck, moving the ash away with her creation skill.

Next to her, Claire took a deep breath as the two looked at the crater the Guardian's explosion had managed to form. Some of the mages were climbing out of the water or emerging from behind the rock formations a little bit further away to put out the flames now raging in their camp.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Stone Guardian of Karul – lvl 334]. For defeating an enemy 130 levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.

'ding' Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 201 – 5 stat points are awarded.

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 12

“Now *that* was a bomb,” Ilea said.

She thought back to the Centurions she had faced. Although this one’s level was a bit higher, it had been a substantially stronger blast. At least, that was how it seemed to Ilea as she looked at the crater.

“Wasn’t that shield specifically against explosions?” she asked Claire.

Claire just gulped as she checked the runed plates, which now looked completely destroyed. Trian landed nearby, and Kyrian and Eve joined them as well.

“Well done,” Kyrian said as they all walked to the crater to check it out. There was nothing of the creature left behind. It was doubtful it ever existed, judging from the remains.

The fires were now more or less under control, and the mages only had to extinguish a couple of small flames now. Some of the other adventurers walked closer to the Shadow squad before one of them shouted, a cry of joy and victory. Many others joined in, mainly warriors, but none of the black-armored mercenaries felt the need to rejoice.

Ilea felt strange on seeing the emotions displayed by the adventurers. They might have saved some lives here, but the fight was nothing too crazy compared to what she’d seen before. Still, she was glad they’d been able to help out.

Guess this isn’t exactly normal for most.

“I have the map and found a door. Probably why that thing appeared,” she said. Claire nodded, walking toward the camp’s center, followed by the rest.

The adventurers parted to let the group through, and many followed to hear what was to come. A lot of them had likely gained a level or ten, considering the level disparity between the groups, only held together by the common goal of the ruin’s exploration.

Ilea got her map and put it onto the table.

“Traps on the way should all be dismantled, and I checked the main room three times to make sure. There were strong poison darts there. I can’t see beyond the door and can’t teleport through it either. I checked all the

side tunnels as well – traps marked and deactivated,” Ilea said, finishing her report.

“We need rune mages and alchemists or any other people versed in poisons,” Claire said, looking around.

“If the cave is safe, we’ll move the camp in there. The cold out here is very demanding...” said the ranger from before. Now that she’d mentioned it, Ilea noticed some of the people around her were shivering, having come straight out of the icy water they’d fled to for safety.

[Warrior – lvl 102]

[Warrior – lvl 120]

[Mage – lvl 105]

[Warrior – lvl 87]

[Mage – lvl 93]

I’m not sure they’re up to this. The Taleen dungeon had lower-level enemies than that Guardian, and the people were all at least near 150...

“You think it’s safe for a camp?” Claire asked Ilea.

“As safe as it gets, and you can have fires there as well if someone manages the air,” Ilea said. “As I said, I have no idea what lurks behind that door. I doubt it’s any weaker than that Stone Guardian...”

She looked at the reactions around her. It was clear that most of the adventurers weren’t ready to face a monster like that, be it due to a lack of strength or of resolve. Some looked downright defeated, but others smiled.

* * *

Ilea walked through the now rather dense crowd inside the chamber with the circular door. A group of four people were looking at the poison darts that had nearly killed her, discussing the substance still clinging to the

needles. Claire was talking with three adventurers and what looked like two scholars near the round door, not daring to touch any of the runes yet.

Ilea stood near an old pillar and leaned on the stone, eating a sandwich she had summoned outside when nobody was looking. Fires were burning in the half-hall, half-cave as mages monitored the flames and the resulting fumes. Water and food were handed around as people talked. One bard went so far as to play a tune on his lute.

“Quite happy, considering the deaths in the past weeks...” a man said as he walked up to Ilea. He was a warrior slightly above level 100, a massive axe strapped to his back. He wore only light leather armor as he leaned against a pillar two meters away. Ilea looked at him and continued eating her sandwich.

“It’s unusual for one of your sort to show your face,” he said as she chewed and took another bite. “You saved me today, you know. That stone monster would’ve smashed me to bits.”

Ilea swallowed her mouthful. “Why are you still here then? You think there’s nothing just as dangerous down here?”

The warrior was quiet for a while before answering. As she waited, the smell of freshly grilled meat reached Ilea’s nose.

“I gained four levels from that fight, and I’m not the only one who leveled up,” he said eventually. “We spent the last couple weeks trying to get further into this ruin while keeping it as secret as possible. Nobody’s leaving when there’s more to be had... with you here, that doesn’t seem very implausible anymore,” he finished, chuckling.

“You’re pretty honest about your intentions. What if you slip up and nobody’s there to save you?”

“Then I die. But today I live, thanks to you,” he said with a wink and a grin.

Ilea couldn’t help but smile – she understood the sentiment.

“You’re alright. The name’s Lilith,” she said, remembering her own misadventures with some comparatively high-leveled companions. Here, the group of adventurers would at least serve the Shadow squad as distractions. Maybe the healers could help, or some of the scholars. More minds to solve problems. Maybe what they needed was more muscle, but retreat always remained an option.

“Nice to meet you, Lilith. It’s an honor to have a Shadow’s Hand member tell me their name.”

Ilea smirked at that and continued to eat. He offered his own name, Storen, and then excused himself, reading Ilea well enough to realize she wasn't up for further casual conversation.

"Lilith, eh?"

Eve appeared right next to Ilea and tried to grab her sandwich. Instinctively, Ilea blinked half a meter to the side, and Eve's swiping hand missed.

"Don't touch my food, if you know what's good for you," Ilea said as she continued eating.

"Scary. Made a friend?" Eve asked, leaning against the pillar Ilea had previously occupied. Ilea didn't answer and instead removed another sandwich from her pack.

"How much food do you have stored away?" Eve asked in a whisper, but again, she was left without an answer.

Ilea finished the sandwich and breathed out.

"Some fresh air?" Ilea asked.

Eve looked at her for a long moment, then glanced at the cavern of adventurers. "Sounds good."

They made their way back outside. Night had fallen, moonlight partially breaking through the clouds to illuminate the rocky island. Waves hit the stone cliffs, the air crisp.

Ilea spread her wings and flew onto an outcrop of rock overlooking another set of islands in the distance. Using her sphere, she saw Eve jumping up a few rocks before she landed next to Ilea and sat down, legs dangling down over the side of the stone.

"A little too much going on in there," Ilea said.

Eve glanced at her, pulling her mask to the side of her face, then back toward the ocean. "I thought you enjoyed being around people."

"Sometimes, sure," Ilea said. "I enjoy being alone too, or just with people I care about more."

"Is that a declaration of love?" Eve said, smirking.

"Not exactly. I think I know you well, but I don't know much about you, if that makes sense."

Eve smiled. "I don't like prying into people's past. Or sharing my own."

"I'm not from this place," Ilea said. "From Elos, I mean. I worked in a fast-food restaurant back where I came from. There was no magic there. No Classes, no spells."

Eve kept looking out at the waves. "Sounds peaceful."

"Plenty of strife as well. I'm still human, though I guess I don't really know if I'm exactly the same as you are."

"We do always find a way to mess things up, don't we?"

"You don't seem surprised that I'm from somewhere entirely different."

"As I said, I generally try not to pry, nor do I care much. You're here now, are you not?"

Ilea laughed. "I suppose I am. And I'm glad you're here too."

"I am from Elos. My origins aren't quite as interesting as yours." She opened her mouth and closed it. "I take it you're glad to have come here? Despite everything you've seen lately."

"I think so. There's a lot of violence. Monsters attacking people. But I feel like I can do something about it here, you know?"

"You want to go and save the world. A world that you weren't even born into," Eve said.

"I didn't say that I want to save the world. Just that... I don't know. I can fly, I can fight the monsters that make people hide behind walls, that make them afraid to go into the wilderness. It feels like I'm more in control. Compared to just walking through life, with everything passing me by."

"Taking action does help," Eve said after some time. "Even though, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter. We'll kill a few monsters, and more will come soon after. A drop in the bucket."

"Sounds like it's not me that wants to save the world," Ilea said and smiled.

"If I could just rip them all out, root and stem..." Eve said and raised her hand. "Every monster, be it man, woman, or beast." She paused and smiled. "Maybe you're right. You caught me in a strange mood."

"We'll get stronger. That's how all this magic works. One monster at a time. I could probably crush a hundred Drakes in a single day now." She imagined herself fighting one of the low-level creatures now. It wouldn't even be a fight.

Eve's smile waned. She put her mask back on but didn't leave.

"What's going on?" Ilea asked.

Eve shook her head and remained silent as the two sat on the cliffs, waves crashing against the stone below. The moons were hidden now, behind the distant clouds above.

"Sorry if I brought something up," Ilea said.

“Don’t mention it. It’s my shit. I need to deal with it.”

“I’m always here if you want to share. But you don’t have to.”

“Thanks, Ilea,” Eve said and stood up. “I think I’ll go back now. See how far our rune mage has come.”

“Let’s hope there’s something interesting down there,” Ilea said, raising herself up with her wings.

“Ancient treasures and gold?” Eve suggested.

“I was more thinking some dangerous monsters,” Ilea said as she landed near the cave entrance, her teammate following quickly behind.

Eve tapped Ilea’s arm with her fist as she walked past. “No surprise there.”

* * *

“So you cracked it?” Eve asked, looking at Claire. The fires had died down, and many of the adventurers were sleeping in the somewhat warm hall which had become the new encampment for the impromptu expedition.

“I think so. At least, I’m pretty sure I can open it up. The problem is, I’m almost certain there are more traps in there. And with all the people here now...” Claire hesitated.

Eve grunted. “They know the risks. We’re not here to take care of them. We’re here to explore the ruin.” She cast an eye over the resting adventurers. “I won’t endanger myself for any of them.”

“You don’t have to. Just think of how it would reflect on our team’s reputation if nearly thirty guild members die on our fourth mission.”

Eve shrugged at Claire’s comment and shook her head. “Why care about our reputation? We’re from the Hand and can’t be held responsible for these people’s actions.”

It was a rather cold view, as usual for Eve, but Ilea didn’t completely disagree. The guild had hired them specifically because so many people had died already, though she doubted they’d get paid if all the remaining guild members died.

“We’re here now. Their safety is part of our responsibility,” Claire said.

“Are you guys done?” Trian asked. “Can we go in, Claire?”

He walked closer to the door. Some of the adventurers looked toward the team as they approached the round entrance. Most had stayed as far

away from it as possible, which wasn't very far considering the size of the hall.

Nodding, Claire walked up to the door and started scratching into the stone with a small, thin knife. The Shadow squad stood before the entrance for ten minutes, ready and poised for whatever might come. The rest of the expedition gathered a little further back, waking their sleeping companions in the process.

"Brace yourselves," Claire said as she touched the middle of the door and released mana from her hand. A pulse of energy rippled through the stone toward the runes scratched into it before a complex runic symbol appeared, shining a dull white. A moment later, it was gone.

"Did it work?" Eve asked.

"Yes," Ilea answered, now able to see through the stone. Cracks formed in the door before it started to crumble.

"Eve, scout," Claire said, and two illusions appeared, running through the crumbling door. "Ilea, traps..."

Ash appeared around Ilea, and under her helmet, she smiled.

TWENTY-NINE

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Barriers

Nothing happened as Ilea walked into the corridor. No explosions, no traps, no guardians attacking.

In fact, the ruin looked a lot less like a cave and more like a place to live. The stone here was more molded and showed far less erosion and decay. It was warmer too.

Ilea kept walking and saw magical lights on the stone corridor's wall. The spheres glowed with a pleasant amber light, something that had not been present in any of the other chambers.

The way led deeper into the ground before another door blocked the way. Eve's illusions were standing in front of it and vanished as they saw Ilea approach. The squad followed after them while the rest of the adventurers waited in the hall, looking into the corridor and ready to join in should there be something reasonable to fight, something they could attack safely from a distance.

"I can't see inside the room beyond," Ilea said as she touched the stone door, blocking the way further in.

"Open up then," Trian said, gesturing for her to do something. Ilea obliged and punched the door, only to find her fist stopped abruptly after breaking through the stone.

"Hmm, weird..." Ilea said. She punched it another couple of times before she simply ripped the rest of the stone from its place on the wall. She found a layer of shimmering golden light beyond, likely what had been blocking Ilea's fist. She touched it, and though her hand remained unhurt, she couldn't push through it.

“A barrier,” Claire commented as she came and stood next to Ilea, touching the barrier herself. “This is nothing ordinary...”

“Yeah, it’s a golden barrier deep inside an ancient ruin. Probably not that ordinary,” Ilea said. “Should I punch it again? With my spells this time?” she asked, expecting a groan.

Claire just shrugged. “Sure, go for it. This is not based on runes, that much I can tell you. I’d try something similar to the blood magic one yesterday, but with the small surface area we can access, your attacks are probably a better bet. Your mana intrusion is great against barriers, but depending on how it’s set up, your heavy gauntlets might be a good option too,” she finished and stepped aside.

“I’ll try first,” Trian said as magic gathered around him. Ilea blinked a couple of meters away to join the others and watched Trian unleash an attack similar to the one he’d used against the Stone Guardian.

This time, however, the lightning was reflected right back at him upon impact. Shock flashed across his features before he teleported away to let the energy split and arc violently into the stone floor and ceiling close to the barrier below him. The explosion rattled the walls as chunks of stone broke away and fell to the floor, blocking the entrance to the hall they were in.

“Good job, noble boy.” Ilea gave Trian a thumbs-up and smiled. He just shrugged and motioned for her to continue.

“Knock yourself out.”

Ilea walked up to the barrier. “Alright, let’s see if my arm gets ripped off from this. Step back, folks, if you don’t want a red shower.”

She grinned as the heavy olvor gauntlets appeared on her hands. A pale blue and red glow illuminated the inside of her helmet as her fist struck with power comparable to a wrecking ball. The reverberation flowed through her body, and she clenched her jaw as she noticed only a slight flicker in the barrier. Another three punches had the exact same result.

Intrusion then...

She stored her gauntlets back inside the bracelets made for them. The next punch was fueled with Destruction and Wave of Ember, her fists surrounded by ash, which she tried to form into a spike. The kinetic impact and spike of ash didn’t seem to do much, but something was different this time. When the destructive mana flowed into the barrier, it visibly disturbed the golden glow from the *inside*.

“Huh...”

She added more and more mana with additional punches, sizzling the inside of the barrier until a small hole was opened up.

“Hey guys, this is working. Should I blink inside?” she asked as she continued her attacks.

“Don’t, we better go in there together. Whatever is causing this might not be able to be taken down by you alone,” Claire said, and Ilea saw Kyrian nod at the comment.

“Alright,” she said and punched again, only to find there was no longer any resistance at all – her arm simply moved through the now open doorway. No golden shimmer could be seen as Ilea’s momentum took her further into the room, her torso now slightly beyond the door frame.

There was a flash, and her mind sent the signal to blink backward as she turned, but it was too late. Golden light flashed, followed by a dull pain below her waist. At the same time, her sphere was cut off behind her.

Turning in the air and looking at herself through her sphere, she found that both her legs had been cut off at the knees. The golden barrier was now a little farther back, caging her in. Blood started to flow. She blinked but only hit the barrier itself.

As she fell, Ilea twisted in the air and saw the outline of her team beyond the barrier spring into motion. Kyrian shot his metal spikes into the barrier, and Eve used her enchanted daggers to slice at it. Ilea fell but spread her wings in the tight space to catch herself. Healing mana circled through her body, immediately stopping the bleeding.

She was about to collect the severed parts of her legs when a thin floating sheet of golden light appeared mere centimeters away from the back of her neck, only visible to her thanks to her sphere.

Ilea blinked behind the golden sheet and focused on reforming the parts of her legs lying on the ground. Unfortunately, she could not regrow the pieces of elven armor now missing below her knees.

Her senses were working on overdrive, trying to prepare for the next inevitable attack as the golden sheet from before shot through the air where she had been a split second before. Her legs were reforming as more and more floating golden sheets appeared around her, almost looking like pieces of a barrier, never closer than five centimeters but always in positions that would be invisible to normal eyesight.

Her elven gear had pretty good coverage, but it seemed whatever or whoever was attacking her had a way to perceive her and spot any

weaknesses. The golden sheets had to move straight forward to cut, and with her blinks, Ilea managed to dodge them in time.

After two blinks, the room had filled with sheets of golden shimmering light, so she aligned her body in such a way that her armor would at least partially block the hits she wasn't able to dodge. Then the golden light hit her in several places at once, most of them only scratching past her armor before she was flung back by the force of the magic.

It cuts through the Veil like it's butter...

Glancing back, Ilea saw the others were still working on the barrier that had trapped her, but it looked like most of their attacks were ineffective. Claire was frantically laying out plates while the others were doing what they could with physical attacks, but it didn't look promising.

Can't get out... Ilea thought as several more sheets cut through her body. Her armor was showing some rather worrisome damage now, something that hadn't happened before.

One of the golden sheets cut through a thinner section near her elbow joint, drawing blood and nearly severing her arm. It healed quickly as Ilea continued to dodge, this time going further into the structure as the barrier prevented a retreat. She found herself in a simple stone room illuminated mostly by the golden sheets she continued to try and dodge.

Another room was behind the first one, and just like before, there was a door Ilea couldn't see through.

Alright, here we go.

She appeared next to the door with a fully powered spin kick, driving her full momentum through the rock. Her leg hit another barrier, but she had expected it this time, and mana started flowing into it from all her destructive skills. She even brought the offensive capabilities of her ash creation, Veil of Ash, and her wings to bear on the barrier.

More and more golden lights focused on the area around the door, which made it hard for Ilea to approach it. Then again, she realized there was no reason to attack the barrier alone.

Ilea smashed through the walls around her, appearing and disappearing all over the place while ash surged around her, forming flowing limbs ending in spikes that crashed into the walls and the golden light. She punched through more and more of the rock, and the golden barrier was now riddled with Ilea's destructive mana sizzling inside the golden light.

Then, right before she managed to form another small hole, the golden sheets' attacks stopped.

"Stop, please, or we will all be buried by stone," a male voice said from behind her. She saw a hazy form in her sphere, and she turned around to look at it. "I'm sure you would survive it, and so will I, but I'm not so sure about the others – especially the ones waiting farther above."

Ilea stopped her attacks and started meditating, recovering some of the mana and stamina she had lost during the ordeal.

[Mage – lvl ??]

He had near-golden eyes and wore a long dark blue coat with a black and gold vest below. He looked to be around fifty, but something told Ilea the man was much older – if he was human at all.

"You're the one controlling the barriers? And the light?" she asked, mostly to stall for time. She wasn't so sure she wanted her team to break through and help, considering his offensive potential. Eve and Kyrian would likely be torn to shreds in mere moments. The barrier she had been attacking vanished as the man walked past her.

"Yes, that would be me. You're with the Shadow's Hand, I presume? That armor, though... It looks elven. You should be careful where you wear that," he said calmly. Ilea saw he was no longer looking at her. "Nosy adventurers. I'm afraid you're not going to find much in terms of riches in this place."

Then he vanished, reappearing in the next room. Ilea followed him in. It wasn't what Ilea had expected at all, looking like a cross between a laboratory and a cozy study. Shelves of books lined the walls, and sheets of parchment littered most available spaces.

Ilea blinked in front of him. "Who are you? Are you responsible for killing all of those adventurers who explored this place?"

He casually took a book from a shelf next to him and made it vanish, then took another before he put it back.

"You may call me Albert. This place was not built by me, so I take no responsibility for any of the deaths. It took even me a while to get in without triggering the traps," he said as he continued with his examination of the shelves.

Ilea was pretty sure the man wasn't a danger to her anymore – he was simply concerned for his possessions. She was still wary, continuing her mana recovery and thinking of a way of attack should the need arise. The lives of her team and the adventurers were more important than attacking the man at the moment, and a fight would certainly cause at least a partial cave-in. He was right about that, considering the state of the ceiling.

“You will not fight for this place? Why attack me then?” She started copying his actions, walking around the room parallel to him and touching books to make them vanish. He glanced at her quickly and furrowed his brow but didn't react further.

“I discovered this place and am not yet done with it. Your rude interruption and ability to get through my barrier so quickly was surprising. Thus my attack and our resulting conundrum as to the structural integrity of this ancient ruin. I need to collect the essentials first. If you let me finish in peace, I will leave, and you may do with the rest of this place as you wish,” he said and continued collecting books and papers.

“What were you looking for in here?” Ilea asked. “Are you human?”

He smiled slightly. “Am I human. That's funny. Is it not understandable to seek ancient ruins and the treasures stored within?”

“For me, maybe? But I feel like you're here for a reason.”

“Perhaps, or not. Either way, it is irrelevant to a Shadow like yourself.” He stopped and opened one of the books. “Hmm. Worth taking, I suppose,” he murmured, then looked at Ilea. “There is a girl here. A girl that does not belong. You're a member of the Hand, perhaps you can take her to Ravenhall. Better than her falling into the hands of nobility or some wretched local adventurers.”

The man did not wait for a response. Instead, golden light started to swirl around him.

Ilea was torn for a second between interfering or not, but within that second, he vanished.

Nowhere in her sphere could she see any trace of the man. She squinted her eyes, using the same techniques she used to spot Eve to try and look for him, but there was nothing.

She turned when something appeared in her sphere, but it was just Trian, lightning sparkling around him. The rest of the team followed quickly after and checked around the room.

“Are you alright?” Eve asked. “We couldn’t really see you through the barrier, you were moving too fast...”

“I’m fine. There was a man here who was controlling the barriers and attacked me, but he vanished. Entirely. I think it’s at least mid-range teleportation because I can’t sense him anymore.”

Claire nodded, immediately walking toward the exit. “I’ll go and stop the others from coming in immediately. Take everything you see,” Claire said as she walked out. Kyrian followed.

“Way ahead of you,” Trian murmured, already filling his storage ring with what little remained. The golden-eyed man had taken a fair bit, but aged parchment and books still littered the space.

Kyrian returned a moment later, one armored leg in each hand, and handed both to Ilea without saying a word.

“Thanks,” she said, looking at the near-seamless cuts. *Balduur will be annoyed about that.*

“Someone’s here,” Eve said, pointing to one of the crude stone hallways.

“A girl, yes. The man mentioned her, told me we should take her to Ravenhall. He said she didn’t belong and shouldn’t be allowed to fall into the hands of the locals or nobility. Not sure what that means,” Ilea explained as she and Eve started toward the hallway.

Using her sphere, Ilea could already see a small form standing by one of the walls in a room off the hallway, moving her hands slowly across it. Ilea knocked on the stone door. The child didn’t react, too entranced by whatever it was she was doing. After another knock, Ilea removed her helmet and opened the door before the two women walked inside.

“She’s painting,” Ilea said. This time, the girl reacted. She looked toward them and smiled.

“Hello. Are you Albert’s friends?” she asked, her blue eyes concentrating on the intruders. Her blonde hair looked wild and unkempt. Freckles dusted her pale cheeks. Ilea assumed she was perhaps eight to ten years old.

“I know him. Is he your dad?” Ilea asked as she slowly walked closer to the girl, unable not to stare at the complex painting on the wall. It looked strange, entrancing in a way she had not felt about art before. It reminded her of runes but less bound by their systematic nature, instead unleashed. It felt like staring into the heart of a fire.

“No. Do you know where Torben is?” the girl asked, causing Ilea to face her again. She crouched down a little and saw Eve approach the painting.

“Is that your dad? Torben?”

The girl nodded.

“I’m afraid I don’t know, but maybe I can help you find him. How about that?” Ilea smiled, which seemed to make the girl a little less anxious.

“Yes! Albert said he couldn’t help me yet...”

“Did you paint this?” Eve said, sounding astonished. “It’s beautiful... the emotions I feel from this painting are overwhelming.”

The girl looked at the ground, her smile betraying the feigned embarrassment.

“Yes,” she said.

Eve continued to look at the wall painting. It was the first time Ilea had seen her so lost in thought.

“My name is Ilea. What’s your name, little artist? And where are you from?” Ilea asked, seeing her best chance to find any relatives the girl might have. Finding her inside this place didn’t make her very hopeful, but it was a start. Perhaps Albert had abducted her? Then again, the way he had talked about the girl didn’t seem to indicate that.

The girl smiled at her. “Nice to meet you, Ilea. My name is Cless, and I’m from London.”

THIRTY

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Ruins

“London? In En—” Ilea started, but she stopped herself at the last moment, looking at Eve as panic gripped her. Her teammate seemed completely lost in the painting, now standing even closer to the wall than before.

“Hey, Eve?” Ilea asked and waited, but there was no reaction.

She wasn’t sure if it was an act, but Eve didn’t know about the importance of the slip up, which made Ilea question the possible reason for any feigned ignorance. She had told her about being from another place, but the possible implications with this girl were vast. For now, she would rather keep the connection to herself.

“Where are you from?” Cless asked, bringing Ilea back into the moment. This was the first insight that could be gained into her appearance in Elos. All the thoughts she had had about it came rushing back to her and, with them, the related feelings.

“I’m from far away, just like you. I’ve never heard about this London you speak of. What was it like there?”

Ilea’s question was centered around the slight possibility of a shape-shifting memory stealer, but added confirmation would also be helpful.

Might be a different London as well.

“I like it. We have a house. Do you think Mrs Williams will be angry with me? I haven’t been to school in so long...”

“Do you know how long exactly?”

Cless shook her head at the question, tears coming to her eyes.

“Do you know where mummy is?” Cless asked, and Ilea just went for the hug, feeling a little bad about her own selfish interests and the fact that

there was a little girl in front of her that had likely lost her family and life while she interrogated her for answers.

Of course, she kept her magic up just in case Cless decided to turn into a demon or something. She did not, however, and simply sat there, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“It’s going to be okay, Cless, alright? You can come with us to Ravenhall. I go to school there. It’s quite fun,” Ilea said and released her hug, looking at the girl. “One with magic and mages. Did your mom read to you about things like that?”

Cless frowned at the question and crossed her arms. “I can read!” she stated. “And I’m a wizard already!”

Suddenly the top of her index finger started to glow as she drew a rune in front of her. The girl emitted a pulse of mana, and a shimmering barrier appeared around her. She had a big smile on her face, her homesickness completely forgotten. Her sparkling eyes looked at Ilea, who smiled back. It was only then that she remembered to identify her.

[Mage – lvl 6]

“Indeed you are! So, what other powers do you have?” Ilea asked with a grin.

“That’s a secret!” Cless exclaimed as the shield disappeared.

“Girl, where did you see this?” Eve suddenly interjected. She was staring intently at Cless while pointing at the painting.

“Albert showed me. It was in the books. He has a looooooot of books.”

“Albert? The guy you saw, Ilea? Is he your dad?”

“No, Albert is not my father. He’s nice,” Cless answered, getting up from her chair. “Is he there? It’s nearly time for dinner.”

Ilea got up from her crouched position as well. “I’m afraid he might have left... on an important mission, but that’s why he brought us here. He told us to take care of you,” Ilea said as she took the girl’s hand and led her outside, followed by Eve.

“Oh, he’s busy. Like Dad,” Cless said, her expression morose.

“What did your dad do, do you know?” Ilea said.

“He’s a doctor.”

The three walked out into the bigger main room where Trian and Kyrian were working on collecting everything. Both shot a quick glance at Ilea,

Eve, and their new companion but didn't stop what they were doing.

"I'm something of a doctor too," Ilea said, letting some healing mana pulse over to Cless. A few cuts and scrapes, the kind kids might get from playing about in a stone room, closed up immediately. Cless giggled at the pleasant feeling.

"A wizard doctor!" the girl said, hugging Ilea's side.

"Exactly. Hey Cless, when Albert called us, he didn't tell us a lot about this place. Do you want to show us around?"

"It's not very big... not here. There are tunnels below. I don't want to go there..."

Ilea immediately stroked her hair, hearing the fear in her voice. "Any clue what Albert was looking for?"

Cless's face scrunched up in concentration. "Pre... per... perservation and regeneration techniques." She stumbled over the words, but her face lit up when she managed to say them. Ilea assumed she meant preservation and regeneration.

Looking for ancient magics? He could've just lied to her though...

"Seems to be kind of the theme around here," Trian said. "Lots of books on the biology of different species – human, animal, and monster. Experiments too, many of them non-magical, which is interesting," he said, flipping through one of the books.

Ilea gave him a nod and glanced back at Cless.

"Any monsters in this place?"

Cless grabbed at Ilea's armor and nodded.

"It's alright now, we'll get you out of here," Ilea said and hugged the girl again. "Did you come here with Albert, or did he find you here?"

Ilea was still more inquisitive than she would've liked, but she was more than just a little curious at how a girl from London had got here.

"No, he found me here. And said I could leave after he finished. It was scary before that..."

"I'm sure it was, and I'm glad the man found you. Do you remember how you got here in the first place?"

"Hmm..." The girl concentrated for a while before she looked up at Ilea. "I was playing in the woods, and then it was dark... like in a film."

Yeah, I don't think there are movies in Elos. Hopefully people won't think her stories are too weird. I'll definitely keep an eye on her...

“As soon as we go upstairs, it’s not going to be dark at all. There’s a whole continent there with magic, animals, and people. Would you like to see it?” Ilea asked, and the girl nodded, obviously excited.

Ilea was glad Cless didn’t ask her for a way back home, because she didn’t have one. *Guess she’s as lost here as I am.*

She ignored her teammates working around her as she walked, Cless in tow, toward Claire, who was standing with some of the adventurers. It seemed they had cleared the partial cave-in, but none of them had been too keen to delve deeper.

“You’ve found another one... a mage, one of the youngest I’ve seen,” Claire said in a worried tone, looking at the girl and then at Ilea. “She must’ve been down here for a while... what did you find out?”

“Not much. Apparently the man I... saw down there had been taking care of her. He even asked me to take Cless back to Ravenhall,” Ilea said, deciding not to share anything about what the girl had told her about her home.

Claire knelt down and looked at Cless. “I’m Claire. How old are you?”

“Eight!” Cless said.

“Level of education?” Claire said, adjusting her tone slightly. She got a notebook out of one of the pouches in her armored skirt and started writing.

“I’m in primary school.”

“You... are in school? Primary school.” As Claire wrote the response down, she glanced at the adventurers nearby. “I need a few minutes.”

They looked at the girl but gave them space.

“Country?”

“England.”

“England,” Claire repeated, no surprise showing on her face. “How did you get here?”

“I was walking in the forest, then everything was dark. Then there were large... rumbling creatures,” Cless said and gulped, gesturing with her small arms.

“I see. I think it would be best if you came to Ravenhall with us. We’ll defeat the monsters first – these adventurers here will protect you for the time being. Now, you’ve already learned magic. Can I see?”

Cless showed her the same spell she had shown Ilea.

“Sloppy execution, but powerful nonetheless. You are gifted, Cless,” she said, smiling, and patted the girl’s head, eliciting a giggle. “And you’re

brave too. There are many adventures waiting for you. Is that something you would like?"

Cless nodded with a bright smile on her face.

"That's what I thought! So," Claire said, opening her pack and getting out a smaller notebook and a pen. "These are yours. Can you write?"

Cless nodded.

Claire smiled. "While you wait with the adventurers, I want you to write about something that you like. Can you do that for me?"

"Anything I like?"

"Yes. But try to focus on one thing only. I'll be reading it." She said the last few words very much like a teacher.

Cless's eyes grew wide, then she looked at the notebook, her expression determined.

Claire told the adventurers of their duty to protect the child and left them with some silver. A few of them took Cless back up to what little remained of their camp. It would be safer up on the surface.

"You're surprisingly good with kids," Ilea said as they watched the adventurers leave.

"What do you mean surprisingly? I'm... well-educated," Claire said, clearing her throat.

"What was that pause for?"

Claire gave her a look.

"It's fine. You don't have to say. So, what do you plan with her?"

"She's incredibly young to have a Class. England is not a country I know of. It is not in the Plains, which makes her more than a bit of a mystery. She's well-educated and well-mannered, which suggests she is of noble blood. Perhaps she was abandoned here or told she's not allowed to reveal where she's from. Or it's something to do with magic."

"Magic?" Ilea asked.

"There are powerful beings of all kinds out there in the world. Who knows, perhaps someone sent her here for one reason or another. Perhaps it was an accident. But we found her, and I don't plan to waste all the resources that have already gone into her upbringing."

So it's at least not obvious to Claire that Cless is from somewhere entirely different. I'm sure she'll figure it out at some point though. The resource thing doesn't feel right.

Ilea smiled. "That's really all of it?"

Claire crossed her arms. “We found her, and there’s no village nearby, so she’s our responsibility. And I’m sorry to say it, but none of you are fit to take care of a child.”

“And you are? Planning to leave the team?”

“No, but I can talk to people in the Hand. A child of her talent would not be refused further education and training, especially with the backing of a Shadow. Inquiries can be made into where she’s really from, but if she’s been abandoned, I’ll make sure she’ll find a future in Ravenhall.”

Ilea smiled. *Kind of like I did.*

“I’ll help where I can,” Ilea said. “With funds, mostly. She does seem like an interesting girl.”

Ilea planned to find out what she could as well, but so far, it seemed like the girl had come here in a similar way to her. That answered the question of whether there were others on Elos from Earth, but it didn’t really shed any light on how or why she had arrived here in the first place.

“One more mystery to add to the pile,” Claire said and rubbed her brow. “Back to the ruin?”

They found Eve waiting for them in the round hall with the bookshelves. The other two had moved on to the side rooms along the hallway.

“I scouted deeper, and most of my clones were destroyed. The first three floors contain insignificant monsters, but the ruin continues further below.” She pointed at Ilea. “The rooms are riddled with traps and golems. It’s a little difficult to navigate and attack without destroying the whole place. It’s a bit fragile, and I’m getting the impression that that’s somewhat intentional.”

As Eve explained, she led them toward a stone stairwell leading down. She gave a whistle, and the others joined them as well.

They headed down the stairs and stopped in front of an open entrance to a dark hall. Inside stood a golem.

“Kyrian and I will try to make sure this place doesn’t collapse. Ilea, you try to get that golem’s attention and keep it while everyone else whittles it down with magic,” Claire said.

“I can see traps around... what do they do?” Ilea asked.

“They spill acid into the room. Feeling up for it?” Eve said with a raised eyebrow.

Ilea blinked inside and immediately stood opposite the humanoid shape. It was of similar design to the one they had fought earlier, though much smaller.

The golem's eyes started glowing a dark blue as its stone body came to life.

[Stone Guardian – lvl ??]

“Let's hope this one doesn't explode. Claire, you'd better prepare...” Ilea said as a stony fist slammed into her defenses, making her skid backward a couple of meters.

Her veil didn't break, nor did the bones in her arms shatter. The creature's name already suggested an inferior version of the Guardian they had faced above, but she would remain careful. The way deeper into the ruin looked shut, covered by stone and more traps that she saw with her sphere.

Another fist slammed into her defenses, and this time, she felt herself tremble from the impact.

“You can start now, you know?” she shouted back to her team, blinking around the next punch and landing one of her own. Her mana didn't seem to do a lot here either, so she donned her gauntlets, continuing her somewhat slow dance around the golem. It was faster than the bigger one above, but it was still miles away from the speed of a Taleen Guardian.

Lightning hit the golem sporadically as Ilea's heavy gauntlets chipped away at its sturdy form. She would get hit sometimes, but it was manageable. The monster relied on its pure strength, which Ilea could match with her technique and equipment.

As the fight continued, the room slowly filled with an acid broth, steaming as it exited from the dozens of holes in the walls. The others were hovering farther back; Claire and Eve were being carried by metal plates controlled by Kyrian while they all concentrated on their tasks.

The acid didn't even manage to get through Ilea's armored boots, which she had resummoned since she had lost the previous ones against Albert. There was a thin seam in the shin greaves now where his magic had cut through the armor, but it fitted tight enough for it to be no major issue, especially when covered in a layer of ash.

Ilea glanced at the steaming acid. She assumed it would help her level up her Corrosion Resistance with some time, but she didn't plan to bathe in it. Not today, at least.

A boom shuddered through the room as her fist connected with the side of the golem's chest. Its arm was outstretched, leaving it open to her attacks. After she'd hit it twice more and a bolt of lightning flashed into it, the light in its eyes went out.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Stone Guardian – lvl 231]. For defeating an enemy twenty levels above your own, bonus experience is granted.

'ding' Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 5

The acid was already up to Ilea's knees by the time they downed the simple stone creature. *Stall people with the golem while the acid wears them down... good plan. At least this one didn't explode.*

She walked through the not-quite-water and stood in front of the doorway blocked by stone. Looking behind it with her sphere, she saw it was only two meters thick. She punched into the wall with her gauntlets, causing the structure to shake, and the rest of the team quickly made their way toward Ilea.

"Let me do that," Claire said, motioning for Kyrian to float her closer to the doorway. Ten runes later, a shield was summoned to support the room's structure, then a controlled set of explosions blasted a deep hole in the doorway. Another explosion broke through the rest of the way, and the team was ready to advance.

Magical light filled the halls beyond, which were more expansive than any room they had been in before.

Ruins with magical guardians and arcane lights...

Ilea felt a slight itch where the Praetorian scythe had cut into her back. Even with all her advancements since then, it wasn't on her immediate to-do list to return to that place.

"What do you think this is?" Ilea asked.

'ding' You have entered the Karul dungeon

“Well, that doesn’t answer anything,” she said and heard Trian chuckle.

“We have incoming...” Eve said, and the group got into formation. Four sets of glowing blue eyes could be seen in the dusty air before them. Loud steps echoed down the hall as everybody prepared their spells.

“This one’s going to be a little more chaotic,” Ilea exclaimed, a smile spreading below her helmet.

* * *

Lightning flashed, a bright bolt slashing through the head of the last remaining golem. Bits and pieces of stone pattered against Ilea’s veil as she watched the thing fall.

They had ventured deeper into the dungeon, clearing three more floors entirely. This seemed to be the last.

Of all the skills she had used in the fight, only Ashen Wings had leveled up by one, but her Classes had also each leveled up by one. She was still checking through the messages when a loud rumble vibrated through the hall, dust falling from every little crack in the room.

“Found something!” Trian shouted from one end of the room as the rumbling intensified, tremors shaking the ground and walls, cracks forming everywhere.

Ilea flew toward his voice and saw words engraved on a massive stone plate before them. Most were too worn to be readable, but some parts were still plain.

...the last stand of the Karul... here we rest undisturbed... shall be buried with us...

“Alright, that’s our cue,” Ilea said.

She used her sphere to spot Eve and Claire through the dust and rock before she blinked to Eve, grabbing her and flying to Claire. With the two women in tow, her buffs flared, and she shot toward the exit with rocks falling around her. She avoided the debris with her speed and perception. Trian and Kyrian followed close behind as the team pushed through the collapsing ruin.

They were back in the round hall in under a minute, the destruction following them upward. Luckily, the adventurers had started fleeing the

moment the rumbling began and were waiting outside the ruin's first entrance.

Ilea stumbled out of the cave and let go of Eve and Claire, fresh air filling her lungs as the dozens of assembled people stared at her. Trian and Kyrian emerged a moment later.

"I'm afraid this expedition just turned into an... *excavation*," Ilea said with a wink to the assembled crowd... that they would probably not see due to her helmet.

"Oh, come on, did you really just say that?" Trian groaned.

"How are you still surprised?" Eve sighed.

Ilea just smiled.

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THIRTY-ONE

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Housing

The team made a stop in Ravenhall, ready to take a break before embarking on another mission.

The entire city felt more lively than when they'd left. The streets and restaurants were packed with people, and food vendors and merchants were selling their wares in every square and corner not otherwise occupied.

"Flags!" Cless called out as they walked through the streets, people making space for the Shadows.

"You'll learn what all of them mean soon enough," Claire said, keeping the girl close while holding her hand.

Cless grumbled something about flags not being quite as great as she'd first thought.

"She's playing her part well," Trian said.

"A little too enthusiastic," Eve said. "But yes, she's not an unconvincing mother."

Claire glanced back at them. "You're far too irresponsible to take care of a child."

"Hey, I didn't even say anything," Ilea said.

"Right," Claire added. "I'd trust Kyrian as well."

Ilea raised her hands, but she didn't disagree. She had no desire to babysit a kid, let alone have a child of her own. Far too much responsibility.

"You realize she's right?" Eve asked from beside her.

"Doesn't mean I want to be lumped in with you two," Ilea said.

"I was fine with her criticism, but now you're comparing me to him?" Eve asked.

“For once, I agree with her,” Trian said.

“Stop bickering,” Kyrian said, shutting them all up – mainly because it was him, of all people, who’d said it.

“Lots more going on than I thought,” Ilea said.

“There’s a tournament in Viscera and another in Ravenhall. It’s a downright festival,” Eve said, her tone making it clear that she wasn’t a fan.

“Lots of opportunities for stealing and assassinating,” said Trian.

“Please,” Kyrian said.

Ilea smiled to herself as she walked from stand to stand, smelling and looking at the food.

They soon reached Viscera and found the Shadow headquarters busier than usual as well. Claire led them up a flight of stairs and stood before one of the office doors.

“This won’t take long,” she said. “Do you want to go on another mission later? Personally, I’d appreciate a break after all this traveling.”

“Tomorrow morning?” Eve asked.

“Works for me,” Ilea said. *Some time to read, maybe. In my new place.*

Trian and Kyrian agreed as well.

Eve saluted and vanished. Trian excused himself and left, and Claire knocked on the office door.

“Come in,” came the muffled voice of William from within.

Claire led Cless into the office, Ilea following behind. Claire took a few minutes to explain Cless’ circumstances and enrolled her in a few classes for Shadows. She suggested the girl should stay with the Hand for the time being, with Claire as her guardian. William agreed after they’d paid for everything. The whole process was far simpler than Ilea had expected.

“I’ll handle the details when I get to it,” Claire said. “Cless, you’ll stay with William until I’m back.”

The girl glared at the mage. “I don’t like him.”

“You don’t have to like him. Can you handle this?” she added, looking at William.

“I deal with overconfident mercenaries daily, Claire,” he said and stood up. “Come, Cless, let me show you around. There will be food and a room to paint.”

Cless lit up at the mention of that and suddenly didn’t seem quite as annoyed.

“It’s going to be a makeshift solution,” Claire said after the two had left.

“You’re quite invested in her already,” Ilea said.

“She was left behind in a dungeon. Of course I am. It can’t be easy for her.”

“Fair.” Ilea found she wasn’t as worried about the girl as Claire seemed to be. *She’ll find her way. As confident a brat as she already is.*

She said goodbye to Claire and went to collect a few meals to go before blinking up to an empty roof that overlooked a busy square.

“Eating again, are we?” Aki asked.

“Ah, there you are. How’ve you been? Enjoyed the missions so far?”

“They’re less monotonous than your training. It’s nice, though. To travel with you.”

She smiled. “You’re damn right.” She ate in silence for a while, then said, “There’s something I want to show you, by the way. Something I did when I stored you away from time to time in the past months.”

“I was wondering what that was about,” Aki said.

“A surprise. Let me show you. We have enough time.”

She finished her food and jumped off the building, spreading her wings at the same time.

* * *

Ilea landed on the cliffside she had chosen for her home, her wings dissolving behind her as she smiled. The cliffside had changed drastically in the past months, the two workers outdoing their promises. Ilea had likely overpaid them, but she’d really wanted a satisfying product.

She’d had many sessions discussing the drafts for the house with Lars and Merina in the first two weeks after hiring them. Ilea gave the architects and builders from Morhill some modern ideas from Earth regarding architecture and certainly challenged them in more than one way. The two had taken her suggestions and added their own experience and expertise to create the building before her.

First, they had laid the foundations, going deep into the mountainside, outlined with high-quality steel inscribed with durability enchantments that made the entire structure both more sturdy and more resilient against the rough ocean winds and weather.

The frame was made of the expensive steel Ilea had purchased and brought to the site by physically carrying it or by employing her storage device if the pieces had been small enough. The structure, which daringly overhung the cliffside by several meters, was deeply rooted into the mountain and wouldn't budge, even as a result of strong winds. The ocean was also too far below for any big waves to reach it.

The walls and roof were made of a heavy, dark brown wood that gave the house both weight and character, contrasting with the stony mountainside. Two stories reached up and out of the stone, large enough to compare the building to a mansion. It had a rectangular layout with a set of smaller roofs, all clad in wooden boards.

The exposed part of the house looked like a more modern interpretation of a luxurious Viking longhouse, the top floor smaller and segmented to allow for the different sections of the roof. Reinforced steel bars were visible here and there, coupled with a lot of windows to provide plenty of sunlight. Quite a few were made from the blue glass Ilea had admired in Viscera's library.

The majority of the structure, nearly two thirds of the entirety, was built deep into the stone and was only clad with wood on the inside.

To fill the space between the metal and wood above or stone below, the two architects had mixed something they'd called Breathing Earth – a mud-like substance to hold the structure together while providing protection against the cold winds. It would keep the warmth inside rather well too.

"Are you ready for a tour?" she asked Aki, whom she had purposefully kept inside her necklace whenever she met with the architects or came to check on their progress.

"And here I thought you had an interesting secret. A house far too large for you alone?" Aki asked. "And why is it out here?"

Ilea was a little annoyed at the negativity. Maybe a second opinion would help balance it out.

Five minutes and a lot of struggling and healing later, Ilea was standing in front of the house with Aki sheathed in his usual place. In her right hand was a leash that was actually more of a rope, looped around a defeated-looking Swordmouth Tiger's neck. Ilea summoned a piece of meat and threw it in front of the creature, which perked up and happily devoured the gift.

"See? She likes it," Ilea beamed.

Aki didn't comment.

And now we'll do the bloody tour, Ilea thought.

She could've brought her team, but she didn't quite feel comfortable enough for them to know the location of this creation just yet. It wasn't exactly hidden away, but it would require a lot of dumb luck to stumble upon it by accident. The dark wood didn't stand out too much against the cliffside, and some light illusion runes were carved into the outer layer so one's eye wouldn't be drawn to it.

Also, it was hers. Ilea's private house.

She liked the mash-up of Viking-style architecture with modern steel beams and magical blue windows. It all looked quite alien compared to most everything else she had seen in Elos so far. She smiled to herself and led the now more agreeable tiger toward the entrance.

There was a patio facing the mountainside with a wooden swing bench attached to the roof covering it. The door was an artwork in itself and actually one of the more expensive parts of the house. Days of work, even for an experienced wood mage. Ilea turned the old school key in the lock and opened the door, leading the animal and Aki inside.

She closed the door behind her, and most of the noise from the wind and water far below disappeared immediately. The temperature was comfortable, though still cool.

A large open room with no carpets and clad in wood opened up before them. Magical lights came to life and bathed the place in a warm, cozy glow. The room's massive windows opened up the enclosed space and counteracted the heavy wood, letting in more light from outside.

There were chairs around a large rectangular table, a leather sofa, and the leather chair she had picked up from the library in Salia. It was all spaced out to create both a lounging area and a space to eat with others. Something that had only happened with Lars and Merina so far.

On either side of the large room, a fireplace was set into the wood-covered walls, both of them cold at the moment.

No unnecessary clutter could be found in the room. It was a space to breathe and take in the raw nature outside while being protected by the house's warmth and shelter.

"It's nice. I like the simplicity, but it feels a little cold," Aki commented, a sentiment Ilea certainly shared. She liked that about this room though. It captured the feeling she'd had when she stood alone on the cliff,

overlooking the ocean. But when the fireplaces were burning, the entire atmosphere changed.

There was a terrace as well, accessed via a manual sliding window. The terrace extended several meters over the cliff and gave Ilea a similar feeling to flying when she stood out there, bracing herself against the strong ocean winds.

She led her two visitors toward a discrete-looking wooden stairway separated by another wooden wall. It led upstairs and to Ilea's new favorite place. In the middle of the room was her Drake-feather bed, and both side walls were lined with shelves filled with books. Above her bed hung an enormous painting of a winged Drake-like creature. To her, it was obviously a dragon, but the artist had vehemently told her not to call it that.

On the far wall, between the bookshelf and her bed, was a wooden cabinet with different drawers and open spaces with inscribed runes. Some of them held beverages kept cold or food kept fresh. Most of them were filled with food she had gotten from Keyla, who had worked nearly exclusively for Ilea in the past months. Even she couldn't eat as much food as the excellent cook had provided.

The open floor was covered in comfortable fur from creatures Ilea had never seen before. Considering how many people died from monster attacks, she didn't feel bad about keeping pelts there.

Ilea's favorite feature of the room was the roof, made entirely from glass and big enough to give her the feeling of being outside. With no light pollution, the stars would shine into the room with their full brilliance. The glass was a specialty of a mage in Ravenhall and had runes inscribed that could darken the glass considerably upon activation, making the room dark despite sun or starlight.

The novel Ilea had started reading two weeks ago was still lying on the messy bed, in addition to several pillows and blankets covering the sizeable mattress. It was her little haven, and she would hunt down anyone or anything that might disturb it. Considering its placement, her bedroom was strategically the least defended place in the house, but Ilea didn't mind.

She had looked for a book lover in Ravenhall and luckily found a group willing to sort through her collection from Salia for reasonable pay. Ilea simply didn't have the time to do so herself. Apparently, there were some rather rare and expensive books in her collection, and she would continue to add to it.

Ilea slowly breathed out and found herself relaxing just from the view of the place. She could likely stay here forever if it weren't for that itch she had. The itch to explore and fight, something she didn't remember having on Earth. Perhaps the explorers discovering the Americas had had a similar feeling. But instead of gold and natives to exploit, she would find magic, ruins, and artifacts.

Gold was certainly nice as well and had given her the opportunity to build this house in the first place. It had cost her a little over a hundred and fifty gold for all the woodwork, enchantments, labor, art, and furniture. Perhaps not as much as she had expected, but then again, she didn't have to pay anything for the land or the materials' transportation.

And compared to hiring an entire company and all the different specialists needed to build a house back on Earth, Lars and Merina were specialized mages. Both their spells and magical tools had made the building process quite a lot simpler. Or rather, it had required fewer people and hours of labor. The enchantments had been the highest expense, despite the relative simplicity of the effects.

Keyla's food, in comparison, had come to nearly forty gold in the past three months, and Ilea had informed the cook to stop for now. There were around four storage rooms full of her food, and with the benefit of magic, it would still be good to eat in a hundred years' time. As long as nobody disturbed it all, of course.

Turning around, Ilea led the tiger downstairs again and into the living room. It tried to get to some of the food in the cabinets, but a strong hand on its leash dissuaded it.

"I must say, it seems very cozy. Though I'm not sure how much my sentiment is influenced by your continued influx of mana," Aki said as they went for the stairway leading down to the floor below.

This one was open and just as large as the ground floor. There was a kitchen and dozens of crates and cupboards here, all lit by a much colder light than above. A broad workspace was separated from the kitchen itself and provided ample space to prepare meals, something Ilea hadn't gotten around to doing yet.

A further stairway led downward into a taller room than any of the preceding ones. On the walls were stands and racks holding weapons Ilea had kept from the Taleen dungeon. Enough to supply a village with gear, but mostly a waste to keep inside her necklace. She did still carry a few

weapons with her, but most of them had been placed here. Ilea had even purchased a few sets of armor so that none of the stands were completely empty.

The rest of the house was made up of storage rooms for food and possibly rarer gear. There were two floors of storage rooms below, only accessible through a teleportation ability.

“There’s still plenty of space to fill. I do wonder...” said Aki.

“What is it?” Ilea asked and unsheathed the dagger, making the tiger next to her a little jumpy.

“You don’t plan on putting me here, do you?”

“A talking dagger is quite a treasure,” she said with a grin before she walked back upstairs and outside. She removed the leash from the patient tiger and dropped more meat. It quickly ran off with its food toward the waiting kittens, which had grown considerably in the past three months. She smiled at her neighbors and stretched, feeling the wind move through her hair.

Certainly beats my studio apartment. Yet I’m not at home half as much as I used to be, she thought as she spread her wings. Suppose I’ll have to invite people in the future.

THIRTY-TWO

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Another one of them missions

The next day, their new mission took them southward, deep into the Isanna Desert. Ilea had underestimated just how huge it was. The team had easily covered twice the distance between Karth and Ravenhall in the time they'd been flying.

It being winter, the heat wasn't too bad – it was just boring. No life seemed to be filling the dunes, and they were supposed to find some sort of elusive critter in all that nothingness. Even Ilea's monster books weren't particularly helpful.

The Dragcal burrows deep into the desert, healing its wounds while its magic rages above. Its level is unknown. The Dragcal has been seen near single mountains within the Isanna Desert. Caution is advised.

"Why are we hunting this thing again?" Ilea asked.

"Attacked and killed traders going to the Foundation," Trian said. "You really don't listen, do you?"

"Sometimes I do," Ilea said, smiling at him as she kept flying. *The Foundation of Glass, hmm? Walter mentioned that, didn't he? Well, I'm a Shadow now. Might visit it at some point.*

And so they flew, looking for isolated mountains in the desert sand.

"That one, maybe?" Claire asked, pointing toward another mountain. They had already checked four, and Ilea was beginning to wonder if they would even find their way back before nightfall.

"Let's check it then," Ilea said, landing the three of them and using her sphere to check below the rock and sand. "Hey, does it look like a spearfish

with scales?” she asked, pointing in a specific direction. “I think it’s sleeping, whatever it is.”

“It is supposed to resemble a fish, yes. Let’s find out if that’s it,” Trian said, unleashing lightning on the indicated position.

“Yeah, that’s not gonna work, man,” Ilea commented as Kyrian’s metal spheres flew over the sand before forming into drill-like spikes and burrowing below.

“It’s probably going to feel the vibrations. Let’s hope it won’t run away for days on end,” Eve sighed, already tired of the hunt.

A sudden and massive shift in the sand where Kyrian’s spikes had entered made the team focus.

“Formation two, ready to engage an unknown monster. Get in position!” Claire shouted.

Ilea stepped to the front, Trian a few meters behind her. Eve vanished, while Kyrian and Claire positioned themselves at the back, metal and runed stones distributed around them.

“Here it comes...” Ilea said, seeing something break through a dune. “Wow, it’s fucking huge!” she exclaimed and laughed as the massive monster swordfish burst out of the sand.

Her smile vanished as the sand followed the long creature. A localized storm spread fast, slamming into the waiting team as a barrier went up behind Ilea. She could hear the sand scraping against her veil as she checked the others with her sphere. Eve appeared inside the barrier, and Kyrian was already there. Trian stood inside the sandstorm, shielding his eyes.

“I can’t see it!” Kyrian shouted, his metal spheres and spikes looking for a target.

Ilea raised her eyebrows and blinked in front of Claire’s runic barrier. She braced against the stone below her feet and stared into the fast-approaching eyes of the beast.

[Dragcal – lvl ??]

The nearly seven-meter-long sword part of its body moved toward Ilea at a rapid pace, its massive bulk carried by a wave of sand more akin to water as the storm continued around them.

Ilea wasn't quite sure how much force she was dealing with here. She smiled anyway and dodged the sword to the right, summoning an olvor gauntlet and turning to punch the passing bone with all her strength. The impact managed to send the sword slightly off course, and it crashed into and scraped past Claire's shield, breaking through after sparks formed from the impact.

Lightning roared above as red flashes of energy appeared in the mist of sand around them. Kyrian's blades and spikes tried to pierce the monster's strong scales from all sides, and Ilea helped by driving some of them into the creature's side with her fists. Explosions rattled around its head to confuse and daze it as Eve jumped toward its eyes, her daggers lacking their usual shine in the darkened surroundings as the massive fish-like monster swam over the stone ground on rolling waves of sand.

It roared as a dozen wounds were inflicted upon it in but a couple of seconds, a massive wave of sand hitting all but Trian from the side. Only the base of the small mountain saved the group, as they would've been without any cover at all in the sea of sand around them. Trian and Ilea grabbed Claire and Eve out of the sand and got them onto solid ground higher up.

The sandstorm raged on; compared to the breeze it had been before, it now pushed against Ilea's veil with more and more power. Another of Claire's shields formed, covering the group under a shimmering dome of energy.

"How long will that hold?" Eve asked, brushing sand from her armor.

"We're fine against the storm, but that thing is too big and heavy for me to block," Claire said.

"Surprising speed as well, we're in its territory. Ilea, what's it doing now?" Trian asked as he lifted his helmet to remove the sand inside.

"It's turning, burrowing into the sand again now. I think it might be healing. You get its eye, Eve?" The rogue nodded, and Ilea was sure then. "It just got it back. Brace!" she said as the massive fish shot up from its recovering position to hit the magical dome, and the team scattered just before another enormous wave of sand hit them.

A series of attacks made the beast roar and roll in the sand to shake off the attackers. Eve and Ilea managed to dodge its frantic movements but were pushed dozens of meters away. Again, the beast dove downward to heal.

“How’s your curse doing?” Ilea shouted to a flying Kyrian, Claire holding onto his back.

“It’s spreading! Only a matter of time, but it’s huge!” he shouted back – just as the Dragcal came out below Ilea, aiming to pierce or simply crush her.

Her veil broke from the impact, and she tumbled along its body before steadying herself between two immense scales. She was dragged along next to the beast but decided not to blink away and inflict some more damage instead.

She held on between the scales as her destructive mana flowed into the monster, her ashen wings and what was left of her veil trying to inflict more wounds. Explosions and lightning roared around her and, combined with the rushing storm of sand, nearly damaged her ears.

Time to let go, she thought as the beast dove back into the sand.

Ilea blinked upward twice but still found herself caught in a wave of sand dragging her down. Suddenly she was covered in sand, and she panicked for a second before she blinked out of her predicament thanks to her spherical perception.

Thank fuck – I don’t want to be buried...

The thought was interrupted when the Dragcal reappeared. This time, it aimed for Eve, who dodged to the side, but she was caught by the wave of sand following the monster’s dive, sending her head over heels.

Trian acted quickly and grabbed the tumbling Eve out of the torrent. The whole team was airborne now, except for Ilea. She stayed on the ground, assuming the fish might leave if there were no more targets on the sand.

“Any success with the mind attacks?” Claire shouted at Eve, who was now on Trian’s back – to the annoyance of both, it seemed.

“It’s very simple but strong! Going to take longer!” she shouted back.

Eve started humming again as soon as the beast was back out, aiming for Ilea again. This time, there were two waves of sand, one on each side of Ilea. They were too big to simply circumvent with blinks, so she stared the monster down and blinked at the last moment to dodge the sword-like bone and punched its massive skull with her heavy olvor gauntlet.

Combined with the curse, mind attacks, lightning, and explosions, the beast was beset from all sides, and it was slowing down despite its wounds continually closing up.

Slower than before... Ilea thought, seeing the scales regenerate around her as she flew up and through the sands. She managed to blink away again, this time prepared for the mass of sand that crashed down around her.

No wonder little was known about the beast – it was likely only sighted when it tore through parties of travelers or from high above while it was attacking other monsters.

It was good that they had Eve with her mind magic and Kyrian with his curses. With its ability to regenerate and flee, it was on a par with having Ilea as an enemy in terms of being annoying and elusive. Her ash control wasn't on the same level as the beast's sand magic, of course, nor was it comparable in terms of sheer size.

She waited for the next attack, but there was nothing but the sandstorm. She saw with her sphere that the fish wasn't going for her anymore but heading away.

"It's fleeing, I think! Kyrian, can you track it?"

"Yeah, there's plenty of metal still in it. Follow me!" he shouted, and Ilea deployed her wings to keep up with the others.

Over an hour later, the monster finally stopped, likely healed back to full health but completely riddled with Kyrian's curse.

No wonder he got to level 200 with this ability. Just curse something and wait, Ilea thought with a smile as she saw the others slow down.

"It's down there, right below us. I doubt it has much energy or mana left," Kyrian said as he pointed to the sand below them, which looked just like all the other endless dunes around them.

"Well, how are we going to get down there?" Ilea asked.

She looked around the group and didn't find anyone willing to shovel. Instead, Claire opened up her pack and dropped a bunch of runed stones down. As soon as they hit the sand, the explosions started.

"It's not super effective, but it'll get the job done," she said over the roaring blasts. Most of the stones survived three or four separate casts, and Claire continued to make more as she held on to her teammate.

"We're getting closer, only a couple meters now," Ilea said as she hovered lower to see the beast with her sphere. It wasn't moving at all, and its eyes were closed. *Not dead yet though...*

She saw the giant creature's heartbeat thrumming through the sand, working hard to get rid of the curse. Then another series of explosions exposed its back, and all hell followed. More cursed shards and spikes,

lightning, and explosions blasted into the monster's hide while Eve continued her humming. Even Ilea could feel some pressure from the mind magic despite the loud sounds around them.

The Dragcal tried to move and did so slowly, but it was too big to get away so easily. Its wounds weren't closing anymore, and it didn't cast any more spells as it turned and rushed upward to face its hunters.

Ilea grinned and flew downward into the explosions that were still raining down. She flew past the monster's sword-like bone and grabbed one of its fins just as it came out of the sand. She could tell the creature was moving slower now, and she used her ashen wings to fly backward with all her power while releasing destructive mana into the monster.

Her veil and ash cut into the beast as her team's spells damaged its now severely wounded back. She kept holding on as the creature crashed back onto the sand, no longer diving into it as if it were water, but still it tried to disappear again.

It was strong and large, and Ilea needed all her strength to keep her team from an excavation that might very well be impossible. Her wings were already touching sand when the pull from the beast got weaker and weaker until, finally, it stopped moving.

Ilea didn't let up and continued to try and pull the massive body out of the sand slowly closing over them. Ten metal spikes rammed into the beast right then, and the weight Ilea had to bear lessened considerably as Kyrian's metal helped her to pull the Dragcal back out of the sand.

Claire's wind runes, however weak, helped push away the sand above, and Trian soon joined her and grabbed the fin next to Ilea before he pulled as well. Ilea thought Eve might start cheering them on, but she didn't go that far. Instead, she just waited to one side until the more strength-oriented people completed the job.

* * *

"Now that is one hell of a fucking beast," Ilea said.

"A beautiful creature," Kyrian said. "It's sad that it's dead."

"It attacked traders," Trian said.

"Did the traders h... have to be t... there?" Kyrian asked.

Ilea didn't disagree, but she didn't overthink it either. The monster had likely been hungry, and the travelers going through the desert had probably seemed like an easy snack. And now they'd killed it, they could eat its flesh in turn.

"Now, how do we transport that thing?" Eve asked.

"We don't, at least not like this. No, Ilea, don't look at me like that. We're not dragging that thing back to Ravenhall. Might attract attention we don't want, and I'm not talking about people," Claire said, rubbing her temples at Ilea's stupid grin. "The mission states that they only need its head for proof."

"Aw, come on. We should at least take some of its other parts. Might even be good for equipment or something," Ilea said.

"You just want to eat it," Trian said.

"We killed it. Shouldn't just let it go to waste," Ilea said, though she knew that wasn't exactly true.

"It will f... feed the creatures of the d... desert," Kyrian said.

Ilea glared at him. *Why did you have to destroy my argument?*

Claire sighed. "Alright. We might be able to sell some of it. Let's see what we can harvest. Eve, how good are you at carving?"

"Very." Eve replied, spinning one of her daggers around.

"Good, then get to work. Ilea and Trian will store everything," Claire said. She got a mock salute from Eve before she started to carve into the beast, humming happily.

Ilea watched her, wondering why she enjoyed the work. Maybe she'd been thinking the same as her? *Keyla will surely make something good out of this.*

"Speaking of storage, how's your ring looking?" Ilea asked Trian. "I'd be interested in some of the books we found in that ruin, and if you're running out and don't want them, I still have space."

Trian looked at her and then summoned one of the books. "Legends and theories. I hope you won't get sucked into whatever that mage was hatching, but sure, knock yourself out. None of it is of consequence to me."

"Thanks," Ilea said, storing the book.

Maybe I should go help Eve. Can't have her do all the work...

She unsheathed Aki and blinked behind Eve, who just glanced at her and continued her work in silence.

"Can you show me how it's done?" Ilea asked.

Eve quickly showed her which parts she could cut out without damaging anything of use. It took a while, but Ilea came away with a sizable amount of Dragcal meat, ready to be processed.

“So that’s it then?” Claire asked, looking at the pile of body parts Eve had carved off the monster.

Most of the pieces were small enough to be stored in either Trian’s ring or Ilea’s necklace, but some select parts weren’t. Luckily for them, Kyrian’s metal shaping and control made it easier to carry everything, although the group had to pause much more frequently on their slower way back.

Checking her messages, Ilea found a single Class level-up waiting for her.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Dragcal – lvl 310]. For defeating an enemy one hundred levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 206 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 3

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches lvl 19

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 13

THIRTY-THREE

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Advances

Ilea emptied her mug and leaned back, seeing Eve vanish out of her sphere of perception.

Into the night she goes.

The few oil lamps in the bar only managed to provide dim light for the corner she had chosen. Their third bar already.

Kyrian was the only one who had stayed. Trian and Claire had left rather early, the former because he was apparently disgusted by the chosen establishments and the latter to finish the necessary paperwork for them to join the tournament that started next week.

She focused on Kyrian now that the others were gone, staring into his gray eyes for an entire second before he averted his gaze. She felt warm from the alcohol as she looked at him. He had stopped stuttering as much in the past month.

And yet I still don't know what you're about.

Ilea smiled, her hands around the empty mug as she tilted her head lightly. "So... you said you survived alone in the forest, eh? What happened before that?"

Kyrian glanced worriedly at her, the dozens of empty mugs on their table a sign of both a waiter's neglect and Ilea's high resistance to the poison that is alcohol.

"I was living in the streets in... Asila, and I... I think I must've passed out. That was years ago. I don't know exactly how long. One day I woke up in the dungeons. But not chained up or anything... like the other prisoners. The cell was open too, so I waited." He took a deep breath. "It was cold.

The ground, made of stone. And it was dark. I c... could hear people in pain, whimpering, crying..."

"What happened?" Ilea asked, leaning forward slightly.

"The w... warden came... some t... time later. He t... told me t... that... I had a choice. To w... work and earn my keep... or to..." He gulped, then looked at her. "To die."

"So, you spat in his face, stole his keys, and fled?" Ilea asked with a smile.

Kyrian kept his eyes locked on hers, visibly relaxing. Then he smiled. "I didn't know that was a choice back then. No. I chose to work. A p... prisoner in a sense, but not really. I got food, water. Had to clean and deliver things, and when I got older, I was told to dig."

"To dig?"

"Yes. It turned out that a group of prisoners had tried to tunnel out of the dungeons with earth magic. Well. They were found out and made an e... example of. What the warden didn't tell anyone was that in that tunnel, there were metals. Copper, iron... and even silver. Of course, it would've belonged to the city, but he had me, and a few others he had... hired."

"That's pretty fucked up."

Kyrian shrugged. "He fed us. We would've died in the streets. Alone." His eyes almost dimmed, looking into nothing. Then he focused again. "That's what he told us anyway." He looked at her, then away. "I believed it."

Ilea was quiet for a long moment.

"You were a kid," she said.

"Some of the others tried to escape..." He shook his head ever so slightly. "I should've..."

Kyrian took a deep breath. He nearly recoiled when Ilea touched his hand but eventually calmed.

She kept her hand there. "I'm sorry."

Kyrian wiped at his eyes but kept his other hand on the table. "No, I..."

"That was quite a fight today," Ilea said, smiling again.

"It was," Kyrian said after a while. "I think we work well as a team." His eyes widened. "All of us, I mean."

She raised her eyebrows and squeezed his hand slightly.

Ilea felt her eyes focus on his, felt the warmth of his hand.

A scuffle near the bar entrance broke the moment. Ilea saw two burly men throwing out a third, who was shouting incoherently and smelt strongly of vomit and liquor, even at a distance.

The sounds cut off when the heavy wooden door swung shut again, the wind from outside causing the flames in the oil lamps around the room to flicker.

She glanced back at Kyrian but didn't really know what to say.

"What about you?" he said, his eyes very close now. "You said you were from far away."

Part of her wanted to come up with an excuse, but it didn't feel right. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked in a whisper.

He smiled, then forced his face to become neutral. "What secret?"

Ilea smiled back and looked at the table, manipulating ash to her will. She formed it into houses, power lines, a public pool, and cars parked on the street. The whole thing was a little hazy, her memory and manipulation not quite good enough to portray everything well.

"Is that where you're from?" Kyrian asked, looking at the ash model of Ilea's hometown. "It looks like a street."

"It is," Ilea said. "These things are called cars. Metal boxes that can be used to drive around. Like carts, but with no animals to pull them."

Kyrian furrowed his brow. "Magic crystals to power them? Or enchantments?"

"No. There is no magic where I'm from. Not the same kind as here, at least."

Kyrian nodded to himself. "You're from very far away."

"I'm afraid so," Ilea said, looking at her ash.

"What's that thing?" he pointed.

"A fire hydrant. For firefighters to get water, to put out fires."

He thought for a moment. "No fire magic. That makes sense. But there's no water magic either, or is there?"

She shook her head. "I think they use pressure or something to get the water out, through a tube-like hose, then it's sprayed out onto the fire."

She tried to create something like a fire truck and a few firefighters carrying a hose. The floating image was even more blurry than the rest, Ilea thinking of too many possible details.

Kyrian watched with wide eyes. "So, you do have magic."

“Technology, I suppose. And physics. But I didn’t really understand much of this. I worked in a fast-food place.” She looked at his lack of comprehension and giggled to herself. “I guess I’d have to explain a lot to you. About where I’m from.”

“How did you come here then? To Ravenhall.”

Her smile waned. “I don’t know. One morning, I didn’t wake up in my bed but in the forest. Near Riverwatch. I saw a Drake... not a creature that exists where I’m from. I ran away... and the rest... is history, I guess.”

She didn’t know how he would react. She was even starting to wonder if telling him about this had been a bad idea.

Kyrian nodded. “I woke up in the dungeons. You woke up in a Drake-infested forest.”

“Wasn’t as cold,” Ilea admitted.

“The stone was cold. Yes. But there were no Drakes in the dungeon. That might’ve been a good way to escape.”

Ilea laughed, and he started chuckling a moment later.

The ash flattened and drifted away from the table in all directions as she sat back.

Ilea smiled, their hands still touching.

“Do you miss it?” he asked.

Ilea shrugged. “Sometimes, a little. But mainly, no. I have wings here. I never had wings before.”

“You do seem happy when you fly,” he said, then he instantly broke eye contact.

Ilea leaned in closer. “Been watching me, have we?”

“I d... didn’t... I mean,” he stammered.

She leaned back and squeezed his hand. “I like your eyes,” she said suddenly.

He glanced at her.

“And the way you can bend steel with your mind alone.”

He didn’t respond.

“Do you have plans for the night?”

“Training my magic. M... maybe try to r... read, a little.” He gulped.

“Nothing wrong with reading,” she replied.

“I c...” He shook his head, then sighed. “I can’t... read that well.”

“Really? Why not take a class? Wait... what were you doing in the monster classes then?”

Kyrian blushed.

“Oh my God. You faked it?” Ilea asked. “I don’t know if I should be amazed by your acting or by how dense you are.”

He lowered his head. “I can r... read a l... little.”

She touched his chin, bringing his head up a little. “There’s nothing wrong with not being able to read very well.” Ilea raised her eyebrows. “But I suppose I get why you hid it with the others around.”

He looked at her.

“If you don’t want to go to a class, maybe I could teach you?”

“W... what?”

Ilea smiled. “You’ve been trying to learn on your own, right?”

He didn’t reply.

“Probably easier with some help.” She thought for a second. “Can I show you something?”

He looked at her and nodded.

Ilea set down a few silver coins and got up, gently pulling him behind her as they left the bar.

The street was lit by a lantern nearby, giving her a tinge of nostalgia after her little ash creation from earlier.

“Are we going to another bar? Or did you have something else in mind?”

“I was thinking something a little farther away,” she said, spreading her wings. “I feel like flying. And we have to fly for me to show it to you anyway. You have to keep it a secret, though.”

“Sure. Who w... would I tell anyway?” he said with a smile.

“Keep up then.” She ascended as the words left her mouth. Kyrian reacted nearly immediately, his spheres flowing out of his pack and around his hands, back, and chest. Not his full armor but enough to stabilize him in flight.

The two rushed through the city at an inhuman speed, past houses and squares, until they came up to the eastern gate. Ilea flapped her wings before the two flew over it and out into the wild.

Up and up she went until the city behind them was a mere speck of light in the distance. She switched directions a couple of times to make it a little harder for possible followers to keep up. Kyrian did well, but she did have to wait for him from time to time.

Half an hour later, the two landed on the plateau where her house stood.

“Is that... yours?” Kyrian asked as she started walking toward it.

“It is. Had it built while we were training.”

“That’s amazing,” Kyrian chuckled. Then he tensed up, and his metal spheres turned into spikes.

“Relax, local resident. It’s a nice cat,” Ilea said, waving toward the tunnel, where two slightly glowing eyes peered out of the shadows. They faded as soon as the tiger recognized the new arrival.

“That’s a d... dangerous animal, Ilea. What if you come here wounded?”

“That would be stupid, right?” Ilea said and laughed.

Considering the point of return for her blink was now inside the house, though, it wouldn’t be an issue. As long as the cat didn’t learn how to open doors.

“An ironic death. At least the cat would probably gain some levels...” she added as she opened the door. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

He nodded and walked in, clearly trying not to dirty anything with the half-melted snow on his boots. “How did you afford all this? I know you’re a paid member... but if you’re not from here at all...”

“I stumbled upon a huge amount of gold in a dwarven ruin, so that’s why I can do this stuff. Hmm, I don’t think I’ve ever told anybody that. But if you need gold, just hit me up,” she said as she closed the door behind Kyrian.

“I suppose your strange expressions make more sense now. And it’s your gold. I would f... feel bad about taking it,” he said, waiting near the door.

“Come on in. Are you hungry?” she asked, summoning a couple of meals onto the table. He followed slowly and took a seat.

“Are you s... sure? This looks expensive...”

“Did you not listen to me just now? And why would you feel bad? It was the dwarves’ gold. I found it, and I can do whatever the fuck I want with it, right?”

“I mean s... sure, but throwing it around like this might not be w... wise. What if you really need it in a y... year or two?” he asked, hesitantly taking a plate of food.

“But then I wouldn’t have lived as I wanted to for a year or two. I understand basic economics, but saving up until you die isn’t the way to go.

And if you can help out your friends in the process as well, then I think it's a good thing. I could even pay your debt at the Hand. How about that?"

Kyrian put his fork down. "Ilea, I understand that you want to be g... generous, but there's a certain pride even I p... possess. I'll manage just fine on my own, but I a... appreciate the offer. Thank you."

She shook her head at that and sat down opposite him, grabbing a plate as well.

"I don't get it... getting gold is kind of random, isn't it? I'm sure there's huge financial inequality in Elos as well, what with all the nobles. Do you think they work more than you do? I found a random stash, now I have it. Giving some to you sounds like a net benefit. But I won't push you, of course. It's your decision, after all."

They ate for a while, absorbed by Keyla's creations until the plates were empty.

"Do you want a tour?"

"A what? A tour?"

"Of the house," she answered, smirking at him.

"Oh, sure. What about the dishes?"

"You're cute, Kyrian," Ilea said, touching the plates until nothing remained on the table. "I'll take care of it."

She had gotten very close to him while retrieving the plate he'd used. The smile on her face grew a little at his obvious distress.

"Follow me then," she said and brushed past him. The two walked downstairs, and she showed him the kitchen space and then the showroom that looked more akin to an armory.

"I know it's not very full yet, but hopefully that will change in the future," she said.

"I'm sure. With all the missions we'll do, you'll p... probably find some interesting things to fill it with. The silver skull would fit in nicely."

"Maybe. Though it was a little small. I'm thinking more... dragon skull," Ilea said, spreading her arms wide.

"That's quite something. How b... big do you think a dragon's skull would be?"

Ilea scrunched her nose. "Think the house isn't big enough?"

"I've not seen one."

"Well. I suppose only time will tell," Ilea murmured before she glanced at him. "You said you wanted to read?"

He gulped.

“Don’t worry. I’ll teach you.”

His face lit up slightly. “You have books?”

She walked past him and tapped his shoulder. “He asks if the woman has books,” she murmured, shaking her head in an exaggerated manner.

Ilea led him to her room and smiled when she saw his reaction to the filled shelves.

“This is my favorite room and mostly the reason I had this whole thing built. You’re the first human to see it.”

Besides the builders.

“It’s... beautiful... you can see the stars from here, and...” He walked over to one of the shelves. “There are so many. Did you buy all of them?”

“Found most of them. Wait, let me look for something that might be a bit easier...”

She blinked over to Kyrian, touching his back while using her other arm to brush over the books.

“This one might be possible,” Ilea said, grabbing the novel she thought was aimed at a younger audience. She jumped onto the bed, pushing aside a few stray books between the three crinkled blankets.

Patting the space next to her, she looked intently at Kyrian.

“Don’t look at me like a frightened animal, they’re just words. I’ve seen you fight worse,” she said with a smile. He swallowed hard but sat down next to her.

“Okay...” he said, opening the book at the first page. “T... There once w... was a... vi... vi...”

“Village,” she prompted, scooting a little closer to him to see the book better.

The two read for a while, Ilea slipping into the role of a teacher as she corrected and prompted where necessary. Kyrian was pretty far along already. She didn’t think she could’ve taught someone without any knowledge to read.

And I got Elos Standard for free when I arrived here. Thank fuck for that. She wondered if there was a connection to her knowledge of English in some way.

They stopped when Kyrian got stuck on a particularly complex sentence, growing more frustrated.

“Let’s stop for the time being,” she offered.

“I can continue.”

“Do you continue when your head hurts from casting curses?”

“Sometimes,” he said, his voice quieter.

“And how helpful is that?”

“Fine.”

She smiled and closed the book.

“You can stay over if you like,” Ilea said, putting the book back.

“Do you think? I can sleep in the forest.”

Ilea slowly turned around and sat back down. This time, even closer. “I know that.”

She could feel his breath on her face now, could hear his heartbeat picking up.

“But what if you encounter something... dangerous out there?” she asked, looking into his eyes.

“You’re very close...” he whispered.

“Do you want me to move?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. “I don’t... I don’t think so.”

“Have you ever kissed anyone?” she asked, moving her arm around his back as she moved even closer.

He didn’t say a word.

“We can try, if you want to,” she said.

She felt his arm brush against hers, then his breath was even closer.

“Are you sure?” he asked in a whisper.

Ilea brushed away some of his hair. “Yeah.”

“C... can you do it?”

“Sure,” she said and kissed him.

THIRTY-FOUR

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Bedtalk

“I’m sorry,” Kyrian said as Ilea cleaned up a short while later.

She glanced at him and smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Tons of people get stressed about it,” she said, sliding back into her bed. “The main thing is to not think about it too much and to try and enjoy it together. Was it fun?”

He nodded.

Ilea laughed. “You don’t seem convinced. Honest answer?”

He grumbled something.

“We have literally killed monsters side by side,” Ilea said, raising her eyebrows. “But this was scary? Really?”

“It was o... overwhelming. And then it was over. I expected... something different.”

She tapped his forehead. “Next time, try not to expect anything and just feel it. In the moment.”

“Was that a one-time thing, or...?”

Ilea looked over and then back up.

“I don’t know. Probably not,” she said. “Depends on what you want. But I’m not looking for anything serious right now.”

“What do you mean by serious?”

“Committing to a relationship. Being with someone regularly. I want to feel free...”

Kyrian laughed.

“Can’t say I’m surprised to hear that from you.” He paused. “Or from any Shadow, for that matter. Well, you were right, it was fun. So, whenever

you feel like it again....” He let the sentence hang. “Can you get fresh air in here?”

“I’m glad you understand... and I have a better idea. Follow me,” she said, getting out of bed and walking down toward the balcony overlooking the ocean.

“You’re beautiful,” Kyrian said after a while, the wind brushing against their naked skin.

“Don’t you fall for me now,” she said and smirked. “Do you feel like sleeping?”

He shrugged.

“Me neither. I’ve never tried this naked...”

She blinked out over the ocean, waving at Kyrian as gravity took her. Ilea smiled at the look on his face as she started falling, wings of ash spreading behind her back, not slowing but increasing the speed at which she descended toward the water. Looking up, she saw Kyrian following behind, surrounded by metal spheres.

Her wings finally slowed her fall a couple of dozen meters before impact. It probably wouldn’t hurt her badly, but going underwater wasn’t something she’d planned on doing tonight.

Ilea continued over the waves for a few meters, the moon shining above. Behind her, Kyrian followed with a bright smile on his face. A game of catch ensued and led the two out over the ocean and then back toward the mountains, Ilea skidding on the rock to avoid capture.

They stopped after a while, flying near the cliff as they looked out over the ocean.

“Ever expected to be doing something like this?” Kyrian asked.

“Not in my wildest dreams,” Ilea said, glancing at her wings made of ash. “Want to give it another shot?”

* * *

The preparations were going well. Ilea was sitting on top of a rather nice patisserie in Ravenhall, watching the people around her rushing around, busier than she had ever seen them.

Building and decorating work was being done all over the place, turning the cold fortress city into something much more colorful. She finished her

meal and looked up at the suns shining down on her, trying their best to melt the layer of snow covering the city and the wilderness beyond.

There was a thud next to her, and she lifted her head to see Kyrian had arrived in his light leather armor. She bit into an apple, checking him out before she got distracted by two nearby merchants fighting about a cart blocking the road.

“You left? Could’ve woken me up,” Kyrian said, his voice neutral.

“You looked like you needed the sleep. Looked cute too,” Ilea answered in the same neutral voice.

He grunted. “You’re watching Cless?”

“You noticed? Yeah, she’s inside, reading,” Ilea answered, looking with her sphere at Cless in the building next door.

“I’m going train in the forest today. You can join if you want.”

“Probably not today. Do enjoy yourself,” she said with a genuine smile.

He smiled back awkwardly and then looked away. “I’ll be... yeah, alright,” he said, stumbling over his words before he jumped off the roof, catching himself in the air as he wobbled toward the city walls.

Ilea chuckled lightly as she watched Kyrian leave. She wondered if she’d gone a little overboard with her advances the night before but quickly dismissed the thought. *He didn’t say no, and I was clear with my intentions. He’ll manage. Might just be a bit confused for a week or two.*

“After that... I fear for the people of Ravenhall. Who will be safe from those gray eyes?” she murmured to herself, watching two men in the street begin a fistfight. She shook her head and jumped off – not to interfere, but to move on.

The excitement in the city was palpable as she walked through the streets, checking out the finished stands and shops. They were a riot of colors, bright against the surrounding snow. Some of the fancier ones held enchantments or perhaps special materials that made them shimmer and sparkle in the light or reflect a kaleidoscope of colors onto the street’s white coating.

Ilea ignored most of them and focussed on the ones selling food. None of it came close to Keyla’s cooking, but there was something about street food that made Ilea happy.

The team would reunite the day before the tournament to discuss their tactics. Personally, Ilea just wanted to get a few good fights in, to see what other Shadows could do, and maybe to gain a new resistance or two, but she

also knew that her teammates wanted to win for useless things like connections, opportunities, and status.

Though perhaps a higher status in the Hand means missions with more dangerous monsters...

An excited smile spread across her face as she heard some interesting music coming from a couple of streets over.

* * *

His claws sunk deep into the mage before him. A tragic loss. Another high-level human, dead at his hands, one capable enough to have noticed and investigated the runes. He ripped out the man's throat, blood coloring the street a deep red.

With a mere thought, two slime-like monsters came into existence, taking care of the body and blood. Adam's hands changed back to normal as he checked his surroundings with his skills.

They're getting closer, he thought. I'm sure this one wasn't with the Hand. So they're not the only ones investigating...

The past months had been very successful. Dagon had believed him, and his work was spectacular. Wallace wouldn't find much purchase in the Shadow's Hand after their plan went through, even with Adam's slight modifications.

He scratched the last runes in this part of the city, linking the whole set together, his heart closed to the inevitable result of his work.

You can't protect them all forever. But you can save her... He looked up at the heavens. *Maybe I really am going mad.*

* * *

Three days had passed since Ilea's night out with Kyrian, but he hadn't shown himself even once since their talk on a rooftop in Ravenhall.

When she entered the familiar pub in Viscera, she saw a recognizable face in her sphere, or rather a lack thereof. As on most days, there was a band playing music, giving a good reason for people to be in that establishment instead of any other bar in the city proper.

Ilea walked over to the group sitting at the table near one corner of the room.

“Hello there,” she said. “May I?” she asked, turning around a free chair to join Sulivhaan and Rock.

“Ilea. Yes. I heard about you joining. I’m glad someone like you chose the Hand. How have you been faring?” Sulivhaan said. The man seemed as pragmatic as ever.

“Ah, look at you! I expected you to be much higher in level already. What happened?” Rock asked as he slammed his massive hand into hers, the two grinning at each other.

She knew he was holding back.

“Got a bit bogged down by team training and all the classes. But it’s been fun, and the missions were alright,” she said, looking toward Sulivhaan, glad he’d suggested this endeavor. More than anything, she’d felt lost after Dawntree, after Salia, and after what had happened in Earl’s smithy.

She felt that she fit in here. More than perhaps anywhere before. And it was the break she’d needed. Time to process things, she supposed.

“Don’t worry. You’re still new. There will be suitably exciting missions to come,” the masked man said.

“I’ll believe you for now. You came from the west? Things a little calmer?” Ilea asked, motioning to a waiter with three fingers up.

“I don’t drink...” Sulivhaan started. “Ah, but those are all for you. I see.” He nodded. “There have been no more coordinated Elven attacks in the past months, but I’m less worried about them. Refugees from the west have now reached not only Nipha and Kroll but Baralia and Lys as well.”

“Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“He’s afraid of war,” Rock said, touching Sulivhaan’s shoulder before he crouched down a little. “Another war is brewing. I can feel it in my old bones,” he said, imitating Sulivhaan’s voice as best he could.

Sulivhaan sighed before he turned away, which only amused Rock more. “You should’ve seen him in Dawntree,” Rock said, shaking his head.

Sulivhaan said nothing to that and just leaned back.

“It’s good to see you safe,” Rock said quietly, crossing his hands in front of him.

“Same. The rest of the team?” Rock’s confirming nod left her feeling better. “Where’s Navalis? I wanted to ask her about archery-related skills.”

The men looked at each other and shrugged.

“Your guess is as good as ours. So tell me, is your team joining the tournament?” Rock asked, his mood turning from bored to excited in the span of a mere moment.

“Yeah, I suppose we’re unknown as of yet, but that will change quickly.”

“I’m sure it will. If your team members are anywhere near as crazy as you are, then most of the others here won’t stand a chance.” He chuckled and drained one of Ilea’s mugs, the additional one she had ordered just for that reason. She liked Rock.

“Only if they’re as braindead as you are,” she said, sipping her own drink. They smiled at each other.

“A lot of them are,” Sulivhaan said, provoking a mock-hurt look from Rock.

“On another note, you mentioned Dawntree. Did the Elves manage to breach the city?” she asked.

Rock smiled at Sulivhaan. “Oh, if anybody breached anything, it was us. You should’ve seen the remains of those poor fucks.”

“You don’t talk about Elves the same way as people in Riverwatch,” Ilea said, finishing her drink.

“We are in Viscera. And we are Shadows,” Rock said, more serious than before.

“Mind your words,” Sulivhaan said.

Ilea felt like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t even look their way.

“He sees monsters behind every little thing,” Rock said, shaking his head before he leaned in closer. “Says the Elves we fight are just the young and inexperienced kind.”

“Are they?” Ilea asked in a matching whisper.

Rock shrugged. “Who knows. At the end of the day, we’re still alive. If his paranoia helps us prepare for the worst, that’s fine by me.”

Ilea glanced at Sulivhaan and couldn’t help but believe him. It was reasonable to assume that there were stronger enemies out there, be they Elves, Drakes, or Guardians.

All the more reason for her to see more and to get stronger.

THIRTY-FIVE

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Tournament

“So, I presume you’ve all read through the tactics sheets?” Claire asked the assembled group.

Eve looked like she hadn’t slept for the past week, Trian must have had a whole group of stylists that had worked on his perfect look, and Kyrian was avoiding Ilea’s gaze – more out of embarrassment than anything else, she figured.

Ilea glanced at the others and then back at Claire, freezing as she saw the team leader staring into her eyes.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that! I’m sure the others haven’t read them either... Claire, it was fifty pages of boring formations...”

Now it wasn’t only Kyrian who was avoiding her gaze.

Betrayed and abandoned. Just like that. Suppose that’s what being a Shadow really means...

She raised her eyebrows, ready to dodge an explosion or three.

“Well, that’s what I expected. As soon as there are no monsters or money involved, you all slack off. That’s why we met so early. We’re going to go through it all together. I hope you have your notebooks with you,” Claire said happily.

Ilea sighed, looking up at the fake sun in Eregar’s Haven.

Save me...

* * *

That night, Ilea heard a knock on the front door of her home. She could see Kyrian in her sphere and blinked down, then opened the door.

"Evening," she said.

"I... I'm s... sorry for showing up l... like this," he said, scratching the back of his head. He took a deep breath and locked eyes with her. "I'm here... to read."

"To read?" Ilea asked, tilting her head.

He nodded. "Yes. If you have time? To help, I mean."

"Sure, come in. Eaten already?"

"I have."

She blinked back upstairs and walked over to the bookshelves. "These should be possible, I think," she said, holding a handful of books out when Kyrian walked in. She glanced at him. "You seem more nervous than last time."

"I... You've prepared more books?" he asked, looking at the stack in her hands.

"You wanted to learn. It wasn't much of an effort."

"Thank you. Umm... what happened last time... I think... I mean, I don't think I can do that again. It was confusing. I think I'm still confused," he said, murmuring the last bit.

Ilea walked over and smiled. "Impressively honest. I'm sorry if I made you feel confused or hurt. I just wanted to have some fun. Do you regret it?"

He shook his head. "No. It's just... kind of... how should I say this? I feel like you're a lot more... experienced than me."

"You'll get there," she said and handed him the books. "Reading then? Might be a bit less confusing."

"I suppose so," he said and sighed, then smiled at her. "Go and join the Hand, they said..."

He chuckled to himself and shook his head.

* * *

When Ilea woke up a short time later, Kyrian was still asleep. He had stayed over again, but this time it was an actual sleepover and nothing more.

She got out of bed silently before dressing and blinking down onto her balcony, summoning Aki and a cup of hot tea that tasted a little bit like coffee. Her necklace really was a blessing.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. How long did you sleep?” the dagger asked as she put his sheath onto her leather armor.

“Not longer than two hours, I think.”

“That can’t be healthy,” Aki said, but both of them knew she didn’t need more. Maybe at some point, she would fall into a coma for a decade to balance things out. So far, though, it had worked out, and she didn’t feel tired.

“Unhealthy? You mean like a thousand-year meditation session, Mr. Blade?” Ilea asked, watching the suns rise as she sipped her Saaih tea.

“I like the house, I must say,” the dagger said, likely enjoying the view as much as she did, if not more, considering the past hundreds of years of his existence.

“You think we’re going to get far in the tournament?”

“Not really. You are all impulsive and undisciplined. You and Sparky are the only ones who can take more than just a little beating, so it will likely be you two left standing at the end, and as much as you have grown, I doubt you can stand against five people at your level.”

Ilea was quiet for a while, enjoying the icy breeze flowing through her hair.

“You just watch me,” she said.

* * *

Ilea left with Kyrian sometime later, flying over the snowy mountains near Ravenhall. The sky was clear that day, and they reached a city in celebration.

This might be a bit much... Ilea thought as she saw the masses of people packed in the streets. Compared to an ordinary busy day in a big city, this felt more like a tourist trap.

“Let’s get to Viscera as soon as possible,” she said to her flying companion. The tournament would start at midday, which meant they had quite a bit of time.

Sadly, Viscera was in a similar state to the city outside. Apparently, more than the usual amount of peddlers had been let in. Additionally, the number of people Ilea saw with a level over 200 was higher than at any previous point in time.

The two made their way down to Eregar's Haven, where the tournament would be held and where they would meet up with the team. Even here, there were more people than ever before.

They really take this tournament business seriously... Ilea thought as she saw the massive fields prepared for the fights, ready with barriers of varied colors and covers of all kinds and shapes. Even elemental resources like braziers of fire and pools of water had been prepared, in addition to the massive stands for people to watch.

Ilea looked at one of the arena sites. *It'll be hard to close in on people with that much space available...*

"Quite busy..." Kyrian commented as he stepped off the platform once it came to a stop before flying toward their destination.

"Yes, it is..." Ilea replied, her wings spreading before she followed him.

Ilea hadn't seen so many people flying in one place until today either. There were levitating mages, wings of all shapes and sizes, and people mounted on giant birds or wreathed in mana. She even spotted what looked like a man riding a cloud.

They set themselves down in an open field, not far from the stands. Crowds were all around them, but people were mostly split into five-person groups in this area. Space was likely allocated by some bureaucratic process only Claire understood.

Claire began talking the moment they arrived. She handed out even more notes and plans before going through profiles of people they might face. Again.

It really was a waste of time. There were too many unknowns, and the match-ups wouldn't be announced until the first one started. But still, Ilea appreciated Claire's enthusiasm for research.

Ilea had leveled her hypothetical speech resistance by two levels by the time they finally made their way toward the main stage, a massive structure of stone and metal.

As the group headed toward some seats set around the side and back of the stage, Ilea checked out the people around them. A lot were sporting

strange-looking armor and trinkets, and some even had glowing auras or spells casually floating around them.

Can't wait to see how they fight... she thought as she sat down.

Over the next couple of minutes, the crowd settled down and found their seats. There were five seats on the stage, two of which were empty. One was occupied by the man who had evaluated Ilea when she had joined. *Not William. Adam, was it?* The other two were occupied by a man and a woman, neither of whom Ilea had seen before.

The woman looked to be in her mid-twenties, but Ilea knew by now that looks didn't exactly determine age in Elos. Her skin was tanned and scarred in many places. Long curly brown hair fell onto her bare shoulders and a thick steel chest piece covered her torso, the dark red color scraped off in a few places. She had her bare arms crossed in front of her, a slight frown on her face as she scanned the crowd. A red fur waist piece padded with leather covered her waist and parts of her legs, thick fur boots completing her look.

The other man was impeccably dressed and sported a long, well-trimmed beard and golden spectacles. He wore fighting leathers but in such colors and of such quality that they didn't seem suitable for either camouflage or the Hand, judging from most everyone else present. His face was more chiseled than lined, his age hard to tell.

The woman got up as soon as the last members found their seats and walked to the lectern.

"Hello. Elder Strand will now speak to you," she said before going back to her chair, sitting down to a rustling of whispers.

Ilea could make out more than just a single conversation about her. The woman was an Elder as well. She heard the name Verena Quil used a couple of times. Apparently, it was quite a spectacle to see her.

Not one for words though... She was a little confused as to why the Elder had spoken at all.

In the meantime, Adam got up and continued where the woman had left off.

"Thank you, Elder Quil. It is an honor to talk to all of you on this day. I have evaluated many of you myself over the years." He looked over the crowd in a long pause. "To see you form experienced teams, ready for every challenge, makes me proud to be a member of the Shadow's Hand. However, let's not pretend you are here for sentimental speeches. We shall

simply get started. The first fight will be Team Six versus Team Nine. Good luck to all of you.”

As Adam walked back to his seat, the last man looked a little confused at his words, but he quickly recovered and got up as well.

“Welcome, members of the Hand, to this prestigious tournament.”

This last Elder definitely didn’t quite share the same antipathy for long speeches as the others. He was practically *bursting* with pomp and circumstance. Ilea zoned out after the first couple of sentences, unsure if anybody else was listening anymore either.

“He’s not like the others,” Kyrian whispered from her side.

Other people were talking as well, obviously no longer listening to the man, who was still pontificating twenty minutes later.

“Why make this political?” Kyrian continued, seemingly genuinely interested.

“Because that’s what he is,” Trian responded. “That man might soon take control of this whole organization. The other Elders don’t seem to care. Two of them didn’t even bother to show up.”

“Why would he take control? Aren’t there five Elders, not one?” Kyrian asked, but the Elder had finally finished, motioning to the arena next to the assembly of competitors.

Most of them got up and flew or teleported to their seats on the other side. Twelve people remained on the soon-to-be battlefield – the two teams mentioned by Strand. Ilea checked them out, but other than their levels being above 200, they didn’t look much different from any adventurers she had seen in the past.

None of them wore anything black, so she had reason to believe they weren’t using their best gear. Combatants weren’t supposed to die in this tournament. Some people were actually selling food out of their storage items.

Guess there are opportunist merchants even here among these elite fighters. She smiled and mused if they had more gold than even her. *They must have if they even use a situation like this to sell things...*

A loud explosion of fireworks above the arena signaled the start of the fight. Immediately, different elements were hurled across the battlefield, and the combatants started vanishing and reappearing.

The fight reminded Ilea of her team’s training sessions; similar abilities and tactics were being used. She did have to admit after just a few minutes

that the teamwork was something else. Humbling but exciting at the same time. She sat back and enjoyed the show, even buying some food.

Yeah, I doubt we can beat them if it's not about killing... she thought after a while, at least when it came to the two teams currently engaged. *These guys are far too goo—*

A sudden feeling of wrongness spread through her body, and she dropped the snacks in her hands, shooting to her feet and activating her buffs.

Many of the people around her were reacting in a similar manner as she felt numerous mages' mana flare.

"What is this?" Trian asked nobody in particular, sparks forming around him.

"Something's coming..." a mage said.

Eve groaned, and Ilea turned to her. She was clutching her temples and looked ill.

"Are you alright?" Ilea asked, using her healing to soothe the obvious headache plaguing her friend. Eve just looked at her with fearful eyes.

"We have to... get away..." she managed to say, just as runes lit up all around the arena and beyond.

"Where have they..." Claire said. "Come on, we need to..."

People were talking over each other until a voice of authority broke through. Ilea looked toward the female Elder who had spoken but a few words at the start of the tournament.

"Everyone, destroy those runes!" she shouted, two burning black axes appearing in her hands before she vanished, reappearing next to a circle of runes on the field and smashing the ground with both of them.

An explosion rattled through the runes, making the gathered magic vanish. People quickly followed her example, but the circles were too numerous.

Ilea appeared next to a circle, her eyes opening wide when she felt the runes. Immediately she was reminded of the hallways below the Calys mines. The den of the Vultures. And the demon that had been summoned there.

She gritted her teeth and smashed her fists into the ground before glancing around to see people in the stands had started fighting each other.

What? Why...?

“Destroy the runes!” she shouted, moving to the next circle. Inside it, a creature had started forming, still only halfway to something recognizable. Ilea destroyed the runes before her but found that the monster didn’t vanish. Instead, a tentacle-like limb shot out at her.

Ilea dodged to the right at the last moment. The arm moved after her, making her dodge again, this time backward.

What the hell...?

The sounds of fighting and magic all around her became louder, soon joined by screams and growls.

Ilea blinked backward to avoid another attack from the abomination before her. It slowly shuffled forward on tentacle-like limbs below the mass of flesh and eyes that formed its body.

[Demon – lvl 192]

Why here? she thought, trying to find her team in the mess of fighting. *Is this some kind of test? Or w—*

An explosion ripped into the earth next to her. She had to lift her arm to prevent shards of dirt and rock hitting her eyes. She summoned her juggernaut armor just as her Veil of Ash appeared. A tentacle hit her chest but Ilea stood her ground, grabbing the limb and pumping destructive mana into it.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Demonic Essence: -25 HP/s -25 Mana/s for the next five minutes.

Of course.

A punch from Ilea sent the creature skidding before it caught itself with its tentacles. She jumped backward, her wings spreading as another monster cratered the ground where she had stood, earth exploding outward. This one was shaped more like a humanoid, other than its right arm, which looked more like a massive bone mace.

Flying into the air, Ilea noticed that more and more demons were coming through the magical circles throughout the Haven, red glows lighting up in the distance.

Explosions rattled through the area as she tried to find her team, but there was too much going on for her to spot any of them. More than six shields similar to Claire's were visible as she ascended.

There was no time to think as a flying demon dived at her from the side. Ilea dodged the teeth that basically formed the creature's whole head and grabbed its leathery wings, flying back toward the ground, holding the monster in front of her.

It tried to puncture her veil with its spiked limbs but only managed to scratch at her armor, and its flailing ended when all of Ilea's speed and weight smashed its light body into the ground. She looked up to see a two-meter-tall demon, shaped like a bull with fins and an exposed rib cage, running toward her, roaring.

Why can't I just have one normal tournament? she thought as she charged.

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THIRTY-SIX

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Horde

The only reason she didn't dodge away was because the demon was at an identifiable level. She remembered too late that Walter had told her about how specialized demons can be as she was struck by the whole weight of the beast and pushed backward several meters. She felt her rib cage shatter, all the air punched out of her lungs. She blinked up above it, kicking at its spine as her injuries started to heal.

Two more flying beasts appeared, making her disengage from the monster on the ground. She caught one of them with a rattling punch to its teeth, its jaw broken. Three more punches cracked the first creature's head as the second demon cut into her back with long bone claws, ripping out ash but unable to get through her juggernaut armor.

She kicked at its stomach when she got a good angle, sending both demons tumbling through the air, lost in the chaos once more.

Ilea ran, occasionally covering distances by flying. She tackled a monster off a female warrior who was being pressed onto the ground, barely keeping its snapping jaws at bay with a spear, blood flowing from several cuts on her body.

Ilea punched the beast three times, causing something to crack in its chest, then she spun around in the air, using both her momentum and strength to fling the thing as far away as she could. Blinking back to the woman, she healed her wounds, ignoring the sputtered words of thanks.

Seeing another two beasts approach through her sphere, Ilea mentally apologized to the woman before she grabbed her and flew upward,

continuing to pump healing mana into herself and her fellow Shadow. Up and up they went, now followed by three flying demons.

Ilea glanced around to see many of the demons were going up toward Viscera.

The city. They can't reach Viscera.

Someone else had apparently had a similar thought as a beam of red light struck precisely where the elevator would vanish upward, sending rock and metal down onto the creatures. Ilea didn't have time to see where the attack had come from as the woman in her arms slowly regained her senses.

"You good?"

She received a thankful nod and so turned around again, now flying downward while avoiding their pursuers, two of them scraping past her veil as she twirled to dodge them.

"I can fly!" the woman shouted, so Ilea nodded and let go of her. Thin lines of black matter formed behind the warrior, who flew down toward her discarded spear, which was still lying where she had been fighting.

Ilea blinked away, dodging a fast-moving chunk of rock something had thrown her way as she flew and divebombed a demon running toward a dome of light. Her knees hit the creature and sent it to the ground before a series of punches broke bone and flesh, destructive mana flowing into the monster.

Three flying spikes impacted Ilea's veil, one of them managing to get through and scrape against her armor with a horrible shriek of metal. The beast below her used the distraction to punch her, the impact making her tumble and disengage.

Ilea ran toward the barrier, finding not Claire inside but three other people – one woman, lying on the ground, was badly injured. Ilea was unable to blink inside, so she decided to run around the barrier, smashing her fists into grotesque faces and throwing any attackers as far away as she could.

When three demons charged her at once, she thought one might get by her, but then a black flame appeared around them and a mage with dark eyes flew by and winked at her.

Ilea blinked next to him and intercepted a gazelle-legged demon as it jumped and lunged at him with gnarled claws. The thing clawed and bit at her ineffectually while her own attacks carved away its health, breaking

bones and destroying organs with kinetic and magical force, each punch increasing in power thanks to her ashen skills.

The two hit the ground in a tumble, sending earth and bits of stone flying, only one of them still alive. Ilea blinked back toward the dome, now unchallenged by enemies, as she wiped blood away and healed her injuries. One of the creatures had left a cut in her juggernaut chest piece, another had bent her helmet.

She punched the barrier to get the mage's attention.

"I can heal!" she shouted, but the rune mage just shook his head. He looked younger than Ilea herself. He was trembling and had tears in his eyes as he beheld the carnage taking place beyond his barrier.

Before Ilea could say more, another series of spikes thudded into her, several more impacting the barrier itself. Ilea turned and saw a demon standing a hundred meters away, spikes growing from its back.

When she tore her gaze back to the barrier, she saw the woman on the ground had bled out. She was dead. Ilea's anger spiked as she threw herself toward the ranged beast, dodging a lithe cat-like demon who tried to tackle her.

She appeared next to the spike-beast and punched deep into its torso, ripping out anything she got a good grip on until the thing fell lifeless to the ground. Then she ripped out the few spikes stuck in her back, two of which had penetrated her armor.

The poison was slowing her recovery more than anything, but her healing remained potent. Looking back, she saw the dome had fallen, the demon with the mace-like arm stalking toward the people who had been inside.

Ilea flew back frantically, but before she could reach them, a stream of red lightning burst from the creature's chest, driving it to the ground. Ilea appeared behind it seconds after and punched down onto its spine with an olvor gauntlet, shattering the bone.

The lightning stopped as she threw the body to the side, and she looked up to see Trian. He was in his black armor, nodding to her as if he were some battlefield commander.

Idiot...

But she was glad to see him alive.

He motioned in a specific direction and she followed, grabbing the two dome occupants who were still standing, obviously injured. Her mana

flowed into them as she flew behind Trian, who she saw was aiming for a ring of people who had formed some sort of defensive perimeter with walls of earth and metal.

Rune mages were using their powers to enhance the defenses, their magic glowing with various colors. Ranged mages of all kinds rained their spells onto the demons below while warriors and tanks fought to defend the line on the ground. It was chaotic, but Ilea knew they would have to work together to survive this. More demons were still appearing in the distance.

Ilea landed in the middle of the ring where two healers were working and put the two people she had rescued – the young barrier mage with a gash on his stomach and a woman with only one hand – next to the others who were injured or recovering. She would be of more help fighting.

She saw one of the healers create a field of light, healing ten people at once, his eyes closed as wounds closed near-instantly, before she flew upward. Checking her mana, she saw it was already down to around forty percent.

Two mages in black robes and masks were organizing the gathered defenders. “Warrior, up there!” one shouted, arm pointing toward the destroyed lift.

Ilea looked down and spotted two humanoid demons cresting the wall. She closed the distance and caught each of them by one leg, then flew down and smashed them into the ground – right before a muscular warrior with a massive axe. She saw the armored man lift his weapon and drive it down to finish the job.

Ilea didn’t stay to watch, disappearing to engage a spindly gray-skinned monster with spikes for arms running at the formation. She charged and used her heavier weight to slam the demon to the ground. Its boned claws broke through her ash defenses, one punching through her armor. Still, she held its back with her hands and head-butted it with her helmet while her wings and veil cut into the creature.

Using her legs to pin it down, she started to deliver blows with her olvor gauntlets, pulverizing the enemy below her. Now that its momentum was gone, its piercing weapons were no longer effective against her armor.

She looked up to find another bull-like creature charging toward them, horns lowered and fangs bared. Elder Quil appeared above it in a twirl, red flames burning around her body and axes, and slashed through the demon’s massive neck with a glowing line of fire.

Beheaded, the monster crashed to the ground and skidded toward Ilea. The Elder glanced at her before she vanished again, intercepting a flying demon that must have been nearly a hundred meters away.

Ilea watched the burning axes slice through the fliers in mere instants before she blinked away, helping out a warrior defending against three heavy-hitting monsters with thick, bone armor plating. Ice lances peppered their chests but were ineffective.

Ilea appeared before one of the demons and kicked at its knees, breaking bones. She then blinked behind it and ripped away the bone plate covering its neck before another spike of ice punched into the now-vulnerable creature and ended its life. She blinked backward, avoiding a bone hammer as she and an ice mage somewhere above repeated the same tactic, their teamwork proving quite effective.

She stopped after that and walked toward the enchanted and growing defensive line, using meditation to regain as many resources as she could. The poison had finally worn off, but she had to rest to avoid an early demise. A group of warriors and mages had gathered around three people, playing music and touching people.

With time to think, she saw the carnage all around. Shadows slaughtering an unending stream of monstrosities. Beams of bright light, explosions of fire and crystal, disappearing rogues that paralyzed every monster their blades touched, and heavy-hitting warriors shouting their defiance, axes and swords flattening their enemies.

She gulped, reminded of the Taleen dungeon and the machines slaughtering the adventurers. And the Praetorians. She looked out for larger creatures, but the only ones she saw were engaged by several Shadows, magic raining down from above.

Ilea took a deep breath and heard one of the bards start playing his lute nearby. She felt her mind calm and focus as she heard the music. She felt like they could win, knew that they would win.

This was different. This wasn't just a bunch of adventurers who had signed up for a quick way to make gold.

A woman in black robes stopped in front of her and touched her chest. She frowned.

"You can heal yourself..." the healer said before walking to the next person, touching their chest and creating a near-white glow.

Ilea smiled now. She saw flashes of the carnage in the Taleen dungeon here and there, as if what she saw overlapped with her memories, but she could see that the Shadows weren't being pushed back anymore. The initial chaos had settled somewhat. They were holding their ground.

She didn't dare rest longer than a couple of minutes before hurling herself back into the fight.

She saw red lightning in the distance, Trian darting away from a group of aerial pursuers. His wings were flickering. Ilea flew toward him just as his magical energy ran out and he crashed to the ground, his lightning wings vanishing.

One of the demons rushed toward him with a bone mace raised high.

No...

Ilea jumped forward to grab Trian before she jumped back into the sky, and the mace hit only stone. She tried healing him but found it impossible.

"What's wrong, Sparky? Run out of juice?" she asked as she flew back to the only recognizable defensible position nearby.

"Curses, and some of them block my drains... damn creatures," Trian said as a series of explosions boomed, scattering the monsters behind them. As the two landed, Ilea ripped out a bone shard stuck in Trian's leg.

"Didn't you learn anything from Kyrian?" she scolded as she healed his slowly closing wounds. "Where are the others?"

"I have no idea... thanks," he said, getting up again.

The explosions didn't stop, ripping through the demons who had pursued them. The mage who had bought them some breathing room nodded from under a black helmet before flying toward the Haven's exit, from which more and more of the creatures were making their way out.

"What the hell is happening?" Ilea asked, gesturing all around at the carnage.

"I have no fucking clue," Trian answered as lightning crackled around him, his wings coming back to life. "But we have to stop these monsters."

"Agreed," Ilea said, spreading her own wings.

"Let's find the others," he said as he flew off, Ilea following behind.

* * *

Claire held onto the power in her runes, blocking the horde of advancing creatures trying to get higher up and toward Viscera.

“How long, rune mage?” asked a warrior with braided hair and thick, corded muscles. He had fetched Claire and used a powerful movement ability to bring her up here, past the first elevator shaft. A group of Hand members was preparing spells and auras behind her.

“Not long, a minute at most,” she said as the group readied themselves.

“What about the people down there?” someone asked in a shaky voice. “There are hundreds of demons...”

“They’ll have to manage. We will hold the line here,” another voice chimed in.

A moment later, a ranger appeared from behind them. Claire looked at the injured woman, blood dripping from a dozen wounds beneath her black leathers. She began collapsing even as a healer ran toward her.

“Th... they are in the c... city...” she managed to say before she gasped, healing power flowing through her.

“They’re breaking through!” a mage said as one of the demons used its magical power to infest Claire’s barrier with its curse magic, disrupting it. “Your minute is up,” she said, just before the barrier shattered.

A set of explosive runes activated and shredded the first lines of monstrosities, but more rushed in from beyond. Claire’s mind raced as warriors ran past her and mages fired spells down the small corridor leading to the destroyed elevator.

They’re already in the city.

She steeled her mind and focused on what she could do, walking forward as she drew runes into the air and aimed her explosions at the rear lines of approaching demons.

* * *

“Three more over there!” Trian shouted as he and Ilea joined three warriors fighting off a horde of sword-armed demons.

Ilea struck five of them in quick succession as a stream of lightning coursed through the other side of the horde.

“How are your resources looking? Start meditating!” Ilea shouted at the warriors, holding off the ichor-stained fangs of one demon while punching

another in the throat.

Trian flew around the group, his attacks drawing the monsters toward him as Ilea finished them off one after the other. A minute later, the warriors rejoined the fight, their stamina sufficiently recovered to help.

“There’s a group of survivors that way, go!” Trian shouted.

But before Ilea could react, a screech tore the air. It was a discordant sound, like pained screaming, only far worse.

A ripple formed in the air a couple of hundred meters away as a complicated-looking set of runes came to life, much bigger than anything they’d seen before. Reality itself ripped apart right before their eyes as a tear in space was forced open.

“We have to stop that...” Trian said, horror in his voice.

Ilea was flying at her top speed before he had even finished talking, overtaking Trian in a moment. The tear was trembling but still getting wider and higher. Below it, Ilea could make out a tall creature with clawed hands and arms spread. Fin-like extensions could be seen on its back before it flew into the tear, vanishing a moment later.

“Focus on destroying the runes!” Trian shouted from behind.

Ilea was flying toward the portal when she saw something emerge from the other side.

“I think we might be too late!” she shouted as massive clawed limbs burst out of the tear, followed by a flood of water. A head slowly moved out of the crack. It looked like a white crocodile, but there were no eyes, and it was about a hundred times bigger.

“What the hell is that?” Ilea shouted as more of the creature emerged, the flood now reaching them.

As the creature flowed out of the crack, somehow levitating in the air, Ilea saw its whole rear part was just a mass of wiggling tentacles. It opened its mouth to reveal not teeth but a black abyss. Just as she would have slowed her frantic aerial dash, Ilea was hit by forceful pressure.

‘ding’ You have felt the pulse of a mighty being. You are paralyzed for ten seconds.

***‘ding’ You have learned the General skill: Veteran – lvl 1
You have experienced the shouts and spells of beings completely out of
the range of your imagination. You will not survive, but at least you won’t***

be entirely immobilized while you get eaten. Good luck, warrior.

Couldn't have fucking learned that with the last one, could I?

Ilea watched the abyss getting closer, unable to move her body or use her skills. She thought back to the Praetorians, the scythe sticking out of her stomach, the curse running through her. She thought of Salia, of the Elves. She had gone on missions, learned about monsters, even joined a team.

But it wasn't enough. What could she do against monsters like this? Monsters that could paralyze her with their magical presence alone?

Fucking bullshit! she shouted in her own head, just as a figure clad in flame smashed two burning axes into the monster's head.

The impact sent a shockwave outward as the beast moved one of its arms toward the warrior. Elder Quil looked at Ilea with a broad grin as she twirled in the air to dodge the large arm, cutting into the white flesh with burning steel before she was blown back by a wave of force coming from the creature's mouth.

The Elder was shot toward the ground, skidding to a halt a hundred meters farther back, but she charged again immediately, her fires flaring as she sped up.

Ilea was still in the air as her momentum had kept her flying forward, despite being paralyzed and unable to change course. Luckily, the gargantuan creature turned and moved toward the burning warrior. Unluckily, Ilea was now flying toward the tear in space the monster had crawled out of.

Are you fucking kidding me...? she thought as she entered the tear right above where the torrent of water was flowing out into the Haven. She felt pressure all around her as she drifted deeper into the dark, the sounds of battle gone in an instant, as was all light.

This isn't good.

She used her meditation, mental and fear resistances to stop herself from panicking immediately as she found she was underwater. Deep enough for her ears to pop.

Fuck.

Power flowed through her again, and her body regained its functions. Her spherical perception spread out as she looked for any magical phenomena nearby, anything that would indicate the presence of the tear she had just gone through, but there was only one thing in the near vicinity.

She held the remaining air within her lungs as she blinked toward Trian, who had succumbed to the same fate. Looking back, she saw no tear, and the flow of the water didn't indicate any exit nearby.

Nonetheless, she swam with the still-paralyzed man toward where she thought they'd come from but found nothing. With her enhanced body, she could search for a little longer, but a feeling of fear and panic slowly settled in her stomach, only kept at bay by her skills. The darkness around her didn't help, and her lungs were slowly emptying.

Focus, Ilea...

She prayed to whatever deity was watching that she could tell up from down, using all her power and even wings to swim upward. A minute later, the darkness was replaced by a dark blue, giving her at least a little bit of hope.

Trian was coughing by now, the last of his air leaving him. Ilea used her healing power to heal them both as the fast change in pressure had managed to damage even their powerful bodies.

Finally, the two broke the surface and coughed out lungfuls of water while their wings spread and got them into the air. Dark clouds were hanging above the near-black ocean, with no end in sight in any direction. She could see stars between the gaps in the clouds.

Squinting her eyes, she could see a distant flying dot that soon disappeared, too fast for her to follow.

The one I saw enter? She wasn't sure but kept herself aligned with its direction. *At least it's something to go on.*

"Where the hell are we...?" Ilea asked after a while, not quite expecting an answer from Trian. She felt the hairs on her neck stand up as she looked at the waters below.

I'm not going back in there. That's for fucking sure.

Trian coughed again. "Wherever the demons are from, I assume."

"That thing was a demon?"

"I have no idea. But the runes looked similar."

"How do we get out?"

"The tear is gone?"

"I couldn't find it. Not with sight, not with my sphere. And I couldn't perceive a water flow. Plus, if there are monsters down there like the one we saw, I'm not going back into those waters to look for something I couldn't find already."

Trian just looked at her, his expression grim. "We're alive. That's one thing, I suppose. Do you think there's land anywhere?"

"Probably... I saw a small dot flying in that direction," she said, pointing. "Maybe the being I saw flying into the tear right before that monster showed up."

Trian turned the same way and looked up. "Let's try to memorize the stars we can see. It'll be easier to keep our direction," he said, summoning a book and sketching what he saw.

Good thinking.

She sighed. "I might be able to use my third-tier skill to get back, but I can't take you with me..."

Trian frowned for a long moment but ultimately nodded. "If you want to use it, then I suggest you do it as soon as possible."

"And leave you behind? No."

She saw him staring at her, his eyebrows raised. "You would stay here? For me?"

"You're acting like we're dead already. If there's a way in, there's a way out. And if we can find that thing, maybe it knows."

"Awfully optimistic," he said and chuckled. He was still looking at her with raised eyebrows.

"Quit acting so surprised. You would've left me here if it was the other way around then?"

He looked at her, then toward the sky. "I would like to say yes, but I suppose we're not that different after all. As much as it hurts me to say that."

"You didn't notice that when we beat the shit out of each other? I thought there was a connection there."

He smiled, then sighed. "I'm sorry."

Ilea squinted her eyes. "You're supposed to punch back. I didn't take you for the sentimental type."

"We're in a strange place. Room for strange behavior?" he suggested with a shrug.

She smiled, and he chuckled.

"I've been unkind. And not just to you. I get that now." He shook his head. "Before I left for Ravenhall, I made sure to tell my father that I was ready to step up, to take on more responsibilities in my House, that wasting

my time with a mercenary order was idiotic. Well, I didn't use exactly those terms, but the idea was the same. They were right. I had a lot to learn."

"You still do."

"I suppose I do."

"Let's go then. The less time we waste, the earlier we can try and track that creature. Not that we'll catch up anytime soon, judging by how fast it moved."

"Sure it was back in the Haven?"

"I just saw a glimpse."

"Better than nothing, I suppose," Trian said and looked up. "These are not our stars."

Ilea sighed. "Let's go."

Trian followed behind as the two flew higher above the quiet and dark ocean, the waters nearly perfectly still.

"We'll find a way back, don't worry. I have enough food with me to last us a while. We'll figure something out," Ilea said and chuckled.

"You're awfully calm about all this," Trian said.

It's not the first time I've been stranded in another reality.

THIRTY-SEVEN

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Salt

‘ding’ You have defeated [Breaker lvl 196]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Bone Warrior lvl 203]

Ilea skipped through the messages regarding the demons she had killed. Most had been around level 200 with three outliers, one of which had been level 230.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 207 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 203 – 5 stat points awarded.

Ilea put all her remaining points into Wisdom.

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 4

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Embered Body Heat reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 4

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2nd lvl 10

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 5

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Fear Resistance reaches lvl 2

None of this is really helping me in this situation...

Ilea kept flying at a high speed next to Trian, both of them quiet. The ocean was eerily still.

“What kind of third-tier spells do you have?” she asked after a while, trying to start a conversation.

“Lightning attack. I can’t yet choose any of my movement skills to get to the third level. Could make this situation a lot easier,” he sighed.

“Yeah...” Ilea said as the two sped over the water. There were some waves now, indicating that the ocean did change from time to time.

“Aki, do you know anything about this place? I think at this point I’d rather know than keep you hidden,” she suddenly said. Trian looked at her as the two stopped and hovered over the water, the stars bathing them in a pale light.

“Who’s Aki?”

Ilea unsheathed her dagger. “This. And I swear, you little shit, if you act like you’re just a normal dagger to make me seem insane, I’ll drop you in the ocean and leave you here.”

She held the dagger right before her face. Half a minute passed, and Trian’s expression turned from confused to worried.

“Ilea, I don’t think you—”

Ilea loosened her grip and made as if to drop the thing into the water, causing Aki to start talking.

“Alright, alright, *I* thought it was funny. Hello, Trian, nice to meet you.”

“You cheeky fuck,” Ilea sighed.

“The dagger actually talks. And here I thought you were even madder than I already knew,” Trian said. “It’s good to meet you, Aki. So, what are you?”

“We haven’t figured that out exactly,” Aki answered.

“He’s pretty much a person. Maybe some kind of soul trapped in a dagger. I found him in a dungeon,” Ilea said. “He’s been around during our training and everything, so he’s familiar with the team.”

“I get why you’d hide something like that,” Trian said. “Maybe best not to show off strange items.”

“I’m right here, you know,” Aki said.

“Right. Apologies,” Trian said. “People trapped in daggers then.”

The three started flying onward again but at a slower pace.

“Do you know anything about the demon realm?” Ilea asked as she looked at the dagger.

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with this place. I can tell you it was probably a bad idea to go through that fissure,” Aki answered.

“Helpful as always.”

“You got me here...”

Ilea smiled. “Oh, don’t act like you don’t love this adventure.”

“Got me. I would prefer not to be dropped to the bottom of this ocean, however. Little chance of anything reasonable finding me down there. Maybe ever.”

“I’ll try not to drown.”

“Aki does seem... familiar,” Trian said.

“Familiar? Yeah, apparently he gets some influence from me, so now you’ll be annoyed by two people at once,” Ilea said, sheathing Aki again.

“Lovely. Well, I’ll be honest, I’d rather have two of you than be stranded here alone.”

They flew on under the never-changing sky.

* * *

“What’s that?” There, to the right!” Ilea suddenly exclaimed.

“You’re dreaming Ilea, there’s nothing...” Trian said, his voice tired as he flew onward.

“She’s right. There’s something there,” Aki confirmed.

“Come on, to the right!” Ilea said, taking Trian’s arm. He followed without further complaint, perhaps even a little hope.

In the distance, the white speck Ilea had seen grew bigger and bigger. Behind it, more white specks came into view until the first one, a sizable chunk of rock protruding out of the water, was clearly visible. The shape of the rock didn’t look very natural to Ilea – at least, not for stone.

On reaching it, they found a platform on which they could land on one side of the white rock. Trian immediately collapsed, sleep taking him within ten seconds.

“Weak,” Ilea sighed with a smile on her face. She bent down and licked her finger before touching it to the ground. Licking it again, she spat on the rock. “Salt.”

“Of course you immediately lick the ground of the new place you’re in,” Aki said. “Can’t level your Poison Resistance any other way...”

“I regret revealing you, Aki. This is all salt. Rock salt, to be exact,” Ilea revealed as she sat down and summoned a meal. She made it vanish again ten seconds later, thinking about their situation. They might need to ration at some point.

Instead, she summoned her notebook and started sketching the surroundings, writing about their discoveries. The platform of salt stone they’d paused on was just one of many. Beyond it, a few dozen protruding rocks turned into a few hundred, and farther back, the salt stone made up a large mass of land, spanning farther than the eye could see.

Ilea couldn’t tell if it was a large island or something as large as a continent. But land was preferable to the ocean, that much was sure.

“What are you doing?” Aki asked, unable to see the page from his current position. She unsheathed him and put him on her lap.

“I’m documenting,” she stated simply.

“You surprise me time and time again, Ilea. Does your brain occasionally go through random shrinking and growing processes?” the dagger asked but remained silent for a while after not receiving an answer. “Can your hunting skill not pick up the thing you saw enter and fly away? Or anything else?”

Ilea had already been consulting the skill non-stop since her arrival but had found nothing so far except for water and salt.

“If I find something, I’ll inform you,” she said as she continued drawing.

* * *

Trian woke up four hours later. He was obviously a little embarrassed at how long he’d slept, taking the next shift of guarding their little rock against anything that might appear. Ilea slept for around two hours before she awoke again and saw Trian working on something quite similar to her own previous activity.

“Continue?” she asked reluctantly. She was bone tired despite her resilience. Still, her buffs and healing activating rid her of the fatigue. Her wings spread behind her as Trian made his decorated leather book vanish.

He nodded and followed. The two flew over the last stretch of ocean before landing on the landmass formed entirely of salt stone.

“I wonder if it’s just an island or something bigger?” Trian mused, looking out onto the rocky salt formations, some high enough to constitute small mountains.

“I’m picking up things here. More than before, at least...” Ilea said, using all her senses to try and locate something that wasn’t salt or water.

There were some smells and dried blood at the edge of her sphere, and even a small bone.

“There were living things here, and they were here recently. I’d assume this is where they live,” Ilea said, quite happy that they were standing on somewhat solid ground.

They decided to walk for a while, just enjoying the ground again.

“And here I was thinking I’d never get tired of flying,” Ilea said.

“You start missing things when they’re not there anymore,” Trian said before he yawned.

“Like sleep?”

“I’m not tired. It’s more things like—”

He opened his mouth to say something else, then looked away.

Ilea smiled. “Caught your tongue?”

He looked at her and rolled his eyes. “I was about to say family.”

“Right. You’ve been away from home for a while.”

“I have,” he said, looking at her as if she was going to say more.

“Expecting me to insult you?”

Trian shrugged. “Honestly, yes.”

She grinned. The two walked onward before Ilea jumped onto a rather sizable chunk of salt and picked up a small bone.

“Don’t eat that,” Aki said.

She was tempted to take a bite just out of spite, but then maybe the dagger was manipulating her. She couldn’t win.

Mischievous.

“I can’t say I miss my parents much,” Ilea said, throwing away the bone.

“No siblings?” Trian asked.

“No.”

“I mean, there’s a reason you left your village. Far away, you said, right? Pretty vague.”

Ilea sighed, looking up at the stars. Most of the night sky was shrouded by dark clouds.

“No need to share. I didn’t mean to pry,” Trian added.

She smiled. “No, it’s fine. I mean, we’re stuck in gods know where. I’m not actually from Elos, you know.”

Trian stumbled. “What?”

“Yeah,” she said, jumping down from the rock. “I was ripped out of my old life and landed here. Didn’t choose to come, and I don’t know what actually happened.”

“A realm traveler, is it? Fascinating. I suppose that explains some of your quirks,” he laughed. “And your magic.”

“Nope. I got that here. Probably would’ve been dead in a matter of days without it. We don’t have magic where I’m from.”

“I see. And don’t worry, I won’t share this with anyone. Feel free to talk about it if you want to.”

Ilea thought about it, then shrugged. “We should focus on this place right now.”

“Fair,” he said, then gave her a look.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Sorry. I just thought about how such a small fact can change my perception of someone by so much. Maybe I shouldn’t

judge so easily.”

“Oh? The character development salt lands, I see. Who knows what else you’ll learn about yourself,” she said, giving him a set of thumbs-up.

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Hey, that’s the nicest way you’ve ever told me to fuck off.”

Trian raised his eyebrows and sighed, then glanced at the sheathed dagger. “How do you deal with that? All the time?”

“You learn to tune out the noise. Just like a breeze,” the dagger said.

“Oh really?” Ilea asked as loudly as possible.

“Ah, I hear the gentle sigh of the winds... nature, flowing through the lands.”

Ilea shook her head as Trian chuckled. “Let’s speed this up a little,” she said, spreading her wings.

They started speeding over the barren rocky terrain again with their flying abilities, sometimes stopping so Ilea could check the surroundings. They found salt rock, boulders, hills, and split ground, but no trees, no life, nothing other than a few bones and blood stains.

It was more of the same for a while until they finally saw something move in the distance.

“That’s one of them alright,” Trian said, stopping in the air.

It was one of the massive demons with an open ribcage she’d seen in the Haven. The creature stumbled, fell down, and then slowly got up again.

“Broken leg or something?” Trian asked.

“It’s injured, yes. And I don’t think it was an accident...” Ilea said, pointing to the left as another beast came into view.

This one was a massive ten-meter-long abomination with a worm-like body. Its entire length seemed to be split in half, thousands of serrated teeth moving within the gap. Ilea shivered just looking at it.

“Should we engage?” she asked, watching the scene before them.

“You should wait and see. Fight the survivor,” Aki commented, and the two others agreed, flying a little closer without alerting either of the monsters. The worm-like creature tore into the other demon’s back, the latter stopping all resistance after half a minute.

“It’s eating, isn’t it?” Ilea asked as they hovered above the creature.

[Demon – lvl 212]

“Yeah, should we end it or follow it?” Trian asked, looking over at Ilea.

“I can follow its trail now, so we can finish it,” she said, her buffs flaring before she blinked next to what she perceived to be the creature’s head.

One kick made it stop eating and focus on the newcomers. It cried out but was immediately shut up by another kick, followed by lightning slamming into its body.

Ilea dodged the beast’s frantic movements before she lifted her hands in front of her, blocking the mass of teeth with her Veil of Ash as she pushed destructive mana into the monster.

The shrieks and cries didn’t stop, and while its attacks didn’t get through her defenses, its durability was impressive. It outlasted their attacks for more than ten minutes before it finally stopped moving altogether, never having stopped its own attacks.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Bone Warrior – lvl 212]

“Not a single level-up,” Ilea grumbled.

“Only leveled a skill... want to find more?” Trian asked as Ilea took in their surroundings, focusing on the trail left behind by the two creatures.

“I’m not sure we’ll find more that easily. At least we have a source of food, should all else fail,” she said, enjoying the horrified look in his eyes. “Or is the thought of eating demon flesh too disgusting for the noble?”

“Who’s the one summoning high-end cuisine all the time?” Trian said, motioning for her to lead the way.

Ilea smiled. He’d got her there. She started running, occasionally pausing to take in the scents around her.

“Didn’t know you’d noticed,” she said.

“I try to be aware of my surroundings, unlike some.”

“Nothing more romantic than two mercenaries trapped in another land slowly falling in love with one another,” Aki said, as if he were commenting on a rather interesting weather phenomenon.

“Why do you carry that piece of metal around again?” Trian asked as the three came upon a cliff. On the other side was a flat plane of salt, a few lone creatures visible in the distance.

“If I’m ever stuck inside a temple again, I’ll at least have someone to talk to,” she said, twirling the dagger before sheathing it again. This time,

there was no remark from Aki. “Wanna go hunt? Maybe if we kill enough of the creatures, we’ll lure out something more interesting.”

“Not sure if that’s the best idea, but then I don’t really have an alternative,” Trian said.

“Itching for a fight, eh?” Aki said.

“I won’t deny that,” Ilea said, cracking her neck.

* * *

“Hello, can you show us how we can get out of—” Ilea started, moving to the side as two bone shards shot past her, digging through her veil before they hit the ground a couple of dozen meters away.

“Well, that’s just rude,” she said, staring into the massive mouth of the creature before her. Another set of bone shards were slowly growing from the holes the last ones had left behind. “Though if I looked like that, I’d be pissed as well.”

She blinked closer, avoiding the new projectile attack and preparing to engage. Lightning crashed into the creature just as her fists hit it. Neither she nor Trian relented in their attacks, and blood and guts splattered over her as the creature burst apart entirely.

“Eww, fucking tone it down, man,” Ilea said, using her ash manipulation to remove the blood sticking to her veil.

“You’re shielded, aren’t you? Just imagine if you didn’t have that skill,” Aki said.

“The smell is bad enough...” Ilea looked at the remains of the most recent demon they’d hunted down. The fourth one on the plain already. And the fourth one that hadn’t responded to their questions with anything other than bones and bad breath.

“I don’t see this going anywhere,” Ilea said, folding her hands. “It took what, three hours to hunt those, and we’re not getting anywhere...”

“What else would you suggest? We can only follow their trails until we find something. Whatever that may be,” Trian said.

“Or we get you high enough for another third-tier skill. Just keep using that teleportation spell.”

“I don’t think that’s viable...”

“Better than nothing. At least I got a level from this, so it’s not a complete waste,” Ilea said, putting her new stat points into Intelligence. By now, her main class had reached 208.

“Yeah, but we’re not... wait... what’s that? Do you feel that?” Trian said slowly.

“Feel what? Not really. If you can sense anything, then let’s go. Whatever it is, it’s better than following these demons. Lead the way!”

Ilea followed Trian after he nodded, picking up the pace.

“It’s like it’s calling for me. A pulse of mana, but it’s weak. Very weak and far away,” Trian tried to explain.

Five minutes later, Ilea could feel it too. It was faint, incredibly faint, and she was impressed that he’d managed to make it out. Thought that might have to do with her lack of skill-based magic perception.

“Look at that...” Ilea said sometime later. “Seems like we’re not the only ones looking.”

A winged gray-blue creature with clawed tentacles for legs was moving in the same direction as them, and she saw it turn and rush toward them with a screech.

“Should I take it down?”

Trian didn’t respond as a bolt of red energy left his fingers and lanced through one of the creature’s wings, grounding it a second later. Ilea landed hard on it and executed her signature move – smashing it with both fists until it wasn’t moving anymore.

Only a paste of blood and guts remained when she was done. She got up again and followed Trian, who hadn’t stopped to watch. The demon had been below level 200, and no level-up messages appeared after the kill.

“We’re getting closer,” he said when she caught up.

“Yeah, I can feel it pretty well now too. Look around you, that wasn’t the only one.”

She watched as dozens of different creatures ran, slithered, and flew toward their destination. None of them seemed to care for each other or for the two humans in the mix. Perhaps because the magical pull was becoming stronger.

Getting a bad feeling about this.

“We should slow down, see where this is going,” she shouted to Trian. He nodded, slowing down a little as the two continued to advance over the rocky terrain.

Cresting a small hill of salt stone, they stopped and looked down onto a field of salt. Hundreds of demons were circling around one humanoid creature holding a crude-looking bone staff, its black eyes hollow as it pushed visible mana into the runes painted in blood all around the area.

“What the hell is that?” Ilea said, right before the creatures all stopped moving and red energy was released from the runes below, leaving no trace of the humanoid creature behind.

“It vanished... as did the pulse...” Trian said, the monsters around them slowing to a halt before some of them started screeching, looking around in a confused manner.

“Some of the monsters vanished as well,” Aki said, surprising the two of them.

Chaos followed as the demons started attacking each other, now that the mana pulse had vanished with the staff wielder. Flesh and bone flew as the battle commenced.

Ilea looked at her teammate with a grin below her black helmet. Her armor was damaged from the battle in the Haven but was still holding together. Mostly.

“Feel like joining in?”

Trian just sighed as red lightning crackled around his arms. “Think they’ll gang up on us?” he asked, slowly hovering higher.

“I sure hope they will,” Ilea said, punching her fists together as she summoned her bladed blue steel gauntlets, her chosen weapons for the occasion. “The one who gets less kills pays for dinner!”

She ran toward the horde and then blinked closer, her blades cutting deep into an unfortunate demon standing a little too close to her.

“Fewer,” Trian murmured, lightning gathering around him before a massive explosion of red light ripped through a group of monsters.

THIRTY-EIGHT

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Mind Weaver

Ilea's veil had just reformed when it stopped another set of claws. Her bladed gauntlets cut into the monster's mouth and beyond as she pushed on, grabbing its jaw and ripping downward. It screeched as Ilea ripped out the blade to blink toward her next target.

There was a glint of light and moving metal before she removed two tentacles and two bony legs from her enemy. The blob of meat fell to the ground as her bladed gauntlets turned black with blood and Ilea landed in an explosion of gore, some of it splattering on her armor.

Ilea looked up to find a massive demon charging at her. Its torso was supported by six horse-like legs with a head covered in mouths and gnashing teeth. She turned with exact timing to merge her full body weight and enhanced power into a destructive punch, simultaneously switching her gauntlets to her heavy olvor set.

The impact stopped the monster in its tracks. Ilea moved back barely a single step as she heard the bones crack, blinking upward to deliver another punch aided by the massive weight of her gauntlets. Her fist smashed through the horrid creature as if it were just a wooden twig. The demon fell, and Ilea jumped toward its head and finished it with a stomp of her armored boot.

Looking around, she found a blood-red battlefield covered in corpses, a smell worse than anything she'd ever experienced, and a flying mage delivering death to a group of frenzied demons. Some of them were still fighting each other, unaware of the intruders. Whenever they did notice, they turned on the humans, but Ilea welcomed the confusion.

She stomped again on a patch of clean ground to remove the guts that had splattered up her armored and ash-covered leg. Her olvor gauntlets vanished, and her speed increased. She summoned her other set of gauntlets again and landed with a blue-bladed twirl in a group of entangled monsters, already injured by their previous battles.

Tendons were cut and limbs severed as Ilea dodged and weaved through the creatures, ash spreading to distract and obscure as she sliced and stabbed, ripping through them like a hurricane of blades.

A heavy blow to her back sent her flying, unable to blink or dodge the attack that likely hadn't even been meant for her but for the creature she still had her blades sunk into. Ilea skidded to a halt, coughing blood into her helmet before her healing skill took over.

Turning around, she saw the new beast had long muscular limbs and an exaggerated human frame, its fists like boulders. It focused on her as she danced backward to avoid any further hits, blinking before its head after her third step back, her blades sinking into its throat. It grabbed at her, making her store her gauntlets and blink downward before kicking the back of the demon's legs, causing it to stumble.

Her bladed weapons appeared on her arms again, and she removed the demon's legs altogether with one precise slash with both hands before another blink landed her on top of its chest. She pummelled it with a set of heavy punches as the three-meter-tall creature desperately tried to get away from the woman destroying its bones and organs with her blue gauntlets. Her veil protected her from the enemy's claws until it finally stopped moving.

Ilea blinked away just before a set of bone spears were launched at where she had just been standing. She ran through the splattered and broken corpses, ducking and weaving to avoid any projectiles, looking for more distracted creatures ready to be surprised.

Trian was using his ranged attacks to fry any clustered groups of demons engaged with each other or running after Ilea, and the two continued moving through the thinning mass of demons. Many of the monsters had started running away from the area, either injured or visibly weaker than those remaining.

Ilea dodged another set of bone spears and finally managed to make out the aggressor, a mass of flesh that was regrowing its bone missiles as it slithered around a mound of corpses, trying to hide itself after the attack.

Ilea blinked toward the enemy, keeping her buffs and sphere up as she activated meditation, ready to move quicker again as soon as the situation required it.

She wasn't in dire need of a pause yet, but in a battle like this, one had to pace oneself. Otherwise, the remaining enemies may be too much, and this time Ilea didn't think she could just run into the next room as she had with the Taleen robots. These demons looked like they'd pursue her to the ocean – and perhaps even beyond.

"Come on out, little one..." Ilea whispered, spotting a bit of movement next to the corpse mound.

Spears of bone flew toward her before she blinked forward, and her field of vision was filled by the enemy before her, not quite ready for what was to come. She brought down both of her olvor gauntlet-covered hands, squashing the creature with a single blow.

Fucking bone spears...

She shook her shrouded gauntlets of the guts and blood, looking around while she used meditation to restore some of her spent energy.

Trian was flying in the distance, followed by a couple of flying demons and two rather slim ones running below, occasionally throwing a corpse or bone his way.

To think I nearly died against one of these creatures when I was with the Vultures. I wonder how far I can push...

Her buffs active, the blue and red light inside her helmet reassured her as her fists closed and reopened, a breath escaping her mouth.

"Alright," she said as she started running, ignoring the smell of blood in the air and the terrifying noises of screaming monsters ready to tear off her limbs.

The two slim creatures were running and watching Trian above them when the armored and buffed Ilea crashed into them, her weight and speed aiding the bladed gauntlets to cut through both of their necks with a precise slash. Their bodies slid on for several meters before they came to a stop.

By then, Ilea had left the ground and the corpses behind, jumping into the air with the help of her ashen wings to follow Trian's pursuers and cut them down one by one. In the end, she nearly collided with Trian as he finished the last of them from close range.

Ilea found herself smiling. Despite being trapped in this strange place and fighting horrors that would've haunted her nightmares back on Earth,

she loved it. A part of her knew she could do this for days on end, or even weeks. All that concerned her a little was the thought that more dangerous creatures joining the fray would only excite her more.

There was silence after the most recent kills, Ilea getting her health up to the max as her meditation skill helped her regain her mana. Summoning her weapons took a little less out of her than a combination of Wave of Ember and Destruction, and it seemed more effective to attack the demons with blunt or bladed weapons instead of her usual mana intrusion.

“Couple minutes, then I’m ready for more,” Trian said as he joined her, and Ilea nodded. She could hear more fighting in the distance, but the horde had thinned to small groups.

“Me too,” she said. “Let’s fly to make some distance. Don’t want to be ambushed while we recover.”

A few minutes later, the two slowly made their way downward, expecting either scattered enemies or a bloodbath of dead creatures. The actual circumstance of the battlefield was rather different as the remaining fifty or so demons of various sizes were standing as if frozen, clustered in a single group.

“What are they—” Ilea started, but a heavy pressure suddenly pushed against her mind, breaking her concentration and making her wobble in the air.

Trian’s wings vanished as he began to plummet. He fell a handful of meters before Ilea swooped to grab him, her veil up and consciousness fighting against the mind magic attack she was very familiar with.

Knocking out Trian in a single hit...

She shook her head as she pushed healing mana into the man in her arms. The attack was strong and had caught them off-guard, but it was brute force compared to Eve’s more subtle and nuanced attacks.

Where the hell is it?

Ilea looked around and eventually found a single demon looking at her from the middle of the clustered group, its head sporting the same black holes as the staff wielder’s had. The same look as the demon summoned into the Vulture’s den. The magic felt much more manageable now, the pain but a distant phantom gnawing at her brain as she locked her eyes on the demon’s face.

“Creature of flesh?”

Its voice echoed through her head, the sound more painful than the mind attack that was still hammering into her defenses.

“Yes, creature of flesh. Human to be exact. Nice to meet you, demon. Would you be so kind as to stop this so we can duke it out like the monsters we are?” she asked in a more than sarcastic tone.

“You Resist? How?”

Its voice sounded more curious than anything else. Compared to the arrogant supremacist demon she had met before, this one seemed rather pleasant. Maybe even second-date material.

“I have fought your kind before,” Ilea answered, curious as well as to the nature of her enemy.

The other demons had all seemed more adamant about getting their teeth into her than chatting. Or even into Trian or each other, for that matter. Getting information wasn’t her strong suit, but even Ilea realized that, this time, talking should come before her fists. The fifty demons likely under the adversary’s control didn’t help the fist argument either.

“You Have? And Survived?” The creature was now moving a little closer to them, hovering off the ground.

“I like that hovering. Is that a skill?” Ilea said, actually interested. It did look rather cool.

“Aaah Yees, It is Slow, But Aerial Combat Is Possible. Those Things, What Are They?”

The other demons had turned toward them now and were marching closer, pushing the corpses of their fallen brethren away as they mindlessly advanced. Ilea was a little confused as to the question, but the motions the demon was making with its hands made her understand.

“Ah yes, those are my wings. Ashen wings, to be exact,” she answered, slowly moving backward at the same pace as the creature advanced. Trian was still out, and she didn’t want to start a fight against a mind mage controlling such a large group of demons without him present.

“Wings, Yes, I Know, But Ashen? That Is Interesting!” The shout inside her brain made Ilea wince.

“Do you not have ash...? Can you talk a little less loud? You’re hurting my brain.”

“Less Loud... Do you mean like this?” The voice was still awful and discordant but much quieter now. *“I can do that, but are you sure you can understand me?”*

Ilea nodded. "I can hear you just fine. You were shouting before."

"Aaaahhhhh yes, your skills in mind magic are inadequate at best. For the sake of curiosity, I will humor you. No, I am unfamiliar with the material. What is it?"

The whole group of monsters below was slowly moving through the salt desert while the conversation went on. Ilea was impressed with the creature's ability to keep so many demons under control.

"I have answered some of your questions, now it's your turn to answer some of mine," she said.

Immediately, a strong force of magic pushed against her mind. It was a brutal assault. Ilea was ready and endured, her healing pulsing through her.

"How Dare You Demand? Mere Spawn!" The demon was shouting again.

"I'm not spawn, and if you don't answer, I'll just fly away, and you won't get anything out of it. Are you not interested in trading information?"

"Trade? You do look unlike spawn. Is that black shell... perhaps a new species?" the demon asked, seeming to have calmed down again.

"I'm not sure what you mean by spawn, actually. So, are you interested in new information? I can tell you about ash... about fire and lightning. Or I can fly away, and you will be left with nothing."

The demon stopped, as did the fifty creatures around it. *"Intriguing. You are a mere being of flesh, with little power of the mind, but your logic is sound. What is it that you desire to know?"*

Ilea rejoiced in her mind. *Finally! Alright...* she thought, quite unsure of what question to ask first.

"Aki, you there?" she whispered. "What should I ask it?"

"I'm here," the dagger replied. "I didn't want to interrupt this miracle from happening. It's like watching two imbeciles figure out fire together."

The demon's eyes snapped to the piece of metal. *"Another artifact, with a mind of its own, or not? Confusing. But interesting..."*

"You could hear it too?" Ilea asked.

"Yes. Very loudly," Aki answered.

"So, will you help me or not?"

"Alright, alright. We need to know where we are and how we can get out. Maybe it knows about the being you saw. Focus on that, and don't get distracted by unnecessary things like you usually do."

Ilea nodded and focused. "Alright, demon, you heard him. Where are we?"

"I do not understand. You are here, human."

"What? No. I mean, what is this place called? Is it part of Elos, or are we somewhere else?"

"This?" The demon motioned around itself. *"I do not know of Elos. This is the Great Salt, or the Great Emptiness, as it is referred to by some."*

"What about the ocean around it?" Ilea asked, receiving a confused gesture from the monster. "The water around the salt?" Still nothing. "The waves. You know..."

She moved Trian in a wavy motion.

"We do not speak of it."

"Alright then. So, the Great Salt... Well, that's not helping. How do we get out? Any idea?"

"Out, yes. You want to leave as well?"

Ilea's mood sank a little at the realization that they might not be the only ones trying to escape.

This might take a while...

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THIRTY-NINE

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Bone Dog

“I might have some info on how your kind get out, but I won’t give it to you just like that. We came here to find someone. They entered right before we did and flew in this general direction,” Ilea said.

Of course, she had no idea how demon summonings actually worked, but she assumed the creature didn’t exactly know either.

“And they came here on their own?” the demon said. “A realm traveler, then... Perhaps they can bring us away from here. It is decided, non-spawn human. You will serve me in this purpose to find the realm traveler.”

It’s taking a few liberties, but nothing too far from the truth...

Ilea looked at Aki. “What do you think?”

“Well, this way, you’ll get help from the thing and whatever group it’s part of. Just make sure it doesn’t realize you have nothing to offer in regard to realm traveling, as it calls it,” the dagger said, and Ilea nodded.

“Sure, we can work together. I’m not going to be following your orders, but we’ll find the thing faster if we work together,” Ilea said to the demon, thinking about the being that had entered the portal. There was a high chance it had long since lost them or veered in another direction during its long flight. She hoped neither had happened.

“Do you have any idea where to start? Are there cities around here or places of power or something?” Ilea asked, not sure she would follow the being into either, should it suggest such a thing.

Considering the demon had actually agreed to work with her, she assumed it wanted out of this place as much as she did. Of course, it would betray Ilea and Trian the first chance it got, but at the moment, she felt

reasonably safe. Should escape be needed, it would be trivial to flee from the slow-moving mind mage.

“Beings wander the salt. There are some places I can think of, but it would be dangerous to go there. I saw you fight, so you will distract whatever creatures there are, and I will check what’s inside.”

“If we switch up the distractions, then I’m fine with it. As you’ve attacked me before, you will distract the first thing we find. And stop using your magic on my friend here, otherwise this partnership ends now and I’ll kill all of you,” Ilea finished, smiling below her horned helmet.

“You threaten me? Hmm... Alright, I agree to your terms.”

The prospect of leaving this place was obviously more compelling than throwing away such an opportunity. Perhaps, given it had seen a being unharmed by its magic, fear drove it as well.

* * *

Ilea was checking through her messages when Trian finally woke up a couple of minutes later. The two were following the mind weaver through the flat environment. Only clouds and nearly white ground were visible in the distance, any glimpse of the ocean long gone.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Breaker lvl 184]

‘ding’ You have defeated....

She skipped through the levels of the demons, noting that some of them had been more than twenty levels above her own, making her proud of the fight.

Though she didn’t want to think of demons armed with armor, specialized weapons, and magical gear. Perhaps the result would have been different in that case. Her armor and gauntlets certainly helped her stay efficient against the various enemies she had fought.

Checking the more interesting notifications, she found quite a few level-ups.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 209: 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 210: 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 204: 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 205: 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 5

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 7

Ilea’s Mental Resistance hadn’t leveled even after the powerful assault, which actually made her even more confident about working with the demon, at least if there was only one of them. The staff wielder they had seen before was nowhere to be found, so she wasn’t entirely certain the demons worked together.

There was, of course, the possibility that the one that vanished couldn’t take another sentient demon with it or had done something completely different, like blowing itself up with a new spell.

Ilea chuckled at the idea and looked down at Trian, having finished checking her messages. “Awake now, sleeping princess?”

He rubbed his eyes as she continued to pour healing mana specifically into his head.

“I’m not a princess. What hap—”

As Ilea let go of him, his wings came to life and lightning formed at his fingertips, ready to strike.

“Chill out, we’re working with them!” Ilea shouted, blinking between the group of demons moving in front of them and Trian.

“What?”

“She struck a deal with the thing,” Aki clarified. “It wants to get out of here as well, it seems. I theorize what we saw the staff wielder do was just that. And the other demons wanted a piece of that.”

“Basically that, yeah,” Ilea said. “Don’t worry, I know it’ll tear us to pieces as soon as it gets the chance, but right now, we should try and work with it. It knows the place and its inhabitants.”

Trian just floated in the air and looked at them a little confused before he sighed.

“What have I gotten myself into...” He looked around. “Well, I agree it’s the best way for us to find a way out, but honestly, this is ridiculous.”

“We’re in a ridiculous situation. Might as well get used to it.” Ilea patted his shoulder, smiling to herself.

“Demon!” Trian called out, making the being stop and the group of horrors around it, their bodies of flesh and bone sloshing to a stop on the salt ground.

“What is it, other human?”

The voice echoed through the surroundings now, no longer only in her head. Ilea wondered how the sound moved. It felt different than normal noise, magical in nature.

“I understand we are to work together to get back to our plane,” Trian said. “I would like to understand some things about you and your kind before we continue. Answer my questions and ask yours, should you have any. If you don’t, this arrangement ends.”

The demon looked at them with its dark abyss-like eyes before it started speaking a full minute later.

“You are aware of our plight, but do not think yourself superior or in control, human. Should you overstep yourself, I won’t hesitate to end you.”

Trian looked toward Ilea, who just shrugged.

“Ask your questions...” it said with a hiss.

“You are sapient. Your goal is to reach another plane. Why?” Trian asked. “We hear legends of demon summonings throughout our lands. What is it you gain?”

Oh, he mentioned the summonings.

The demon made a noise Ilea couldn't quite interpret. Perhaps it was some sort of ethereal chuckle.

“Look around you, human,” it said and gestured, the beings around it sloshing a little further away. “There is nothing but blood and salt in this place. The flesh we eat is of our own. There is nothing but pain and strife... that is reason enough to seek another realm, something all the sapients here learn of early on. Some manage to leave, but we do not know where they go. It may be better or worse, but having lived in this place for two hundred years, I want nothing more than to see something different, to feel... more. The gift of thought, and of mind magic, is a curse to bear in these lands... but it is also an opportunity. You are not meant to have this knowledge, but I have lived too long to care. I want. To get. Away.”

It turned around and continued to move toward their destination.

“That's more than I expected...” Trian said in a quiet voice.

“Seems like a shit place to be in, honestly,” she said as they followed the mind mage.

“What should we call you?” Trian asked the being.

“Names hold power, human, do you not know that? Demon is sufficient, or, if you like, mind weaver. You know of my abilities already.”

“What does it mean about names holding power?” Ilea whispered to Trian.

“Alright, mind weaver it is,” Trian said at full volume. Then, more softly, he added, “I'm not sure regarding the name thing. Never heard anything like it.” He looked at Ilea and shrugged.

“Why don't you ask it?” Aki suggested.

Trian nodded. “What do you mean by ‘names hold power’?”

“That is a question for which I will want an answer of my own,” the demon said. “You will tell me of fire and lightning, as you promised.”

Trian looked at Ilea, and she smiled at him. “They apparently don't have those here...”

“Deal,” Trian said, accepting the proposal.

“Very well,” it said. “I know of more than one skill that, if one possesses sufficient power, can reveal things about a being of which you know the true name. The extent of said knowledge I do not know, but be wary.”

“Interesting... maybe that’s why?” Ilea murmured to Trian. “The Hand doesn’t usually share their names with outsiders, right?”

“Perhaps, yes. But it’s not common knowledge among the nobility. I wasn’t taught as much, at least.”

“Weird. Maybe it’s a monster thing?”

“Could be.”

The group flew on for quite a while, their speed reduced considerably by the demon being carried by one of its minions. It didn’t seem like the beasts had any way of fighting back against the mind weaver’s hold. Trian had explained a lot about lightning and fire to the demon, which had listened carefully, asking questions from time to time.

“Do the spawn not get resistant to your magic?” Ilea asked.

The mind weaver looked toward her. “They know what will happen, should they fight back. And they know that if they follow me, their chances of getting out of here are considerably higher. Even their deteriorated brains understand this.”

Ilea nodded and looked at the monsters. She smiled at the thought of none of them actually being controlled, that it was more of a symbiotic relationship. Somehow it made her feel a little more at ease. Maybe not all of them would slaughter them on command and would flee instead.

In the end, though, it would be better not to find out.

When all the creatures suddenly stopped, Ilea glanced at the mind weaver, which was looking up and toward the distant clouds.

“We have to hide. Now,” the being said, pointing at a large crack in the landscape nearby. All the demons rushed toward it. “Quickly, humans!”

As Ilea flew toward the crack, she tried to follow the demon’s previous gaze. She could make something out between some of the clouds. At first, she thought it was just another cloud, but bits connected to it were moving.

“What the fuck is that?”

“A god of the void. You do not want to gain its attention. Their power is beyond compare. Come now, hide.”

The demon slid into the crevice in the salt stone, followed by Trian. She gave the gargantuan flying creature a last glance.

How strong is that thing, I wonder? Could I fight it?

She decided to trust their local guide for the time being and followed it into the crevice.

They waited for a long while, continuing only when the mind weaver declared the area safe.

Hours of traveling later, the demon came to a halt. They had exchanged knowledge but found it either unable or unwilling to answer some of their questions about its kind, the beasts under its control, and the ocean. Ilea feared the massive body of water enough as it was, and this eldritch demon's unwillingness to talk about it didn't help.

"We have arrived. Can you feel it?" the demon asked, and Ilea and Trian looked out onto the area before them.

It was a large field of salt, utterly unremarkable. There were dunes here and there, some sections seemingly entirely pulverized. Ilea strained her senses and could feel a soft pulse but nothing substantial.

"I can. It's of a magical nature. Is it coming from one of the beings inhabiting the place?" Trian asked.

"Perhaps, yet it is more likely a facility of the Old. A place to start our search."

"I thought you knew this place?"

"I knew of the location, not what lies within. There is a danger and risk to lands claimed by powerful creatures, more so when exploring facilities of the Old."

"The Old? You haven't mentioned those before. Who are they? Another species from here?" Ilea asked.

"According to ancient knowledge, the Old once ruled these lands. There are treasures and runes left behind in their facilities of steel, but so are traps and death," the demon said.

"Are they still around? Like that flying thing we saw?"

"Perhaps. I do not know what they were; I only hear whispers here and there. Masters of steel and runes. Perhaps they found a way to leave these wretched lands."

"The facilities aren't guarded? Other than by traps?" Trian asked.

"Some are, some are not. There is a great risk and great danger, but I have seen how you have healed and resisted. You may survive. The power in these facilities attracts many a being. The pulverized sections you see are from one such creature that has claimed this one."

“Have you ever been inside one of those places?” Ilea asked.

“Yes. Do not try to comprehend the runes, should there be any. It would be... unwise,” it said as one of the monsters under its control started running toward the dunes.

“Trying to lure something out?” Ilea said, more to herself than anyone else. “That demon is below level 200 ...”

Just then, a howl filled the air as a hound-like demon exploded out of one of the salt dunes, smashing one of its four clawed legs down onto the scout demon, crushing it completely.

“What the hell is that?” Trian asked. The monster looked like a greyhound on steroids, its bones growing out of its body to form spikes. Its bloodshot eyes were staring at them.

“Looks hungry,” Ilea said.

“I will distract it while you explore, as we discussed,” the mind weaver said, but Ilea had other plans.

“It seems manageable, actually. Do you want to fight it, Sparky?” she said to her teammate, not wanting to use his name in light of their earlier conversation.

“I’m starting to think you like this place...” Trian answered as the two flew over the allied force of demons and toward the monster.

Ilea just smiled.

“Attack its mind and use your ranged fighters to weaken it. Don’t try anything stupid,” Trian called back to the mind weaver. “If the demon tries anything, we fly up. Doesn’t look like that can fly either,” he added, looking at the dog, which was now sniffing the air.

As they got closer, the demon started loping toward them, its paws crashing into the ground below, throwing up white clouds of salt.

“That dog isn’t even cute...” Ilea murmured.

The monster opened its mouth, which filled with red energy before it was blasted at them, nearly engulfing them. Both Ilea and Trian teleported away, avoiding the attack.

“Bad dog,” she said as she dodged away from the paw strike that followed the blast. When she tried to inspect the creature, it showed two question marks.

A moment later, the beast looked toward the group of demons in the distance and growled. The mind weaver’s mental attack wasn’t going unnoticed, it seemed.

The monster didn't have long to be distracted before both Ilea's and Trian's attacks started landing, which were much more physical and imminent. Ilea's bladed gauntlets cut through the tough muscles on the monster's legs while Trian focused mostly on its head, melting away the beast's eyes before a red beam forced him to dodge again.

Ilea overextended a little with her slashing and was blown away by the sudden and unnatural movement of one of the beast's legs, moving backward against its supposed joints. Blood burst out of her mouth as her veil was pushed into her chest, denting her armor inward and blowing her ribs into her internal organs. Her healing kicked in immediately.

She blinked backward twice and saw the beast was still advancing on her, already at the first blink's position. Ilea moved upward, carried by her wings and teleportation as more lightning cascaded onto the monster's back.

Set on its target, the monster ignored both Trian and the mind demon, then jumped, trying to intercept the flying morsel. Ilea's sphere told her exactly when to move as she blinked down. She appeared right below the beast's maw and used her heavy gauntlets to deliver a punch to its throat.

A bone suddenly extended out of the dog's neck and shot straight into Ilea's defenses. It tore past her veil and armor, sending Ilea spiraling through the air, unbalanced by the force of the attack.

What the fucking hell, what is this thing...?

She blinked away from another beam of energy it sent her way, but the monster wasn't being slowed by Trian's or the mind weaver's attacks as it continued to barrel toward her, its body opening up in some places to reveal even more teeth and spiked bones.

"You ugly fuck," Ilea said as she engaged it again. This time, she didn't use any gauntlets but rather her traditional fighting style, unable to determine if cutting or blunt damage would be effective against this monstrosity.

Blinking on top of the beast, she released a kick with her destructive mana into the beast while her recovery finished taking care of her internal bleeding.

A set of tentacles rushed out of the beast's shoulder, making her dodge downward and to the right. With every movement, she threw punches and kicks at its body.

She continued dodging, dancing around the creature and delivering a multitude of punches and kicks as she evaded bones and grabbed arms of flesh shooting toward her.

Let's see who tires first...

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FORTY

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Relics

The ranged attacks from her allies slowly proved their effectiveness as the monster started to show actual wounds and burns.

Then, with a howl, the beast activated some sort of skill, its movement speed increasing drastically and catching Ilea by surprise. It turned around, doing a roll with its whole mass. Ilea blinked away as far as she could but was still caught in the path of moving flesh and bone. The impact flung her into the salt ground before the weight of the beast followed so quickly as to prevent her from blinking away.

Jagged teeth and whipping tentacles tried to grind down her defenses as she screamed and punched back, the mana leaving her body before it burned into the monster's flesh. Her ashen defenses were breached and the impacts rocked through her body, the damaged juggernaut armor barely holding on. Summoning her bladed gauntlets, she cut through several tentacles and made enough space to roll out from under the monster, blinking out of her predicament a moment later.

Damn that was close...

Ilea was surprised her armor hadn't fallen apart entirely by now. The chest piece was hardly holding together, and deep furrows, scratches, holes, and dents were visible on the entire set.

I'm going to need a replacement.

She slammed a fist against her armored chest, and the veil of ash appeared around her again, healing mana flowing through her. The monster slowly climbed out of the crater of pulverized salt it had created with its skill before moving toward Ilea in a frenzy.

She didn't blink away and instead answered with a hard punch of her own, and their combined momentum created an explosion of force that shredded the beast's flesh and Ilea's arm and shoulder.

The damage healed quickly as the beast continued to push against Ilea with its full weight. Spikes of bone and sharpened limbs rammed against her defenses as she hit back with all she had, while the somewhat friendly demon and Trian continued to bombard the creature from a distance.

Ilea's heels pushed into the salt ground, weighed down by the unrelenting attacks. She blinked away right before her veil was broken.

The beast slowed its assault, not following her immediately but instead breathing hard as it locked eyes with her. Ilea just smiled. Every second the monster gave her was another second spent with meditation. Every second gave her another strike she would eventually deliver. She tightened her fists and grinned.

Come on, then.

Their stare-down didn't last long. Ilea wasn't even sure it counted as such, considering their differing numbers of eyes. Lightning rained from above and into the monster's exposed back, which was now covered by less and less protective bone. Blood pooled on the ground below, bringing a scent of death to the area as Ilea advanced again, tired of waiting.

Her next hit landed on the creature's front leg. In response, its body changed its form, flesh shifting and bones rearranging, although much of its flesh had melted, so the transformation was hard to watch. Worst of all was the sound of bones moving around inside the massive monster.

Now that's just disgusting.

Ilea continued punching as more and more of her mana pulsed into the beast, her power near its maximum as she attacked with perfect efficiency, recovering her mana whenever possible with meditation and Azarinth Reversal, weaving in and out of the shifting monster's reach and attacks, moving fast and slowing down when she was able.

Still not dead.

The monster's attacks were getting slower and weaker while Ilea's increased in both power and number. More and more of its flesh was burning, set alight by streaks of lightning from above.

Ilea dodged another spike of bone before she delivered her next punch. She was moving her wings to fly back when she saw the creature twirl, serrated bone blades digging into the salt stone, just barely missing her.

A bright beam of lightning flashed up and burned into the creature's flank, and it screeched as bone plating formed to block the assault.

Ilea flew in again at full speed, an olvor gauntlet appearing before she slammed her entire weight into the defense, cracking the bone plating so the lightning beam could burst into the writhing flesh, some residual sparks clinging to her armor. When she blinked past the creature, she saw an explosion in her sphere, blood and flesh splattering against the white stone, some even reaching her veil and wings.

For once, she wasn't especially bothered, turning around as her ash rid itself of the gore. She glanced at the pile of steaming, burnt flesh in front of her before she waved and nodded to her flying teammate.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Abomination of Despair – lvl 330]. For defeating an enemy one hundred and twenty levels or more above your own, bonus experience is granted.

'ding' Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 211 – 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Body of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 13

No further messages appeared.

Suppose I need even more dangerous monsters to fight. The downside of having teammates, she thought. Though I suppose I may not have been able to win at all without their help.

"That one took a beating," Trian said as he landed next to her.

"Yeah. I need more firepower," Ilea said, looking at her fists while the demon horde approached, the mind weaver at the front.

"Would you... claim this prize?" the demon asked.

"The corpse? Do with it what you like," Ilea said and shrugged toward Trian, who nodded back.

"Not a necromancer, so these bones are useless to me," he said.

A moment later, the demons, including the mind weaver, fell on the corpse like a starved swarm of piranhas, cutting and slashing through the monstrosity with a fervor Ilea had seldom seen.

“We’ll go and check out what that thing was looking for or guarding. Join us when you’re done,” she said to the demon, feeling an affirmative pulse from his mind magic a moment later.

Trian followed as she flew upward, checking the area.

There’s nothing here...

Trian moved past her toward a patch of ground between some dents in the salt.

“You found something?” she asked, landing beside him on the hard salt rock.

“There’s something below us... Can you see anything with your skill?”

“What is it?”

“The magical pulse... it’s strange. Like a low hum, unlike anything I’ve felt before.”

“Sounds promising...”

Ilea summoned her olvor gauntlets and lifted them high. A loud boom echoed over the salt plains when her fists landed on the rock, creating cracks and sending large chunks of salt skyward. Ilea continued to pound the ground for ten minutes until—

“I can see something!”

Trian moved closer immediately, shielding himself from the flying rocks with his hands, some of them striking his helmet and making him flinch.

“What is it? Describe it to me,” he said, moving even closer to Ilea, who was still digging like a madwoman.

“It’s like the top of a diamond, or some other geometrical form... one I don’t remember the name of. Can’t look past it sadly...”

A few minutes later, the two were standing inside a new crater, looking at the shiny gray metal before them. Just the top of the near diamond-shaped structure below was exposed. All of it was entirely made of a metal that looked like steel – unpolished but also unblemished, neither from the salt stone, nor from Ilea’s violent excavation.

“This doesn’t look like salt,” Ilea said.

“Or anything those monsters could create... Are they still eating?” Trian looked toward the demonic group while Ilea inched her hand closer to the metal.

Just before she touched it, Trian appeared beside her and grabbed her arm. “Don’t touch it.”

“Why? Because *you* want to touch it?” Ilea asked.

“Precisely,” Trian said with a wink, removing one of his gauntlets before putting his hand on the metal. Mana flowed, and his eyes opened wide a second later.

“It’s... responding... Is it a creatu—”

Trian was interrupted by a cracking noise from below. Both Ilea and Trian teleported upward and flew even higher as the sound grew louder and louder. At first, they could only hear cracks upon cracks, but soon they were visible all over the ground below them.

A rhythmic sound soon took over, bangs coming every other second before the salt rock below them fell into the spinning metal shredder they had apparently unleashed.

“Yeah, sure, let’s touch it,” she muttered.

A minute later, the spinning stopped, and the massive diamond-shaped object was floating inside the hole it had created. It was at least forty meters high and twenty across.

“That was cool,” Ilea said as she started floating toward it.

“Wait, don’t go closer!” Trian shouted. “Don’t offend it!”

“Offend a fucking geometrical object...?” Ilea asked, drawing closer before she touched the object as well.

Even after pushing some of her mana inside, as she would with random enchantments, the object didn’t move.

“I think we’re safe here,” she called as she flew down, seeing an opening in the metal below.

Trian floated down, a little more hesitantly than her, and joined Ilea right next to the entrance. It was in the shape of a triangle.

“Whoever built this, they like their shapes,” she said as she stepped inside onto the metal floor, her wings dissipating into flakes of ash. She was prepared for a response, but nothing happened.

A magical light of sorts cast the corridor before them in a dim orange-red light. As they walked on, the corridor opened up to the right before looping back toward the middle. The two intruders looked around with wide eyes as they reached a central room.

The walls inside, made entirely of steel, were almost fully covered in deeply engraved runes neither of them had ever seen before. Some of them lit up here and there, likely the reason the object was managing to float in the crater it had created.

“What the hell is this...” Trian whispered.

“It’s pretty...” Ilea said after a while, floating into the open space with the help of her wings. Touching the runes did nothing. “If only Claire was here. Aki, anything?”

“Nah, these don’t ring a bell,” the dagger responded.

“I’m not the worst at runes,” Trian said. “Just don’t have the Class for it. Maybe I can figure something out. I think we should stay here for a while and try to learn more about this thing. Otherwise, who knows how long we’ll be stuck in that salt desert again.”

Ilea agreed wholeheartedly. “Yeah, that sounds great. You try to figure something out, I’ll go hunting and exploring a bit.”

“Are you sure? That monster looked to be quite close to killing you. If you’re on your own...”

Trian gave her a pointed look before turning to a rune and sketching it.

“Precisely. That’s why I want to go.”

She smiled at Trian’s chuckle as she went back to the doorway. She flew out and upward to be greeted by the mind weaver.

“A marvelous find. I had hoped for an abandoned facility, but an entrance gate might be even better... if it is open,” the demon said, speaking into her mind again.

“So you know how to use it?” Ilea asked. “Then come on down.”

* * *

“This rune here is speculated to be drawing energy. This one as well, while these four expel it in some way,” the mind weaver explained to Trian, who was listening intently and writing down all he could get out of the demon.

Ilea was sitting near the control room’s entrance, her armored legs dangling into the space below. Her juggernaut armor was still just about holding together, though it wouldn’t last another fight like the last one. Coupled with her veil, her defenses would at least remain somewhat effective. She was eating a celebratory meal from Keyla, their find completely warranting the indulgence.

The entrance gate had turned out not to be open, but neither Trian nor the mind weaver planned to give up so easily.

I can still eat demons if I run out of food. Probably taste worse than Drakes though...

She looked at the beautifully crafted meal before her. A combination of raw meat, cream, and crumble dessert. Both spicy and sweet, but somehow, Keyla had made it work.

Maybe she just has the skills, and whatever shit she puts together will be delicious...

Her thought was interrupted by the crackling of lightning.

"There was a reaction, definitely," Trian said, shaking his arm.

"*There was, but it's not the right energy,*" the demon said, its voice trembling in Ilea's mind.

Is it excited or what? she thought before continuing her meal.

The two mages continued to try things, and Ilea had to heal Trian occasionally because whatever they were doing to the runes was apparently quite dangerous. Enough, perhaps, to kill a weaker adventurer. She absently noted that the mind weaver hadn't brought its platoon of horrors down into the structure.

Now's the time to kill it...

She smirked at the thought. The demon didn't seem like much of a threat to her anymore. True, it had managed to knock out Trian with a surprise attack, but even he should be able to resist it if he was prepared. Or so she hoped.

Again, she was glad to have leveled all those resistances. Her veil had become a near constant partner as well, always at the ready.

Hours passed, but Ilea didn't feel like going outside again just in case something did occur down here. The two mages had gotten continuously more nervous and excited, learning more about the runes with their testing.

"You think that will work?" Trian asked, and the demon nearly shook before answering.

"Yes... Yes I'm Sure Of It... Try!"

It had returned to shouting a while ago, but Trian didn't seem to mind. Ilea just tanked through it while reading another book from her collection.

I hope the others are fine... she thought. *The Hand will probably stop the demons, but that massive thing at the end?* She wasn't sure about that one. *Though the Elder might've actually done it, who knows.*

"Ilea, we need you here!" Trian shouted, and she made her book vanish, getting up and flying toward the two crazed scholars. "Hold on tight and

heal me. Can you shroud us in ash or something too?”

Ilea moved to stand behind him, their armors touching as she wrapped her arms around his chest in something akin to the Heimlich maneuver before her healing started.

“You too, demon. I don’t think this works if you’re far away or turned to dust,” Trian said.

Sharing hobbies is a good way to make friends... Ilea thought as her wings came to life and wrapped around the two people before her. Ash came to life around them, building crude walls that might protect them from whatever was to come.

“Are you ready?” Trian asked, healing mana flowing through all of them before lightning crackled and struck four distinct points in the structure.

The feedback was as quick as the lightning. Organ-sizzling energy flowed through them at a constant pulse, increasing in power as Trian upped his output. Ilea’s healing fought against the damage, but if nothing happened soon, she wasn’t sure the demon would make it. She and Trian were still mostly fine – in fact, she wasn’t bothered by the damage in the least.

“Come on, *more!*” Trian shouted, a massive pulse of red lightning leaving him as demons burst into the room. They must have broken through the mind weaver’s control in the hope of being part of an event that might take them somewhere else, Ilea thought.

She saw the first of them enter the energy field and burst into white-hot flame as light filled her eyes. Dozens of colors floated in front of her before they vanished, replaced by dull gray metal.

As her sight returned, she saw two heavily burned individuals before her. She blinked between them and reached out a hand to each, healing both. One was Trian. The other was a demon that hadn’t come out of the field quite as well, and its torched and smoking corpse filled the room with its stench as it collapsed.

Trian started coughing a minute later as Ilea took in their surroundings.

One thing was for sure. They weren’t in the same place anymore.

FORTY-ONE

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Chambers of the Lost

“Is he going to make it?” Trian asked Ilea, who was still healing the demon.

“He?” she asked, glad the tattered black robe had made it through.

“I think so, despite the lack of reproductive organs.”

“Did I need to know that?”

“Yes,” he answered with a smile.

A moment later, the demon started moving again. A pulse of mind magic flashed through them, images of blood, violence, and pain quite prevalent.

“I think he’s fine now. Hey, Weavy, wake up,” Ilea said, lightly slapping the mind weaver, conscious of her high Strength.

“Have we made it? Made it beyond?” the demon asked, the elation in his voice quite unlike anything they had heard from him before.

“Dunno. We’re definitely in a different place, but the metal looks quite similar to the diamond thing we were just in,” Ilea said, looking toward the opening in the room. Her sphere only told her that this structure was bigger than the one they’d been in before.

“The runes in this room are similar as well... so whatever this is, it’s for spatial travel?” Trian asked, carefully touching some of the runes. “If we could recreate this...”

“Well, I hope you sketched down all the runes in the other place,” Ilea said, walking toward the exit. Stopping, she sighed. “Don’t tell me you want to record all of these as well...”

Of course he will.

“Ilea, this goes beyond demons summoned to the Haven, or even the Hand, entirely. If we could recreate this... well, I don’t know how far we’ve traveled, but even for medium distances, it would revolutionize trade.” He paused. “And warfare. The possibilities are... staggering.” He started to sketch. “If only the runes didn’t hurt so much to look at...”

“I’ll go check out the place while you finish the drawing.”

The mages didn’t respond to her, entirely captivated by the runes in the room. They were now even more obsessed – as they knew what the magic could do.

What if it just moves you fifty meters away? Could still be useful, I suppose. He’s not wrong to be interested. Possibly something similar to what Felicia, Edwin, and Aliana used in that Taleen dungeon.

Ilea left the room and found herself in a massive open space, clad in dark gray metal.

The floor was even, but the walls went up at different angles, creating a more triangular shape. On the ceiling and some of the walls were magical orange-red lights that provided dim illumination.

An empty warehouse? Or some kind of event hall?

She was wary of traps, checking her surroundings with her sphere and ready to teleport if anything happened. But the tapping of her steps was the only noise in the complex. Ilea looked around, lost in an alien facility.

What could build something like this? she asked herself, admiring the architecture and sheer scale of the whole thing. *Did they just choose triangular shapes for style?*

She wondered if this place was underground, or if they had entered a distant facility somewhere on the salt plains. Her eyes opened wide at the thought of them being underwater.

Please no. Meditation flowed through her as she calmed herself down. *No. There’s steel everywhere.* She didn’t want to even consider possible traps involving the ocean outside.

Ilea wandered on without any traps obviously activating, checking out different rooms and halls and finding all sorts of weird machinery and items she didn’t know what to do with. Her identify skill only spat out strange names that helped her just as much as simply looking at the objects. But she did find one thing that seemed more straightforward.

[Mana Crystal 50/50 – High Quality]

She refrained from pushing mana into any of the items before Trian and the demon had had a look. She could try things out, but she had no clue when it came to runes, and things here seemed quite a bit more advanced than what she was used to. She didn't want to consider what would've happened if she'd been the one to operate the diamond structure.

Maybe if it's healing mana... she thought, but still didn't try anything. It would've been different had the items looked interesting in the least, but they were just more weird metal shapes covered in runes, surely to fulfill some great purpose like making the best smoothies in the galaxy.

Instead, Ilea just put everything movable into her necklace, planning to give it all to the others as soon as she went back.

"Less walking for everyone..." she murmured while sketching out her path.

"This place is impressive," Aki said, causing Ilea's buffs to come to life as soon as the voice reached her ears.

"Don't fucking do that out of nowhere," she said, releasing her auras again.

"You're jumpy today. Everything alright?"

"Yeah, stranded in yet another place I don't know shit about, and this time it's demons and a steel-obsessed civilization. I bet we're underground as well... because why wouldn't we be?" she said, walking to the next room and continuing her pillaging.

"I'm glad you were the one to find me. This place is fascinating."

Ilea smiled, checking her surroundings and finding nothing but old metal and herself.

No traps, no enemies... what is this place? And why is nobody home?

She returned the way she had come.

* * *

Ilea started reading soon after her return as the mages finished documenting all the runes. She shared the items she had found with them, half-listening in on their evaluations, book in hand. But after they had been staring at a runed rod for over half an hour, she had to intervene.

"Come on, just activate it," Ilea said.

Trian seemed to be losing his patience as well, not as interested in studying the runes of a likely more mundane tool compared to the teleportation device itself. He grabbed the rod from the demon floating next to him and pushed his mana into the item. The top started glowing immediately and produced heat.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, handing it to the demon.

“Smithing tool, maybe?” Aki suggested as the demon put the glowing end on his arm.

A scream followed.

The obvious result didn’t surprise Ilea. She walked over, took the rod from the demon, and made it vanish before she healed his injury without any words. The demon didn’t even look embarrassed, but she certainly hoped it felt that way.

“Fascinating,” the mind weaver spoke, already moving on to the next item.

Ilea sighed, unsure if her role here was explorer and assistant or caretaker.

The testing continued as the mages tried out different items left behind by whoever had built or used the place. Once that was done, the group started walking the halls, adding various enchanted items to their collection. There were still plenty of places left unsearched.

Most of the facility looked similar, and without Ilea’s sketches, she doubted finding the teleportation room again would have been a simple task. Quite a few of the halls were absolutely massive.

“Why build everything so large?” Trian asked after they entered another empty hall.

“Maybe they’re massive people?” Ilea suggested.

“The Old Ones are no longer here. That is what some of my brethren believe,” the mind weaver said.

Ilea smiled, noting that his initial insistence on trading information had entirely gone.

“Maybe they left and took everything valuable with them,” Trian said. “Would also explain the strange nature of the tools we’ve found. None of them seem particularly useful.”

“Or we don’t really understand their purpose,” Ilea said.

“It’s possible. Whoever built this place obviously had tremendous magical capabilities. Metal magic, to be sure, but the scope of this place is

ludicrous. With this much power, why not build a few massive halls just to test things, or to live in?”

“I just wonder what they were, or are. Weavy, you said Old Ones? Any idea what they look like? If they’re even people? Or some magical creatures?”

The mind weaver looked her way for a moment with its dark eyesockets, likely processing the increasing use of his nickname. “No. I’m afraid I have not learned more than the legends. Ancient rulers... or even gods.”

“I wouldn’t even question that, seeing this place,” Trian said.

“I mean powerful, sure, but what really constitutes a god?” Ilea asked.

“You already said it. Power,” Trian said as they walked on.

The entire place had the same flair and was built with the same metal. No other materials could be found anywhere except for the embedded magical lights made of a glass-type material, glowing dark orange.

Ilea could see into the walls with her sphere but found only metal. There were small mechanical details inside the lamps, but dismantling one revealed just a mana crystal and nothing otherwise substantial, according to Trian. It was a lamp, after all.

The wonders of science...

Ilea went back to reading her book as she walked.

* * *

“Are you sure?” Trian asked.

They were standing in front of a round structure comparable to a large table. Runes were carved into it, and the demon had apparently found the control panel for whatever it may be. The room was not particularly large by the Old Ones’ standards, but it was still huge compared to most rooms. About the size of a dining hall and empty, save for the table thing.

“Just activate it,” Ilea said. “We’ve been walking around for hours. I want something to happen. Even if it’s a trap.”

Trian walked over to the mind weaver and used his magic to activate the runes. He winced, and Ilea blinked next to him and healed him while he continued to push lightning inside. The runes on the table lit up with the same orange-red light before a holographic map formed over the table.

“Oh wow, that’s cool, a hologram. Hold it, Trian. I’ll draw it,” Ilea said, summoning her notebook and moving her leg against his to keep the connection for her healing spell.

“It... hurts...” Trian said through gritted teeth.

“Perfect, you can level your Pain Tolerance. Now I’m jealous – this is actually useful for you,” Ilea said drily as she started drawing. “Trust me, the second stage is worth it.”

“You h... have the second s... stage?” Trian opened his eyes wide but focused on the runes. Ilea didn’t respond and kept merrily sketching, glad he didn’t stop until she was done.

“Alright, I tried to make it as 2D as possible. Here’s the first floor, here’s the second, and here’s the third,” Ilea said as Trian released his connection to the table. “I think we’re supposed to be here...” she added, pointing to a dot she had painted that had been blinking when the map was still holographic.

“2D? Holograms? Are you secretly interested in rune magic?” Trian asked, wringing his hands where the runes had injured him.

“It’s light magic, I think. I learned about some things from this crazy old teacher in our *village*,” she answered, winking at him.

“Right,” Trian murmured. “It’s interesting that we can access the map at all.”

“Your lightning. I believe it is the key,” Weavy said.

“The interaction with runes is different than just using straight mana, I agree,” Trian said. “But usually, it just destroys enchantments or explodes in my hands.”

“Guess the stuff here is better made,” Ilea suggested.

“But light magic... just to show a map. It seems pretty advanced. I’ve never come across anything like it. So, where should we go? There’s several bigger halls, but it’s hard to say how large the whole facility is.”

“We haven’t come across anything so far, so I doubt there are traps or enemies. There could be some waiting, but if I’m at the front, I’ll be fine from nearly all surprise attacks that would take me out immediately,” Ilea said.

Trian understood and nodded, looking at the demon and then at Ilea. “We should speed up.”

“He could climb on your back?” she suggested, laughing as his expression turned sour. “It’s safer. He’d die if I carry him and get engulfed

in flames or something,” she argued, watching Trian’s expression turn into one of pained resignation.

“Hey, demon, how fast can you run... or float?” Trian asked. The speed they had traveled together before had been less than thrilling, at least to the two mercenaries.

“I’m fast, humans.”

“Show me,” Ilea said, gesturing for the demon to start.

The mind weaver turned around and sped through the corridor they had come from. Ilea looked at Trian a couple of seconds later. The demon was *not* fast.

Trian avoided her gaze and just gulped. “Alright, alright, I’ll carry him. Do you have some more clothes at least? He’s covered in blood...”

Ilea smiled at his answer and summoned some dwarven clothes she still had in her necklace. “You’re wearing armor, it’s not like he’s touching you. Not that it should bother you in the first place.”

“You’re enjoying this,” Trian said as he walked to the returning demon, throwing the clothes at him. “Get those on. Ask her if you need help. I’ll carry you.”

Trian walked into the corridor, leaving Ilea with the mind weaver. The demon looked at Trian and then at the bundle of clothes in his clawed hands. Finally, he looked up at Ilea.

“How can you look like a confused puppy with those terrifying features?” she said and smiled, walking toward the demon and taking the clothes. It took a while to get them on without damaging them badly. There were too many claws and massive teeth.

“There you go. You look much more sophisticated now, but I think a robe or something would be better. Larger than yours.” Looking up at the demon’s face, she furrowed her brow. “Maybe a full plate helmet as well.” She smiled brightly.

She had some dwarven helmets left, but it wasn’t like anybody here would mind the demon’s terrifying visage. She decided that should the mind weaver get out with them, he would get a helmet from her. Otherwise, he would be killed in mere days.

If he decided to not attack them after they got out.

When the mind weaver and Ilea joined Trian in the corridor, he grudgingly let the demon get on his back, both of them visibly uncomfortable.

Proud, powerful men.

* * *

When they reached another large hall, Trian slowed and pointed to one of the faraway walls, where a massive alignment of metal shapes was hovering. When the shapes stopped moving, a pulse of orange-red energy shot out from the opposite wall, straight into the alignment and away into a dark void that opened up behind it.

“What’s happening?” Ilea asked.

“Either that’s something that happens periodically, maybe in reaction to our intrusion, or someone else is fucking with things,” Trian said. “Can you tell where that beam went?”

Ilea opened her notebook and looked through the sketches, finding the place that was most likely the destination of the beam of light if it continued in a straight line.

“Yeah, should be the central hall of the middle floor. Or past that.”

“We have a goal then. Hold on, demon, and I swear if you try anything stupid, you’re fried meat.”

“Our agreement stands. We all want to leave,” Weavy said. “There is no need for threats.”

“You’re acting like you didn’t instantly try to kill us when we met,” Ilea said.

“A mere... misunderstanding,” Weavy said, shrugging slightly.

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FORTY-TWO

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Flashy Beams

The flight to the central chamber proved to be longer than expected. The Old Ones didn't build to accommodate the small or slow. Perhaps it wasn't an issue for them, considering the teleportation devices they must've built.

Ilea had the theory that they were simply loners and wanted to be as far away as possible from others of their race without completely giving up the comfort of socialization and perhaps a market or something.

They saw more energy pulses as they flew toward the center of the facility, all of the beams going in the same direction.

"Be prepared," Trian said as he slowed down, letting go of the demon before they entered the next expansive hall. Less the size of a warehouse and more the size of a stadium. A rhombus-shaped steel object floated in the center of the room, hundreds of meters in the air, with other metal objects hovering around it.

Beams of blinding red light entered the object from six different openings in the distant walls of the hall, pulsing with continuous energy. Another pulse followed, flowing past in the next moment.

"What was that?" Trian asked as the three floated in the air.

Ilea turned when she saw a beast approaching through her sphere. A lone humanoid demon, with bone spears for hands and jagged tusks jutting from its too-wide mouth, was rushing her way, followed by a few dozen more, all running in from different directions. Mace-handed bipedal beasts, spike-backed quadrupeds, and even a terrifying winged worm. Some appeared out of thin air, others rushed through the hall's large entrances.

Ilea prepared to fight but soon found them running past her, leaping, flying, or using movement abilities to reach something in the room's center.

"Should we follow?" Trian asked.

Ilea smiled. "Sure. Let's find out what this is about."

She and Trian sped forward, quickly overtaking the nearby running or flying monsters. Another pulse rushed out from the center. Ilea could see a few steel platforms now, right below the floating rhombus.

Is that lightning?

She couldn't quite tell with the bright beams flowing into the shape above.

"There's someone near the center. Is that a demon? Weavy, do you recognize it?" she asked, then realized that the mind weaver had fallen behind and couldn't even hear the question.

The largest of the platforms sat directly below the rhombus, sticking out of the metal floor. It was large enough to fit the entirety of Riverwatch's arena. Metal protrusions extended upward from it, covered in runes. They all appeared to bend slightly toward the center of the platform where there was a gap, perhaps for a person to stand.

Control consoles? And the demons are going toward them? Do they think this is some teleportation spell to get them away?

Getting closer, Ilea's eyes opened a little wider. There was someone there, and he wasn't alone.

The two landed before a man who was now surrounded by a plethora of monsters, some demons but most a variety of other beasts. She recognized some from her studies. Ilea glanced at Trian and then at the man before them, whose face was a mask of surprise and confusion but still familiar.

[Mage – lvl ??]

"Elder Strand," Trian said. "So, you were the one to open the rifts and summon the demons?"

"Ah, yes, you are the noble of House Alymie. And you... the battle healer," Adam Strand said, the monsters nearby spreading out to encircle the two warriors. He walked to one side, away from the metal pillars, likely to avoid damaging the mechanisms governing the laser show in the room. His robe was armored and definitely magical, but he wore no helmet.

“Why have you followed me? Only doom waits in this place.” He frowned as the beasts and demons circled Ilea and Trian, who stood their ground.

“Why are you here? Why summon those demons to the Hand and Ravenhall?” Trian asked.

Ilea was slightly confused. The thing she had seen enter the rift looked quite different from the man before them now.

He’s controlling the monsters, but it doesn’t seem like the demons running in here are his creatures.

The Elder sighed. “I don’t think you would understand. The demon invasion will be a test for the Hand. An opportunity to grow, for every last member. I did not intend for anyone else to come here.” He trailed off and stopped walking. “We do not have to fight.”

“After what you’ve done?” Ilea asked, shaking her head slightly. “Dozens of Shadows will have died.”

He sighed. “I know.” He took a deep breath as he extended his magic. “Leave now, or there will be two more.”

“You regret it? Then why?”

He shook his head. “This conversation is over.”

“That doesn’t cut it,” she said, grinding her teeth.

No explanation, no reasoning. All of that death – for what?

Trian and Ilea were now completely surrounded while the mind weaver floated a couple of dozen meters behind, still ignored by the Elder.

Trian glanced at Ilea. She looked back and gave him a slight nod.

“We’re not going anywhere,” Trian said.

Strand raised his head and closed his eyes, then opened them again.

“Reckless and young. If only the majority of members consisted of people like you.” He smiled and looked up. “I cannot, will not, give up now. Come then, warriors, and meet your end.”

And I will beat the answers out of you, Ilea thought as her spells came to life, feeling Trian’s lightning crackle next to her.

The air around the Elder exploded with motion, and Strand disappeared from view as several monsters launched ranged attacks. Ash surged outward as Ilea appeared next to one of the ranged beasts, a wolf-like creature with a curved beak covered in roots.

Trian appeared above them, dodging more attacks as Ilea punched the wolf creature. It absorbed the blow and went for her with its beak. She

ducked it and delivered an uppercut before ending the beast with a kick to its unprotected stomach, blood spurting from its mouth as it collapsed.

Ilea darted into the air, not wanting to be surprised by the lurking Elder. She knew the animals and monsters were a mere distraction. Her bow came into her hand as she aimed, moving her head a little to the side as a massive snake launched a blob of acid at her. She released the heavy metal arrow, which punched through a cat-like monster's head as if it were made of paper mache.

***'ding' You have learned the General skill: Heavy Archery – lvl 1
You have proven capable with a heavy bow, hitting your targets with
destructive precision. This skill will improve your capability, making the
bow just a little easier to handle, its impact just a little higher.***

Ilea ignored the message as her perception of the weapon in her hand changed. The massive string moved back to her ear with unprecedented ease, the next arrow striking a moving bear in its broad chest. It fell to its knees, the spear-like arrow protruding from its back, black blood cascading from its maw.

Where are you? she thought as lightning struck a group of worm monsters that had tried to protect their ranged brethren harrying Trian.

She perceived the Elder below her with her sphere – he was climbing through the air at an incredible speed, his movements as quick as her ability to fly. As she had suspected, his form was now that of the creature she had seen entering the tear.

She waited until the last moment and blinked away, her bow vanishing into its bracelet as she locked eyes with the man-turned-monster. Strand's facial features were distorted, his blue eyes smaller and more piercing. His skin had taken on a grayish hue, his body larger and covered in muscle, and his hands ended in shiny claws long enough to pierce through her neck.

The Elder's nose had vanished, his mouth now filled with rows of teeth as he stood on a platform of shimmering air below his powerful clawed feet, webbing visible between the toes as he rushed her.

Ilea braced herself, holding her breath as the Elder approached.

He reached her and his clawed hands slashed out. She dodged three strikes in quick succession, trying to find an opening, while her own attacks were dodged or blocked just as expertly by the summoner. Before she was

pushed back, Ilea changed her style to one a little less focused on defense, willing to take a couple of hits to land one of her own.

Strand's claw cut through her veil, slamming onto her armored shoulder. Ilea managed to get in a punch with her offensive spells, but the Elder didn't even flinch, driving another claw into her less well-protected elbow, the sharp edge cutting through and drawing blood. Three more strikes nearly ripped off her arm and another two cut into her stomach before she managed to disengage and start healing.

Another scuffle forced her to teleport away, coughing blood, with even more bits of her armor gone, her veil utterly shredded. She looked at the Elder, who was standing in the air with his arms raised.

She blinked next to the man and swung a fist into his side, making him slide away in the air before turning back toward her, seemingly uninjured.

He raised his eyebrows and touched his side.

"Healing intrusion. Ilea, was it? I see you've improved your offensive potential." His tone was neutral.

A quick glance around her told Ilea that Trian and the mind weaver were working hard to decimate the horde of monsters below, most unable to fly like they could. She focused on healing for the time being.

"Why did you summon the demons?" Ilea asked to stall for time, watching Strand circle around.

The Elder didn't respond, instead rushing at her again. Ilea met him, his clawed hand ramming into her just as a bladed gauntlet sliced across his chest. The blade didn't manage to get through his tough hide even though she'd scored a direct hit, while her own chest was cut open by his magically enhanced claws.

She managed to avoid the follow-up strikes before a kick sent her spinning through the air. Ilea blinked away from a flurry of ranged attacks from below. When she regained her bearings, Strand was gone. Looking for her teammates, she saw the Elder was closing in on Trian.

"Trian!" Ilea shouted before she blinked and followed Strand.

Trian spotted the attack just in time and teleported away. He then built a curtain of lightning around himself and engaged the half-man half-beast.

Ilea summoned her heavy gauntlets as she continued to heal her wounds, flying down in an arc toward the group of monsters that had been engaged with the lightning mage a moment ago. She fell from the sky like a

hammer and crashed into the biggest of the summoned creatures, its blood and guts spraying outward and blinding some of the other crazed demons.

Next, ash whipped into existence around her. Ilea weaved in and out of the cloud, appearing and disappearing with her heavy weapons, breaking legs and skulls. The seventh creature died just as she spotted Strand approaching through her sphere. Her knees tensed as her fist shot upward inside her ash cloud, her olvor gauntlet intercepting his outstretched claws.

His hand cut through her defenses, but it was slowed enough for her to angle her head to avoid most of the force while her other fist collided with his abdomen. Air and ash were pushed to the side from the power of the impact, causing Ilea to skid back several meters.

More beasts lunged at her, but she weaved through them, her gauntlets vanishing to increase her speed as she attacked the monsters, trying to use their bodies to avoid the Elder's attacks. Two wolves circled around to flank her as he advanced and an eagle-type demon flew in from behind to block her retreat, forcing Ilea to blink away or be caught by Strand's claws. She found his control incredibly efficient, maneuvering through the monsters as he timed his attacks.

She flew up and away. Only the Elder followed. Spells of fire and wind cast by the monsters rippled past her as she turned to face him.

As their fight continued, her opponent grew increasingly calculated and began to anticipate more and more of her reckless attacks, leaving Ilea with nothing other than backing up further and trying to defend against his unending onslaught. She started to notice her Form of Ember growing stronger; the Elder's attacks were no longer leaving deep wounds, her healing pushing against his continued attacks.

Thunder rang out. The Elder glanced backward, and there was an annoyed look in his eyes before he flew toward his minions. Ilea pursued, seeing a bloodied Trian raining lightning on the Elder's mob. She couldn't make out the mind weaver but hoped he hadn't been killed in the chaos.

Strand landed in the middle of his summoned creatures, clapping his hands together while some of the monsters formed a circle around him. Trian didn't stop his assault, pulverizing some of the beasts below. There were still dozens left.

Ilea made her way toward the wounded noble. A large chunk of his armor was missing. Her own was not in much better shape.

Before Ilea reached Trian, a pulse of energy ripped from Strand's body. At the same moment, Trian roared and released a bolt of lightning into the circle of monsters. Yet there was no impact – the lightning had stopped in mid-air.

Ilea looked left to see a being of pure lightning floating above the Elder. It was roughly humanoid and hurt her eyes to look upon it. Its body pulsed with blue energy before it extended its hands toward them.

Trian grunted and charged up another attack.

Blue lightning shot from what Ilea thought must be an elemental. She blinked to intercept the blast at the last possible moment, interposing herself in front of Trian. The attack pushed into her veil, vaporizing her densest ash and breaking through after only a second.

Her teeth clenched as her healing spell and resistances worked against the lightning coursing through her, pushing her backward through the air.

Ilea controlled her fall and landed on one knee, her burned body already healing from the inside, her organs rebuilding. She opened her eyelids, her freshly regenerated eyes looking up at the Elder, who was once again in his human form.

Strand was glancing over the platform's edge as demonic screeches filled the air, much closer now. Then he looked at Ilea and Trian, shaking his head before he moved over to the controls embedded in the steel.

Suddenly Trian hit the ground next to her, his fall far less intentional. She reached out to heal him.

Fucker isn't even facing us.

FORTY-THREE

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Horde Mode?

“Are you alright?” Ilea asked Trian, her own health topped up again by her superior self-healing spell. Trian would take a while longer to recover.

She watched the summoned creatures group up near the Elder, screeches from below now audible as the first monsters not under his control reached the platform. Strand glared at them as he stood at the controls, his summoned beings fighting off the monsters coming in.

“I’m... fine,” Trian murmured, touching his armor, which was missing a large section near his right shoulder and chest.

Ilea glanced back to see a few demons scaling the edges of the platform. She spread her wings before she pulled Trian up into the air.

“What should we do? Any idea what that blue thing is?” she asked him as they flew, watching the demons clash with the Elder’s summons.

“That looks like a minor lightning elemental,” Aki responded.

“It completely counters Trian,” Ilea said.

Trian replaced his damaged chest piece with another, this one red and white instead of the Shadow’s black.

She heard Strand curse as more demons joined the fray, his creatures swarming to his defense as he fiddled with the controls. Ilea summoned her bow, nocking an explosive arrow and drawing the string back to her ear before she let go. The spear traveled at high speed and right toward the center of the group before a blast of lightning cut its flight short, the explosion rocking the ground.

They dodged aside as a flying demon rushed past them, screeching as it descended toward the platform.

Ilea drew another arrow as she continued healing Trian, locking eyes with the Elder for a split second before his lightning elemental touched the control panel. A strange pulse rushed past them as another set of beams of orange-red light flowed into the middle of the room. The beams collided and created a blinding flash, and both Ilea and Trian had to hold their arms in front of their faces.

“What was that?” Ilea asked as her eyes adjusted.

“I think he finished whatever he came to do here,” Aki said.

The Elder was gone, and with him, all of his summoned monsters, including most of the demons that had made it onto the platform in time.

Finished what he came to do? He looked more panicked than anything.

The huge hall echoed with the screeches of the hundred demons that remained, chaos erupting all around them.

“We should get out of here,” Trian said, his wings of lightning burning bright.

* * *

Ilea and Trian were resting in one of the side rooms of the hall, both nearly spent on mana and stamina. Ilea was looking up at the metal ceiling when she heard a thud on the large metal door, which was now a little dented. She was unconcerned. Using her sphere, she could see that two demons on the verge of killing each other were the reason for the commotion.

“What was his goal here?” she wondered aloud. “He caused so much chaos and death. What for?”

Trian shook his head.

“This place holds strange and advanced technology. Perhaps he wanted to find it, bring it back?” Aki suggested.

“And in doing so, summon demons into the Haven?” Trian asked. “Why not prepare everyone in that case? He could’ve had the support of the entire Hand if that was the goal.”

“He didn’t seem confident either when he used the panel at the end,” Ilea said. “At least it looked that way to me.”

“Maybe we pushed him more than we thought,” Trian said.

Did he hold back? He got through my armor like it was wet tissue. She shook her head. Kept alive by my healing once again. But I have to do more

than just stay alive. I've finally found a place I like, with a group of people I feel comfortable with... and now this. I need to be stronger.

"We will get out of here," Trian said, meeting her eyes.

She closed her eyes and sighed.

Right. You're not alone in this.

Cracking her neck, she opened her eyes and looked at him. "We will."

"The platform teleported him away. Maybe we can use it too."

"We do have your lightning." She stood up, her mana full again. "Ready to join the chaos?"

He grinned back at her and cracked his neck. "I'd be more comfortable with the full team, but we'll make do."

Ilea stopped Trian just before they teleported back into the hall, feeling a throb in her head and seeing a mind weaver pass within her sphere, just beyond the door.

"Mind weaver, and it's not the one we know," she whispered. "Prepare yourself. I don't want to carry you again."

Trian scoffed but nodded.

"It's gone. Let's check what's happening," she said and teleported out, Trian appearing next to her in the next moment.

The light in the hall had dimmed now that the bright beams were no longer powering whatever device the Elder had activated.

There were hundreds of demons remaining, far more than she had seen before. She had expected to find chaos, but instead she found herself watching pockets of demons fight each other in almost coordinated efforts.

"There's more than one of them," Trian whispered, pointing to the distant floating forms of the mind weavers. Each one was controlling a group of demons.

"They're slaughtering each other," Ilea murmured.

"Let's keep our distance, let them battle each other before they decide to take us out."

Ilea's eyes widened when one of the mind weavers turned toward them and pointed, its group of demons immediately rushing their way.

"There goes your plan," she said. "We fight – and flee if they cooperate and overwhelm us."

"Works for me," Trian said as his lightning crackled.

They dove into the oncoming charge, their skills flaring and demon bodies breaking with every move.

Ilea reveled in her skills, her strength, and the rush of adrenaline and power that flowed through her while she appeared and disappeared. Her fists destroyed tissue and bone as she dodged enemy attacks with the smallest possible movements, the claws and teeth scratching her veil or armor before she delivered her destructive magical payload or used her gauntlets to cut and mangle.

The demon variants were no longer an unknown to her, and she evaded their wild attacks more easily now. The mind magic pushing into her was just a distraction. Unlike Weavy, this one didn't even talk back. She blinked close to it and stopped the magic with three fast punches before she smashed its skull into the metal ground, killing the creature and releasing the demons around her back into the already chaotic hall.

She only had a moment to breathe before more mind magic slammed into her. She gritted her teeth and turned to look for the next mind weaver.

"You're getting better at this," Aki said. "Almost reminds me of..."

Ilea didn't comment, focused only on her fighting as she blinked, punched, and kicked. She didn't know how long she fought but at some point, the demons stopped coming.

Littered around them were the splattered corpses of demons, some parts still moving. The stench was mostly of blood, but in a day or two, it would become something different altogether.

Ilea rolled her shoulders and tried to clean what was left of her armor with ash, wiping blood away. Not all of it was hers.

Her attempts at cleaning worked to an extent, but mostly she just smeared the blood around.

Trian fell on his ass nearby. "I could use a drink," he muttered, picking burnt bits of demon off his newly replaced armor.

"After we get out of here," Ilea said as she picked herself up and started toward the platform.

FORTY-FOUR

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Into the Light

‘ding’ You have defeated [Bone Whirlwind – lvl 205]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Thrasher – lvl 189]

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 212 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 213 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 206 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 207 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 208 – 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Body of the First Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches 2nd lvl 1

Passive: Hunter’s Sight – 2nd lvl 1

Your eyes are unmatched, and so is your nose. Perceive the smallest irregularities in your surroundings to find clues about your prey’s whereabouts.

2nd stage: Through experience, you can feel your prey’s general state of distress.

Category: Body Enhancement

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 13

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 7

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 4

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 7

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 8

‘ding’ Heavy Archery reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Heavy Archery reaches lvl 3

Ilea looked through the corpses to see if any of the demons wore anything valuable or interesting while Trian checked out the runed control panel in the middle of the hall.

Ilea activated her buffs when she saw something a little unexpected, a mind weaver hiding below a pile of demon corpses.

“I can see you, demon, come out or die,” she said. Trian glanced toward her but continued his tinkering.

The demon moved immediately but was obviously stuck under the corpses, its strength not enough to move the massive pile of flesh even in

the slightest.

“*It’s Me!*” it shouted into her mind, Ilea’s eye twitching at the sudden assault of mind magic.

“Why not just say that immediately instead of staying hidden, you dunce,” she said, grabbing the first corpse and flinging it away. The body landed with a thud on the metal ground, its innards and blood splattering the gray with red.

Ten seconds later, the demon was lying before her, looking at her with his lack of eyes. Ilea could feel a little distress in the mind weaver as he looked at her, and she offered her hand to help him up.

He took it.

“Don’t use your mind magic to shout at me like that, I’ve told you before. It’s like me just randomly punching you. I can start doing that if you like.”

The demon held out his clawed hands to soothe her. “No, no. I don’t think I’m as resilient to physical damage as you are to my magic,” the monster said, floating a little above the corpses around him.

They moved back up to the platform, where the demon joined Trian, the two immediately sharing their thoughts on the runes and their respective functions.

Ilea was glad to get away from the stench below, despite the fact that she had reduced her sense of smell within her sphere. It wasn’t pleasant.

She sat down and looked upon the field of death.

We did this, she thought after a while, looking at the carnage before she glanced down at her hands. *Both me and Trian. We fought an entire demon horde and won.*

They hadn’t been able to take down Adam Strand, or even stop him, and she knew there were monsters out there that she wasn’t ready to face. Elves, demons, Taleen machines. But she was making progress. *I just hope the others survived.*

A flash of light and a sharp crackling noise brought her out of her thoughts.

“Ilea! You might want to see this!” Trian shouted.

“Progress already?” she asked, her tone a little on the sarcastic side.

Trian didn’t answer but showed her as lightning flowed into specific runes, a holographic image coming to life above the control panel.

The image flowed between sceneries. There were deserts, rocks, water, fire, snow, and many more, changing quickly one after the other.

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"We think these are places we can go to," Trian said.

Ilea raised her eyebrows as she saw occasional glimpses of different civilizations. They were more enticing than the massive and terrifying creatures she saw as well, one of them seemingly looking right back at her.

She took a step back at the sight of the eldritch creature, shuddering from the glimpse.

"Are you alright? I can't make it slow down. This rune here is supposed to be responsible for targeting, but I have no idea how to do that. At least, we think it does that..." Trian explained, the last part not inciting confidence in Ilea.

"Dagger, got any ideas?" he asked.

"It's Aki, and no. Just because I'm old doesn't mean I know anything about this place or demon runes," the dagger said.

"Not our kind, something else, the Old Ones... Different in many ways," the demon beamed into their minds.

"Just think of something real hard? Like Viscera, maybe?" Ilea asked.

Trian shrugged, activating the runes again. This time there were more glimpses of cities and underground halls, but nothing looked quite like the city they'd come to know.

"So, thinking does have an influence," she murmured.

"Seems like it," Trian said. He grew quiet and looked at her for a long moment.

"What is it?"

"I mean... I don't know what this device does... and how it can show us so many places, but maybe..."

She opened her eyes wide. *Maybe it can get me back to Earth.*

Her gut reaction told her the truth. She recoiled at the idea. She had wings now! And she had friends that she had fought with. People she could help if she returned.

A part of her considered it, but she knew how she felt. And even rationally, there wasn't a lot to think about. Give up her life as a member of the Shadow's Hand? Being an adventurer in a fantastical land, with places she could explore, finding ancient ruins and fighting monsters? No. She had tasted this new life of hers, and she wouldn't go back for anything.

“We have a team to get back to,” she said, meeting Trian’s eyes.

He looked back and raised his eyebrows, then smiled. “We do.”

“Can I try?” Ilea asked. She had the beginnings of an idea.

“I don’t think you can activate the rune.”

“Well, you keep it activated and I’ll just touch it. I think I can at least let some mana seep into it.”

She pushed her mana into the rune. Cities appeared again, and a glimpse of what looked like Earth made her release her spell and refocus.

The possibility was there. Whatever this device was, it had the power to take her back home, or to a place that looked just like it. If it really worked, that was.

Still doesn’t answer how I got to Elos in the first place, or why.

She smiled at the thought of appearing in her gym once more with her veil and wings of ash. But the feeling faded quickly. She had made her decision.

Her mind focused first on Ravenhall and Viscera, the images changing quickly from one to the other. She tried Riverwatch and Dawntree, bringing the same result. Ilea even focused on the Taleen dungeon that Felicia, Edwin, and Aliana had left through some teleportation device. Still the same.

Then she thought of her home on the cliffside.

The images snapped to a stop. It showed her living room.

Her eyes widened. *Just where my third-tier Blink would bring me...*

She’d hoped that whatever linked her ability to the location would help guide the device, but she was surprised it had actually *worked*.

“Hold on, demon, this might be our way out,” she murmured. The mind weaver grabbed her arm.

“What is that place?” Trian asked.

“Elos,” Ilea said and smiled wide. “My home.”

Trian was still using his lightning to push into the runes. As he did so, he touched her as well.

“Are you sure?”

“Send it,” Ilea said.

His lightning surged into another set of runes as bright orange-red beams of light shot out into the hall, coalescing in the floating rhombus above.

Ilea gritted her teeth as she healed herself and Weavy from the lightning damage her teammate was causing.

A big mana pulse came from the machine after a few minutes had passed, and nothingness took them.

* * *

Kyrian watched as the little girl finished her latest masterwork, his thoughts on the possibilities should she reach higher and higher levels of her skills. There was something entrancing about her skill usage. Even now, he assumed she would rival the best nobles of her age with her output. Her barrier was able to stop a surprising amount of force.

“Cless, are you ready for dinner?” he asked. The girl looked up at him and nodded. She jumped off her small chair and walked toward the stairs, leaving Kyrian looking at the painting. It had a strange feel about it, depicting a few vaguely humanoid shapes flying in a wasteland of white rock. Just the latest of many that now decorated the walls behind the dwarven weapons displayed in the cellar.

Ilea wouldn't mind that he'd put them up, he was sure.

Fairly sure.

“Where are you?” he asked into the silent room and shook his head, walking upstairs to join the girl. He didn't want to accept the thought that they had died in Ravenhall.

Cless was sniffing at the cooking food as always, squealing with delight at the smell. Something she had in common with their unknowing host. Ilea had left plenty of food behind, enough to feed half a town. Plus, they were far enough out from Ravenhall to ensure the girl's safety – and his own, for that matter.

Kyrian grabbed a chunk of meat and walked outside and closer to the cave nearby. Its residents had at first been ignored as a nod to Ilea, but as the weeks had passed, it turned out to be the right decision. The monster cat didn't just warn them of demons, it actively hunted some of them down.

He placed the chunk of meat at the mouth of the cave, and soon the Swordmouth Tiger appeared, looking first at Kyrian and then at the meat. He waited for the animal for a while, but as usual, it wouldn't come closer, simply staring at him with its blue eyes.

Kyrian knew it would take time for it to trust him. But he found comfort in knowing it was there. Perhaps it felt the same. He left the cave and went to eat with Cless.

"I'm happy I don't have to go to school anymore. Mrs. Johnson doesn't like me," the girl said.

Kyrian smiled. He wondered where the girl was from. Somewhere far away, that much was sure. Same as Ilea.

"Eat or it'll get cold, Cless," Kyrian answered, his armor clinking when it touched one of the glasses on the table. Cless looked at it and frowned.

"Don't you have nice clothes?" she asked, for the tenth time already in the past weeks.

"You know I have to wear this. I promise I'll get something nice after everything is over." He smiled at her and continued eating. Twenty minutes later, he got up.

"Do I have to hide again?" the girl asked, pouting.

"You can paint more, no?" he said, but he found the answer unsatisfying after giving it so many times. "Look, Cless, this isn't forever, okay? We'll find a solution at some point. A safe place where you can stay. Or you can work on your skills and get stronger. Until you can match me, it's too dangerous out there for you."

Cless was smart. She'd understand. He knew she didn't like it, and the only thing that kept her entertained enough not to go out and explore was the copious amount of books upstairs.

Why did I even come here of all places? We should've gone north instead.

It had seemed safer, what with thousands of demons going toward Morhill. But now he had all of them between this place and the Plains.

"We'll do something as soon as Ilea is back, okay?" He'd found that mentioning the name made the girl light up. She nodded and waved, walking down into the cellar.

She's dead. And so are the others.

He shook his head. He wouldn't accept it. Couldn't. Not after his journey to the south, after he had opened up. They had taught him so much.

He took a deep breath. *But I should at least leave this place, find a way to Lys. With Cless.*

Kyrian stood there and sighed. He had been doing that a lot lately. His helmet appeared from his armor storage device – an item from the

enchantress Ilea had introduced him to.

He prepared himself for battle and walked outside, closing the door behind him as metal spheres started floating around him. It wasn't easy without the team. He had gotten used to their support.

Two spheres landed in his hands and two more formed chunks around his legs before they started pulling him upward. He felt his face grow serious as he flew up at a high speed; it was a little faster now every day.

Checking the surroundings of the house, especially the area above it, Kyrian found it deserted, as it was most days – but he had to make sure.

“Alright, let's go,” he said, trying to emulate Ilea and Trian, who never seemed to doubt themselves when rushing into battle. It did help a little.

The screams could be heard in the distance as he left the forest. Not human screams. Flying over the next snowy hill, he found his first targets. A group of demons just shy of level 200, eating a dead horse and what remained of a human.

He focused on the demons as some of the metal spheres around him formed into small needles, others into bigger spikes. Mana flowed into them as the curse concentrated. Two needles sneaked around the distracted group of monsters and started carving into the snow below.

A moment later, Kyrian set the storm loose. The demons looked up and screeched when the curse took hold, followed by metal needles and spikes crashing into their bodies, shredding them amid the multitude of sharp flying objects.

It took only a few seconds before the last of them fell without even knowing what had attacked. Kyrian looked at what was left of the body of the woman, seeing deep claw marks. He steeled himself and sent down spikes of metal, one through her head and one through her heart. He assumed too little of her body remained for her to turn into a demon, but he had to make sure.

Continuing onward, Kyrian took care of all the smaller groups of demons he found, even some stragglers that were completely alone. The larger ones were a bit more difficult, but with his skill set, it was only a matter of time before they fell. He had to hide several times when flying demons or groups too big for him to handle appeared. The mind mages were the most dangerous of the lot, but he had trained his resistance against Eve. They were crude compared to her. Powerful, but easily avoided. And

their flight was slow. Mind weavers. He'd learned the name after he had killed his first.

They had hidden well when the demons first appeared in Eregar's Haven, not showing themselves even after it had been declared clear. Kyrian knew he could resist one of them at least, but some were stronger than others. Eve, and the resistance he had built up to her magic, were the only reason he was still alive. He wondered where she was.

The latest group of demons passed, running toward the east, and Kyrian moved out from behind the trees, flying at a low altitude until he came up on the hills overlooking Ravenhall. The fires were still burning. It was quiet as he looked toward the broken gates and the mind weaver standing on the walls, looking out at the outside world with its black pits.

He gritted his teeth, hearing screeches from beyond the walls. No corpses remained on the road leading out of the city, but the snow and dirt were colored red.

FORTY-FIVE

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Ripples

“What do you think?” Maria asked, looking over the battlefield. Edwin didn’t respond, as he was prone to do, crouching down next to one of the dead demons and moving it around to see its face.

“The Hand couldn’t stop them,” Maria commented. She had gained some weight again after being released, having forgotten how good meat and wine tasted.

“The timing is good,” Edwin said as he got up. “They’re getting closer to Virilya by the day.”

“Are you sure about this? They will be on high alert in there.”

“Yes, for demons,” he replied, walking ahead of Maria back to their hideout nearby, where Aliana was likely cooking already.

There were a lot of people on his list – and on Maria’s.

War is brewing in the north, and now the Hand has fallen. Things are looking up.

* * *

A set of her runes were activated in the distance, blazing explosions cutting through the running demons. Not enough to stop them, Claire knew, but certainly enough to damage them.

“Miss, they’re circling around. We’d better go back,” the old adventurer next to her suggested.

“Stand where you are,” she commanded and turned around, seeing the creatures of horror moving through the trees. If she knew anything about them, it was that they wouldn’t ignore a direct target if no mind weaver was nearby to control them. There had been no onslaught of mental magic so far, so she was relatively sure about her plan.

Claire focused as she ignored the adventurers shivering next to her, some because of the freezing cold, some out of fear. Their strength was inadequate at best to face what was lurking in the trees before them, but their resolve in choosing to leave the safety of the town was commendable. Claire’s magic wasn’t well-suited for use inside the stone walls of Vihall, her old home, but out here? Out here, she was in control.

Screeches sounded from the trees before her as she took three steps toward them.

“Stand fast, and you shall prevail,” she said, holding out her hand and focusing on the tree line.

A moment later, the monsters broke through. She saw gray flesh hanging from bones, beasts made of muscle and sinew. Different yet similar to each other. One of the adventurers next to her started screaming, but Claire ignored him, waiting for the last moment to activate her magic.

A wall of light formed before her as a big chunk of mana left her body. The monsters crashed into the line of light and Claire closed her eyes, an explosion rocking through the ground before them. Five seconds later, she opened her eyes and saw blood dripping down her barrier. She let it fade, guts and flesh falling to the ground.

Some of the demons were still moving but were quickly taken care of by the adventurers not entirely frozen with fear. The respect for the Shadow’s Hand had won her quite a bit of power and influence – enough to get them ready. Word would reach them soon that the Hand itself had been responsible for the summoning, but Claire wasn’t too worried about the peasants and low-ranking nobility in the area.

They had killed thousands of the monsters, but it hadn’t been enough. Their forces had splintered and retreated to save their own lives before saving a lost city in the southern mountains of Lys. But Claire knew humans. She knew that reason and fact wouldn’t prevail against fear and anger. The demons stemmed from Ravenhall, and someone within had summoned them. If blame fell on anyone, it was the Shadow’s Hand.

The way back was quiet, and the others only started to whisper when the walls came into view. It was a nice town and Claire smiled at the memories she had of the place. Winter painted the stone walls in an especially beautiful way, the thick forests around giving it a magical feel.

The gates opened when the guards on duty saw the group approach. Claire still had work to do today, preparing more runed plates to use in the next fight. Luckily, the city council had offered to provide her with materials. After seeing her use them, there had been even more support.

“My lady! You have returned safely. Was the hunt successful?” the captain of the small city guard said.

“Don’t address me in such a way, Mack,” she scoffed, frowning under her hood.

“Ah come on, Clairry, for old time’s sake,” he smiled, but she ignored him and walked onward.

The captain followed behind. He was a level 80 warrior, one of the highest ranks in the whole town.

“Lord Felt wanted to meet as soon as you arrived,” he said. “The defensive reinforcements you requested have been finished, and the food inventory has been completed. You already have the list of people living here. We’re also gathering water in the tanks you requested to be built. Are we awaiting a siege?”

“We have to be prepared for anything. The demons will come, one way or another. Others will see an opportunity as well, especially with the refugees from the west. Don’t let anybody in for now. Only adventurers are to leave – and only for good reason,” she explained as they walked up toward the center of the town, where Lord Felt had positioned his guard and all the logistics upon Claire’s request.

“What if they want to flee? I’ve already arrested two.”

“Then they’re of no help to us. Let them go, but do so discreetly. We don’t want morale to sink further than it already has,” Claire answered, smiling with grim satisfaction.

Killing demons was frightening, but management and logistics? *That* she could face easily.

* * *

“Miss Russel. You have returned. How many this time?” Lord Felt asked.

Lord Felt was a mage in the low hundreds in level and early forties in age, at least looks-wise. His hair was thinning slightly, though he hid it meticulously with styling and combing. Claire looked at his fancy leather armor with all its unnecessary embroidery.

His eyes were focused on her, waiting for her answer.

“Forty-six, all smaller variants, but more will come. Let us hope the villages and towns nearby have heeded our warnings,” Claire replied, walking to the repurposed inn’s central table, on which was a massive map of the southwestern region of Lys.

People were bustling around the room, but many glanced at her and stopped to hear the conversation between their Lord and the member of the Hand who had suddenly appeared a few weeks prior, followed by the monstrosities now present in their lands.

“Some have come to join us, but far too few,” the Lord said from the opposite end of the table.

“Vihall isn’t the most fortified place around, so there’s hope for more people surviving. The first step is lasting through the winter. Food is more important right now. Are the hunters still out?”

The noble nodded. “They are. Are you sure the beasts also kill animals?”

“Yes, I saw it many times on my way here. And they turn into demons as well.”

Lord Felt took a sharp breath and nodded. He at least tried to keep his fear in check around the townsfolk.

Claire was glad he had remained. She was sure that many minor lords of the south had long since fled to the capital or one of the larger cities.

A servant handed her a sheaf of parchments, the promised inventory.

“If that is all, I’ll go and tend to my runes, my Lord,” she said to excuse herself, careful to use his title as previously discussed.

He nodded and locked eyes with her.

Claire had no desire to gain any permanent power over the town, and the Lord’s insecurity and fear had helped immensely in convincing him to listen to her advice. Claire was more or less in control, just not officially. Not a bad thing considering the superior education she had received on topics that were now highly relevant.

With her notes and the stacks of paper she had received, she made her way through the town, receiving some nods and fearful looks from the townspeople.

Reaching a small dilapidated house, Claire entered quietly. She put the stacks of paper on the small table in the kitchen and walked around, opening the windows to let some air inside.

“I’m home!” she called. Coming to the master bedroom, she knocked and entered.

Her mother was sitting hunched over in a chair next to the bed, her hands in her lap. Claire got a pillow from the bed and put it behind her mother’s back before fetching a second chair and sitting down in front of her.

“Hello, Leia. It’s me, Claire. Today I went out with some adventurers to fight monsters and I got the inventory from Mack so I can start planning for the next couple months and sorting the provisions for the families...”

Claire continued to tell her mother about her day and then some. Despite the lack of reaction, she did so every day. She had felt guilty for leaving her home to go to the Hand, but she already had more power and money to protect and care for her mother than ever before. She could even help protect the entire town.

After a while, Claire sighed and got up before kissing her mother on her forehead. Then she went back out to the kitchen and sat down at the table. There was a lot of work to do.

* * *

“Hey, look at this one!” one of the men shouted.

Eve was listening intently to their conversations. She couldn’t see his face, but only one eye was visible under his helmet.

“Oh yeah, that one will be valued a little higher. Take her to the wagons. Leave the rest,” another man said. This one was in possession of both his eyes but seemed to have a constant squint.

“Shouldn’t we burn the others? Won’t they turn into demons otherwise?” One-Eye asked.

Both were wearing full plate armor – the only reason Eve hadn’t slit their throats yet.

“We’ll be long gone, let them sow some more chaos,” said Squinty.

Eve could see the other man didn’t agree. Even scum like them showed contempt for creating more demons. Still, his professionalism won over as he dragged the woman to the wagons. Eve followed in silence, ignoring all the dying, injured, and freezing.

Ilea would already be running in there.

She smiled at the thought, then shook her head ever so slightly. She had her badge, had her armor. Another disguise added after months spent laying low. Already she had stayed too long, grown too attached.

They’re dead, like the others. This life is not for them. Steel your mind, and focus on why you are here.

“Did you hear that?” one of the other men asked.

A hum filled the air around them before the first of the men hit the snowy ground, bleeding from his neck.

Four more fell before one of them managed to break out of the trance of Eve’s spell. He shouted about them being under attack and tried unsuccessfully to break some of the others out of her influence by yelling at them and shaking them. Five more of them died while he did so. Luckily, the well-armored One-Eye and Squinty were among them, eyes stabbed through their visors.

Three men remained, each having at least some ability to defend against her magic. Not surprising, considering the quality of their wagons and gear, let alone their training. Eve had stalked them for three days and found it hard to approach.

She’d had to wait for them to find some prey – to get into range while their attention was divided. With the Elven attacks in the west and the demons coming from the southeast, it would be a perfect season for their business. Luckily for her, it was rare to find someone near her level who would join a band like this one. Not here in Lys.

Eve revealed herself, slowly approaching the three remaining men. They took up defensive positions, activating their skills and magic. Her hum rose in intensity – she didn’t care for subtlety anymore.

They were already dazed, and when she pushed even harder, Eve found she already had an opening. She dodged the first man’s blade and stuck her dagger into his face. He was dead in an instant, falling into the snow.

“Who are you? I’m sure we can negotiate!” one of them shouted.

Several of her clones greeted him. She didn't answer but simply approached the last two men. One of them turned tail and ran. Eve threw one of her blades, the weapon piercing the man's leg right at the knee. He tried pulling the dagger out, but black veins were already forming around the wound and he was dying moments later, gurgling in pain.

"What the fuck... Come on, girl, I'm sure there's something I can give you! What about the location of our base? Or gold, I can give you gold!" the man shouted.

Eve stopped and just watched him as he spilled everything he knew. Of course, she doubted he was telling the truth, but he would die nonetheless. Free, possibly good, information wasn't something she would let go.

The man soon stopped babbling when he didn't detect a change in her behavior. His face became even more pale than before.

"You're... not gonna stop, are ya?" he stammered.

"No. No I'm not gonna," Eve answered, imitating his accent.

She walked closer, dodging the man's last desperate strike with his sword, her fingers hitting hard into his windpipe. She watched him grab at his neck, unable to breathe, right before she stabbed her dagger into and through his head.

The people who had been found and robbed by the slavers were still sitting in the same place, their hands and feet bound. Some of them looked up at Eve as she approached, noting her black armor and smiling mask.

She grabbed one of the swords from the dead and threw it toward them. "Help yourselves. It will be a cold night."

* * *

Sitting inside an overfilled inn in her leather armor and mask, Eve looked at the man sitting opposite her. He was professionally unremarkable. Not notably short or tall, fat or thin, and his age was hard to gauge. His hair was black. Neither of them touched the drinks sitting on the dark wooden table between them.

"I have two requests that would match what you're looking for," the man said after a while. "Though I wouldn't recommend pursuing this any further, whoever you are."

He handed Eve a letter, and she placed a gold coin in his gloved hand before getting up and leaving the inn.

She walked to the next side street and jumped up onto the roof of the inn before making herself comfortable. She opened the letter and read its contents. Then she smiled and burned the paper with a small magical lighter.

“Finally,” she whispered.

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FORTY-SIX

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Return

“That’s why you have to work on your attack and defense skills as well. I’ve explained that to you four times now, Cless. Please try to understand,” Kyrian said, his food cooling in front of him.

Handling animals is much easier than taking care of children.

“But why do I have to fight monsters?” Cless asked again, causing Kyrian more mental stress than facing several mind weavers at once.

A sudden distortion in the midst of the living room made Kyrian jump up. All his metal spheres floated from his quiver as his helmet appeared and he threw himself in front of Cless, who had already activated her shield.

Complains all the time, but I suppose some things have stuck in that stubborn head of hers.

He slowly moved back whilst staying focused on the spatial anomaly before him. It was like a tear in the air, but fluid and wavy like water. He could see glimpses of a place filled with metal and the corpses of demons before the anomaly winked out of existence.

Kyrian was starting to relax again when another fissure suddenly appeared and three figures fell out of it. He launched his spikes of metal at them, but then stopped them shy of their bodies as he realized who it was.

The fissure vanished again, taking a piece of both the floor and ceiling with it. Two of the figures were still lying on the ground, both of them coughing.

“Fuck, my floor!” Ilea exclaimed before she puked right into the gap of missing wood. Trian managed to keep it together and simply continued lying on the ground.

“It’s you... It’s really you!” Kyrian exclaimed as Cless ran past him, stopping short of Ilea and wrinkling her nose. She smelled of blood and vomit.

“One of the demons followed you!” he exclaimed, finally taking in the third figure. Spikes of metal surrounded the abominable creature, and the only reason he didn’t kill it immediately was because Cless was nearby.

Ilea stood in front of the creature and coughed. “It’s fine.”

“Fine? It’s a mind weaver...” he said, unsure if the creature had somehow taken over her mind.

The monster’s hesitant body language made him pause. It looked weaker than some of the ones he had fought before, and Ilea was far more resilient to mind magic than he was himself.

“No killing that one, at least not yet. Weavy helped us out in the Great Salt,” Ilea said. “I suppose I won’t have to think about rationing food anymore either,” she added and ruffled Cless’ hair. “Good to see you alive.”

“I knew you would come back!” the girl exclaimed.

Ilea walked past Kyrian and sat down at the table. Six steaming meals appeared before her.

Kyrian knew he wouldn’t get much more out of Ilea for a while, so he decided to go help his more reasonable teammate whilst keeping an eye on the demon.

For some reason, the mind weaver had knelt down, touching the wood as it murmured to itself. Kyrian checked to see if it was carving runes but there was nothing there, and he felt no magic coming from it.

“Trian, you’re back! What happened?” he asked, but the noble held one finger in the air to stop him. He retched and then swallowed again.

“Ahh, better now. Ilea I want some of that food as well. Do you have something alcoholic?” he asked, completely ignoring Kyrian and walking over to the table.

“Don’t move, demon,” Kyrian said, watching the creature on the floor.

“*This Is... This Is Another Realm!*” the monster’s voice boomed as it touched the wooden ground to its face. At first, Kyrian thought that the voice in his head was an attack, but then he realized it had only sounded happy, nearly hysterical even.

“What are you doing? Stop that!” he shouted at the demon licking and biting the wooden floor. He looked around. Both his teammates were

eating, and the demon was apparently making love to the floorboards. “This is insane, and everyone’s ignoring me... I give up.”

He walked over to the table, defeated.

“Welcome to our strange new reality, pal,” an unknown voice exclaimed.

Kyrian glanced around, confused, unable to locate the speaker.

“Down here. Ilea’s belt.”

Kyrian looked down to find that the source of the noise appeared to be the sheathed dagger Ilea always carried around.

“Yeah, right here. You’re dreaming right now. Wake up,” it said.

The world spun, and Kyrian felt himself lose balance. He sat down heavily on a chair. Next, he grabbed one of the dozens of plates of food before Ilea and Trian and started eating.

If I’m finally going insane, might as well do it on a full stomach.

* * *

“The demon’s not getting up,” Trian said, holding his stomach as he looked over at Ilea, who was still eating. “I think he’s hurt... I think I’m hurt,” he added.

Ilea finished her plate and looked at him. “I was healing you guys through the whole teleportation process.” She thought both of them were fine for now. Touching Trian, she found a bit of burn damage remained, which she quickly healed before walking over to the demon.

“I’m glad you like the wood but calm the fuck down, you’re freaking everyone out.” She grabbed him and walked back to the table while carrying and healing the monster. Cless squealed in fright at the sight and hid behind Kyrian.

“Do you eat human food?” Ilea asked. “Well, let’s find out. You’re in my house, so you eat. That will be a rule, I think.” She slid a plate in front of the demon.

Weavy touched it hesitantly. There was a moment’s pause, then the demon put some of it into his mouth, chewed for two seconds, then started shoveling faster.

“So, he does eat human food. That’s good. Better than eating human flesh, I suppose,” she said as she started eating again.

When she felt the nausea gone, Ilea refocused, her eyes coming to settle on Kyrian.

“Why are you here in my house?”

“I’m not dreaming?” Kyrian asked.

“You’re not. What happened in the Haven after we left? And where are Claire and Eve?”

“There were demons all over the place. We cleared the Haven while demons rampaged through Ravenhall above. I went to get Cless and fled. I thought you would come here, if you were alive.”

There were demons above as well...

“I don’t know if Eve and Claire made it out. There were many Shadows who survived and left, but it was chaotic,” Kyrian added.

Ilea sighed and smiled, glad that he and Cless were safe at least. “We’ll go look for them when we’re ready to leave.”

“Who was that voice before? You heard it as well, right?”

“That’s my stupid dagger, Aki. Aki, you know Kyrian. Kyrian, Aki.”

She unsheathed the blade and put it next to Kyrian, who just looked at it.

“Hello,” the dagger said.

Kyrian looked at the dagger and nodded. “Hello,” he said, then he stood up. “I think I need some fresh air.”

Aki laughed as Cless took Kyrian’s place and looked at the dagger. She turned it around, holding the blade instead of the hilt.

“Hey, girl, don’t do that. Ilea, this child is handling a dangerous weapon,” Aki hissed.

Cless apologized and held the dagger normally.

“The only danger you pose is to everyone’s nerves,” Ilea said, taking Aki back from Cless and putting him back into his sheath.

“He reminds me of someone,” Trian said, drinking from a cup of tea before he sighed.

Ilea smiled just a little as she relaxed in her chair. She knew there was work to do, but she could allow herself to relax – at least for a moment.

“We made it back,” she murmured.

And I’ll need a wood mage or something to fix my floor. Or maybe I’ll leave it. A reminder of our safe return.

* * *

“It was Adam Strand? I don’t understand,” Kyrian murmured.

“We don’t know why he did it. He didn’t seem happy about it either,” Ilea said.

“Not that that changes his actions,” Trian said.

“It doesn’t,” Ilea added.

“So, what do we do?” Kyrian asked.

Ilea looked at Trian, but she found everyone looking at her.

“Really?” she asked, realizing that even Weavy was looking her way.

“Claire isn’t here,” Kyrian said, as if that explained everything.

“Well. Ravenhall is taken. I don’t think us four is enough to clear it, if the numbers you’ve been throwing around are true. Knowing that killed humans turn into demons changes things. It means this could endanger more cities.”

“Not just more cities. All of the Plains,” Trian said, sitting with his arms crossed. “I’m sure the Empire knows what’s going on, so I’d guess cities are being closed down and adventurers are hunting down the demons.”

“What’s the average level of corpses turned to demons?” Ilea asked.

“Depends on the corpse, I guess. I’ve seen everything from thirty to two hundred, but the latter is very rare,” Kyrian answered.

“What about the rest of the Hand? You said there were others who survived?” Trian asked.

“Yes, and they fled the city. Where to, I have no idea. I took care of Cless and hid out here while hunting demons anytime I could. I’ve seen hundreds if not thousands of demons throughout the mountain ranges, many leaving north, heading toward the Empire. And it’s been weeks.”

“That might not be a bad thing,” Trian said. “If the demons are spread out, we can take out the smaller forces. I doubt a couple hundred thousand of the monsters working together could be stopped. Mind weaver, do you think your kind could work together to control such a force?”

“Oh, no, no. There will be no alliance. The strongest mind weavers I’ve seen control several hundred spawn at once, and there will be competition among the spawn as well. These lands are ripe for the taking. They will not be as calculating as you are, not yet. Not with all of this... wood, flesh, and food.”

Kyrian gave the demon a look, not used to the telepathic communication yet.

“Good, then we’ll assume there are some that can control a couple thousand but likely not more, and they’ll probably work alone. You said Ravenhall is being held by one of them?” Trian asked.

“Yes. I’m not sure if there’s only one, but I’ve seen one standing on the walls when I got close to the city,” Kyrian said.

“Good. Ilea, how many do you think were in those fights we’ve had?”

“Couple hundred, I think. They’re easy to deal with if you fly up to regain your breath,” she said.

“Well, we can all fly, and now Kyrian is here as well, so a couple hundred more should be easy.”

“We should look for Claire and Eve as well. See if they made it out.”

“And the other Shadows. Do you have a map of the area?”

Ilea summoned one, as well as snacks and drinks. Kyrian was alive, which left Claire and Eve from their team, but there were plenty of others in Ravenhall and Viscera that she had come to care about, from Joseph and Keyla to Balduur and Iana.

She gritted her teeth and focused on the here and now. They would find them.

Ilea hadn’t expected Ravenhall to have fallen, but now that they were back and her stomach was full, she was ready to remove every single demon from this realm.

“Let’s get started then,” Trian said, looking at the map.

FORTY-SEVEN

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Air Support

“That brings us to you, demon. You’ve reached your goal of coming here. What now? We can’t have you running around killing humans,” Trian said.

The map in front of them was now covered in a variety of notes and markings. Cities and locations to prioritize, mountains and forests that would require clearing in order to provide shelter and a relatively hidden way to travel.

“And pretty much everyone will try to kill you on sight, with all the demons running around,” Ilea said.

The demon sat up straight. *“You speak true, human, I have reached my goal. But now I desire to experience this new world. You have already proven to be powerful, and so there will be others. I do not know the rules and ways of this world, but I will learn. I suggest a trade.”*

Trian gestured for him to continue. Weavy looked at him for a long moment, glancing at Ilea.

“That means he’s asking you to continue talking,” she elaborated.

“I see. Then, I offer to accompany you and fight by your side. I will tell you what I know about the demons of the Great Salt, and in return, you will tell me about this world and protect me from other humans. Or at the very least, explain to them that I am fighting by your side.”

Trian sighed. “I suppose with you close by, we can keep an eye on you. But know that if you switch sides or attack any of us, I won’t hesitate to kill you.”

“I understand that very well. I have seen you two fight,” Weavy said with a slight shiver.

Trian went back into planning mode and looked at Weavy appraisingly. “How many of the spawn can you control? And would you be willing to cut down your own kind?”

The demon cocked its head to the side. *“I’m confused. Why would I not fight them? I’ve been doing so for two hundred years.”*

“That’s settled then. We’ll work together. We’ll hunt down demons, and you can add some of the higher-leveled ones we find to your troop.”

“That sounds agreeable. I can control around one hundred and fifty spawn, fewer if they’re above my level,” the demon said. His impressive level of 186 would help them a lot against most of the spawn at much lower levels.

“Good, then we all know our roles. Let’s move out,” Trian finished.

“Finally,” Ilea said, lifting her head up from the table.

* * *

Sulivhaan ate in silence as he usually did, his mask raised just enough for him to be able to access his mouth. He didn’t allow himself to smile as he looked around the campfire to see his small team eating and resting. Despite it all, they still stood strong. Some of the few who remained in close proximity to the deathtrap previously known as the city of Ravenhall.

Rock’s stomach rumbled when he finished his own meager meal. It would take them days to get to the next town for re-provisioning.

“I should be fine now, going to sleep for two hours,” Rock said as he put the plate down and started rubbing it with snow in an effort to clean it.

Navalis nodded, the gesture barely noticeable. They were all still clad in black, but more and more red was creeping in, their gear growing more bloodied by the day.

Senia, their rogue, was already sleeping, her skills not allowing her much by way of reduced rest.

Navalis got up quietly and left for her hourly scouting while Sulivhaan worked his gravity magic to ease his companions’ rest. He moved his mask down again to cover his face as he meditated.

* * *

Sunrise came, and a pat on his shoulder woke Sulivhaan from his meditative state. Navalís was standing near a tree and Senia was perched in its branches, already shrouded in shadow. Sulivhaan reduced gravity around him as he rose, prepared for another day of fighting.

“We’ll scout and fight south of the city today,” he said.

They moved easily through the foliage, all Shadows at least somewhat familiar with these valleys and forests. Senia vanished; she was about as difficult to make out as Navalís, who had reached nearly the same level of camouflage with raw experience and the help of some minor skills. Sulivhaan was glad that the young woman saw Navalís more as a role model and less as competition, otherwise he wasn’t sure the team would work together quite as well.

Even Rock managed to stay relatively quiet while he ran through the forest. Sulivhaan, of course, was floating, the exercise not a skill but a simple use of his gravity magic that he had worked on for years to perfect.

It didn’t take long for them to find the first group of demons. Whoever controlled them regularly sent scouts and small groups to check Ravenhall’s surroundings.

Sulivhaan had his suspicions as to the reason for the demons’ appearance. He wouldn’t put it past some of the Hand’s members to use this for their own gain. His best bet was on a failed experiment by a random member dabbling in necromancy or summoning. It had happened before. Just never on this scale.

The battle shout of their tank forced Sulivhaan to focus as he prepared his magic, dozens of demons screeching as they rushed through the foliage to fight. There was no warning signal from Navalís, so they engaged.

They emerged in a slightly less forested area, demons weaving their way through the tree line before them. Their gray skin and bones looked even more alien in the morning light. The groups consisted of a variety of long-legged humanoids and beast-like creatures built for speed, along with a few of the more tanky melee types. In the distance hovered some airborne demons.

A field of increased gravity spread out around Rock, who swung his massive hammer around him, blood and guts spraying as he cleaved through the leading monsters, crushing their bones before they were hurled into their compatriots behind them.

Lines of golden light shot from the trees behind Sulivhaan, impaling the heads of several demons. Senia appeared in the midst of the monsters, slashing at exposed flesh with her daggers while using Rock as a shield. She appeared and disappeared, reaping the lives of their enemies while moving in tandem with Rock's hammer swings, herding any pursuing demons toward him.

A large group of demons was suddenly flailing in the air as magical force took them upward. Next, the gravity field around Rock pulsed outward. Rock smiled, his shoulders raised, his stance less strained, and his hammer now light as a feather. The demons around him couldn't move, forced toward the ground just as the others had been forced into the air, and hammer swings and dagger thrusts took them apart.

As a pulse of magic left Sulivhaan, the aerial contingent of demons hurtled to the ground at around five times the speed they should've fallen. The snow didn't help much to soften the landing as their bodies splashed onto the earth, mixing more blood into the ice. Sulivhaan was shifting his focus to another group when a heavy presence in his mind drew his attention to a copse of bushes in front of them.

"Mind weaver!" he shouted as several golden streaks of light flew into the bushes.

The weaver emerged with a gargantuan beast at its side. It was a massive bear-shaped monster, bones growing from its back. Golden streaks of light punched into its blood-covered hide without a noticeable effect.

Two new groups of demons emerged on either side of the bear-demon, each as numerous as the one they had just fought.

Navalis immediately signaled the retreat, and Sulivhaan prepared his area spell to slow the enemy as they retreated. The mind weavers had learned to surround themselves with demons when they attacked; they were far less arrogant than they had been in the first few days after their appearance.

Another signal arrow came from their ranger, now from a different position. A signal to reengage.

Sulivhaan opened his eyes wide and smiled, reforming his slowing spell into an offensive one. A loud crackling sound came from above as a massive bolt of lightning smashed into the rightmost group of demons, their flesh set alight. Some of the creatures even exploded from the sheer energy of the spell. Simultaneously, spikes of metal crashed into the massive bone-

plated bear monster protecting the mind weaver. The long needles sunk into every gap, skewering the beast.

He saw a winged silhouette in black armor fall from the sky and barrel down into the group on the left, leaving a shower of blood and earth in its wake. Ash flared into existence around the warrior, shrouding the scene. Shrieks and grunts came from within the cloud, followed by broken demon corpses being flung out of it.

Sulivhaan concentrated again as his spell took form, lifting up the bleeding bear and the mind weaver behind it. The two rose as lightning and golden arrows crashed into them. Senia vanished into the black ash cloud while Rock charged the remaining enemies in the right-hand group with fast and heavy steps.

Three golden arrows pierced the mind weaver's head, killing it, and the pressure in Sulivhaan's head gradually left him as he put a chunk of his mana toward accelerating the fall of the struggling bear demon. The subsequent impact sent a shockwave of snow and frozen dirt in all directions, causing one of the trees in the copse to fall.

The cloud of ash cleared as two mages, the lightning user and the metal user, landed nearby. The warrior in black moved to stand next to Senia, who teleported toward Sulivhaan as the falling tree crashed into the blood-covered snow.

The new arrivals had helped engage the demons, but Sulivhaan was prepared for anything. At least until the helmet on the black warrior vanished, revealing a face he hadn't seen since the collapse of Ravenhall.

"Ilea, you fuck!" Rock exclaimed, roaring with laughter.

He caved in a struggling demon's head before he threw his hammer to the ground, charging toward Ilea. The two hugged briefly before they disengaged and threw their fists together, creating a resounding clang of metal against metal, a piece of her armor falling to the ground from the impact. It looked in disrepair.

Sulivhaan watched them and smiled. Team 34 had been unaccounted for. But he could tell they hadn't been idle.

* * *

“Glad to find another squad out here,” Trian said as he looked at the approaching figures. Ilea knew at least one of them, that much was clear from the hammer wielder’s exuberant reaction.

“Yes, but all the demons are dead... nothing left for our weaver,” Kyrian said, looking behind him to see the mind weaver and his sorry-looking band of demons slowly approaching in the distance. They had fought all through the night and morning but found few high-leveled enemies – until this group.

The other group’s ranger flinched and raised her bow toward the slope from which their group of demons was approaching, still hundreds of meters away.

Trian appeared a couple of meters in front of her and gave his best diplomatic smile. “They’re on our side.”

The ranger kept her bow drawn until the masked mage spoke.

“Explain.”

Ilea lightly punched the large warrior’s shoulder before she walked over to Trian.

“We went through the fissure, got stranded in the Great Salt. Followed and found Adam Strand, the one who orchestrated all this. Talked to a mind weaver on the way and traded information. He’s with us now. Well, kind of.”

Trian could see the other group taking in the information.

“Kind of?” the large hammer wielder asked.

“It’s a trial period,” Ilea said.

“We’ve fought by his side. He would rather survive than oppose us, and he’s willing to learn about this world. He’s under our protection,” Trian said.

“You shouldn’t trust those creatures,” the small rogue said.

“We know the risks. But talk to him and see what you think,” Ilea said, looking at the masked mage.

“I trust you, Ilea. All very interesting. And it’s good to meet the rest of you. Thank you for the intervention before. My name is Sulivhaan, squad leader of Team 8, Shadow’s Hand. I think we should move this conversation elsewhere as soon as possible.”

Trian smiled now, having heard of the team. “Trian, Team 34. And yes, I’m sure we have a lot to discuss.”

“The day is still young,” Ilea said as she approached the group, nodding to the ranger in the process. “Let’s go hunt.”

* * *

Sulivhaan watched as demons were slaughtered. They had moved through the forest to the mountainside. He had expected some groups of people to have stayed behind, but in the past few weeks, all they had found were individuals, all trying to get into the destroyed city for personal gain. At this point, he hadn’t expected to find a full team still fighting.

He would have to verify the new information brought to light. Mainly the accusation of Adam Strand. The Elder was well-trusted and regarded. But he saw no reason why Ilea of all people would lie about such a thing. The mind weaver would be invaluable as well, if possibly a danger. But the fact remained that there were tens of thousands of demons running wild. The benefits far outweighed the risks, at least for the time being.

He watched the approaching demons as his spell finished, the enemy shooting up into the air before plummeting to their deaths a moment later. Sulivhaan looked to the next group even before the previous one hit the hard-packed earth. A harsh wind pushed at his coat, making parts of it flutter as he watched streaks of red and gold destroy the confused and shrieking demons that remained.

A storm was coming, not an uncommon occurrence at this altitude. The snow would help them more than the enemy, concealing their forms and magic from the demons unfamiliar with these lands. There had been sixty-something monsters in the most recent group of monsters when they had found them, yet their melee fighters were already hunting down the last remaining stragglers that had managed to escape.

“Well done,” Trian said, checking the injured higher-level demons left alive, held down by Sulivhaan as their mind weaver worked its magic.

Sulivhaan watched as Trian joined him at his side. His once black armor was chipped in places and showed spots of red below the Hand’s black. The sight was common to anyone returning to Ravenhall after months of travel and fighting. A badge of honor.

Slowly, the demons in his field of gravity calmed.

“You trust him,” Sulivhaan said.

“I’m more annoyed that the others seem less open to communication,”
Trian replied.

Sulivhaan raised his eyebrows. He glanced at Trian, then looked back at the demons.

One outlier doesn’t change what they are.

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FORTY-EIGHT

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Family Dinner

“We can make camp in the woods later, it’s safe enough,” Sulivhaan suggested to the quiet man, Kyrian, who quickly went over to Ilea, talking to her in a whisper.

Ilea nodded at whatever was said. “Sure. Sulivhaan, you guys can stay at my place as well. I have plenty of food and everything.”

He was a little confused as to where ‘her place’ was, given they were in the middle of the wilderness. Ilea had only been near Ravenhall for a few months; had she made herself a home already? He didn’t dare expect anything properly defensible, perhaps just a cave with some animal carcasses to deter others from entering.

Sulivhaan was surprised when the location was, in fact, rather close. It didn’t take long for them to reach the mountainside above Ilea’s claimed residence, at which point the three of his teammates unable to fly reacted quite differently to Ilea’s suggestion of carrying them down the cliff.

Navalis skidded down, occasionally grabbing onto outcrops of stone to reduce the speed of her descent. Senia grudgingly agreed to being carried by Ilea, while Rock was laughing, continuously joking about his weight and her inability to lift him. Obviously, he was proved wrong.

They all landed safely on the plateau extending from the cliffside, and it was only now that Sulivhaan appreciated the house was difficult to make out from a distance.

“You built this?” Rock asked, his skepticism quite obvious.

“Nah, had it built,” Ilea answered, disappearing into a cave nearby and coming out with a Swordmouth Tiger in her arms that she hugged tightly.

The beast was wild and didn't seem enthusiastic at the encounter, but Sulivhaan wasn't surprised in the slightest.

"Rich as well. You have a suitor yet?" Rock asked. Sulivhaan noticed the sharp glance from the quiet metal mage traveling with them at the question.

He followed Ilea into the spacious home featuring more glass than he thought necessary. *Not built to withstand an assault, as predicted.* He supposed the location made it reasonable enough as a base either way. For the time being.

* * *

"I don't really have any beds other than my own. You can stay downstairs, I guess. We'll find something tomorrow," Ilea said, trying to think if she had anything that might be usable as a pillow. She smiled at the idea of Sulivhaan snuggling down beside the Swordmouth Tiger.

"There is no need, we have our packs," Rock said, stepping into the house with his slightly cleaned boots. Ilea nodded at that as she saw Kyrian going downstairs and checking on Cless, who was staying in the showroom and armory. And apparently now an art gallery.

Ilea didn't mind. The room had been a little barren, and the girl's paintings had an almost lifelike quality. Some of them even felt a little familiar. She wondered if Cless had thought of their group when she had been painting.

Kyrian went to cook for the others. The mind weaver was high above the house on the mountainside; his horde of demons wasn't something Ilea wanted nearby. Considering his life in the Great Salt, he had agreed immediately to her proposal of staying up there, the trees and snow just as exciting to him as her house was.

Ilea blinked upstairs to find her bed neatly made. Her intention of getting a book was interrupted for a moment by the sweet gesture. *Sweet but unnecessary.*

She smiled and grabbed one of the books she had planned to read before blinking downstairs again, changing her remaining bits of juggernaut armor to a more comfortable set and sitting down at the table.

Trian had also changed from his armor to regular clothes and sat down with a sigh, summoning a tea set of all things.

“Your armor has seen better days,” he pointed out.

“A bunch of scraps,” Rock commented from nearby.

“They’re *my* scraps,” Ilea said, opening her book. Then she looked at Trian, her eyes widening. “I forgot to add a bath to this place... Fuck.”

“I’m not sure about a bath, but the ocean’s close if you and your team want to clean up, Sulivhaan?” Trian said.

“Thank you,” Sulivhaan said, bowing his head.

“I’ll go help with the cooking,” Rock said. He left the room smiling, his helmet neatly tucked under his arm. Navalís walked back outside, and Senia sat down at the table and started playing with her dagger.

“Don’t cut the wood, it’s expensive,” Ilea said. She shot a stern look toward the rogue, who glared back at her, then at the missing chunk of the living room floor.

“How much rest does everyone need?” Trian asked.

“Two, four, and six hours. Our ranger needs less, but I’m not sure how much,” Sulivhaan answered, sitting down.

This just isn’t super cozy... Ilea thought.

With everyone now sitting at the table, the scene looked more like an uncomfortable family meeting than the atmosphere of an inn. She would have to change that at some point.

Let’s start burning some wood in the fireplaces. Some oil lamps would be good as well. And a nice rug to really tie the room together.

She blinked downstairs to get some wood from one of the storage rooms, then blinked back up to fill the fireplaces.

“We have similar rest patterns, although I believe the highest is at four hours. Not sure if Ilea even needs sleep or if she just likes it,” Trian said

Ilea ignored the comment. She enjoyed sleep. Nothing wrong with that.

She fueled some mana into the enchantments on the fireplace before her and smiled as flames flickered to light. Not enough to burn for long, but likely enough to engulf the wood. She did the same to the other fireplace and sat back down.

“Then I suggest everyone who needs less rest and has an ability to escape easily or fly should go out to hunt at night as well. Who is the fastest among you all?” Sulivhaan asked.

Trian looked at Ilea, who was pretending to be lost in her book while sprawling in a relaxed manner across two chairs.

“A messenger for reinforcements?” Trian asked, and Sulivhaan nodded.

“It might be too early, but as soon as we have a comprehensive scout report of the city and its surroundings, we must strike.”

“The survivors of the Hand. Would they have gathered somewhere?”

“I don’t know. We have been in these mountains since the summoning. Many would’ve returned to warn or protect those close to them. Ravenhall has been lost. The Empire will be slow to move, and I doubt their response will be enough, considering the demons already in their lands. Ravenhall’s future lies with us.”

“I can deliver a message, but I won’t stop fighting demons just to fly to the wrong city,” Ilea said.

“Then tonight, we go north,” Sulivhaan said. “We will check Morhill and its surroundings. Perhaps there are survivors. Otherwise, Ilea, you could scout the southernmost towns in the Plains to gather information on the remaining Shadows.”

Ilea didn’t look up from her book. “Sure, let’s do that. But first, dinner.”

Trian smiled, then summoned a map and continued discussing specific approaches for their group with Sulivhaan.

The smell of food coming from downstairs made more than one stomach rumble. In the end, Senia went downstairs as well, leaving only the team leaders and Ilea in the big living room.

* * *

After eating her fill, Ilea left with Navalis and Sulivhaan. Given how little rest they required, they would hunt at night while the others slept.

The night was a dark one, the moons hidden behind clouds heavy with snow. The small group had traveled over mountain ranges, hunting down any smaller groups of demons that were hunting for the increasingly scarce populations of animals, monsters, and humans in this region, their hunger insatiable.

A group of dead demons lay in the snow right outside the forest line Ilea had found herself in, the battlefield proving that not all wildlife bowed to

the new predators. No human had done this, at least not someone using conventional weapons.

She thought of Adam and his beast form.

“Want to investigate, look for whatever did that?” she asked Sulivhaan in a whisper, her breath forming a mist in the air.

The mountains were still clinging to the cold of winter while the lower altitudes slowly rid themselves of their icy white mantle. She only wore some comfortable clothes combined with the scraps of her juggernaut armor, her resistances and Vitality making the weather easy to bear.

“It’s no concern to us if it kills demons,” Sulivhaan answered.

The group flew on toward Morhill, which was located another two mountains farther on. It was one of the closest large settlements to Ravenhall and would have been one of the first to be stormed by the demon hordes.

Of course, some of the members of the Hand may have reached Morhill early and warned them of what was to come. Many would likely have refused to leave, their homes and security too much to give up based on the word of a stranger, even if they were from the Shadow’s Hand.

The group traveled over the remaining mountains, ignoring the most frequented paths. Ilea had asked Sulivhaan earlier if Navalis wanted to be carried, but he had only chuckled lightly in response.

Floating in the falling snow and strong winds, Ilea gritted her teeth as she saw the fortress city of Morhill, fitted with high walls, lying quiet and dark in the distance. No fires or smoke could be seen. As they got closer, Ilea glimpsed moving demons in the streets.

The city was already lost – just like Ravenhall.

They landed on an outcrop of stone near one of the mountains that overlooked the city.

“No mind weavers,” Navalis whispered as she joined them. She gave Sulivhaan a long look.

“We can think about it,” he said.

“You want to clear out the city?” Ilea asked.

“If there are no mind weavers to control the beasts, it may be possible.”

Ilea looked at the hordes, hearing some of their screeches even at this distance.

“I want to check on a village nearby first. A friend of mine lives there,” Ilea said, looking at Navalis. “Let me know if we need to slow down.”

Then Ilea started flying toward Indur, the village where Balduur Birch had his smithy.

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FORTY-NINE

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A Good Show

“No demons. Hardly any signs of battle,” Navalís reported after returning to their hiding spot near the village. “No signs of any inhabitants either. The doors are locked.”

“The demons must’ve focused on Morhill, allowing the mountain villages to prepare and escape,” Sulivhaan said.

“If they’re not hiding anywhere,” Ilea said.

“They would’ve shown themselves to me,” Navalís said.

“Right. So, what now?” Ilea asked.

“Dawn will soon be upon us. We should rest for an hour or two,” Sulivhaan said. “Ilea, you are by far the fastest of the three of us. Can you go and gather the others? Bring them here?”

“You want to try tackling Morhill?” Navalís asked.

“If no mind weavers show once the suns rise, yes. We will try.”

* * *

The suns were rising over Morhill as Tiva watched the disgusting creatures fight each other within the walls of the mountain town. A few spilled out again, running up in the direction of Ravenhall or down toward the Plains. She wouldn’t get in their way. A single high-level one could rip apart her entire squad.

She gritted her teeth, knowing that Jeff had fallen asleep during his watch again. Their team was gathered near a rock formation overlooking

the town below, monitoring the creatures' movements. The little shit might have missed something major.

She knew he didn't care, though. His position in the squad was as secure as ever. Nobles and their shitty influence. Of course they'd had to put that high-born reject into *her* team. Still, there was little she could do about it, and on a job like this, she couldn't let team issues distract her. At least everyone else was carrying their weight.

The others weren't happy with the situation either, but they had to involve Jeff. Otherwise, they'd be chewed out again by the higher-ups. Tiva had two more years of service until she would be allowed an administrative post in the capital – one of many highly desired positions and one she wouldn't give up because a team member annoyed her.

Usually, the jobs they were given were simple as well. Their scouting squad was rarely asked to actually deal with real problems; mostly, they were only asked to report on them. One upside to having the noble on her team.

Tiva hoped to the gods it would stay that way, especially because her team was assigned to the area around Ravenhall and its mountain range. It had previously been one of the safest and most secure spots in the Empire. So much for that.

Before all this, the Hand had dealt with most problems themselves. Some monsters used to vanish overnight without anybody even paying for the mercenaries. There were many reasons the Empire let them do as they pleased, and that was one of them.

Now, though, all bets were off.

"What should we do, captain?" their healer, Aman, asked. He was in his thirties, yet his Classes were so contradictory that she questioned his base intelligence. Still, having a healer on the team was more important than anything else, so she didn't mind his presence.

She chuckled at the thought of being a scout captain, a highly regarded job when she had still been in the academy in Virilya. Experience now told her otherwise, but she wouldn't be found telling anyone about it, lest she lose her position. Or be assigned to a team and area where danger was more prevalent.

Which might just be everywhere by now. With demons running wild in the Plains.

She sighed. Not even the noble's safety had retained its importance in this crisis. Otherwise, they would've already been called back. This was their designated region, and the higher-ups knew that as well.

She wondered if there were people in the Lys military hoping their squad would perish. Silently, in these snow-covered mountains.

"Boss, someone just appeared near the south gate. Look," said the blue-haired ranger, Bertha. Her tone was as boring as her character.

Tiva had thought most rangers were interesting people. Generally, her assumption had not been wrong, but there had to be an exception to every rule.

Two more years... she thought, repeating the three words like a mantra.

Tiva had noticed the mage flying above the south gate. In fact, there were several, one flying at a much higher altitude. They all stopped above the city, where they remained, hovering.

She wasn't concerned about being discovered; an illusion spell had been cast on their location, making them very hard to discern.

Two more flying people appeared soon after, one adorned with black wings and carrying two others. All of them were clad in black.

"So the Hand hasn't given up on these mountains entirely. And here I thought they had all run to the capital," Aman said. His negative attitude toward the Shadow's Hand was well known by now, but Tiva had given up on trying to change his mind.

Let him insult one of them and see how he fares with his shitty camouflage spells and self-healing.

"Yeah, why not throw your lives away in that horde of demons, seems like a great idea," Jeff said, making Tiva's breathing speed up. She was so very close to ripping off his head, consequences be damned.

Two more years. Two more years.

She focused entirely on her mantra until she saw the people above the city start to move.

"What are they doing?" Aman asked, eyebrows raised and mouth set in a confused scowl.

For once, Tiva was wondering the same thing as she watched the black-winged warrior plummet downward with their two teammates, one held in each hand. The winged figure let go of them at the last second, all three crashing into the demon horde.

Her squad shut up as they watched a massive warrior using his hammer to smash five monsters at a time, entirely unbothered by any claws that scraped at his armor, his battle cries echoing through the valley.

A small rogue appeared in different places around the big warrior from time to time, cutting heads and limbs off the nearby monsters. The black-winged one teleported and flew through the demon horde with what looked like bladed gauntlets, moving so fast she looked almost blurred to Tiva. Her movements were like a dance, leaving only sliced corpses and flying limbs behind.

She found herself chuckling. *I had nightmares about those monsters. And here they are, being cut down like village bandits facing Imperial Scouts.*

Nobody said another word.

A loud crack rent the air as a massive stream of lightning ripped through the masses of screeching demons. Tiva looked up and saw the spell had come from a flying Shadow with red wings. Metal spikes flew out from another mage, shredding through the demons, their bodies falling like flies.

Then a large group of them suddenly started floating.

Upward they went, and as Tiva's whole squad was looking at the floating monsters clawing at the air, utterly lost and confused, they suddenly crashed downward at an unnatural speed, splattering against the houses, the streets, and their brethren below.

The sound of squashed bodies was interrupted by the crack of lightning. Tiva saw golden flashes coming from somewhere on the other side of the valley, impaling a dozen demons, heads exploding into bits and pieces of flesh and bone.

Tiva gulped at that point, unable to comment on the massacre before them.

The suns were shining down on the gruesome scene, ushering in the spring even in this snowy place. It was still cold, oh so cold. She hadn't noticed how cold it was until that moment.

She pulled her coat closer to her mouth, breathing into the thick fabric as she watched the warriors and mages of the Hand dance and fly through the demon ranks. Monsters of terrifying children's stories were being burned and smashed by the overwhelming power of these individuals.

Her whole perception of the Hand changed in those moments. No longer was the Hand an entity the Empire of Lys allowed to exist in order to

exploit. Now, it was a terrifying organization that allowed the Empire to host them.

“What the fuck is this...” Bertha breathed.

For once, Tiva agreed with her.

* * *

Ilea cut through three demons at once as her veil was pierced from behind, two golden lances taking the lives of the monsters who dared to attack her a moment later. She appeared in a crouched position ten meters away just before a scorching beam of lightning burned away a group of demons next to her. Then, as she spun, she took off the heads of four more monsters.

She had a big smile on her face as she teleported again, farther away this time, so as not to disturb the others. A cloud of ash sprang into existence around her, confusing and blinding the demons frantically clawing at each other to get to the prey that had suddenly appeared.

Ilea found it was almost too easy as she danced through the beasts, her blades biting through demonic bone without noticeable resistance,

A sudden push from the right sent her flying through two walls of a nearby house. Dusting herself off, she looked for the offender and saw one demon standing a little taller than the others. Its level was over 200 – rare for this encounter. Most of the monsters were below level 70, likely former residents of the large town and not demons summoned from the Great Salt.

Ilea spread her wings and switched to her heavy olvor gauntlets as she shot toward the monster at full speed, landing on its chest and sending the two of them through the house behind it. They crashed down onto the street beyond, where an unfortunate beast was squashed by their combined momentum.

Ilea ignored the monster’s struggles and punched at its head. Where some of her blows missed, the stone street cracked and broke, creating thunderous booms with each impact. The demon’s head didn’t fare much better, even with its higher level. After four blows, it was paste.

Ilea blinked upward to avoid the claws of four more monsters before she let herself plummet back down, her fists smashing two of their heads, blood and brains splattering against her Veil of Ash.

Next, Ilea blinked onto a balcony, summoned her bow, and loosed explosive arrows into the masses. She ducked when a group of demons rained down from the sky, their bodies destroying more monsters and parts of the houses.

A rain of golden rays came from the nearby mountain range and hit more than thirty of the beasts as Ilea jumped back down into the fray, advancing through the demons with her bladed gauntlets until she met up with Rock and Senia.

She blinked and fought, soon falling into the same battle trance she had felt many times before, every move flowing into the next as their team of Shadows removed the demons left in Morhill. Only one mind weaver showed itself, and the creature was on their side, his mind magic singling out high-level demons that he used to fight and kill more of the enemy.

Hundreds of enemies still remained, but Ilea didn't tire, nor did the Shadows fighting by her side.

* * *

Tiva gulped. The whole group was still fixated on the scene before them.

It had been hours of continuous fighting, yet the members of the Hand were untiring, calculating, and ruthless beyond compare, the destruction beyond anything she had ever seen.

"We have to... we have to report this..." Jeff said, backing up a slow step.

"Don't you fucking move!" Tiva said a little too loud. "The illusion spell is all that keeps us from being noticed – do you really want those people to see us?"

Although the Shadows were almost certainly on her team's side, Tiva didn't want to risk it. If there was only the slightest chance of offending those people, they were dead. She was sure of that.

"Absolutely amazing..." Tiva whispered to herself. Only a few hundred demons remained, and still the Shadows fought on. She was sure they wouldn't stop until the last of them were killed.

"Wait, isn't that guy coming straight for us?" Aman suddenly said, pointing at a masked individual floating toward them at a somewhat leisurely speed.

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FIFTY

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Wine

“Welcome to Morhill. I’m afraid I’ll have to ask who you are,” Sulivhaan said, having approached the hidden squad Navalís had immediately spotted upon their arrival. Their medium-grade illusion magic was an indicator of their level. They hadn’t interfered, and Navalís had reported them to be wearing Imperial armor.

One of them stood up, while the rest remained crouching. “Captain Tiva, Third Imperial Scout Division. You must be a member of the Hand?” she said, very willing to provide information and visibly nervous.

It’s good we found them. This inexperienced and so close to Morhill. A single mind weaver would’ve meant their end.

“I am. If your mission is to surveil the city, then I presume that task is done. Do you have a camp or reinforcements nearby?”

“Yes, sir. We will go back to report and send for reinforcements to secure the city.”

“Any news from throughout the Empire?”

“Demons throughout the lands, sir. The military is hunting down the largest groups as all cities south of Virilya remain in lockdown to prevent further escalation.”

“The capital is not locked down?”

“Partially, but I don’t see how the walls could be breached, and with most of your organization now in the city, it is doubtful that a single demon could enter.”

“The Shadows are in Virilya?”

“Yes, sir. A large number, as far as I’m informed.”

Should've expected it. Who organized it? I wonder...

"Thank you. We will secure the gates. Be wary of stray demons," Sulivhaan said before he turned to leave.

Hopefully the group would bring reinforcements and the situation in the bigger cities wasn't quite as dire as in Morhill. Sulivhaan was optimistic, but he knew the Empress and Lys nobility would focus on the Empire's largest and most central cities first and foremost. It would take months for them to retake Ravenhall with a sufficiently powerful force to push past the demons. He didn't plan to wait for that, nor did he think they had the luxury of doing so.

But now they knew a group of Shadows had gathered in Virilya. He hoped there were enough of them left.

* * *

Ilea looked up to see Sulivhaan approaching from the mountain the Imperial squad had been watching from. Ash appeared around her as she tried to clean the blood and guts that had penetrated her veil. It worked a little, smearing everything much less than last time.

'ding' Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2nd lvl 11

She blinked away the notification, sending it to join the already extensive list of skill advancements and level-ups from the previous fights. Punching what little remained of her breastplate, she nodded to Sulivhaan.

"Are the military coming to help Ravenhall?" Rock asked Sulivhaan as he joined them, Trian and Kyrian following behind.

"Reinforcements, but don't expect many," Sulivhaan said, hovering above the demon-covered ground. "But there's news from Virilya."

* * *

Ilea stood on the city walls while Kyrian helped to secure what was left of her armor with some spare strips of leather.

"Sure you don't want to wear a new set of leather armor?" Trian asked.

She looked down and onto the battlefield within the city. “It’s a fucking mess.”

“The demons or your armor?” Aki asked.

“This is as good as I can secure it,” Kyrian said. “But with your ash, it should be serviceable. It’s tough, even battered as it is.”

“You’re biased,” Trian said.

“Steel beats leather,” Ilea said. “I take his side.”

Sulivhaan landed near them and handed Ilea a letter. “For whoever has taken charge or organized the gathering.”

“I’ll make sure to deliver it. Don’t die in the meantime,” she said, spreading her wings.

“Good luck,” Sulivhaan said as Kyrian waved and Trian nodded her way.

* * *

Darkness filled the room. Day in, day out, it had been the same.

Eve opened her eyes from her near-constant meditative state to check she hadn’t missed anything. The hall was the same as it had been the previous three days. The bookshelves were still empty, the table and the adjacent chairs unoccupied.

And so she waited, completely invisible to most eyes, in her chosen corner of the room.

There was enough space for her to lean comfortably but not enough for someone to choose it as their own spot for lounging. All her leads had come together to point to this building. An old house, quite well built – but then again, most buildings in the capital were made to last.

To her annoyance, there was nobody to stalk, nobody to get information from. Just the dim light that occasionally made it through the windows. The house held little to no comfort. Only this room held some sort of importance.

The only reason Eve was still there after searching the whole place was that there was too little dust. The space was used, she was sure of it. With the information she had obtained in the past weeks, she was sure she had stumbled upon something big, something she had been looking for, for many years.

And today would be a day for answers, she could feel it. Then she literally did as the vibrations of someone entering the house came from below. A confident smile bloomed as she pushed her magic further to make herself even harder to detect.

Even Ilea had difficulties with detecting her like this, and they had trained together dozens of times. Her training had pushed her to be even more creative in using her powers. Smells merged around her, and light fell naturally through her illusion spell as she slowed her breathing.

The door opened, and a well-dressed man in his fifties entered. His well-groomed hair and beard were gray, his eyes black. He looked like a butler in a noble house or some other wealthy establishment.

Her waiting had paid off.

The man checked the room with trained eyes before he walked to the door and operated a small switch that activated different magical lights built into the ceiling. Eve's eyes adjusted quickly, ready for any move on the man's part, but he just walked to the windows and closed the heavy red curtains.

Next, he meticulously checked the whole room and cleaned some parts, dusting off non-existent dust from some of the furniture. Eve changed the visual of her corner a little to make it nice enough for him to ignore.

His cleaning ended an hour later, all done in silence before he set the table. He produced a red tablecloth and placed it on top of it, together with an expensive bottle of wine and a single glass. Then the butler left the room, but Eve was sure he didn't leave the house.

She blinked, and when she opened her eyes again, a woman was sitting on the chair next to the wine bottle. Her black hair was long and luscious, and her porcelain-white skin was visible on her arms and back. She wore a black dress that allowed for quite a bit of movement. She was either a passionate dancer or, according to Eve's identify ability, a dangerous warrior.

[Warrior – lvl 230]

Eve had made the right decision to come. Even here in Virilya, it wasn't common to see people above level 200, other than travelers and adventurers from far away or nobles who didn't often show themselves outside the city's central district.

The warrior quietly opened the bottle of wine, driving a nail into the cork before simply pulling it out and filling the glass with red liquid. The wine's heavy aroma drifted so far that it reached Eve. The woman swirled the wine around the glass, occasionally moving it close to her nose to smell.

It took another few minutes for the door to open again. This time it wasn't the butler who entered but two new figures, a woman and a man. Both were below level 150, and both were mages.

"Master," the two said at the same time, bowing low to show their respect for the woman now sipping her wine.

"Report," she said directly, her voice clear and controlled.

She wasn't a simple upstart, Eve thought. Her composure and grace were built on experience. Though she would likely come to a bloody end, Eve held a certain amount of respect for the warrior before her. Strength, both in battle and of will, was hard to earn.

"The boy has been sighted in Virilya. Four more dead nobles, all minor," the first of them said, the man.

"Names and locations?" the warrior asked.

One of the two mages stepped forward, proffering a sealed envelope. The warrior gestured to the table.

"A woman was sighted with him, though the sources are not reliable," the man added after a moment. The warrior hadn't touched the letter.

"The sister?" the woman asked, finishing her glass of wine and putting it down.

"It's a possibility, but the descriptions didn't match what we know. Perhaps it's the escaped prisoner," the other woman said.

"Hmm, yes. Any leads, or is this all?"

"Nothing more. They're experienced," the man said.

"You may leave then. Continue as before," the warrior said.

The two people in front of her bowed again and left the room quickly and quietly.

"Aaaah, incapable subordinates. A pain," the woman sighed, pouring herself some more wine before she started swirling it around the glass again. "Wouldn't you say?" she added, looking to one side – right at Eve.

Eve's eyes opened a little wider, but she stayed quiet, her magic still activated. She was certainly impressed but not convinced. Eve simply waited, calming herself for a possible fight. It wouldn't be easy. The woman

was a warrior nearly twenty levels higher than her, and she may have just lost her element of surprise.

“Did I get the wrong corner? Oh well, doesn’t hurt to check, does it?” the woman said, suddenly appearing before Eve with a thin, slightly curved blade in hand.

She cut through the wall, right where Eve had just been standing, her movement fluid and strong. The blade carved through the wooden wall with no noticeable resistance.

“Not here? Hmm,” the woman said as she appeared in the next corner, swiping her blade and cutting into the wall again.

She’s not bluffing.

Eve wondered for a split second if she should run, then made her move.

She waited for the woman to move to the next corner before creating an illusory copy that ran toward the window. The woman immediately apparated next to the clone, her blade cutting through the air just as Eve’s dagger closed in on her neck.

Suddenly a shiver ran through Eve, and her whole body shifted a couple of centimeters to the left. The blade of her dagger scratched the skin on the woman’s neck before the warrior moved impossibly fast, her blade angled backward and thrust straight at Eve’s face.

Eve’s second dagger intercepted the weapon, but a cold impact still reverberated through her chest, a cut deep enough to draw blood.

The woman was moving her blade upward when Eve whistled. Loud and deafening, startling the woman with a brute force burst of mind magic. Eve quickly moved past the table, grabbing the letter before jumping through the window.

She created four clones just before she landed, then saw one of them immediately cut down by the woman, who had already appeared outside. The woman teleported again and smiled as she cut through another copy with a letter in her hand.

Unfortunately for the warrior, Eve had let go of the letter during her fall. Now near invisible and barely a meter away from the woman, she aimed her dagger at the center of her target’s back. The woman’s body shifted again, but Eve’s blade still struck true, cutting through the surprisingly tough dress and into her opponent’s lung.

Eve let go of the dagger and created more copies, and though the woman appeared behind her, she was unable to swing her blade. The

warrior screamed as she tried to grab the dagger in her back, the cursed blade rotting her flesh before Eve's second dagger struck deep into her enemy's stomach.

Instantly, Eve ripped the dagger out again and slammed it into the woman's throat. Lifeless eyes stared back at her, the woman's blade clattering to the ground. Eve ripped off a piece of the woman's dress, grabbed her daggers and the letter, then ran off. Her injuries were too serious to engage the others in the house, who were likely rushing toward the noise at that very moment.

Four streets later, Eve bandaged her wounds with the cloth and started moving through the alleys more strategically, her magic working to mix up the trail she left behind. She remained fully focused, not once feeling anyone on her trail, until she arrived in one of her hideouts, stumbling into the cellar and shutting the door before falling to the stone floor.

She winced as her wounds continued to bleed, slowly moving toward one corner of the room, grabbing the health potion she had in every hideout. Stolen wares and sadly nothing compared to Ilea or another capable healer, but it would help.

Eve undressed in silence, taking stock of her wounds and any infections or curses, luckily finding nothing for the time being. Poison was running through her, but what Eve had never mentioned to her teammates was that her resistances to such attacks were likely on a par with Ilea's, if not higher.

She bandaged her wounds in silence. A few minutes later, Eve moved to the bed, stopping her meditation and Iron Mind skill. She focused on her breathing and looked at the ceiling. Despite the pain and splitting headache that came as soon as her spells were gone, she had a broad smile on her face.

That was close. And yet I came out on top. Without a team. Just me.

She passed out, knowing she had rid the world of one more piece of evil.

* * *

Eve woke up with a start. The combination of clouded thoughts and bodily pain made her cough immediately, nearly retching up whatever little food was left in her stomach.

Falling back down onto the hard bed, her eyes focused on the ceiling. She wouldn't be able to sleep again tonight. At least, not sober. And the danger of being hunted was too high to justify such a risk.

Lighting a candle, she checked her injuries and found them already nearly healed. That meant she had slept for over ten hours.

She sighed deeply. It had been a little too close. Her wounds would leave scars. Blood had nearly soaked through the bandages, so a change later in the day would be necessary. Maybe she should've stayed at the Hand for longer, should've looked for the others.

She put the thoughts out of her mind, focusing on the tasks at hand. It had been the best opportunity to get out of the Hand's deal with the badge and armor enchantment intact, her debt lost in the demon summoning. For all they knew, she was dead and had turned into a monster by now.

"It *was* nice to have a healer around, though," she whispered, holding up her arm. She refrained from moving too much so as not to reopen one of the cuts she had sustained. But it was too hard to resist grabbing the bloodied letter lying on the ground next to the bed. Eve reached down to pick it up, and she groaned as the cut on her chest started bleeding again.

Letter in hand, she lay down again and breathed slowly. She was a little annoyed at herself for her lack of patience but even more so for her lack of care during the fight. Eve had gained some valuable fighting experience while at the Shadow's Hand, but a reliance on a nearby healer shouldn't have been part of that.

She waited an hour before moving again, this time only lifting her right arm with the letter, opening it with one hand. The envelope was brown and thick to prevent anybody from seeing through it. On the page itself were names, dates, and how the people had died, written in simple ink. The woman had apparently been looking for the murderer, but the letter only mentioned the name 'Red,' which could refer to anyone.

Whoever this Red was, perhaps they could help her, could work together with her. Then again, it would likely be a waste of time. Someone else who would try to expose her, use her, control her.

No. That time was over, and she would find her own path. Alone.

Either way, thanks to the letter, Eve had a few more places to scour and people to look for, people who would lead her to more targets.

FIFTY-ONE

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Bureaucracy

As Ilea slowed her flight, the morning suns were already hanging on the horizon. She was high up, the Plains spreading far and wide below her, occasionally interrupted by small sections of forests, rivers, and lakes.

Despite still being kilometers away, she could see the high walls of her supposed target. Within them, thousands of buildings were set within the near-circular city built against a large lake.

She could hardly see the walls on the other side as the city spanned nearly as much land as some cities back on Earth. All of it was packed with buildings small and large, some roofs glittering in the sunlight, others bright red and tiled, many still cast in shadow by the hundred-meter-high stone walls, wide as a dam.

She took a sharp breath, knowing that without magic, anything like this would be impossible with the technology available in Elos. Riverwatch seemed like a backwater compared to what lay before her, and Ravenhall just a military outpost.

“Is that it?” Ilea asked herself, falling back into the habit of talking to herself as soon as she wasn’t around people anymore.

“Should be,” Aki answered. “What else would it be?”

Ilea smiled and flew higher to see the extent of the city below.

There were few buildings outside the walls – the chance of monster attacks likely made it too dangerous for anybody to even consider living beyond them. There was a harbor outside the walls though, with enough buildings and structures for it to seem like its own town. A large forest spread to the west and along the southern part of the lake.

The city spread to the east and north. Quite far, even with Ilea's high aerial view. Flying farther down and a little closer, Ilea marveled at the sheer scope of the walls, towers, and complex battlements. It seemed more like a castle or burg that happened to be built in a wide circle.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she saw a group of flying figures approaching from the walls at a high speed. Two were winged, and the rest simply floated as they approached. All five were soon identified by their matching gray armor and red helmet plumes or capes, the same as the scouts they had seen near Morhill.

"State your... name and business in Virilya!" the man in the middle shouted nervously, perhaps a little stressed at her high level. Ilea wasn't sure if he could identify it or not. The people were of varying levels, the highest being a mage at level 140. She was impressed that they could all fly.

"Lilith is the name. I'm here to look for the remainder of the Shadow's Hand. I'm one of them myself," she stated. Most of it was the truth. The silly fake name just fit, and she hadn't forgotten what Weavy had told them about names. True or not.

The man looked over to his colleagues, but he seemed much more relaxed after the mention of the Hand.

"Yeah, many have arrived in the past month. You're pretty late. Come, we'll go through the formalities," the man said and flew downward, the other four spreading around Ilea as she followed him.

"These are honestly the nicest walls I've ever seen..." she said to nobody in particular.

One of the men chuckled. "First time in Virilya?"

"Yes, actually. You for hire as a guide?" she asked jokingly.

The man opened his mouth to respond but was swiftly shut up by a gesture from the man beside him. Professionalism seemed to be more highly rated than comedy. A shame, Ilea thought.

"We have a wave of demons approaching from the west, captain," a mage flying to Ilea's left said. "Should we provide support? The west wall has had a rough time the past two days."

"They'll send out a signal if they need anyone," the warrior to the right of Ilea retorted.

"I'll go. Where can I find you afterward?" Ilea said, stopping in the air, her wings moving steadily as she watched the demons in the distance. She assumed the walls were much too high for them to climb or break through,

but what the beasts lacked in intelligence or planning, at least without mind weavers to control them, they made up with sheer ferocity and numbers.

And numbers they had. There were at least a few hundred of the monsters, and as they moved in, the lights of magical spells forming on the top of the wall began to appear. Beyond them, the sunlight reflected off the lake to the west. Ilea smiled at the view. Even the noise of the demon horde couldn't reach them at their altitude.

"No, you're coming to fill out the required forms. Afterward, we'll see if we can get you a spot in the civilian support corps," the captain explained, shaking his head, apparently thinking the offer of support to be a silly notion.

Ilea's smile turned into an outright laugh, and the people around her stopped to look at her, confused at the sudden outburst.

"Yeah, I don't think so. The other guy here mentioned the western side having a rough time, and I'm a perfectly good killing machine," Ilea said. "And I don't expect to be paid, so don't worry about your gold," she added offhandedly before she dove downward.

She heard shouts from behind her, which she ignored. Some of her escort tried to follow, but they were quickly left behind as her buffs came to life, taking her to maximum speed in mere moments. She could fight, and there were demons attacking the city. Anyone with a brain would let her.

"Civilian fighting corps? What the hell is this bullshit?" Ilea murmured as she admired the wall circling the city. The closer she came, the more impressive its sheer size was. As she flew on, she started concentrating on the upcoming fight, her muscles itching to move freely and at full power after the long flight.

The formalities would have to wait a little longer, she thought, as the first long-range fire, ice, and lightning spells were launched from the top of the wall and into the horde below. Ilea saw some rock projectiles and thought of the possibilities of adding explosion enchantments, then smiled at the idea of climbing one to become additional payload.

Her landing was not quite the impact of a launched boulder the size of a house, but certainly close enough. She dove straight down, olvor gauntlets extended in front of her, completely flattening an unfortunate demon before she hit the ground. Her body compressed as the earth below gave way, dirt and rock surrendering against her momentum, exploding outward to blind or strike her enemies.

Demons hissed as a black mist appeared in the vicinity. Densely packed clusters of ash spread out to encompass a large area. The first demons to approach the small crater left by the human ballistic missile found it empty. A moment later, the first of them fell.

Ilea, clad in her near-destroyed black armor, spun through their midst. Shrouded by ash and hidden from their eyes, she moved deadly efficiency, the low-leveled monsters offering little resistance to her gauntlets, now covered by the red of their blood.

* * *

“Yeah, I’m not going in there,” aerial guard Torrence Alivia said.

Torrence had been following the Shadow, then stopped in mid-air when she engaged the enemy. The mage next to him – Torrence never could remember the man’s name – deflected a bone spear shot from a massive demonic monster below.

“Neither am I, but we’ll have to keep an eye on her. We don’t want any more unregistered adventurers in the town,” the mage said, floating back up to the rest of their team. They were already closing the distance, the two of them being the fastest fliers in the group.

“Are you kidding me?” Torrence said, his sword deflecting a ranged attack before he moved up and out of the enemy’s range too. “Adventurers don’t jump into demon hordes. Did you see that impact?”

“Yeah, for all we know, she misjudged the height and is now paste on the ground,” the mage said, getting a chuckle out of Torrence. He was all for seeing upstart adventurers go splat.

“I mean, she said she’s with the Hand, so fair enough. Crazy fuckers,” Torrence said, right before the captain and the other two members of their squad reached them.

“Where’s the woman? I saw her flying into that group. Why didn’t you stop her?” the squad officer asked, quite stupidly in Torrence’s opinion. He was a capable fighter, but sometimes his reasoning left a little to be desired.

“She’s faster than any of us, captain,” Torrence said.

“Where is she now?” the captain asked as they tried to make sense of the battlefield below.

By now, parts of the forest were in flames, fireballs and ice lances flashing down into the demons, ripping them to shreds. A few scout squads had jumped down from the walls to join the fray. Rock and ice walls had also been formed near the closed and barred southern gate and combined with several magical barriers in front and behind to form a perimeter.

A few crazy guards or adventurers jumped over the barricades or flew down into the masses from above, joining the Shadow the aerial guards had encountered. There were just a few, but each one was taking an unnecessary risk in Torrence's mind.

The horde wasn't being controlled, so it was a simple matter of time before they were dealt with. Something as trivial as this might have scared a recruit in the first week of the demon attacks, but it was a common sight by now. Still terrifying, but common.

Torrence sighed. "I don't get paid enough for this shit."

* * *

Ilea weaved through the masses, avoiding exploding projectiles falling from the sky around her. Blink and her sphere were both massive boons to her maneuverability and continued survival. She cut into the demons, running outside of a fireball's blast radius, finishing off the monsters injured by arrows and ice spikes.

The sheer number of projectiles raining down from above drowned out all the other noise. Three more blinks and seven enemy casualties later, a flash of light blasted through the three demons before her, the angle of the spell indicating the caster was close.

She turned to the right as she continued running and saw a mage in black robes and a white mask channeling what she could only compare to the power of the sun. She looked at him with a smile, jumping over an exploding crystal. Some of the shards glanced off her Veil of Ash before she spun in the air, pouncing on a demon with her blades extended and disappearing again in the direction of the mage.

The light mage was being slowly pushed back as he continued to send beams of light through the monsters' skulls. Four of them were closing in, forcing him to teleport away, when Ilea appeared above them, taking two down with bladed arms and the other two with kicks enhanced with

Destruction and Wave of Ember. All four were dead before she landed, sliding for two meters before she jumped up again, blinking toward the next set of enemies.

The mage descended behind her and channeled a longer spell before a beam four times the size of his previous attacks burned through the approaching beasts. It vaporized any body parts it came into contact with while Ilea blinked and cut down the demons flanking him from behind.

“You with the Hand?” she asked as she ran past him.

“Yes! Group them up for me and teleport out when the spell hits!” he shouted.

Ilea’s heavy steps dug deep into the dirt below, her velocity and weight creating a deadly combination of force as she barrelled into the enemy line. Having heard the man’s instruction, she shouted as loud as she could, not moving too far from her position as more and more demons piled toward her.

A few moments later, she saw a spherical object slowly approaching from behind. She waited until the last second as the first claws finally punched through her veil before she pushed herself off, blinking backward and behind the object.

Reappearing again, she saw a small globe of light floating into the mass of demons, her hands instinctively moving upward right before an explosion of fire and light turned the grass and dirt below into ash. Her veil took the hit as she turned and nodded toward the mage.

The two of them repeated the same tactic for another two chunks of demons, Ilea playing the role of target to pile the enraged creatures up before the mage detonated a deadly payload in their midst. The combination was more effective against the large numbers than the two of them fighting independently.

“May I join in?” a female voice called out behind them just after the latest blast took out at least thirty demons.

It was, of course, a rhetorical question as a wave of lava emanated from the woman’s hands and swallowed the ground to Ilea’s left, forming a line going forward and to the left. Demons hissed as their way toward the city wall was cut off; it was either too far to jump or too painful for them to cross the bubbling lava.

Ilea understood and so did the light mage, moving behind her as she stepped a couple of meters to the right before another wave of lava shot out,

this time to the right. Which left Ilea right in the middle.

Perfect.

Ilea grunted as she held out her arms, facing the frenzied demons charging toward her. Her veil was working overtime as a stream of ash blinded the creatures in front of her, the beasts falling over each other in the confusion while being funneled into the death zone the three mages had created.

This time, the explosion caused by the light mage was a little stronger, singeing a part of her veil before it was reformed. The demons weren't quite as lucky – only ash remained of their corpses.

"We should move, they can't see us here," the woman said, but Ilea just moved her arms so that the ash parted and flowed into the streams of lava, and the demons beyond ran screaming toward the enemy they once again saw before them.

"That works as well, I guess," the woman said. "Charles, how many charges left?"

"Six of the big ones, better make them count. Regroup at the gate after," the light mage said as they continued their tactic.

Ilea had noticed that no ranged attacks were being launched in their direction from the wall above. At least the defenders were gracious enough to let them do their work.

* * *

Ilea's metal boots squashed the bloodied and burned mud underfoot as she made her way over to the two members of the Hand, now idly chatting. Many of the soldiers – guards and adventurers by the looks of them – had joined them to clean up the battlefield. Ilea brushed at her battered helmet, her gauntlet coming away with a layer of mud, blood, and ash.

"There she is. Not bad, newbie. You're one of the new ones, right? Full member already?" Charles asked as his masked face looked her way.

Ilea was intrigued by his mask. Now that she was closer, she saw it was a mixture of metal and cloth that pleased her. She still liked her horned helmet though, as battered as it was.

"Yeah, been for some time already," she answered, stopping in front of them.

“Right in the thick of it then. You do look the part. Though maybe a smith or ten could help. It’s good to see new people filling in for the sad sods that died in the last month. I can’t remember a hit to our numbers this bad.”

“How many are left? I come from near Ravenhall. We’re looking to retake the city,” she said, bumping her fists together.

“Fuck yeah!” the woman with lava magic shouted. Several heads turned toward the group, most quickly looking away again upon seeing the dark armor and high levels. “Told you we’d go back,” she said to Charles, who kept looking at Ilea.

“The mountains are overrun. The initial demons summoned were as high as level 240, at least from what I’ve seen,” Charles said.

“We cleared out Morhill two days ago,” Ilea said. “Couple thousand there, and we’re seven people. The demons are uncoordinated and easy to handle if you take out the ranged ones first and have flying abilities. Ravenhall will be different. Some Mind Weavers are there for sure, the smart ones coordinating the other demons. We’ll try to storm it either way.”

The woman’s grin was wide. “And I won’t miss out on that.”

FIFTY-TWO

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Virilya

“I’m Petra! Charles, let’s go and fight!” the lava woman said, looking happy before her smile vanished. “Let’s go show those demons what they’ve done.”

“We’ll think about it, alright? Now, I’m Charles. I assume you want to meet the people in charge?” the man said.

“Ilea, nice to meet you two. And yes, who would that be?”

“Elder Urn was killed during the assault, Elder Strand has vanished, and Elder Quil is gone as well, teleported by that massive beast that came through that fissure. Glad that thing was shut so quickly.”

“Yeah, funny that,” Ilea said, but she chose not to elaborate.

“Strand or Quil would be in charge if either of them were around. But Dagon is the one organizing the members in the capital at the moment,” Charles explained.

“Hmm, Dagon? The librarian? Lead on, then. I assume there’s no trouble with these guys?” Ilea asked, motioning behind her to where the group of flying soldiers she had encountered on her arrival were floating.

“Don’t worry about them. Petra, would you take care of them and join us later, darling?”

“Of course,” Petra said. Her smile was a little too enthusiastic, but Ilea wasn’t going to stop whatever fun she would have with the soldiers.

“Follow me then,” Charles said, walking off toward the gate. “Time is of the essence, I assume?” he asked, looking sideways at Ilea as she followed him.

“Somewhat, yes. I’ll go back south when I’m done here. I have a letter from one of the squad leaders for Dagon. We’ll meet at Morhill in a week – or two if it takes longer. Worst case scenario, the demons will summon some eldritch horrors to destroy all of Elos,” she answered, her tone dry.

“Alright, if that’s all that’s at stake, then we’re golden.”

Ilea smiled.

“Well, it won’t take us a week to get there. Maybe some of us will come with you immediately. Scouting the city and planning will take some time, however. At least we know the terrain, secret entries, and every building,” Charles said, walking through the humongous gate that had opened now that the battle was over.

Ilea looked around, stopping in her tracks after entering the city. The smell had changed, and a square opened up before her with beautiful ancient trees, gnarled wood and branches carrying near-golden leaves. A massive fountain stood at the center, adorned with a bird made of stone. The houses were nowhere near as simple and drab as those in Ravenhall. Nor were they built to withstand monster attacks.

Large windows and beautifully carved doors adorned many of the buildings, each at least four stories high, the façade colored in different shades of red and yellow. It looked like a theme park’s interpretation of a European city with the budget of Wall Street and sprinkled with magic.

“Didn’t grow up around here, did you?” Charles chuckled.

The streets were bustling with activity, the people unconcerned about the massacre that had just happened a couple of hundred meters outside their walls. The suns shone through the trees as merchants, bakers, and smiths shouted their wares and prices while restaurants and pubs, with music playing inside, served food to their patrons.

“It’s beautiful...” Ilea said, looking toward Charles. “No, never been here before.”

“Well then, you’ll want a tour. It’s quite rich in character and history. I believe some parts of Viscera were inspired by Virilya, or the other way around. Both been here for a while. Considering the circumstances, though, I suggest we hold off on the tour. Any objection?” he asked, surprising Ilea that he would even consider asking her.

“No objections, lead the way. If it’s more than a couple minutes, we can run or fly.”

Charles nodded and started running, Ilea following behind a second later before they found a comfortable pace for both of them, avoiding the people in the streets by jumping up onto the roofs above. Ilea nearly stumbled as she got a better view of the massive buildings all around – chapels, cathedrals, and towers reaching nearly as high as the walls. Some of the streets were incredibly broad, trees lining either side.

“Found myself in Rome, eh?” She smiled as she followed Charles. “Why don’t we fly?” she asked as they jumped onto another roof, both landing with such expertise that not a single tile moved out of place.

“They don’t like it. Not that it matters much, but a happy host is a happy host. Running on the rooftops is already considered rude,” Charles replied as they sped through the city.

Ten minutes of high-speed running later, Charles jumped down into a small square devoid of people with a lot of trees and benches. The adjacent buildings were overgrown with ivy, a dark red color visible below. Ilea could hear faint voices through some of the open windows, but this area was much quieter than the one near the gate.

On one side of the square was a cathedral in gothic style, smaller than most of the others she had seen in the distance while running but no less impressive. Charles walked toward it, Ilea close behind.

A massive man in black full-plate armor nodded at them as they entered. Next to him was the biggest sword Ilea had ever seen.

[Warrior – lvl 223]

“Nice sword,” she said.

The man let out a puff of air in response as they walked past him into the cathedral proper. The windows looked tinted, almost sepia, dimming the sunlight from outside. To Ilea, it looked similar to one of the old churches she had visited on Earth. The only things missing were the rows of benches, an organ, and pictures and sculptures of holy men and angels.

Instead, she found tables and chairs, gear in piles and boxes, and a bar near the wall with a man cleaning glasses. Warm magical lights gave the place a homely feel. She only saw a few other people. Four were playing cards and drinking, and two more were walking past them at a brisk pace.

“Dagon, we have a visitor. With news from Ravenhall,” Charles said as the two walked up to a man at a table, busily occupied with the piles of

letters in front of him. The large librarian looked over his glasses and smiled slightly as he spotted Ilea.

“Another survivor. I will note it. Welcome back to the Hand,” he said, getting up from his chair, which nearly broke under the stress.

“Hey, Dagon,” Ilea said. The card-playing people perked up and paused their game to see what she had to say. “Letter for you,” she said as the item appeared in her hand. She gave it to Dagon, who opened it immediately and started reading, sitting down a moment later.

“So much for the worth of knowing you have a storage item,” he murmured, looking at her for a split second before he continued reading. Ilea smiled and waited.

Dagon’s hand started shaking before he set down the letter, leaning back as he closed his eyes.

“So, you saw him?”

“Saw whom?” Ilea asked.

His eyes opened. “Adam.” His voice was hard this time.

“Yes. We even fought him.”

“The runes, all his planning... there’s no more denying it,” Dagon said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

Ilea now saw the bags under his eyes, no longer obscured by his glasses.

“We must do what we can, then. Sulivhaan has survived,” Dagon said, then he took a deep breath and stood up, slow and steady. “Everyone, gather the Shadow’s Hand. We cannot wait any longer.”

* * *

Ilea told Dagon about her journey through the Great Salt, her fight with Adam, and what little he had said.

“You knew him well?” she asked. She’d found his response subdued as he busily wrote everything she said into one of his books.

“I suppose I didn’t, after all. I didn’t think he would be capable of something like this.”

“Any idea why he did it?”

Dagon looked at her for a long moment, then nodded to himself. “There are a few possibilities, yes. But I can’t confirm anything until I meet him.”

His voice was cold, and one of his fists tightened around the book he had closed.

“Need a drink?”

He sighed. “You could say so, yes.”

Ilea motioned to the bar before she went and sat down, getting some mead as they waited for the Shadow’s Hand to gather. Dagon joined her a few minutes later, remaining silent as he gestured to the barman.

“Do you have food as well?” Ilea asked. The barman nodded, producing a cold plate of snacks.

“Dagon, our team was split up. Eve and Claire are still missing. Do you know if they’re here?”

Dagon looked at the glass in front of him and downed it. “Neither of them is here,” he said, his voice soft. “I’m sorry.”

Ilea gulped. “Anything confirmed?”

“Nothing is confirmed as of yet.”

Then they’re not dead, Ilea thought, thinking back to the Taleen dungeon. She looked at the barman and motioned to Dagon’s glass. The barman refilled her glass too.

“I’m looking for a cook as well. Keyla is her first name. She worked for some establishment... damn, I forgot the name of it,” she said, picking up her glass and drinking. It was something like tequila.

“Keyla Aranoth. She’s alive and in the capital.”

Ilea wondered how he knew that immediately, but she chose not to press the matter. *She got out.*

“Glad to hear that. I’ll get in touch with her at some point, then. Thanks.”

* * *

It took a mere hour for the previously empty cathedral to be bustling with life. At least a hundred people were present, not one below level 200. Most were armed and armored, and most were in black.

Dagon cleared his throat. The room went quiet a moment later as all eyes focused on him. Most people were seated or leaning against something, no longer occupied by their own conversation. Ilea looked on from the bar.

“Welcome, Shadow’s Hand,” he started. “Thank you all for coming. We have word from a survivor near Ravenhall. Morhill has been cleared of the demon infestation. Seven members stayed behind to hunt down the beasts.”

Some people started to murmur at that.

“The most likely suspect for the summoning is none other than our own Elder Strand,” he said.

The Shadows were less enraged than Ilea had expected. A few even laughed. One sighed and handed some gold to another. Ilea looked at them, shaking her head slightly.

“We have waited here for an Elder to return, but none has come so far, and with every week we wait, the demons have more time to prepare,” Dagon continued, the room quieting again. “I’m no Elder, but most of you know me. There is no pay I can offer, nor is there an obligation for any one of you to join. But there are demons sullyng our halls and our city. Let’s go and kill them.”

A few people laughed, some chuckled.

“We’re with you, Dagon,” a deep voice said, then more joined in.

Ilea smiled. She hadn’t expected a speech from Dagon. He seemed more warrior than librarian right now.

“We leave today for Morhill, and then for Ravenhall. Let’s retake our home,” Dagon finished, and Ilea stood up.

“Let’s gut some demons!” a man shouted from the corner of the cathedral.

The Shadows returned to their own conversations once more, teams discussing what they wanted to do.

“You alright?” Ilea asked Dagon as she went up to him. He extended his hand and shook hers.

“Thank you for coming. And for caring.”

“Don’t mention it. As much as this cathedral is nice, your library has a certain charm,” she said. “That was a pretty good speech.”

“You think so? I do read a lot, but it sounded better in my head,” he said, pointing at his temple. “Let’s leave, then.”

He opened one of the heavy tomes on his table, then slammed it together. The shockwave and sound caused people to look toward them, some shrouding themselves in shadow or preparing spells to counter an attack.

“We meet at the southern gate in one hour,” Dagon called before walking out. Ilea smiled as a puff of air left her nose.

“An hour to check out the city,” Ilea said to herself as she looked around before spotting Charles. Walking up to him, she put a hand on his shoulder. “So, we have an hour for a quick tour,” she said, smiling at him.

“An hour? For Virilya? That’s not even enough for Viscera. You wouldn’t see all of this city in a month,” he answered, shaking his head. “But I can show you some of the places around the most southern part if you like. I’m sure Petra will gladly play the guide.”

On hearing her name, Petra perked up and jumped toward them, leaving her previous conversation behind.

“Did I hear the words Petra and guide? City tour?” she asked excitedly, locking eyes with Ilea as a big, scary smile blossomed.

“You’re intense,” Ilea said as she grabbed the woman’s shoulders. “Show me the city, Petra!”

“You’d better keep up then, newbie,” Petra replied as she ran off.

“We’ll meet you at the gate, then,” Ilea said to Charles, whose eyes were focused on Petra, a smile on his face.

* * *

“How was it?” Charles asked as Ilea and Petra joined him outside the south gate. There were a lot of people not in black armor or robes looking on at the scene, more gathering by the minute to see the spectacle.

“More running than seeing. She knows a lot more about history than I would’ve expected,” Ilea answered, looking around her. The hour would be up in a few minutes.

“She does,” Charles said, his voice quiet.

At that moment, Dagon came out through the gate, covered in heavy armor from head to toe. He held a metal book the size of Ilea’s chest under his arm as he walked past the gathered people, reaching her a moment later.

“We leave,” the librarian said, a pulse of magic emanating from his form before he started levitating. Around her, Ilea watched as people took to the air, wings and magical extensions sprouting from people’s backs as animals and monsters were summoned, ready to carry people both on land and in the air.

“They all came,” Charles said as he started floating upward, pride in his voice as Ilea began hovering next to him.

“Carry?” Petra asked from below, lifting her arms toward Ilea with a smile.

“Carry,” Ilea confirmed as she lowered herself down again, letting the lava mage grab her right arm.

* * *

“Still think it would’ve been a good idea to stop her?” Torrence asked his new friend, watching from the top of the wall as over a hundred people in black left the capital. They didn’t know where they were going, but Torrence felt a little lighter with all of them gone.

“Fucking spectacle, isn’t it?” Gem said.

“Yeah, whatever they’re heading for, I don’t want to be there,” Torrence said as the people around them started to disperse. The gate below would close again soon, lest another demon attack follow the earlier one.

“Shift’s over in ten, wanna go to Tally’s?”

“Sure, you’re paying. And stop trying to talk to that barmaid. I told you she’s not interested.”

The guards continued to argue as a distant bell rang in the busy city.

* * *

A bandaged woman woke to the sound of bells ringing in the morning hours, a heavy cough shaking her body. The room was dark again.

Eve checked herself and found her cuts had healed enough for her to fight again. She got up and walked to the other side of the room, grabbing some water to wash herself before carefully removing the bloodied bandages and stacking them. They would be burned later, in case blood mages tried to track her down.

Today she planned to find a few people to *interview*. A man, a woman, and a butler, though she doubted the latter would yield anything of import. Then again, there were surprises waiting at every corner of life, especially in Virilya.

Next, she washed her daggers. The blood was already dry and stuck to the blades. That was one of her many reasons not to get badly injured during battle. She could clean her weapons straight after.

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FIFTY-THREE

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Preparations

“How does it look?” Sulivhaan asked, Navalís having arrived just a moment ago. He had chosen one of the most central pubs in Morhill to use as their base. The square in front had been prepared by Rock. Barricades blocked all the streets to the square, and the pub was now only easily accessible by air or by climbing over everything.

As soon as they had any earth mages around, the defenses would be extended. For now, it wasn’t feasible to defend the whole city against possible intruders, but the Empire would arrive with reinforcements at some point, and perhaps Ilea would manage to convince some of the Hand’s survivors to assist, if they were still gathered in the capital.

In the meantime, Senia was regularly scouting Morhill and its gates, taking care of stray demons near the city’s walls.

“At least three mind weavers visible. Ranged demons stationed on all walls and high buildings behind. High-level scouting bands patrolling around the city, and I saw at least five unidentified, previously unknown demon variations,” Navalís reported, walking up to the broad table in the middle of the pub.

The rest of the tables and chairs had been moved away to make space. Oil lamps burned around the room, giving it a warm feeling, though the hearth was currently cold. The remaining occupants of the city weren’t in need of the warmth, although the two Imperial Scouts who had stayed behind were sitting huddled in a corner, covered by several blankets. Even at level 130, the two didn’t seem to have much resistance against the cold.

Sulivhaan ignored them. Perhaps they would finally gain a suitable resistance in the coming days. It would take some convincing for the Empire to assist them in retaking Ravenhall, at least in any reasonable time, while the demons were still establishing themselves.

The army wasn't known for their timely reactions when it came to an external organization like the Hand or any non-central region. Their answer would come in overwhelming force, but this wasn't a human enemy or a normal monster population. Retaking the city would cost a large number of lives and use up resources that then wouldn't be available elsewhere, where cities were still untouched by the demons, and the populations alive.

"Good. It seems their movements haven't changed much, then, but either they were hiding those creatures, or they're creating or summoning new ones. We should focus first on destroying their scouting teams. I'll talk to Trian and Kyrian about this. They should be able to handle that," Sulivhaan said, marking the newfound information on the large map of Ravenhall and its surroundings.

At least the demons didn't seem to be expanding outward, remaining within the walls they likely deemed safe. Other than a few stragglers and small groups, no new enemies had come close to Morhill.

"No word from Ilea yet?"

When he didn't receive an answer, he closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at the map once more. He was thinking about possible avenues of attack when Rock burst into the room, a big grin on his face.

"You should come see this," the warrior said, motioning for them to follow him outside as he held the massive wooden door open with his free arm. The four occupants of the room left a moment later, Sulivhaan and Navalis looking at each other before following Rock.

The square looked the same, but when Sulivhaan looked up at the sky, a smile replaced the frown that had plagued him for the past month.

In the distance, he saw a group of flying people, all in black, breaking through the heavy clouds. There were a lot more than he had expected. More importantly, it wasn't the Empire. It was the Shadow's Hand.

"I always said you're too pessimistic, old man," Rock said, looking toward their squad leader. Even Navalis sported a slight upward curve on her lips. A rare sight.

"There's a difference between realism and pessimism, Rock," Sulivhaan replied as they walked toward the center of the square.

Still, he had to admit this was unexpectedly promising.

Rock chuckled as he raised his hammer, waving at the new arrivals.

Ilea and Dagon were among the first to land. Ilea was waving wildly with a huge smile on her face. The librarian had taken the lead, Sulivhaan surmised, which explained a few things. It was likely he had gathered the remaining Shadows and waited for one of the Elders to arrive.

His posture less tense, Sulivhaan walked up to the big man, arms extended.

“We rushed here as soon as we could after we got the news. I’m glad you survived, old friend,” Dagon said, hugging the smaller mage, yet not managing to lift him up. Sulivhaan’s gravity magic fought against the other man’s strength, a tradition they had upheld for quite a long time, originating from a stupid bet in Viscera. As many things once had.

“Come, then. We have much to plan,” Sulivhaan said, nodding to Ilea, who returned the gesture.

The two men and several others headed into the pub while the remainder of the Shadows put up tents or claimed houses for themselves. Still more spread out toward the city walls to ensure higher security or to go and hunt. The Hand’s members were mostly independent and were used to working in small teams. This situation wouldn’t change their approach; they simply had more teams and firepower available.

* * *

Ilea watched the two men’s backs as they walked toward the pub.

“Good job, you were faster than I expected,” Rock said, stepping next to her and following her gaze. “I assume it wasn’t exactly hard to convince him?”

“I think he was still waiting for Adam,” she said.

“If there was a leader of the Hand, it was Strand. I think those who knew him better were even more shocked. Good to see they’ve shaken that off now.”

Ilea cracked her neck. “Yeah. I’ll go catch a few hours of sleep.”

“Don’t miss the fighting,” Rock said with a smile. “Oh, and that armor. You might want to have it checked beforehand.”

“Had no time in Virilya, and there isn’t a smithy around here. Not anymore.”

Rock just looked at her and chuckled.

“What?”

“The Shadow’s Hand is here. Plenty who dabble. Might not be the work of a master smith, but I’m sure you can have some basic repairs done while you sleep. Let me introduce you to a few people.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Ilea said, following the large man as he called out to a group of nearby Shadows.

* * *

Sulivhaan looked through the info in front of him. It was a list of all the people who had come to Morhill, together with their general abilities and Class information. Many were here with their full squad, likely having survived the demon summoning together. Others were alone or with incomplete teams. He wouldn’t ask – he was simply glad they’d come.

“I expected the Empire at least to contribute to the force, but I think we’ll be able to work our way through a large part of the enemy now before they even decide whether to send reinforcements,” Sulivhaan said, sitting down on a chair next to the map.

“I talked to a few officers before we left Virilya, so there’s a chance we’ll see Imperial colors earlier than you’d expect,” Dagon said, removing his helmet to sit down at the table, his small glasses still sitting on the bridge of his nose.

The other people who had followed them in were all taking a chair or a standing position around the map, each a veteran in one way or another.

“Alright, let’s start,” Dagon said, pushing his glasses up a little.

* * *

Ilea raised her fist, took a step forward, and rotated her whole torso a couple of degrees to get as much power out of her attack as possible. Her fist impacted the heavy iron gate with a dull sound.

They were in a valley near Ravenhall, a location entrusted to them by Sulivhaan and Dagon. Kyrian, Weavy, and Trian stood nearby, scanning the

landscape for demons.

“Not bad,” Trian joked. “Now come on, we don’t want to waste any time.”

“We have seven hours. No need to rush,” Ilea said. Nonetheless, she activated her buffs, and a dull blue hue formed on her skin below her armor and clothes, nearly overpowering the thin lines of red from her second class.

The repairs to her juggernaut armor had been extensive; by now, not much of the original metals or the enchantments remained. It turned out her armor was so fucked up that every Shadow in Morhill with at least some interest in metalwork had wanted to figure out how to make it wearable again.

She breathed in deeply, the cold air reaching her lungs before it was once again released into the cool air around them. There was still snow, but less than last month. The twilight broke through the trees and shone onto the warded metal door set into the mountainside before them.

“Stand back, you two. Don’t want to have you die to the defensive measures,” she said, getting a grunt and a frown in response, respectively. Still, her teammates stepped back. “You too, Weavy.”

The demon gave her a nod and slowly floated backward and away from the doorway, slightly disturbing the snow on the ground with his clothes, which were of Taleen make and not exactly a perfect fit.

Ilea looked back at the door and this time punched with all her power. Her fist landed on the metal plate, immediately denting it as a wave of force pushed outward from the impact, and there was a sizzling sound as her destructive mana flowed into it. The door started glowing a little before a single metal spike shot out toward her torso. Ilea moved to the side just enough for it to only scratch the veil protecting her chest. The force made her spin around, but she landed on her feet, taking a step forward before hitting the door with her next punch.

This time a series of wind attacks were summoned, and Ilea lifted her arms to protect her face. Part of one attack made it through her defensive veil and into the slit of her helmet, cutting into her eye and deep into her skull.

“Fuck,” she murmured as she stepped back, making her helmet vanish and summoning a piece of cloth to clean up the blood on her face. Hunter Recovery took over as she waited through the dull pain. With her

resistances, it felt more like stubbing a toe, definitely not like a near-fatal head injury. “Always the damn doors... why can’t we just dig through further down?”

“Because then the tunnel collapses,” Trian stated.

“And it doesn’t if the door is broken in?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t we get a key for this?” Kyrian asked.

“The key is *in* Ravenhall,” Trian said.

Ilea’s next punch unhinged the door, and a blue fire burst from around the entrance, engulfing Ilea, who just stood there, her healing taking care of the little damage the fire did. It was nothing compared to the green fire that had nearly killed her in the Taleen dungeon.

Green beats blue, I suppose. What does that say about my Class?

“Ready?” she asked, then entered the darkness waiting for her beyond the doorway. Steps led downward into the earth toward Ravenhall’s sewage system.

“Let’s go,” Trian said.

Using her sphere to see, Ilea walked downstairs with sure steps while the others either floated behind her or touched the walls for orientation. It took a little longer than expected to reach the deepest part of the spiral staircase, where another door, this one not warded, opened up to Ilea’s push, old and rusty metal creaking as she moved the massive door.

A dark tunnel lay beyond, the sound of flowing water clearly noticeable in the distance, giving their quite obviously artificial surroundings a more natural feel. Looking around, Ilea thought the place may have been built for a practical and fast escape if it wasn’t simply part of the infrastructure. They were still a fair distance away from the actual city, which was more suggestive of the first theory.

Trian and Kyrian used their limited perception of the space around them, still training their eyes to perhaps receive a similar skill to Ilea at some point. Behind them, Weavy followed a crowd of all the monsters they had helped bring under his control since returning to Elos. The creatures shuffled in the dark, occasionally twitching and scratching a wall or the ground before them.

Ilea opened another door, ready to meet the enemy demon already rushing toward her. She jabbed it in the face, disorienting the beast before

another two punches to its torso broke the bones and organs within. It slumped down, dead in mere moments.

“Low levels down here,” she said. The mind weavers had probably pooled the stronger demons around themselves to ensure their safety and a tight grip on their minds.

“That’s nasty...” Trian said as he followed Ilea through the door, stepping over the demon corpse and holding his nose. The flow of water was closer now, and with it came the stench of a sewage system nobody had taken care of for more than a couple of weeks.

“Welcome to paradise...” Ilea said absentmindedly as she heard the first screams of monsters. The stealthy approach was likely not going to happen. “Might as well start with the cleanup,” she added, putting her fists together. Behind her, a series of Kyrian’s metal spheres split into sharp, bullet-sized projectiles while lightning sparkled around Trian.

“Calm down, Sparky. We don’t want the ceiling to come down on us. Remember your words. Keep an eye on Weavy instead,” she said, then walked toward the noises steadily coming closer.

Trian gave her a nod, serious now. “I’ll intervene if you get overwhelmed.”

Then the first demons spilled out into the passage before them, nearly running each other over as they screamed toward the group of humans, teeth bared and spittle hanging low from their mouths.

FIFTY-FOUR

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Flying in the Dark

Ilea appeared before them and crushed a head, the bone and flesh exploding like a watermelon. Her arms were covered by the black olvor gauntlets and a layer of ash as she breathed out and turned. A sea of claws lay before her.

She blinked upward as ten demons struggled against each other in the small space in their effort to get to her. They were shredded a moment later by a multitude of metal spikes, their organs and brains destroyed before Ilea landed, heavy strikes with her fists colliding with any demons still standing.

In her sphere, she saw that their path ahead was full of the beasts. So far, not a single one had been over level 80, their bodies easily destroyed by the more seasoned warriors.

Dodging the savage claw attacks and answering open maws with a fist let Ilea wade through her opponents like a bulldozer, leaving none of them intact. Kyrian advanced from behind, cleaning up the still-living monsters and sending spikes into the mass of flesh arrayed before her, the projectiles flying past her as she dodged and punched.

In the end, the ones advancing weren't the demons but Ilea and Kyrian, who massacred the opposition, leaving behind a tunnel filled with bleeding and destroyed corpses. The walls were stained red, glinting under the slight blue and red shine emanating from Ilea's helmet.

"That's all of them for now. No mind weaver," she said, walking back.

"No mind weaver, I agree," Kyrian said as the demon bodies around them shook slightly. There was the sound of metal ripping through flesh before pieces of metal flew back toward the metal mage, forming back into spheres that circled him, dripping with blood.

“We can move on,” Ilea said to the others as she looked at the carnage around her with her sphere.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Demon – lvl 74]

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Demon – lvl 62]

...

The list went on and on, and Ilea skipped through the messages. Not a single level-up to any of her skills or Classes. Considering the ease of the fight, it would take a couple more of those to gain more experience in her skills.

She smiled to herself, ready to reach the city and wreak havoc from within. A small group like theirs would likely be ignored in favor of the bigger threat from outside, even if they were discovered earlier.

That was the hope, at least. If not, they would take some of the enemy’s resources off the walls before making their escape.

They walked or floated onward through the dark corridors of Ravenhall’s sewers, the dark and murky water next to them reflecting the little light they produced from their skills. Ilea wondered how she would have handled being in a monster-infested sewage system without light two years ago. She was glad for her Classes, readying herself as they got closer and closer to the city.

* * *

“The surveillance is complete, master Sulivhaan.”

A man in dark leather armor bowed to the mage after placing a report on his table.

Sulivhaan stood up and nodded to acknowledge the respect the scout had shown. The assault on the city was planned to take place in seven hours. The teams were already preparing for the assault, some sleeping or cooking, others sharpening their blades and preparing potions or bombs.

Moving fast was of utmost importance; more reports of previously unseen beasts were filling his table. The demons had a way to summon

more, and their numbers were already exorbitantly high. Every minute, every hour, their numbers would grow. The only light on the horizon was that, for the most part, the newly summoned demons remained in the city. They had to strike before that changed.

“We have the groups, the combination of skills, a couple of healers, and enough firepower to wipe out an entire army,” Dagon said as he removed his glasses and cleaned them with a towel that appeared in his hand.

The initial summoning had caught them off guard, the entire battle pure chaos. Individuals ran to survive. Civilians just as much as Shadows.

This was different. They had more information now, there were no more civilians to consider, and they could prepare their perimeters, advance with planning and precision. With any other force, Sulivhaan would’ve thought it impossible, but these were Shadows.

“There are too many variables we don’t know,” Sulivhaan said as he leafed through the latest report.

They knew the terrain, the city, and, at this point, most of the enemy troops. Removing the ranged units from a distance would give complete air control to their mages, allowing a continued bombardment while funneling the demons below through the gates and onto the field before Ravenhall, where their most resilient warriors and close-combat mages would be waiting.

That was if many of the mind weavers could be taken out at the same time and if their information on them was accurate.

“There is much we don’t know, but that’s not new to anybody here. Each and every one of our members could take out hundreds of those demons on their own,” Dagon said, putting a hand on Sulivhaan’s shoulder.

“They will have to kill thousands.”

“And they will. Trust in the Hand. Now, come, I haven’t seen you even eat since we arrived.”

Sulivhaan agreed. He didn’t know the librarian to be this optimistic, but it almost seemed like this whole mobilization had given him a bit of his youth back, made his step a little lighter.

It was early morning as the two strode out of the inn. The previously deserted square was returning to near the same level of activity as it had had when Morhill still stood strong as a town of the Empire.

The scene reminded Sulivhaan more of an adventurer camp before the exploration of a dungeon. Cooking stations and fires were burning as

people trained their skills, talked, and worked together with people and teams they hadn't been in contact with for years – if ever.

The air was still fresh, and as the suns had not yet reached the horizon, the fires provided most of the light. The snow in the square was churned into the earth by the many people occupying it, turning the ground to mud.

The smells of different exotic and regional foods filled their noses as Sulivhaan and Dagon advanced to one of the tables set up outside the inn. Nearby, a bard was working on his lute, tuning the different strings before he started playing, the thick mana streaming from his magical weapon penetrating the surroundings.

No wild beast or demon had come close to the walls of Morhill in the past day. Many Shadows had gone out to hunt and clear the surrounding villages and small towns, finding many of them occupied by demons – but no mind weavers.

A select few villages had even managed to withstand the demon attacks, which was quite impressive, being so far outside the Empire's main cities and so close to the demon summoning in Ravenhall.

Dagon joined Sulivhaan with two plates of steaming food, placing them down on the table. The stew was comparable to what an experienced cook in Viscera would produce. Perhaps someone had brought one with them.

"How do you feel about Strand?" Sulivhaan asked, influencing the space around them a little to make it harder for sound to travel.

Dagon looked at him and then back at his plate, poking around in his food for a moment before he answered. "I don't know why he chose this way. I had hoped he had more left in his stubborn heart for us, you know?"

Sulivhaan stayed quiet. The man would talk more if he wanted to. There was no reason to push him. It was no secret that the librarian and the Elder had known each other for longer than others even lived.

"We did manage to bring the Hand back together. A part of me hopes that was his plan, though it doesn't justify what he did."

"What do you mean?" Sulivhaan moved in a little closer, the magic around him thickening. Dagon sensed it and looked around.

"Wallace Urn was... taken care of in the confusion of the summoning."

"So that's why you didn't grow suspicious of Strand's behavior... Did it really get that bad?" Sulivhaan asked.

He knew that the Elder wasn't exactly similar to the other leaders of the Hand, but at least he was sometimes in Ravenhall. Two hadn't even shown

up when the city was destroyed.

“It did, but that’s not why I trusted Adam. He was always scheming, planning, and being a suspicious character. That’s why I didn’t think this was different. All his experimenting with animals and monsters. It’s led to this.

“Urn, on the other hand, wanted to change the Shadow’s Hand, wanted to change who we are. I have reliable sources and evidence pointing to cooperation with Baralia,” Dagon said, sharing information for free, not something he was known to do regularly.

Sulivhaan shook his head. Like the Empire, the Kingdom of Baralia had its hands and eyes on everything. Or at least it tried, but to think it had come so close as to plant an Elder in the Shadow’s Hand was definitely concerning.

“There will be a vote, you know?” Dagon said.

Sulivhaan knew what he was talking about, and he had already considered it.

“Maybe a few years off the battlefield would do me well. My age is a bad influence on the team,” Sulivhaan said and smiled as he continued eating, most of his mask still covering his face.

“Verena isn’t exactly good with people. Let alone administration. It’ll be good to have you.”

Sulivhaan finished his food, a single thought on his mind as he looked at the friend sitting opposite.

There were two Elders dead or missing, not just one.

FIFTY-FIVE

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Infected City

“We’re right below the entrance. Are you guys ready?” Ilea asked.

Trian and Kyrian nodded, and Weavy was actually smiling. Or at least he was producing the closest thing he could with his terrifying features.

“We’ll follow the plan, then,” Ilea said.

“Will do. Good luck, Ilea. And try not to die,” Trian said.

“We’ll wait for you inside,” Kyrian added, nodding to her.

“I’m the healer, so it’s you who shouldn’t die,” she said.

Ilea left them behind and motioned for Weavy to follow her with the creatures he had under his control.

Weavy hadn’t been informed about anything. Even the attack on the city had only been communicated to him after they’d started their journey to the outskirts of Ravenhall. Mind magic-savvy members of the Hand had kept an eye on the demon during their stay in Morhill.

“Alright then, Weavy,” Ilea started after they had run through the sewers below Ravenhall for a couple of minutes. “Your goal is to send your demons up and cause as much havoc as possible from inside the city as soon as the attack starts. Take over new demons as you lose any, if possible. I suggest keeping a group of your highest-leveled ones with you to avoid any retaliation. Oh, and use the gullies and other sewage exits to enter the city. I don’t think you’ll be able to destroy the ceiling easily.”

“Understood, Ilea,” he said as his demons spread out.

“I like you, so don’t go dying on us now. Once this is done, I’ll make sure you have a safe place to stay.”

“It is appreciated, Ilea. I shall try not to perish.”

She left him there, more or less right under the center of the city. The mind weavers either hadn't detected them yet or had simply ignored the few pests hiding right under their noses – which made Ilea worry a little.

Ilea rushed through the broken walls they had left behind, quickly finding her way back to the entrance outside Ravenhall. At full speed, it took barely five minutes, her sphere making the darkness around her easy to navigate.

The suns blinded her for a moment as she rushed out into the snow-covered mountainside, immediately alerting the group of rogues and mages waiting for her, Shadows all.

"The way is clear," Ilea said. "Now come, we have barely an hour to scout out the city from below and find all the mind weavers."

Bringing the mages and rogues through the tunnels and sewers took some time, but eventually they were all positioned below the city. Above them were what felt like countless demons. Ilea looked at one of them in her sphere.

"I'm pretty sure that's a mind weaver," she said.

"Doesn't look like it. The mana signature feels wrong," a masked rogue said, shaking his head.

Weavy had never heard about even two or three mind weavers working together, yet here, they found dozens, all surrounded by strong-looking demons.

"You go and find one then. I'll stay, I think time is nearly up. Once the chaos starts, we can continue the search for more. Good luck," she said. The man nodded and vanished.

Ilea prepared herself. The house above her was packed with demons, as were the streets around it. She couldn't identify creatures through walls, but she was pretty sure they weren't the low-leveled monsters she had fought in Morhill and outside Virilya. They looked more aware, more savage, their muscles tense and eyes focused.

She waited for a minute, then two, humming a tune to herself with a stray thought to her long-lost phone. The central demon in the house above was undoubtedly a mind weaver, his scrawny figure a near mirror image of Weavy. The monsters surrounding it were twitching with the urge to tear into fresh meat. She didn't quite understand the last scout's detection skill, but to her own sphere, her target was clear.

Three minutes passed, and her humming was the only noise in the stillness as she created spirals of ash that twirled around her. They formed tendrils that touched the walls and the ground before they surrounded her armor and vanished again, an exercise she was slowly getting better at.

She suddenly felt a light tremor through her feet, and her sphere confirmed that the earth had been shaken from an impact quite a distance away.

“We’re starting...” she said, but she waited for another minute as more and more tremors came.

The demons in the streets above were already moving toward the northern gate, where the main assault would occur. Bending down to tap the toes of each boot, Ilea stretched and prepared herself as she next cracked her hands and neck.

Ready to jump into a demon horde again.

She felt nervous, despite her many fights against the creatures.

They took Ravenhall.

Let’s do this.

“Shit, should have thought of a better one-liner,” she said out loud, then she vanished, reappearing on the second floor of the building above her.

Her blue bladed gauntlets reflected the magical light illuminating the monsters who had taken residence inside the unremarkable stone townhouse. They were quick to react, but Ilea was quicker. Before any of them had moved, her first blade was already through the mind weaver’s neck as she turned to kick one of the surrounding demons.

A claw cut through her Veil of Ash, crashing into her side and making her unable to blink away. These weren’t the demons she had come to know in the past week but monsters who had survived the Great Salt.

As she landed hard on the ground and felt more claws cut through her defenses, she knew that it wouldn’t be enough.

She silently promised them that they wouldn’t survive Ravenhall.

FIFTY-SIX

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Brawl

A surge of ash spread around her as the demons tried to penetrate her armor, scratching at the metal with their savage claws. They cut deeper into it compared to the initial juggernaut set, but the extensive repairs held up.

Ilea used each impact to send a destructive Wave of Ember through the attackers combined with Destruction and reversed Reconstruction. The damage was enough to give her a minuscule time frame where none of them touched her, letting her blink up to the roof. The mind weaver was dead, and her task now was to focus on finding more of them.

One down...

Ilea stood on top of the house. She leaned to the side to dodge a bone projectile that flashed past her. The battle was in full swing now. The sky was burning with fire and ice, magical explosions destroying walls and parts of houses near the front gates, ripping through the assembled demon masses and their stolen defenses. Ilea was deeper inside the city, removed from the main fighting force. Where more mind weavers would most likely be.

Another four projectiles made her focus on her surroundings, blinking to the top of a tall local tavern as she looked for mind weavers in her sphere. Finding nothing, she spread her wings and flew to the next building, continuing to ignore the growing number of ranged attacks that shot toward her and demons chasing her below. They tried to scale walls and leap at her or rushed after her through the crowded streets, waiting for her to land. A few fliers turned her way as well.

A distant demon must have taken notice of the pursuit as a massive rock was hurled her way. Ilea smiled and stopped her search, landing on a wide-roofed general store, where she waited until the last moment before the projectile landed, demons flocking toward her, before she blinked away.

The boulder clipped the side of the three-story store, taking out a big chunk of it, before it smashed the demons below into a bloody paste before it rolled further, pulverizing even more of them. She blinked again to make distance from the fliers, most of them already going toward the main battle instead.

“Another one...” Ilea said as she appeared inside the top room of a tall, thin apartment block, bladed gauntlets slashing through the weaver’s body as ash entered the space around her.

She pushed aside the demons in front of her and barreled right through the opposite wall to avoid being swarmed once more. Cutting off the arm of a monster still clutching at her leg, she blinked upward. A fireball landed in the crowd below, the explosion heating her back as she continued running and leaping over the rooftops.

She could see another warrior mimicking her behavior a couple of hundred meters to her left, the two working as beacons for the artillery to attract demons around them. Killing the mind mages brought chaos to the now uncontrolled monsters around them, and Ilea could already see some of them attacking each other. Perhaps that was just the result of Weavy’s efforts, but soon enough, she hoped the monsters would do so of their own volition.

Ilea had found a third mind weaver and was heading toward it before she saw the warrior from before fly through the window of the house in front of her. She appeared inside the stone townhouse, her bladed gauntlets cutting through the monsters who were preoccupied with the other warrior. Now that she was closer, she could see that he was thin for a warrior and highly agile. His armor was black and slim-fitting, almost aerodynamic.

There were clearly more demons than the warrior had expected. The monsters hadn’t managed to rip open his chest piece, but the cuts were getting deeper and deeper while wounds near his elbows and knees were already bleeding profusely, covering his arms and legs in red rivulets. Ilea created ash around them as she grabbed the man and carried him through the townhouse’s nicely decorated wall.

Seeing a veritable mosh pit of screeching demons below her, she spread her wings and carried them into the building opposite, across the street. It was more of a multi-story mansion than a townhouse, with conveniently large arched windows, and Ilea flew straight through the largest of them.

She landed on her feet and felt the warrior's vitals with her healing skill. He was stable, but it would take another couple of minutes to get him up to fighting strength again. On the ground floor, demons were screeching and hammering on the door in an attempt to reach the humans. Luckily, whoever had once lived here had invested in a heavy oak front door that was well-barred and secured. It would buy them some time.

"Go for the demon..." the warrior said, blood spurting from his mouth as his wounds slowly closed.

Ilea nodded and blinked back to the townhouse, where monsters were still scrambling toward the freshly opened wall to get to the mansion window, jumping out and falling into the masses below when they couldn't clear the distance.

The mind weaver had four high-leveled humanoid demons arranged around it, each clad in thick bone armor and sporting claw-like fingers as long as swords. Knowing the imminent danger it was in, the weaver pushed its magic straight into Ilea's head.

She resisted the mental invasion and dodged the claws of the creature's first bodyguard, then let two others cut through her veil as she thrust a blade into the screeching mind weaver's head.

Ilea continued forward, using the momentum of her attack to impale the demon at the weaver's back, then blinked out of the building and back to the wounded man.

"He's dead," she said, pushing more healing magic into him.

Using her sphere, she saw the demons on the ground floor had managed to break through the door and started scrambling up the stairs. She knew she needed more time to heal the warrior and decided to take every moment she could while he was stable on the ground. Moving him while he was injured wasn't the best idea.

"Didn't mean... the Weaver..." the man said as he coughed again.

Ilea turned and saw a significantly larger demon than the ones coming up the stairs had landed on the roof of the building opposite. The spikes of bone that extended from its shoulders looked far denser than those of other spawn. It had more muscle too.

The demon walked to the edge of the roof and looked down, directly through the window of the mansion. Ilea saw its hideous mouth curl up a little into the resemblance of a grin. She grabbed the warrior below her and used all her strength to jump out the other side of the building.

The two started flying as Ilea's wings spread from her back. Checking her sphere, she saw the demon was now on the ground floor, having crashed straight through the upper-level floor where Ilea and the warrior had previously been.

She flew upward, holding the slim warrior under his shoulders as she pushed more healing mana into him. Ranged demons harried them as she flew through the city, keeping low enough to stay below most of the building's roofs.

Three streets later, Ilea saw movement behind her with her sphere. The demon from before was sprinting along the ground and closing in on them, barreling past the monsters around it. It jumped, a clawed arm aiming for Ilea's back, but she managed to move to the side fast enough to suffer only a glancing strike.

Even so, the force still sent her spiraling into a nearby cottage. She flung the warrior aside as her armored body broke through the front wall before she rolled across the ground, dust whirling around her. She stopped on her knees in the middle of the living room, turning around just in time to see claws heading straight for her face.

Ilea blinked a mere step backward before she answered the demon with a vicious jab to its stomach. The impact felt more like she was hitting a punching bag in the gym and less like her overpowering strength that usually demolished enemy monsters. She barely managed to stop the monster's approach as it swung at her again with its free hand.

Ilea pulled her torso backward, aided by the backlash from her previous punch. The monster's strike missed, but it was followed by a kick, too fast for her to anticipate. Its bone-spiked foot landed on her chest, and she was thrown through the back wall of the stone cottage, several ribs broken and her spine fractured.

She landed with a meaty *thunk* against the wall of the building behind the cottage but thankfully didn't smash through it. Ilea started to circle healing mana through her body as she slowly staggered away from the wall, expecting the enemy's next move to follow immediately.

Luckily, the demon had stopped its attack for a moment as she didn't see anything in her sphere. Looking toward the hole in the cottage wall, she could see the monster slowly walking toward her. In its right hand was the warrior she had tried to save. His body was being dragged along the ground with the sound of screeching metal, his neck broken and bleeding.

A quick motion from the demon sent the warrior flying toward her, his body spinning twice before it hit the wall behind Ilea, who simply stood there, mending her broken bones and internal bleeding.

"Throwing is not good," the demon snarled in a barely comprehensible voice, already an impressive feat considering the zombie-like state of most of its brethren.

"Throwing *is* not good," Ilea whispered in agreement, glancing at the broken body of the warrior.

[Demon – lvl ??]

Her initial plan to find and kill more mind weavers left her mind as she thought of more possibilities. If there were hundreds of demons capable of what the monster in front of her displayed, they might be in trouble.

Based on what she had experienced so far though, she assumed it was more likely that this demon was an anomaly. And who better to distract this monstrosity from slashing through their long-ranged artillery than herself? She was durable, at least.

"I healed him. And you fucking ruined it," she said as her eyes turned to ice.

"Heal?" the demon asked, its head cocked to the side before its muscles tensed, the claws on its feet cutting into the stone below before it rushed her with explosive acceleration.

No longer surprised by the monster's speed, Ilea shifted into a more defensive style of fighting as she dodged backward, avoiding the three quick strikes from its claws. Ash spread around her as she stopped five meters further back, waiting for the demon's next move.

"Hmm..." it gurgled, its claws wading through the floating ash before it sniffed at the substance.

By now, Ilea's body was healed and ready. She tensed her muscles and felt the power of her skills flow through her, a dim blue and red hue illuminating the inside of her armor.

She exhaled deeply, and the moment passed, the demon focusing on its prey again. Ilea blinked upward, wings spreading from her back as she summoned her bow.

The monster looked upward and turned its head as she loosed her arrow. The beast simply caught the spear-like object out of the air, looking at it intently before the arrowhead exploded in its face.

Ilea heard a snarl from inside the cloud of smoke, but there was no indication of any injury. An instant later, the demon shot up, leathery wings of flesh now extending from its back.

The monster looked at Ilea and closed half the distance between them with surprising speed before it suddenly twisted and crashed into a row of warehouses below. It smashed sideways through at least six walls before it came to a stop outside the last warehouse, even taking out a couple of normal demons in the process. It flapped its wings a few times as it rose to its feet.

“What are you doing?” Ilea murmured, hovering in the air, her bow stowed again after the underwhelming impact it had had on the enemy.

The demon stood up slowly, dust and stone falling from its body as it spread its leathery wings more carefully this time. Then, finding its target, it shot toward her.

The fight resumed, and Ilea barely held her own. She was forced to retreat through the air, drawing closer to the main gates. Big spells of fire, stone, and ice were peppering the streets and houses as they slowly approached the northern wall.

As much as Ilea wanted to keep the demon away from the bulk of their forces, she wasn't exactly in the controlling position. The monster was fast. She had been unable to get another hit in as she used her higher experience in aerial combat to outmaneuver the demon desperately pursuing her. It had the advantage in speed and momentum, that was for sure. Ilea had felt the massive changes in air pressure as it shot past her.

Turning toward the northern gate, Ilea sped away as the demon repositioned itself a couple of dozen meters behind her and headed toward the masses of demons behind the high walls of Ravenhall. The walls were somewhat protecting the monsters from the artillery fire coming from the snowy fields outside, while a continuous rain of flesh and bone projectiles was being sent back, hammering into the ground and barriers summoned by the Shadows.

Ilea blinked backward at the last moment as she approached the ground near the gates. Some of the monsters had already been shooting projectiles toward her. Her timing adjusted to the pursuing enemy's speed, and she managed to blink right behind the muscular demon as it continued its charge and crashed into the screeching monsters below. The impact was lost in all the noise and elemental explosions as Ilea watched the demon smash into and kill at least a dozen of its brethren.

In the meantime, Ilea dodged more airborne bone spikes and moved into the chaos to take out as many ranged monsters as possible, not aiming to kill as a single blow usually wasn't enough. Instead, she grabbed monsters from roofs and windows and hurled them into the mass of demons below.

The raging sea of fangs and claws was now barely controlled by the remaining mind weavers she had yet to find. It felt like the chaos was spreading now, thanks to the other Shadows in the city hunting mind weavers as well. Bone projectiles occasionally scraped past her veil or broke through but failed to penetrate her armor as she continued her attempt to destabilize the enemy's ranged forces.

She had lost sight of the flying muscular demon when she spotted a group of rogues approaching her from deeper in the city. They were mimicking her approach, systematically slaughtering the demons positioned on the roofs and high floors of buildings. The enemy weavers responded quickly, groups of demons from the streets below rushing up through buildings or across roofs to try and protect their ranged brethren.

With chaos planted inside the enemy lines, fewer monsters were focusing on the distant group of Hand mages, allowing them to fly closer to deliver their destructive spells more precisely into the throng behind the wall.

Ilea felt the sudden presence of a powerful magical field as she finally found one of the mind weavers hiding in what appeared to be a personal library. Resisting his mental magic as she blinked closer, she sank her blades deep into the frail body of her enemy. The demons around her screamed but didn't attack as everyone, including Ilea, looked outside. She blinked up as a massive fissure in space formed right above them.

"Again?" she groaned as she tried to find the runes responsible for the summoning. She couldn't find anything immediately, but she did see something breaking through the roof of a nearby teahouse and into the air.

The flying demon was floating near the fissure as a massive form of white and red flesh came through. It was a whale-like creature accompanied by heavy magical pressure, its nose smashing into and through the city wall. The accompanying noise and bone-shuddering rumbling rushed through Ilea's body as she braced herself for the wave of wind, stone, and snow that followed.

Ilea blinked a couple of meters back when she saw the winged demon move, its claw digging deep grooves into the stone she had been standing on a moment earlier. In the corner of her vision, she saw another massive beast slowly wriggle through the fissure. This one reminded her more of a squid.

If this goes on...

She stopped her thought and concentrated on the demon before her. While it was focused on her, she wasn't going anywhere. All she could do was trust her companions.

The demon rushed her again, and Ilea blinked backward several times in quick succession, but it got closer after each blink before it finally managed to close the distance. Though its strikes were blocked by Ilea's arms, the monster's claws reached around her bracers and pressed down hard.

She could feel her bones slowly giving in before the beast kicked at her torso while it grasped her arms. Blood and air rushed out of her mouth as she felt her organs smash together and the tendons on her shoulders rip.

Not again... she thought as ash spread around her, shrouding both herself and the demon, which was still gripping her.

Her wings pushed her forward as strongly as they could before she delivered a buffed-up headbutt right onto the deformed nose of her enemy. The impact made the monster release her for an instant, and Ilea immediately blinked upward. Her wings carried her further away from the disoriented demon, her healing taking care of the imminent danger to her life.

The squid-like monster had now wriggled most of its body out of the fissure and it screeched, the wave of sound pushing Ilea backward through the air.

You have heard the Alizoss' Scream. You are paralyzed for five seconds.

Veteran reaches lvl 2

That's not good.

At least the demon hadn't flown up at her from below yet, which meant either her hit had done a little damage or it, too, was paralyzed.

Or perhaps it didn't have the Veteran skill yet.

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FIFTY-SEVEN

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It's just a Flesh Wound

The five seconds passed as if in slow motion. Ilea's organs and tendons were healing quickly, for the injuries were less severe than she'd thought and her healing was still active despite the screech she had heard.

The world was frozen. All the beings that had heard the monster's scream were unmoving when, with a complete lack of sound, the fissure in the air vanished. The massive squid-like monster was split in two by the vanishing crack in space, tentacle-like extensions flailing around wildly as they tried to find the missing part of its body.

Ilea watched the monster die as it fell with almost magical slowness. She didn't know if the Hand could've taken that one down, but they didn't have to worry about it anymore. Even so, the whale still remained.

She saw the demons all around, some already moving again. More spells were flying down from the long-ranged mages beyond. Then the massive whale-like creature started to move again, and the winged demon below was still there.

"One step at a time," she said to herself as the five seconds came to an end.

Ilea blinked downward immediately, watching the muscular demon falling slowly, its face and body still frozen. Another blink brought her behind the beast, and she delivered a series of quick punches to its spine and neck, trying to inflict as much damage as possible in whatever time she had.

Sped up by the impact of the attacks, the monster was thrust downward and landed hard on the cobbled street. Stone crumbled below the two as

shrapnel flew outward and into the other frozen demons.

Ilea equipped her black olvor gauntlets as she continued her assault, each punch pushing the muscular demon further into the ground. A satisfying crack accompanied the last one before a kick from the beast made her blink backward, her gauntlets vanishing again as she prepared for its assault.

Ash formed around her, spreading into the surrounding immobilized masses of demons. The monster she had assaulted slowly got up before it stumbled sideways into the building next to them. The whole street was covered in ash by that point, Ilea's bonus from Form of Ash and Ember now at its peak.

The monster turned sluggishly, the broken bone in its back giving it at least some trouble. It still stood, but was having difficulty approaching her. Ilea used every second to regain some of her mana through meditation.

The demon seemed to be struggling to find her in the midst of her ash cloud, and she darted in and out to deliver quick blows. She also realized the second stage of Wave of Ember was slowly stacking as she started to hear a sizzling inside the demon.

Several big impact spells evaporated the demons just a couple of streets over. More and more of the monsters nearby began moving again, twitching and screeching. Ilea was weighing her options before the muscled demon spoke.

"Boring fight. Coward. I... am tired."

The monster then jumped up onto a temple steeple before spreading its wings and flying toward the south. As Ilea blinked out of the ash, the masses of demons behind her started to flow toward the northern gate.

Ilea looked at the already distant demon, its wings carrying it up toward the high mountaintop overlooking Ravenhall.

It just left? She shook her head. *If only I'd had more time.* She knew the result would've been uncertain, but a part of her was annoyed the demon had left. *Next time won't be the same.*

She turned around, bladed gauntlets materializing on her hands, and flew toward the next building as she continued her search for mind weavers. It would be easier to slaughter the demons first and then focus on the massive magical whale.

Appearing in one of the houses, her blades sliced two demon throats before she ducked, claws flying past her head. Then she cut through the legs

of her enemies, blinking behind the mind weaver before she slashed through its head.

This time, she didn't vanish but faced the demons scrambling to their feet as her meditation skill finished restoring the mana she had just used. Ilea stood still before she dodged the first attack, a small kick sending the demon stumbling before she caught the next enemy's arm, staggering it with a fist to its chin.

Two minutes later, Ilea was alone in the room, surrounded by twelve demon corpses, all having once been above level 200.

They would take this city back.

Her eyes were cold as she blinked outside again, looking for her next target.

It wasn't long until she found it. This time, her prey was in the attic of a huge theatre, complete with massive stained-glass windows from which the weaver could observe the fight below.

The battle did not take long.

Another one down... Ilea thought as she made her gauntlets vanish, looking around the room of dead demons. Stepping closer to the window, she saw monsters in the streets fighting each other, confused at the magic coming from above and the chaos around them.

"Guess we've managed to break through..." she said, looking up to see the whale dotted with explosions of differing elements.

Ilea let her meditation skill recover her mana while she looked through the messages she had received since coming to Ravenhall. Ilea didn't want to engage that flying monster without a full stock of health and mana.

'ding' Your group has killed [Striker - Demon – lvl 58]

...

'ding' You have killed [Claw Master - Demon – lvl 207]

'ding' Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 214 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 219 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 4

‘ding’ Body of the First Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 19

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches 2nd lvl 5

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 19

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 209 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 215 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 16

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 18

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 8

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 12

Ilea distributed the various stat points into Strength and Dexterity to slightly catch up on her base physical attributes. She didn’t want them to fall off too much as there was a balance that provided more of a bonus: buff her auras by boosting Intelligence, or increase the raw stats her active auras would affect.

A few minutes later, she was as prepared as she was going to be to face a monster capable of breaking through a city wall with its sheer weight alone.

“Let’s see what kind of magic you can do...” she said, lifting her helmet to scrape out some of the already-dried blood. Luckily, her Healing magic had the side effect of creating new blood and tissue, otherwise she’d be fucked ten times over by this point.

Ilea blinked outside and flew toward the massive creature from beyond the rift.

Fire rushed toward the whale and spikes of ice flew down from above, seemingly enhanced by gravity magic – Ilea had never seen ice magic move that quickly. Arrows, rocks, crystal spears, and beams of light and arcane magic joined in here and there.

It was so impressive that she even felt a little regret at having not become a long-ranged mage. It must be fun to throw around flashy spells that explode in the enemy’s face.

But a bow is nice as well... she thought as she rushed closer to the massive whale.

[?? - ???]

“Well, that’s informative isn’t it? Why even have this skill?” Ilea cried as she smashed sideways into the beast, all her offensive skills activating as she ripped into the monster’s flesh. A big tear was the result, but no blood came out. Either her attack was too shallow or the monster’s body was built differently than normal biological entities.

Maybe go for the eyes or just keep digging in...

She rushed toward the monster's front, massive spells detonating around her, making her dodge under and over them. A thrumming wave of magic came from the whale's head before it opened its mouth. Ilea was still moving closer when a pulse of sound ripped through her body; she braced against it and pushed with all her power as healing magic started repairing the damage from the attack.

Seeing the landscape in front of the whale made her realize that the attack was mostly focused on a line before it. The snow had parted, pushed away toward the mountain nearly a kilometer away. Trees were snapped like twigs, and the unfortunate members of the Hand who were caught in the wave were swept away with it, most of them likely dead given the limp way their bodies fell in the distance.

Ilea gritted her teeth and pushed forward until she came up to one of the monster's eyes. The orb swiveled to look at her as its attack came to an end, the mouth closing slowly before Ilea used her bladed gauntlets to slash into its eye.

That definitely got a reaction as its mouth opened again in a wail. The monster's eyelid closed shut, pushing Ilea's blades downward, an enormous weight hitting her arms as the blades came to a stop at the bottom of the eye. She ripped out the blades, and the beast bellowed in pain.

The hide is too tough. Let's hope it needs some time to use that attack again...

Ilea turned and rushed toward the whale's mouth. The mages had done some damage, but it would take quite a while to whittle down the monster's health, given the tough skin. And what was a tough skin against a downright suicidal bladed warrior with impregnable defenses?

She grinned at her idea. *This might be a tiny bit risky.*

Ilea blinked inside the mouth before it closed, hoping no magical sound attack would be unleashed in the next ten seconds. She rushed farther in, seeing through her Sphere while looking for any weak spots or organs.

The good news was that she found what she was looking for. The bad news was that there were simply too many things that might constitute weak spots, and Ilea didn't recognize any of them.

To work, then...

She decided on her blades to do the job. Causing internal bleeding was likely better with such a big monster compared to the blunt trauma she

could inflict with her heavy gauntlets or the magical damage with her fists and spells.

Readying the blades on her gauntlets, Ilea started to slash away at the whale's flesh from the inside. Being a butcher hadn't been on Ilea's list of things to do in life, but her current predicament necessitated her starting out in the profession.

She left a path of jagged, bleeding wounds in her wake until she came upon a pulsing organ behind a set of fleshy walls. The tissue itself was still tough, even with her high stats and high-quality blades, and Ilea had to cut into it bit by bit to get to the organ.

That took longer than I thought. She glanced back, considering if she should flee before it used its magic again. *Will it reach here? Fuck it. I'm here already.*

Luckily there was an opening around the organ and close behind the two meters of flesh she was working on. It would lead right to her target as soon as she managed to break through.

And break through she did, blood suddenly rushing out at such a high speed and with such heat that her defensive Veil of Ash nearly broke down. Her sense of smell reduced to its utmost minimum, she smiled before she pushed into the torrent of near-boiling blood, her blades cutting into the flesh to stabilize herself.

Breathing wasn't much of a problem as the blood only reached her knees after a few seconds, but its boiling temperature was more of an issue as her veil slowly failed. Good thing she had her old friend – a total lack of pain perception.

The organ was massive, at least two meters high and wide. She kept pushing forward, then slashed into the biological tissue to cause as much damage as possible. After twenty slashes, the thing exploded in a shower of blood and yellow mucus, causing Ilea to puke into her helmet. An experience she really could've done without.

Ilea stumbled backward and out of the opening again as she made her helmet vanish to puke again, this time not back into her mouth and nose.

"Holy fuck!" she shouted as a magical surge ran through the whale. It opened its mouth, and the light of the suns illuminated just how disgusting her current environment was.

Oh no.

Helmet back on, to her displeasure, Ilea jumped back into the gash where she had destroyed the organ and rammed her blades into the flesh. Just then, another sound wave came from deep within the being's body, ripping through her, and Hunter's Recovery had to work overtime to keep her brain and organs functioning.

Ilea's health was down fifty percent after that attack. Standing in the middle of it might've actually killed her immediately. She could feel her stomach sink, knowing that she could've just died.

And yet, she hadn't. Which meant she could survive again.

Ilea healed herself as she continued further in. This time, she made sure to brace herself for the next organ's explosion, most of the blood and mucus landing on her wings instead. She waited for the next sound attack and hid even deeper in the flesh, braced for impact. This time around, she sustained even less damage from the attack.

Doesn't seem like my efforts are doing much though...

Considering there had been three attacks from the whale now, she didn't know how the Hand's forces were looking out there on the battlefield. Hopefully they had spread out far enough to avoid the sound magic.

Ilea steadied herself as the whale moved around in the air before continuing her attacks, ignoring the organs she saw through her sphere and simply going further in. She wondered if she could find and destroy whatever enabled the monster to use those sound waves.

Or some other weak spot.

Wait, can I...?

She focused and used her healing skill to check on the monster. As expected, she could determine a little about the beast's condition as she was in direct contact with it. The damage she had inflicted so far still seemed relatively minor due to the size of the creature.

Using her sphere, Ilea saw the mages outside were working overtime as the hide had been pierced in several dozen places and the monster was bleeding profoundly. Both its eyes were blinded too, one of them by her.

And still, it seemed the only reason they hadn't been wiped out was their coordination against the slow-moving, monstrous creature.

Ilea gritted her teeth and breathed. She had work to do.

FIFTY-EIGHT

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Bloody Entrails

Ilea pushed on deeper and deeper into the beast before she felt mana gather again, this time much closer than before. She quickly found the best cover she could and cut into the flesh to keep herself steady. The sound immediately shattered her freshly healed eardrums as her whole body shook from the vibrations running through it.

Ilea felt her bones slowly crack at the sheer intensity of the attack. She gulped, thinking that perhaps it had been a little too brave and stupid to rush into the monster's mouth. One thing she had realized though was that the beast could only use its sound attack every thirty seconds, or maybe it simply chose to do it that often.

Looking back, she saw through the closing mouth that the target this time had been a big part of Ravenhall itself. The Hand must have managed to turn the whale around and use its attack against the demons, many of which were now splattered in the rubble of the once proud city.

Ilea took some time to heal herself back to nearly full health before she pushed further in. She'd gone too far to turn around now. At least she could use meditation whenever the monster attacked, so her mana was still looking fine. She could take another one or two attacks before it became too much for her to recover.

As long as one of them didn't outright kill her.

Another attack later, she had found it – the source of the vibrations and the monster's attacks. It was a massive red organ with hundreds of holes, held in place by dozens of tendons.

I'm fast enough right?

Ilea gulped and got to cutting.

The thirty seconds were barely over when the organ started vibrating; Ilea had only cut through around half of the tendons.

Shit.

She looked around and decided to blink behind the massive organ, hoping the main force of the spell would be aimed up and outward. She covered her face and made herself as small as possible as she braced for impact.

The being shook, and Ilea gritted her teeth, screaming against the exuded power until it vanished once more. Only her position behind the organ had saved her. Her body was mangled but healing fast.

She didn't waste any time, and once she'd finished removing the last three connections at the top of the massive ball-like object, it fell down with a loud squelchy noise.

"Absolutely fucking disgusting," she said.

"Indeed. Good job on not dying," Aki added. "That seemed close."

"Finally chose to comment?" Ilea asked.

But she didn't disagree. *Too reckless*, she thought. *Because I lost against the winged demon. Another stunt like this might just kill me.*

"You flew into the mouth of that monster. I didn't think a distraction would help."

"Probably not," Ilea said, focusing on the monster. "Now let's finish this beast."

She worked her way back, this time taking care of every single organ she could find. After twelve organs, she got a message in her mind.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Bane of the Deep – lvl 823]. For killing an adversary six hundred levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

She could feel the whale starting to sink toward the ground. A big grin spread across her face before it vanished just as quickly as it had come.

"Probably need to leave," she said to herself as she rushed toward the mouth of the beast.

Ilea nearly made it before a heavy impact went through the whale and she found herself in the monster's throat, the whole weight of its upper body pushing downward.

The throat held as the corpse settled, and Ilea pushed against the massive weight. She breathed with relief and started to claw her way out.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 220 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 221 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ You have gained one 3rd tier skill point in [Azarinth First Hunter]

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached level 216 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 19

Something good after all...

Choosing the next third-tier skill to advance would probably be difficult, but she had a favorite already. For now, all she wanted was to get out of the whale corpse and check on the situation outside. There was still a demon horde waiting to be destroyed and possibly survivors of the Hand to be healed.

Ilea pushed through the flesh and blood of her fallen enemy with closed eyes, using her sphere to navigate as she tried to not burn the experience into her brain.

“Aaaaaah, air,” Ilea exclaimed as she exited the whale’s mouth, nearly completely covered in blood and pieces of spongy organ-flesh. She coughed immediately and retched up whatever was left in her stomach, then breathed deeply.

“Gods, you stink,” a broad-shouldered and impressively bearded man said as she emerged. He was standing at least four meters away from her. “Larina, can you spare one of your spells?”

He looked over to a woman dressed in shiny blue armor that sparkled where the suns hit it with their light.

“We have more important things to consider than smell,” she said as magic gathered in front of her hands. “Oh goddess of water and rebirth,

send thy power through me,” she exclaimed before a torrent of water shot out with the speed of a flying arrow.

Ilea watched as the water pushed back a charging group of demons, their bodies smashed as if hit by the weight of a driving train. Ilea wondered if the prayer-like line was really needed to cast the spell.

“She survived, we can go back now,” the woman said, which elicited a nod from the bearded man. He unsheathed a curved sword before he vanished, reappearing near the last stragglers of the demons still approaching.

Ilea watched as the demons suddenly fell apart, their limbs removed by slashes nearly too fast for her to perceive. She summoned some ash to try and clean herself, surprised that this time it actually worked. Well, it did somewhat, removing a large part of the mess, leaving her presentable enough for a battlefield with thousands of demons and seasoned adventurers.

“All forces unattended should find a team leader or the commander,” the blue woman said to Ilea.

“I’ll find him. Thanks for checking on me,” she said, receiving a nod from the woman, who started floating upward as small spear-like objects of water formed in front of her before she loosed them in a high arc toward the city.

Ilea was standing on a small hill outside Ravenhall, still mostly covered in snow, the corpse of the whale to her left. Her wings spread behind her as she slowly ascended, meditation flowing through her and helping her recover her mana more quickly.

Ravenhall was in ruins. A massive chunk of the city had been completely obliterated by the whale’s sound attacks. Sulivhaan had likely considered the attack’s destructive capabilities against the demons a higher priority than the resulting damage to infrastructure.

They could rebuild Ravenhall – of that, Ilea was certain. Where the town had been hit, massive breaches in the walls had opened up, and demons were pouring out in the thousands, freed by the death of most – if not all – mind weavers and no longer caged by the city’s stone buildings and walls. Yet they were running straight into the destructive spells of dozens of high-leveled mages.

Ilea ascended higher and found a large part of the city burning. The Hand had moved closer together, and with the enemy command crumbling,

they could let loose. The mages unleashed a firestorm, its light bright enough to blind Ilea for a fraction of a second as it incinerated hundreds of demons in the blink of an eye. Above one of the breaches, another mage unleashed a storm of air, cutting apart several dozen running demons who fell, each bleeding from hundreds of cuts.

The demons were having difficulties funneling through the breaches in the walls, so vast were their numbers. The corpses on the ground, combined with all the blood, ice, and other elements still lingering from spells, made their flight from the city even harder. However, the few demons that made it through to the defensive line were devastated by an assortment of warriors, rogues, and rangers, blades flashing as everyone displayed their skills, honed by years of experience.

There were fewer members of the Hand now than had initially gathered in Morhill, that was for sure, but Ilea was glad the casualties hadn't been significant. She flew over to the gathered Shadows and quickly found Sulivhaan flying somewhat behind the defensive line while occasionally using a spell to slow down parts of the enemy hordes.

"Should I join the defensive line?" Ilea asked, wanting to join in the fun.

"Ilea, you survived! Of course you did. No, our healers are doing all they can, but the injuries are numerous. I want you to help them." Sulivhaan pointed toward a small group a little behind the line of melee fighters, and Ilea nodded.

"What about Trian and Kyrian?" she asked as she flew toward the few healers they had.

"I sent two teams in already, a scout should return soon. Seems we got most of the mind weavers. Good job out there," he called to her before turning back to the field of death, where an endless number of demons rushed through a monstrous hail of magic before entering a meat grinder of blades.

Ilea looked away and increased her speed, landing near the healers. They were arranged about a hundred meters back from the defensive line, and they looked tired. Around them were dozens of injured people, some screaming, their bodies showing wounds that no human was supposed to survive.

Ilea joined in without a word, checking on the six people immediately around her as she stabilized them one by one. It took a while with her secondary healing spell that worked best on herself, but she managed. With

her slow movements, at least she could use meditation while she conducted her work.

“Any more in critical condition?” she shouted just before stabilizing the last of her group.

“Nearly done here,” a man in robes said, sweat, blood, and dirt covering his face. He removed his hand from the inside of a woman’s chest, and the wound quickly closed over.

Ilea watched on as a magical pulse left his hand, his eyes focusing for a moment before the woman gasped. “You’re fine,” he said, holding a hand out toward her.

“Thanks, put it on my tab,” the woman said, ignoring his hand as she jumped up. She spat out some blood before two blades appeared in her hands. She rolled her shoulders and started running toward the defensive line again.

Ilea smiled at the scene as she looked around. For now, at least, the situation seemed in control. To one side, the robed man joined another healer clad in armor – not a primary healer either, it seemed. They were only six people around Ilea, just three likely full healers.

“We’re fine for now. You can fly, right? Some were thrown toward the mountains in the first few whale attacks,” said a woman in a perfectly clean snow-white robe and mask while pointing toward the mountaintop to the north. Ilea nodded and flew off.

The forests were devastated. The whale must have hit that part of the valley at least twice, two lines cutting a furrow into the ground that was at least five meters deep. All the trees had been broken and splintered.

“Aki, help me spot them,” she said, unsheathing the dagger as she flew toward the hundreds of meters of devastation, the land covered in broken trees, rubble, snow, and earth.

She searched for five minutes before recognizing a human form through her sphere. The person’s heart was still beating, and Ilea sheathed Aki and started clearing away the tree trunks and rocks covering the woman, likely a mage, who seemed to be unconscious. Twenty seconds later, she got to her, a touch revealing that she was close to death but not quite there yet. Mana was still flowing through her, soon joined by Ilea’s helping hand.

It took nearly four minutes for her to heal the mage. When her body seemed fine, Ilea slapped her lightly.

“Come on, wake up.”

The woman opened her eyes, a deep brown, and stared back at Ilea in disbelief.

“Whale is dead, you got hit. More people might be buried here, can you help me look?” Ilea said quickly as she helped the mage up, who shook her head to gather her senses.

“Y... yes, give me a minute.”

Ilea nodded, flying off again and over the rubble to find more people. The first two she found were already dead.

“Over here!” the mage she had rescued shouted, so Ilea blinked toward her, flying at her top speed. She landed softly next to the mage, who was already using her magic to fling away tree trunks as if they were mere sticks.

Ilea found an injured man lying below them and blinked toward him before she started pumping healing mana into him. He was thin and clad head to toe in black cloth. Most of it was now coated in blood.

“Gods...” the man said, coughing up blood. “Finally... I’m fine, I’m fine,” he added, waving Ilea away and getting up. He wasn’t quite ‘fine,’ but he was certainly better than most of the injured people Ilea had treated previously. “I couldn’t lift up those trees. Next twenty stat points are going into Strength, I swear to the Mother.”

“Got any spotting skills? There might be more people here,” Ilea asked, but he shook his head.

“I’ll be of more help clearing those demons. There are still some left, aren’t there? Wait, the whale is dead?” he asked as golden light filled his eyes.

“The whale is dead. And there’s plenty left. Leave some for me.”

“Good, good. Just do your work, healer. And thanks,” he said before teleporting at least fifty meters into the air. The light in his eyes intensified before a small sun formed in front of his face, a beam of light shooting out a moment later toward the city. Ilea didn’t know how much damage it would do, but she could feel the heat from down on the ground.

“Another cannon back in action,” she said, nodding to the mage before continuing her search.

Ilea spent a while scouring through the mess of a landscape the whale had left behind before she was pretty sure they wouldn’t find anybody else. In total, they found four additional corpses and three more survivors.

“That should do it. We’ll send some rangers back here when the city is clear or if we can spare them,” the mage said to her before holding out a hand. “Can you take me back? You’re faster than me.”

Ilea nodded, grabbing the woman around her stomach from behind and flying off a moment later.

The situation hadn’t changed much in the time they’d been away. There were fewer injured people near the healers, and there was a group of people resting nearby. Some were even preparing food while the demons still spilled out of the wide city streets, heading for the opened sections of the wall. Spells continued to rain down onto the masses. Each of the Hand’s mages must’ve racked up thousands of kills by that point.

The defensive line was fighting just as before, though their numbers had thinned a little as some were resting to regain their resources. On the field outside the city, between the mercenaries left standing and the enemy hordes, massive walls of ice and stone had sprung up, funneling the enemy into concentrated spells from specialized high-level mages, who took turns burning through their mana.

It wasn’t a battle anymore. It was an extermination.

FIFTY-NINE

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Lakes and Crystals

“Any more help needed?” Ilea asked after she landed near the healers.

“We’re fine, seems like people have become comfortable with fighting these monsters. Leave the rest to us,” one of them said as the woman Ilea had rescued moved over toward the group of resting fighters. Ilea followed and took a couple of minutes to regain her full mana.

She watched as the mage talked to some of the healers, three of them immediately heading toward the rubble Ilea had been searching for the past half hour. They probably had a better way of detecting people in that mess than her Sphere, which had already done a wonderful job – but was unlikely to find any more.

Sulivhaan was floating in the same position as before, still using his spells as people occasionally joined him and left again, having received further commands. It seemed everyone accepted him as the strategic leader of this operation, at least enough for them to have a working command structure.

Ilea moved past the healers to where around eight corpses were lying in the snow, each covered by a white cloth. She continued the line with the dead they had found in the rubble, placing them down gently before she closed their eyes. Each of them was geared with expensive, high-quality armor or clothes, each one a human strong enough to face a hundred high-leveled demons on their own. Each one of them dead.

She flew toward Sulivhaan and slowed when he noticed her.

“Healers are fine, rangers are looking for more survivors but we’re probably done searching. Five survivors and six dead,” she reported.

“Thank you. And for your intervention with that massive creature. Reckless, but you got results.” He spoke without looking her way. “I would suggest you join the defensive line. If you want to.”

“Actually, I’ll go find the others of my team if that doesn’t fuck with your plans.”

“Do as you will,” Sulivhaan responded, giving a slight incline of his head.

Ilea flew toward the city at top speed. She could see the devastation now that most spells were targeting the battlefield in front of the walls. Only about a third of the houses had been completely destroyed, but the attacks from the whale had come from above, and its magic had cut deep.

Much of the sewers and several levels of the underground would probably have to be rebuilt completely. Fires raged in the more intact parts as well, mainly caused by the Hand’s mages who had released their initial spells into the demon horde in the city.

Some solitary bone spears were fired at her, making her use her bow to kill the mostly lower-leveled demons. It was a trickle of damage for the enemy forces, but the ranged monsters were somewhat rare by now and were the only thing that would stop the Hand’s mages from advancing and unleashing death upon the melee demons. No fliers remained, likely having been targeted first, or maybe they’d simply been the first to reach the Shadows.

“Now to find a lone demon...” she said to herself as she dived downward. *Let’s hope he was as smart as I think he is.*

Ilea blinked through a mostly intact part of the underground infrastructure before appearing a minute later in a room she had been in before. She smiled at a startled mind weaver surrounded by other demons.

“Weavy, you did it! Glad you survived. Now come with me, we have to find the others.”

“Ah, Miss Ilea. I am also most grateful for your survival. What about the spawn?” he asked, gesturing around him.

“Whatever you want. I’d kill them now so they don’t become a problem. If you want to look for them later, you can, but it’s going to be hard getting them all out of here,” Ilea explained. She looked into the deep black holes of Weavy’s eyes as the monsters in the room methodically cut their own throats before falling down with a nearly single echoing splat.

She raised her eyebrows. *Suppose that answers whether the mind weavers have true control over the demons. Might just be a numbers thing. Either way, he definitely made his choice.*

She held out her hand. Weavy stared at it, confused, before Ilea just grabbed his arm and flew upward, smashing through any floors in their way and using her ash to protect the demon from any falling debris.

Ilea reached her next target a few minutes later, landing before the Hand's headquarters. Demons screeched around her and started running toward them. She ignored them and continued toward the entrance. She cut down the monsters who reached her, none above level 80, while the ones farther away remained frozen by Weavy's influence.

The main hall was partially collapsed, rubble covering most of the ground. Hundreds of monster corpses lay on the floor, some even stuck to walls and the ceiling. Ilea found a single mage and dozens of dead demons stuck inside a massive crystal in one of the corridors.

The woman was alive, but her eyes were closed. Ilea took the time to methodically cut off big chunks of the crystal until she reached the woman. Touching her, she found her to be in perfect health.

Reaching her hands inside the small enclosed space, Ilea pulled with all her strength and heard the crystal crack. A moment later, the prison flew apart, both sides smashing into the partially damaged furniture around the room as Ilea caught the unconscious woman before pushing some healing mana into her.

She continued on toward Viscera with the crystal woman in her arms, finding a similar scene in the Hand's headquarters as in the main hall. Demon corpses covered the ground even more densely here, so she flew over them with her ashen wings. She couldn't spot any human bodies, but any dead Hand members, merchants, or trainees had probably turned into demons themselves by now.

The crystal mage stirred and slowly opened her eyes.

"Hah!" she exclaimed as a crystal shot out from her hand at Ilea's head, but her ashen veil stopped it before it dropped back into the woman's hand. She was out of breath already, and Ilea doubted the level 205 mage would be able to pierce her veil even at full power.

Ilea stopped Weavy from doing anything stupid as he closed in. "Calm down, I'm not the enemy. And neither is he," she said to the mage,

continuing onward and giving the survivor a brief rundown of what was happening outside the city.

The woman had been in her crystal prison since the start of the attack, her skill attacking any demons who stepped into the room. Mind weavers either couldn't attack her inside it or hadn't found her. It was a miracle she had survived, really. She shot glances at Weavy a few times, but she seemed to trust Ilea for now.

"I actually survived..." the mage said as she closed her eyes and relaxed in Ilea's arms.

"You have two more minutes, then I'll drop you," Ilea stated in a soft voice.

The woman gulped but didn't answer, her face reddening a little as she realized the situation she was in. She stayed in Ilea's arms for the full two minutes though, her joy at surviving stronger than her sense of embarrassment.

There were no surviving demons inside Viscera, at least not as far as Ilea could sense. The crystal woman decided to follow her, probably feeling a little bad at having done exactly nothing since the demon summoning.

"This is horrible... I never imagined the attack could be on this scale..."

"You should see outside," Ilea said. "The mind weavers are dead, but thousands of demons remain. The Hand is cleaning up rather efficiently though."

Ilea looked down into the hole where the main elevator leading to the Haven had been. It wasn't there, so she decided to jump down. The mage made a surprised noise before she followed, just as Ilea was already reaching the bottom of the elevator shaft.

Ilea's wings spread as she landed, her knees bending as the force of gravity shuddered through her body. She smiled. The fall of over a hundred meters felt more like jumping down a small flight of stairs. Weavy followed behind as quickly as he could, which at least was faster than the crystal mage.

The rubble of a destroyed elevator platform was spread around the bottom of the shaft, and dust filled the room. It reeked of blood and rot. Here, too, corpses were piled up, but someone had moved them to the corners of the room.

Ilea continued on to the second elevator that led to the Haven. It was still in working order, she found, so she activated it, looking at Weavy. The

crystal mage managed to jump onto it before it started moving. Ilea didn't look at her but saw through her sphere that her legs were shaking.

"We're not the first ones down here, don't worry," Ilea said, gripping the hilt of her dagger tightly.

As the elevator shaft opened up, the environment of Eregar's Haven spread before them. Ilea immediately began grinning and loosened her grip on her dagger as she saw the spark of familiar lightning in the distance. She jumped off the platform and flew in the direction of the magic.

A bizarre scene was revealed as she got closer, the crystal mage and Weavy following a little behind at a slower speed. A lake had formed in a part of the Haven where there had been none before. It wasn't big – it wasn't even quite enough to be called it a proper lake, really, but it was bigger than a pond.

On a nearby hill were eight people, some sitting, others standing. Trian was one of them. The man lifted his hand lazily before lightning flashed and struck the lake.

Ilea saw the group tense up as she approached, but they relaxed quickly after realizing the newcomer was one of their own. Trian got up and waved at her, and when Kyrian turned his head, she saw his posture relax a little.

"Hey all, guess my help isn't needed here? Don't mind the demon, he's the one with us," she said as she landed. Most of the others ignored her as they looked for the demon before soon facing the lake again.

"The rest of the Hand is exterminating vermin, and you're all just enjoying the new addition to the Haven?" she asked, smiling as her teammates came up to her.

"How's it going outside? I heard there were some pretty huge monsters," Kyrian said.

"Yeah, we took down most of the mind weavers. Two huge creatures were summoned, but one died when the portal closed. We took down the second one, and now it's more or less just killing a flood of demons. What about you guys?" she asked, looking at the lake with interest.

"I'm glad it went so well. There were demons down here, rather high-leveled compared to the ones in Viscera. We cleaned up, but it seems like more are coming out of the lake," Trian explained, motioning toward the water.

"*Aaah, a dimensional spawning pool. So they're real,*" Weavy beamed into their minds, though it felt like he was talking to himself.

“You know about it?” Kyrian asked. He’d taken his helmet off, and he glanced at Ilea.

“An old tale I once heard. A way to attract and capture spawn. Ponds connected to another source of water. To think it works between realms...” the demon said. *“I wonder. Was it deliberate, or was it an incidental occurrence due to the summoning you mentioned?”*

“Can we use it to go there?” Ilea asked, now more than eager to find Strand again after she’d seen the damage he had caused.

“No. Only spawn may travel through, and only one way. But who knows, you could try.”

“Already did. Nothing in there,” one of the Shadows said, dashing what little hope Ilea had had.

Ilea sighed and finally relaxed a little. The battle had been long. “It’s not dangerous to swim in there, right? I need to clean off.”

“Yes, you do,” Trian said, giving her a long look before he nodded.

She smiled and blinked down to the shore, where she removed her helmet and started scrubbing herself down with her hands and ash. After checking for nearby demons, she soon focused inward.

Time to make a decision.

Third-tier skill points available [Azarinth First Hunter]: 1

Skills available for third-tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:

- ***Hunter Recovery***
- ***State of Azarinth***
- ***Azarinth Fighting***

Apparently, neither Destruction nor Azarinth Hunter Sphere had fulfilled the requirements to become a third-tier skill.

Ilea thought about her choice while the others were talking to Weavy about the strange phenomenon of the lake. Her healing spell seemed like the obvious first choice; considering the losses and near-death experiences she’d had in the past months, it seemed vital to get some sort of edge for her healing.

Then again, I'm not getting stronger through that, simply less killable. Whatever that third tier might give me, it probably wouldn't help me get through the defenses of that flying demon I fought, or against the Elder...

Eventually, Ilea knew she'd reach level 240, at which point she could still choose Hunter Recovery, but for now, she decided against it.

That left State of Azarinth and Azarinth Fighting. She had used both nearly constantly since getting them so long ago, but somehow the decision between them was easy. Both skills improved her offensive capabilities by a lot, but the flashy glow was a better sell than a simple improvement to her fighting skills.

'ding' State of Azarinth advances to 3rd tier

Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 1:

Your body glows with the power of Azarinth, increasing your resilience, speed, and strength by 55% [Effect after bonuses – 220%].

2nd stage: Your sight, hearing, and sense of smell is also affected by State of Azarinth

3rd stage: You are one with State of Azarinth. The skill's upkeep has been removed. Instead, you may overcharge it with your life's energy. The amount depends on both skill level and health used.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Ilea hoped she hadn't made the wrong choice as she read through the new information. The upkeep removal was nice and with her long fights, it would considerably reduce her mana consumption.

The overcharge thing was ambiguous at best. Health in exchange for more power, she assumed. Ilea thought that she could probably only use the overcharge ability while her healing spell was taking care of her at the same time.

She shrugged and used the new ability. Her mind raced as she instinctively decided on a number. One hundred. The murky question in her head asked for a level of power and Ilea chose at random again.

A split second passed as Ilea activated the skill before an odd feeling coupled with a weird pain shot through her body. One hundred points of

health were ripped from her being before a light red glow shone from inside her armor.

Ilea looked at her hands as she removed her gauntlets. The runes were still there, slightly changed in form but still recognizable. The difference was that these runes shone red. Much more subdued than her previous blue shine, but she attributed that to the low level of the skill – at least in its third stage. She felt more powerful, not comparable to when she'd activated all her other buffs, but certainly stronger than with just the older form of State of Azarinth.

As quickly as the moment had come, it vanished again, and so did the shine. Both her teammates had stopped talking to Weavy and were instead looking at her, specifically her arms.

State of Azarinth was still active, Ilea found, but there was no glow anymore. Apparently the *You are one with State of Azarinth* meant more than just the removal of its mana cost.

It made her a little sad that the blue shine was gone. It had been the edge it'd had on Azarinth Fighting when she chose it over the other skill, after all. At least it would be less obvious that she was using a body enhancement spell now, and she could have it active at all times without any cost. She wondered if it worked while sleeping as well. Considering she didn't have to consciously keep it active, she thought it likely.

"Whatcha got?" Trian asked.

"New third tier. Removed upkeep, and I can sacrifice health for more power," she answered. "What are we going to do about the lake?"

"Well, according to what Weavy says, there's little we can do to stop the spell now. It's self-sustaining. All we can do is kill the demons that come out of it."

Ilea nodded. "Use it for training then? Like a dungeon or something?"

"To replace the monsters that previously inhabited the Haven," Kyrian nodded. "More of a responsibility than before. If one of these gets out, a whole city could fall."

"At least the human cities should know how to handle them better now," Ilea said. "Can we leave this place to the others? We have three mages and one fucked up demon here to thin the enemy numbers."

"Fine by me. Hey, we're gonna get some fresh air," Trian said, directing the last part at the others standing on the ledge.

“We’ll make sure none of them go up into the city,” one of the Shadows replied, giving him a nod.

Ilea spread her wings and flew back toward the exit with the others in tow.

A constant source of demons for the Hand to fight. Suppose it’s not as bad as finding a massive tear like the initial one down here.

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Hordes

The crystal mage looked a little confused when her savior and the others suddenly left, and her indecisiveness cost her the opportunity to continue fighting with the group. Ilea figured she would be fine with the other Hand members anyway.

Ilea had Weavy on her back as the three rushed toward the elevator – they were moving too fast for the demon to keep up otherwise. There was still a horde in their city, and she was eager to meet them. Alongside her team.

They reached the top of Viscera and the exit of the Hand's stronghold shortly thereafter. Trian began frying demons as soon as they stepped outside.

"Save your spells and follow me," Ilea called and flew off toward the defensive line of the Hand.

The demon hordes were flowing just as they had before. Gazing into the overfilled northern part of the city, where demons were still fighting each other, Ilea realized the flow would continue for more than just a few hours.

The Hand was already taking turns fighting to keep it going. In the worst-case scenario, they could retreat, but that would create a lot of new problems when the demons dispersed into the surrounding countryside. Until now, they had been held back by the mind weavers in the city.

"Weavy, just stay close so they know it's you," Ilea said to the demon as they approached the front lines. Streams of demons ran below them, screeching at the enemy in the sky as they were scattered and destroyed by the many spells and obstacles being thrown their way.

The group soon reached Sulivhaan.

“You found them and the demon. Good,” Sulivhaan said as a couple of people around them gave Weavy and their group weird looks, though one smiled. “You are done with Viscera and the Haven?”

“More or less. We have a few things to report,” Trian said.

Ilea let go of Weavy and rolled her shoulders.

“I’ll be down in the slaughter. Let me know if another healer is needed,” Ilea said, waving to Sulivhaan before she let herself fall downward.

The snow had melted by now, too many hot spells in the environment. Ilea landed in the mud and looked around. In front of her, a group of around forty people was fighting against the oncoming horde, each person occupying a rather large space, while some grouped up with two to four others to use their skills more effectively.

She was certainly interested in seeing them all fight, but considering the overwhelming enemy numbers, she knew she would probably get enough time to do so regardless. It was good training for all of them and somewhat easy and safe experience given the demon fodder’s levels. Though, with most of the remaining monsters seeming to be below level 100, the experience would only be a trickle toward their next level-ups.

Good way to test my new skill...

The power of State of Azarinth flowed through her, as it nearly always did now. No glow was visible, and no mana was removed from her store. Form of Ember joined the skill as small lines of red formed on her body and below her armor.

The horns on her helmet reflected the different colors of the spells being unleashed in front of her as she slowly walked to the front line. There was plenty of space between the warriors, the frenzied demons charging forward without regard for their own safety. A Veil of Ash shrouded her as she prepared for battle, breathing steadily as ash formed around her, perceiving the world through her sphere.

The warriors on her left and right ignored her as their blades and axes flashed, the sound of metal cutting flesh a constant grind in her ears. A band to play some metal would have been a welcome addition, but then again, the thrill of fighting for your life was more than enough to keep the blood pumping.

Ilea moved the ash in front of her to the side, alerting a couple of running demons to her presence in the middle of it all. She continued to

move the ash around in more and more intricate forms and motions to boost the skill as much as she could while she prepared.

The first demon arrived, a level 90 monster of claws and teeth, pure muscle covering its legs and arms as it screamed toward the human prey. Ilea stepped up, dodging the clawed hand by a couple of centimeters before her fist landed in the demon's abdomen. Her skills sending mana through the beast were combined with the kinetic force of her heavy and enhanced body and bones.

The monster was stopped immediately mid-stride, Ilea standing like a rock against the sea as the enemy's limbs flailed around her before they slapped uselessly against her veil, the corpse of the demon falling to the ground a second later.

Ilea breathed in and closed her eyes, concentrating on her sphere of perception and the ash around her as it twirled and moved, allowing the enemy to see her as she prepared the next strike. Her perfectly timed kick connected with another demon's head, cracking its skull with a satisfying crunch.

Ilea recovered from the motion almost immediately before the next demon was upon her. *Ten*, Ilea thought as a flash of pain and wrongness went through her. Her health reduced as a light red light joined the fiery color on her skin, runes and lines of molten fire branching into each other. The next monster was hit in its chest, its ribs shattering as its thorax was pushed inward and out of its back, its spine broken.

Ilea breathed out again as she stopped the motion, ripping her hand out of the beast's corpse again as the power of her third-tier State of Azarinth left her again.

Only a few seconds... she thought, analyzing the time the spell had held. The power chosen was neither the lowest nor the highest she could go at the moment. A middle ground. The higher the power chosen, the faster it would burn through the allocated health cost.

For the next enemy, she chose one hundred health again. Hissing in pain, she felt the power rush through her as her healing skill restored her lost health in exchange for mana. The spell didn't hold for thirty seconds, though, as she had assumed. Ilea's fists only destroyed four demons, with two expertly placed attacks, before the power vanished again.

Diminishing returns...

She looked at her hand as she sacrificed two hundred health. The pain was stronger this time, so much as to distract her from her surroundings. A claw hit her veil, not managing to break through before she grabbed the hand and kicked the body, ripping off the clawed limb in the process. She chucked it away as she counted the seconds, realizing when the skill lost its power that the diminished returns simply didn't make sacrificing a high amount of health particularly effective.

It wasn't much that seemed lost, but there didn't seem to be a reason for her not to keep investing ten health in quick succession for the duration of the fight. Not until she noticed something else. The power level she could choose was directly influenced by how much health she sacrificed.

Ilea invested more and more until she'd sacrificed five hundred points of her health and could access the highest amount of power, her buff lasting for ten seconds. Each punch literally ripped apart a demon as her fist traveled through their bodies like a blade through flesh.

It was intoxicating, but the feeling of wrongness and internal pain was near unbearable. Her Pain Tolerance didn't work on it either. It wasn't pain, exactly – it was something in her mind alone. No nerves were affected. The wrongness of the spell flowed through her as she used it again. The strength she gained demanded a sacrifice, and not just in health.

Ilea's tests went on for hours as she lost herself in the process of controlling and moving ash around her and finding the new limits of her skill and the most efficient ways of using it. She knew that as her new third-tier skill grew in levels, the numbers would change, but some internal understanding of the magic let her know that the ratios would stay the same.

The corpses around her piled up as she moved farther away from the line of defenders. More demons were flowing toward her, and it was only the ash in her vicinity that prevented her from being overwhelmed.

Soon, spells were cratering the ground around her and laying into the demons as she reached the position where the mages unleashed their destructive elements. Avoiding the deadly spells and using them to kill clusters of enemies she had grouped up beforehand added another level of difficulty to her fight.

Some of the mages started working with her as time went on and the enemy lines started to thin. The large clusters from hours earlier were no longer present, so the mages' big area spells were less and less effective against the isolated targets running toward them.

The horizon was on fire as smoke and ash moved around Ilea. All her senses were focused on her immediate surroundings as she used every second of quiet between encounters to let meditation flow through her.

She controlled and moved the ash and prepared her next usage of what she now thought of as blood magic. She was sacrificing her health, after all, and the wrongness of it suited the name. The thought was still in the back of her mind as she splattered another demon's head, kneed another in its crotch, breaking its pelvis, then grabbed a third enemy and tore its limbs out with a quick tug.

She lost her perception of time as the smell of blood and fire filled her senses. Her body moved through enemies with the grace of a tank and the efficiency of a car manufacturing machine. Blood sprayed on her veil and armor until, finally, her breath became heavy and each hit slowed as she came back to herself.

Checking her resources, she saw her mana was down to one hundred and her stamina was at ten, climbing each second and falling again with every hit. Around her were the corpses of dozens of monsters, still more approaching from the unending enemy horde.

Ilea sighed as she spread her wings and blinked upward to avoid three monsters about to run into her. Flying at a much slower speed than usual, she returned to the defensive line, which at that point was nearly a hundred meters away.

She saw some people nodding toward her and realized that a couple had tried the same thing. Some had evidently been more successful than others at cutting paths into the demonic lines and grouping monsters for the mages to destroy.

It was a good approach, tactically speaking, and would save a lot of mana and energy in the long run, but it wasn't without risks. She watched two warriors dragging out an injured woman from the claws of a dozen monsters. She was alive and would be fine, but she had overreached – the risk was visible to all.

Ilea wasn't worried though. Her skill set allowed her to adopt just this kind of approach. She wouldn't have it any other way.

Flying back, she landed near where the members of the Hand were resting, getting two nods and several stares. One guy in heavy black plate armor was even clapping as she sat down and thought about summoning a

meal. But she didn't, considering the risk of her stomach's nearly empty state and the value of a storage item.

Looking around, she saw a few people cooking. A man wearing both armor and an apron near the pot gestured toward her as he filled a bowl with near-boiling stew.

Ilea blinked over and grabbed the bowl with her bare hands, her skin too resistant at this point to be affected by the heat. She thanked the man and walked back to the slightly smoldering tree trunk she had been sitting on. Many like this now littered the valley, especially to the north, where the whale had directed its magic.

"Your endurance is impressive," said the brown-eyed female mage Ilea had rescued earlier as she landed next to her.

"Thanks, the only problem seems to be my lack of impact. You guys can just fry fifty of them with a single spell," Ilea said before blowing on the meal. It was an unnecessary gesture, but still, it felt right to her.

The food was simple and good, lentil stew with thick chunks of well-cooked meat. She closed her eyes to appreciate the taste and the energy it brought back to her body. It seemed to bring back more than any food she'd ever consumed. It was one of the best meals she'd ever enjoyed, though still not quite at Keyla's level. She wondered if the cooks had used magic or if her exhausted state was the cause, though she found it mattered little as she ate more.

"I paused to meditate ten times while you were out there, so in the end, the numbers are similar," the mage replied, but Ilea knew that wasn't true. She had seen the devastation of the mage's spells. Trian alone had burned through dozens of demons in mere seconds, during which time she could only kill one or two.

"The ash control you have is impressive. Maybe you could do something there?"

"Yeah, maybe. I'm working on it, though I can't really kill anything with it."

Ilea didn't want to look at any of her skill advancements yet, so she'd been ignoring the incoming messages. Her brain felt like mush and not up to taking in new information. There wouldn't be many Class levels as the demons had been of a much lower level, bar a few. Ilea just hoped her skills would grow, especially those of her second Class.

“Perhaps your ash can’t cause much damage yet, but you’ll get there. I’m sure of it. Let me get some more of that food as well,” the woman said. She smiled and got up before she walked to the cooks. They were members of the Hand too, it seemed, all above level 200.

Meditation fully restored Ilea’s reserves a short while later. Her body was still sore from the expenditure, and in the long run, she knew it wouldn’t be healthy. Still, she would invest as much as she could right now to advance her strength while there were still demons left to kill.

“This food is amazing,” the brown-eyed woman said. Then she noticed Ilea getting up again. “Going back already? You should give your body some more time, even if your resources are already full,” she added, a bit of worry in her voice.

“I’ll be fine,” Ilea said as she walked to the nearby bard who had previously calmed her mind with his music. Once again, the effect soon began to take hold.

“Thank you,” she said, tossing a gold coin toward the man, which he snapped out of the air before he bowed his head slightly. She gave the cooks a few gold coins too.

“To hear praise from a warrior such as thee is prize enough. I’ll make sure to spend it wisely,” the bard replied before continuing to play.

Ilea felt her muscles relax and her mind focused; the music wasn’t just sound, it was infused with magic as well. Each member of the Hand had more than just one trick up their sleeves, it seemed. All of them would be needed; this day had already been a long one.

She smiled to herself and cracked her neck and knuckles, then spread her wings before she flew back toward the sounds of battle.

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Night Shift

Eve's hand was steady as she read through the content of the letter before her once again. Then she sighed and placed the document into her pouch.

Should've stolen that necklace...

Then again, Ilea probably needed it more with her food obsession and heavy armor.

She expertly walked over the cold corpses around her, doing her best not to leave any tracks or cause any disturbances. It was even more important since she wasn't the one responsible for their deaths. Her targets had struck before she had managed to find them.

The Golden Lily was within reach. Now, she had a name and more possible sources.

For once, she wasn't happy about the bad news that would reach Trian. She'd hoped his noble family acted by the book, but after all her time with him, somehow she doubted it.

Leaving the building through the roof, she breathed in the morning air. She wouldn't waste too much time on this, but she owed the man at least for her increased Lightning Resistance. It was already worth sending a letter.

* * *

"What do you mean? I'm not going to cooperate with these people," Claire said to the man in front of her, the Lord of Vihal. She had practically taken

over the defense and governance of the city while the demons attacked, and now she felt as if her power was being ripped from her. Again.

“You saved this city. I know this, and so do you,” the man explained. “The people will remember you, but I cannot risk it. Their influence is too great, I’m afraid, and you of all people should understand the politics involved.”

Claire’s rational mind understood, but still she rejected it. It was unfair. A betrayal, right after she thought she’d finally reached the status she needed.

“They’re asking for a friend of mine, and I’m not going to cooperate. I will not budge on this,” she said, her voice calm as she locked eyes with the Lord. The two were inside his office, where enchantments prevented anyone from listening in.

He looked down and sighed.

“I thought it would come to this. Claire, I’m sorry,” he said sadly.

Claire prepared to defend herself.

But rather than summon his guards, the Lord only got up from his chair and moved to a bookshelf, removing and opening one book in particular. Inside was a letter that he handed to her.

“I’m a simple Lord in a small town, but my word should still hold some meaning to those who would listen,” he explained in a quiet but steady voice. “You’ve already joined the Shadow’s Hand, and I’m sure you will be able to advance quickly with your talents. This might help pave the way. I know Ravenhall is occupied, but my sources have brought information of the Hand gathering outside Virilya and moving out to retake the city. When you get there, they will either be dead or back in power, likely more powerful than ever.”

Claire calmed herself again. He wasn’t going to betray her, at least not yet. To think a noble house in Dawntree had so much power in the distant town of Vihal as to influence the local Lord’s actions.

“It’s the safest place I can think of for you two. If you cannot be convinced to give over the requested information about your friend, Vihal will not be safe. We will not be safe here because of you. You have three hours until we agree to cooperate with them. Your house will be emptied, and you will be declared an enemy of this town. We will look for you, but we will find nothing. You’re a Shadow, after all.”

He gave her a rare smile. She had only seen him smile twice before. The first time was when they had rebuilt the city after the attack and it was safe enough for people to resume their daily business. That was four days ago. Two days ago, adventurers hired by a noble family in Dawntree had arrived, asking for Claire and someone called Lilith. A name Ilea had used from time to time.

“I need more time to prepare provisions,” Claire started.

She was thinking things through. What to take, what to leave, and how to transport her mother through the dangerous and cold environment.

The Lord stopped her with a move of his hand.

“I prepared something. This town is old Claire, and you know that. When you came here, you were Claire Russel, part of a forsaken noble house from far away. Now, you have to leave again, branded as our enemy, but you will be remembered by the people. This is our parting gift and something that will let you remember. An apology, if you will, and a treasure of my family. Now bestowed to you.”

He took out a small black ring from his pocket. Handing it to Claire, she identified it and was prompted with the question of whether to claim it as her own. Looking up at the man with a confused face, he just nodded.

“Go ahead.”

She gulped and allowed herself a smile. “Thank you, Lord Felt. Rule this town well.”

“Call me Damien.” He bowed deeply.

Claire was out of the room a moment later, rushing through the dark streets with purpose and anger in her eyes. She had worked for years to get to this position, to ensure her own and her mother’s safety. She would find a way to fight back against those who had chosen to interfere. Not now, but in time.

First, she had to get to Ravenhall. She hoped the Hand had been successful.

* * *

Ilea looked up and spread her wings. Tired eyes glimpsed the moons while fires burned around her. The smell of blood lay thick in the air as she

ascended, clawed hands grasping at her legs before she blinked away, nearly fainting as she wobbled through the night sky.

Meditation took over as she slowly recovered, but her mind was burnt. The concentration required to keep up the style of fighting she had pursued was immense, but so was her growth, even with lower-leveled enemies.

“God, I’m tired...” she murmured as she flew back to the meal and rest station. Some people were already sleeping, while others looked at the ground with cold eyes. Mages were still unleashing their magic, but as soon as this was done, more than one would drop unconscious for days at least.

A whole day and night had passed since their initial assault on the city, and the mercenaries were tired. Many were used to it, to fighting for so long without much rest, to being stuck inside a dungeon or dangerous terrain for weeks or even months, but the constant killing weighed on them. The knowledge of what they had been before. Who they had been. All changed.

At least the demons’ numbers were thinning now. There were fewer clusters in the distance, but that meant the work simply shifted from the long-ranged mages to the warriors on the ground, who had to take care of each demon individually.

Ilea grabbed a bowl of food and flew away to a secluded spot near where the whale had destroyed the terrain with its sound attack. Sitting down, she crossed her legs and started meditating as she ate and concentrated on the food. The skill helped her brain relax after hours of constant fighting and killing. She would have to go back soon enough, but this time she gave herself half an hour.

Ilea thought of Earth, of mornings in her bed with food and shows.

After this was over, she would take a week off, relaxing in her bed, eating, and reading. Then she would head back out to get stronger again. Hopefully, her team would still be with her. All of them. They could do other jobs until she felt powerful enough to look for that demon she’d fought. Maybe find Edwin first.

She chuckled at the thought. Maybe that should wait. Find him when she was much stronger so she could slap him around a bit. The thought brought joy to her soul.

“This is unhealthy thinking...” she said quietly. She sighed, though the smile was still on her face.

Soon enough, the demons would be destroyed, and all she would have to worry about were more being summoned, Elves attacking, eldritch

beings becoming interested in this realm, dwarven machines coming to life in hidden chambers deep underground...

She stopped herself and slapped her cheeks. She was free, and she could do whatever the fuck she pleased. Maybe any of those things would happen, and maybe she would join the fights, but she would do it for herself, not out of some misplaced sense of duty or responsibility.

The demons had destroyed Viscera and Ravenhall, places she had thought of as close to a home. The Elves had attacked Riverwatch and Salia, and she wouldn't forgive them anytime soon. And the Taleen machines, well, those fuckers were creepy as hell and had nearly killed her.

Thinking of the curse and the Praetorians still made her angry. She would find them again, and she would dismantle them piece by piece.

"And it'll be fun," she said as she continued eating, meditation working overtime to keep her calm.

"You're freaking me out a bit there, woman," Aki said.

"Oh yes, I forgot about my fucking talking dagger," Ilea said quietly. "Don't worry about me. Just been a long day."

"I know, just trying to help."

The dagger fell quiet after that as Ilea sat and finished her meal while watching the faraway stars. Before she started thinking of aliens, she got up and walked back, renewed vigor in her stomach and mind.

She spread her wings with a smile on her face, and soon enough, she was back in the thick of it, her sphere allowing her to operate just as efficiently in the night as many of the others huddled around magical lights created by the mages.

An hour later, four mages were following Ilea around in the dark, destroying the groups of demons she managed to bring together. Her loud movements, shouting, and fighting attracted them quickly as she ran through the destroyed environment around Ravenhall. The city itself still likely held tens of thousands of demons in buildings and cellars. It would be safest to get as many of them out as possible, but Sulivhaan had decided to clear the city's surroundings first.

More people had been sent to Viscera and the lake in Eregar's Haven both to investigate and to take care of the monsters that came out. Weavy insisted that only spawn would make it through and no larger monsters like the ones summoned by the mind weavers the day before would arrive, but

Sulivhaan was cautious at best. A dimensional connection like that at least had to be monitored by a sufficient amount of capable mages and warriors.

Ilea didn't disagree.

Her newfound power in State of Azarinth was now already a part of her, and she used it in quick succession and increasingly efficiently right before a blow. The power was overkill against the comparably weak demons, but she had to learn how to use it, learn to control it. She was getting more and more used to the pain with each use.

Maybe my Pain Tolerance will level. I wonder if General Skills can reach the third tier... she thought as her fist smashed through a demon's skull, the blood splashing onto her veil. A sea of ash followed her as she moved through the burning environment, four silent Shadows following her in the air, waiting to unleash death and carnage.

A group of demons screeched as she approached the city's northern gate, or at least where it had stood before. Ilea focused her mind as she came to a stop, and the four mages behind her powered up their spells as she moved the ash around her forward as quickly as she could. The ash formed into sharp tendrils and condensed as much as possible at their tips before they reached the horde of demons. The impact was underwhelming, but Ilea smiled as some of the demons' skin was lightly scratched.

Deafening sounds and flashes of light followed as the mages unleashed their spells. Ilea watched as the monsters were torn apart and burned to ash as blood and guts splattered onto the rubble and earth before her.

"Alright, to work then..." she said to no one in particular as she blinked into the lingering flames and started picking off the surviving demons.

* * *

"Hey, look who we have here!"

Rock's voice reached Ilea before the man landed, flattening a demon with his hammer before he grabbed another one with his bare hand, smashing its body on the ground. Ilea heard bone cracking before he got up again.

"Surroundings clear then?" Ilea asked as she brushed away the sweat on her forehead, meditation working hard as she looked around to find a gap in the wall devoid of demons, at least living ones.

Hours had passed, and the mages had left one after the other to regain their resources. Right now, there was only one remaining who was refilling his mana while sitting on the ledge of the broken city wall. The man's shiny coat reflected the moonlight from above. It was a cloudless night, which was good for the Hand as not everyone could see very well in complete darkness.

"More or less, yes," Rock smiled. He stretched and raised his hammer to his shoulder.

"While you slept, I've been clearing out the city, though I haven't gotten very far," she said, looking around the rubble of the once large square. They were standing barely twenty meters away from the wall.

"You should rest as well, Ilea," the man said, his face turning serious as more members of the Hand entered the city.

"We're supposed to form teams and start clearing out the buildings and streets one by one," Rock said as Ilea spotted Navalis landing on the wall.

"I'll be fine, go on then. You're wasting time, hammerman," Ilea said as she walked over to a piece of rock and sat down, removing her helmet, a tired smile on her face.

"Gods, you look like some goddess of ash and blood." Rock shook his head and motioned for Navalis and the hidden rogue of their team, who was presumably hiding somewhere, to follow.

"Thanks," was all Ilea could say. She really appreciated the compliment, though she wasn't sure if Rock was trying to flirt with her or if he'd just been struck by a random thought. Either way, she was too tired to think about it.

She sat there for a couple of minutes, twirling the dagger in her hand as more teams of mercenaries entered the city. It had been a long night after a long day. She put on her helmet again and looked at her hands before she balled them into fists.

"On we go. Until the last demon is no more," Aki spoke in a quiet voice.

"Right," Ilea answered, standing up before she walked deeper into the devastated city.

* * *

The Shadow's Hand worked for three days and four nights straight to clear out every cellar, every house, and the whole underground of Ravenhall. Demon corpses littered the streets and occupied nearly every building; the city reeked of rot and blood.

And yet the undead, spirits, and other monsters would appear again soon enough. Or so was the talk among the Shadows. Even so, more monsters would mean more experience, more strength, and at least a small piece of revenge.

Ilea strolled through the city streets. The Hand had repurposed some of the most central government buildings as their headquarters. People worked in shifts, some cooking, some sleeping, and others scouring the beaten-down city for any surviving demons.

She reached a gap in the wall that earth mages were already working on rebuilding to ensure any surviving demons would be trapped inside. Her wings spread behind her in silence before she took to the air, landing on the wall a moment later.

The suns were coming up slowly, the horizon bathed in red and pink. The sunlight illuminated a part of the field in front of the once-proud city. Fires were still burning all around as mages created ditches in the ground to burn the corpses, which others moved into the flames. The work would take even longer than the fight, but the mercenaries worked tirelessly.

Ilea would join them soon, but first she would find something to eat.

SIXTY-TWO

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Imperials

Checking the wall, Ilea saw nobody was looking toward her, so she crouched down and summoned one of Keyla's meals. She still had a lot, but she'd have to go back to Virilya to get more at some point.

A horn sounded in the distance. Ilea put a forkful of food into her mouth as she looked toward the sound, seeing a rider climb over a hill near the burning trenches and wrecked forests. Following behind the first rider were a dozen more. Soon the whole hill was filled with armored riders, flags of the Empire fluttering in the wind.

Ilea enjoyed the food and watched the riders frozen atop their hill, taking in the scene before them. The field of battle was littered with thousands of corpses, the destroyed city had plumes of smoke still rising to the skies, and the corpse of a massive whale and half of a squid lay rotting.

"A bit late, aren't they?" Kyrian said as he landed next to her.

"They can help clean up. How many came?" Ilea asked, glancing toward the man. Neither was wearing a helmet now the battle was over.

"Looked like a few hundred from higher up."

Ilea shook her head. "They would've been slaughtered..."

"I think those are scouts. Should've been fine against the lower-leveled demons, but yes, it's good we got here first."

"Care to find out who this company of late heroes are and if they can help?"

"I think I'll watch from a safe distance."

"Look, Sulivhaan's already moving out," Ilea said, seeing the man fly up from the middle of the city, followed by at least a dozen Shadows.

She put her empty bowl back into her storage necklace, then flew toward the scene, her wings spreading behind her, while Kyrian leaned against a bit of wall that still remained.

A group of the Hand's members converged around their newfound leaders, Dagon and Sulivhaan, who were heading to greet the Imperial officers. Ilea spotted Trian in the midst of the assembled group and went to stand beside him.

"The city is cleared out then?" the officer in charge said, still on his horse.

"It is, though we would appreciate your help with the cleanup," Sulivhaan answered.

"The scouts cannot spare anybody for such mundane tasks. Where is the current leading Elder of your order? I'd like to discuss the reestablishment of the city's governing body."

Ilea was swiftly losing interest. Were the political games already starting again just days after hundreds of thousands had died?

"Will you truly not honor the contract between the Shadow's Hand and the Empire of Lys?" Dagon asked, taking a step toward the officer on his horse. "In the Third Agreement, the terms of cooperation in the event of an attack on Ravenhall are clearly written. This so-called mundane task is not beyond any one of your soldiers. It is, in fact, your duty. For your information, I'm Dagon Keywire, the current representative of the Hand, together with my dear friend." He motioned toward Sulivhaan, who stood next to him in a relaxed manner. "We may discuss the cleanup, rebuilding, and re-establishment of government in the city center, if you and the other representatives join us. I'm sure the long ride has tired you."

The officer was about to answer when a female scout put a hand on his shoulder.

"We will gladly join you, Lord Librarian," the woman said, getting a smile and a nod from Dagon. The mercenaries dispersed again, continuing their respective work as the scouts entered the city on their horses.

Ilea was watching them go when one of the soldiers waved at her and rode closer.

"Hey, we managed to get some backup! Sorry for being too late," Tiva said as she scratched at a blemish on her helmet.

"Ah, you're that scout from Morhil! Thanks, the cleanup will take a while." Ilea smiled at her before the woman nodded and followed her

companions.

Ilea watched the company of riders as they formed a thin line and rode toward the city. Some things would change with the Hand, that was for sure.

She sat down on the muddy ground and finally scrolled through her notifications. The past six days had been long, and she had killed more living beings than she had in her whole time in Elos. Most of them had been much weaker than her, at least when it came to their levels.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Bone Warrior – lvl 74]

...

The kill notifications were endless, so Ilea skipped them and got to the juicier notifications.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 222 – Five stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached lvl 224 – Five stat points awarded.

Just three levels for the main class... Guess I’ll have to find some higher-leveled Drakes soon. Or actual dragons at this point.

Ilea shook her head and continued.

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 217 – Five stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Inheritor of Eternal Ash has reached lvl 220 – Five stat points awarded.

‘ding’ You have gained one third-tier skill point in [Inheritor of Eternal Ash].

Well at least four levels here and another third-tier skill point, just shit that I apparently have zero Inheritor skills to level up...

That was something else gained from all this. But more importantly, Ravenhall had been cleared, and the demon threat, at least in this region, had been dealt with for the time being.

‘ding’ Blink reaches 3rd lvl 5

‘ding’ Body of the First Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches 2nd lvl 6

‘ding’ Hunter’s Sight reaches 2nd lvl 7

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 13

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches 2nd lvl 15

A bunch of Azarinth skills had reached level 20 in their second tier. Ilea now needed to do whatever was required to unlock their third-tier capabilities and then level up her class enough to get them all to the third tier. The next one would likely be at level 240, and she’d already decided to take Hunter Recovery after her earlier choice of State of Azarinth. Hitting the level 20 mark was nice, but it was a double-edged sword as she couldn’t increase those skills further until she hit a much higher level.

I do have enough to work on in my other class though...

‘ding’ Veil of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Form of Ash and Ember reaches 2nd lvl 18

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 13

...

‘ding’ Ash Creation reaches 2nd lvl 17

Well, that one was effective...

She looked at the numbers again to make sure. Ash Creation was now nearly at level 20 as well, though she had used it almost constantly in recent days while surrounded by admittedly rather weak enemies. Perhaps it was because the skill didn’t rely on fighting, so using it while fighting with nearly twenty other skills active in a stressful environment made the leveling process more effective.

‘ding’ Embred Body Heat reaches lvl 16

...

‘ding’ Embred Body Heat reaches lvl 20

That one had been a gamble. Ilea had simply activated the skill whenever her mana wasn’t low. She hadn’t managed to damage any enemies with the heat itself, but it might’ve helped attract more monsters toward her.

Maybe reaching the second stage would make the skill more useful than it was at the moment. At the moment, anything it damaged even a little bit would die from a couple of her punches anyway, while it would be useless against anything stronger.

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 9

...

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2nd lvl 15

...

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches 2nd lvl 19

Ilea was still happy she’d invested so much of her mana and concentration in the swirling pool of ash around her. The remaining demons weren’t dangerous enough for her to need to be too defensive, but they still provided enough danger to help her level up those skills quite quickly. Against stronger enemies, she’d probably avoid using the manipulation and creation abilities a lot, other than for blinding the enemy or hiding.

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 12

...

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 17

...

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 19

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 16

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 13

...

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches 2nd lvl 15

Ilea’s second Class was steadily catching up with her first one, and the skills had finally closed the gap as well. She was happy.

Checking for third-tier skills to advance, she found none to use her skill points on. Veil of Ash was level 20 in its second stage, but something was still missing.

Ilea saw that her meditation skill had also reached level 17 in its second stage. It was pretty much why she had been able to fight for so long in the past week. She’d consider its capabilities rather ridiculous if it weren’t for the fact that literally everyone had it. The skill made her healing ability insanely good. She just needed a short break, and she could go from literally broken and near death to perfectly fine again, at least physically.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [Azarinth First Hunter]: 0

Unspent 3rd-tier skill points [Inheritor of Eternal Ash]: 2

Class 1: Azarinth First Hunter – lvl 224

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 3rd lvl 1***
- Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 5***
- Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Hunter’s Sight – 2nd lvl 7***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – 2nd lvl lvl 15***

Class 2: Inheritor of Eternal Ash – lvl 220

- Active: Veil of Ash – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Form of Ash and Ember – 2nd lvl 18***

- **Active: Ash Creation – lvl 2nd lvl 17**
- **Active: Embered Body Heat – lvl 20**
- **Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 12**
- **Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – 2nd lvl 19**
- **Passive: Ashen Wings – 2nd lvl 14**
- **Passive: Eyes of Ash – 2nd lvl 19**
- **Passive: Body of Ash – 2nd lvl 16**
- **Passive: Ashen Warrior – 2nd lvl 15**

General Skills:

- **Elos Standard language – lvl 5**
- **Identify – lvl 7**
- **Meditation – 2nd lvl 17**
- **Poison Resistance – lvl 17**
- **Heat Resistance – lvl 19**
- **Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 4**
- **Mental Resistance – 2nd lvl 10**
- **Fear Resistance – lvl 2**
- **Water Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Wind Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Lightning Resistance – 2nd lvl 5**
- **Ice Resistance – lvl 7**
- **Crystal Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 5**
- **Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 6**
- **Corrosion Resistance – lvl 3**
- **Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2**
- **Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Curse Resistance – 2nd lvl 2**
- **Mana Drain Resistance – lvl 18**
- **Health Drain Resistance – lvl 16**
- **Blast Resistance – lvl 12**
- **Dark Magic Resistance – lvl 1**
- **Veteran – lvl 2**
- **Heavy Archery – lvl 4**

Status:

Vitality: 650
Endurance: 233
Strength: 182
Dexterity: 193
Intelligence: 596
Wisdom: 584

Health: 6500/6500
Stamina: 2221/2330
Mana: 5828/5840

I'm pretty damn awesome...

Ilea grinned at the thought. Her tiredness from the past days was slowly catching up with her when she heard an explosion in the distance. Looking in the direction of the sound, she saw a forested patch near a faraway mountain, where a fiery ball slowly dispersed a couple of dozen meters above ground.

A signal?

She narrowed her eyes. The slowly rising sun's rays hadn't reached that specific part of the horizon yet, and Ilea doubted she'd have even seen the fire in broad daylight.

Ah, what the hell, why not...

Ilea spread her wings. It was a good excuse not to shovel corpses around, and it was certainly more interesting to her than the discussions between Imperial officials and the librarian.

It took Ilea a couple of minutes at full speed to close the distance, though that was enough for her to make out more. The caster was still hidden inside the thick forest, but she could make out the familiar light of a barrier. A lone mage must have wandered off – or someone was coming toward them.

* * *

Hard eyes stared back at her as another spell hit her barrier. Claire summoned a heavy blanket and put it on the hard ground before she moved

her mother onto it. She was quiet as always, her eyes as absent as if she were sitting in her room in Vihal.

The last days had been rough, but they had made it so far. Her goal was so close. The smoke in the distance had made her cautious, but having caught a glimpse of an Imperial flag had made her risk a signal.

She smiled at her mother as she summoned another blanket from her new ring. She was clad in a warm cloak already and didn't get sick easily, but Claire didn't want to take chances. Traveling this far in such a short time had to have taken a toll on her. The horses had been left behind, both too tired to continue after two days' travel. There had been no time to clear the trail, and even a barely adequate tracker could have followed them.

She wasn't surprised they had finally caught up.

Claire hadn't expected the noble's hunters to actually follow and confront her. They must have either been desperate, overconfident, or extremely well paid. None of them were above her level, the closest being at 180.

Still, with six of them standing around the barrier and her mother within it, it would be a difficult fight. The explosion she had sent upward was meant for the Shadows and Imperials closer to the city. She hoped someone would be curious enough to come.

"Are you sure you want to die here, mage?" one of her enemies said. He was an older man, his axe cradled lazily in his hands. The man didn't smile, his question not mocking but confused. "Protecting a friend shouldn't stand above your own and your mother's life. We were even instructed to pay you for the info, though I'm sorry to say that will no longer be an option after this unnecessary pursuit."

The man dragged his axe across her barrier, sending small sparks down toward the snow before they vanished in the air.

"And really? Trying to signal the army? Don't you realize that you're in the wrong here?"

The man shook his head while one of his compatriots, a weasel-faced fellow, snickered loudly. A sharp glance from the axe-wielding leader made Weasel Face shut up immediately.

"We'll wait her out. The trees are covering us for now, but if we make a ruckus..."

Claire stopped listening as she felt something and looked up. A smile tugged at her lips as she saw a familiar silhouette in the sky.

A moment later, a figure in black landed in the nearby snow. Dark wings of ash were already floating away and vanishing behind her, the once pristine armor was scratched and battered, and one of the helmet's horns was chipped.

Claire sighed and felt a weight leave her shoulders as she crouched down to her mother and brushed her hair.

"Is she alright?" Ilea asked.

Claire just nodded, smiling with relief at her friend.

* * *

Ilea took in the scene. Claire was standing behind one of her barriers, surrounded by six people. Her sphere noted two mages and four warriors. The old woman below the blankets was apparently fine, so Ilea moved her attention toward the others.

A man with an axe, one of the warriors, walked a couple of steps toward her and put the butt of his weapon on the ground. "Greetings, warrior of the Hand. I assume Ravenhall has been retaken, then?"

"Greetings, warrior of...? The city was retaken, yes," she said as she watched their movements through her sphere. Claire seemed more relaxed now as she brushed the old woman's hair. The shield, however, stayed in place.

"You may call me Horrus. We're here with orders from Dawntree. This woman, a mage of the Hand, has information on a dangerous fugitive," he explained as the others moved a little around Claire's barrier.

"Horrus, then. From Dawntree? That's quite a long way to come for information on a fugitive. And why is it that she's found the need to be protected behind a barrier?" Ilea asked with interest.

"It is a long way," Horrus said. "This woman here refused to cooperate with our noble-endorsed investigation. Perhaps the persuasion of someone in her own Order might help? We will reward you handsomely, of course. We're just here for the information. Neither of them will be harmed, that is my promise to you."

The five others were now all in attacking range. Either they didn't share their leader's diplomatic approach, or he was deceiving her. The occasional annoyed glances he shot toward the others made it seem like the former.

“What are you looking for anyway? Depending on the situation, I might be inclined to help,” Ilea said, thoroughly interested in what Claire might know to cause hunters like these to come all the way from Dawntree.

Horrus sighed and nodded before touching his bushy beard. “We’re looking for a female healer with the name of Lilith. We know this woman has ties to her,” the man said, and Ilea tried very hard not to laugh. A big grin spread across her face as she attempted to stay calm.

“Lilith... I have heard of her as well. I think she tried to join the Hand a while ago,” she said to them after a while.

“Impossible, she was nowhere near level 200,” one of the enemy mages said.

“She said the bitch *tried* to join, not that she did,” one of the warriors, a muscular man with a war hammer, shot back. Apparently, he wanted to be the first one to be killed by her.

“So, you know of her?” Horrus asked. “Then I will extend the offer to you. Ten gold coins for information that will lead directly to her current location, and descriptions and information on her skills and Classes will increase this reward.”

“Hmm...” Ilea said as she scratched her chin. “I know all of those things. In fact, I know where she is right now.” She saw Horrus’s eyes light up. These guys had been searching for a while, that was certain. “I want to know something in return, though. You may subtract the value of said information from the reward.”

“What do you want to know?” Horrus barked, clearly eager for his hunt to be over and therefore willing to negotiate.

“Well, it’s simple. I just want to know why you’re looking for her. When I met Lillith, she seemed to be on the run, but she didn’t want to tell me why.”

Horrus seemed a little reluctant, but after looking at his men fidgeting with their weapons, he shook his head a moment later.

“A girl ran away from a noble house, a girl by the name of Alice. We believe she might be with the woman called Lilith,” he explained, sharing just enough to explain the situation without mentioning any family names or exactly what had happened.

Ilea could fill in the rest. Finally, the noble girl had made one right choice. She’d run away from home to find her own way in the world.

Maybe it hadn't been such a bad decision to be nice to her. Only if she managed not to die, of course.

Ilea smiled under her helmet, knowing that Alice would have to survive in the wild. Perhaps next time they met, she would have learned a few things.

"That's awful. Well, you've convinced me. The woman's name isn't actually Lilith. Neither is she a healer, at least not anymore." Ilea cracked her neck. "She did, in fact, join the Hand – as a full member," she said pointedly toward the man who had called her a bitch.

"Her skills mostly include body enhancements. She fights with her fists and legs," she said, raising one fist. "I heard she can crush a man's skull with her bare hands." Her smile got bigger as she felt the tension around her rise. "She's usually clad in black, like most members of the Hand. To top it off, she has ashen wings that carry her through the skies."

"You..." Horrus spat as he hefted his axe.

"Me? Yes, welcome to Ravenhall, Mr. Holmes. And now, everyone, you'll tell me what you did to my friend Claire," Ilea said, her eyes turning cold.

"Who cares about her now? We found you. Where's Alice? The reward could still be yours, depending on what you tell us," Horrus said, his axe pointed more offensively now.

"Who cares about her? I do. And I swear if you don't answer me now, I will kill all of you. I don't give a rat's ass about Alice. If she's run off from her shitty family, good for her. I hope she's far away from here now and gets strong enough to fight for herself."

She locked eyes with Horrus.

A few breaths later he relented, looking toward the ground.

"So, it was you? You got her to leave?" he asked. "We simply asked this woman Claire about you, nothing more."

"They threatened my hometown, made me a fugitive. They forced us out of our home before hunting us down and attacking us – several times. I would've killed them all if it wasn't for my mother." Claire wasn't looking at them, her voice clear as it rang through her shield.

"Interesting. Horrus, I didn't make Alice leave, that was her own decision. I suggest you leave before I decide to kill you for what you put Claire through."

“Boss, she’s clearly lying, we can take her,” said the hammer-wielder who had called her a bitch.

“Let’s take her out. We’ll bring her to Dawntree,” another warrior said. This one had a long halberd that looked light in his hands.

“No pay if we return empty-handed,” one of the mages said, raising his hand and sending a bolt of lightning flashing toward Ilea.

She stood there and let the magic wash over her, a chunk of health leaving her as a red glow appeared below her armor and veil.

“She’s...” started another mage, possibly a fire user, as Ilea appeared in their midst, grabbing her first target, the lightning caster, by the throat and lifting him up.

Blood sprayed onto the snow below, the mage’s throat ripped out as Ilea turned around, feeling her Veil of Ash block a blow from behind from the axe.

“You damned fools...” Horrus said as the axe started burning and pushing through her defenses.

She pushed it aside and blinked, appearing next to the fire mage who had dashed farther away, presumably to attack her from a distance. Aki was unsheathed and stabbed into his heart.

Ilea felt the fire mage’s health drain as she grabbed his arm with her free hand, using reversed Hunter Recovery to speed up the process, destructive mana flowing into him. The fire mage dropped to the ground a moment later, his eyes cold as blood poured from the wound in his chest.

The remaining four warriors charged, their weapons drawn. Ilea sacrificed another two hundred health and advanced, the snow and dirt pushed down beneath her feet as she met them. She dodged a hammer before her knee hit a stomach, pushing Wave of Ember and Destruction into the man and destroying organs as the sheer force of her attack broke bones.

As a dagger dug into her veil, she grabbed the warrior’s arm, breaking it with a quick movement before she grabbed the weapon and smashed it into the wielder’s skull, all the while ducking under a halberd stab. A swing of Horrus’ axe was blocked by her bracers as she stood, the glowing weapon cutting through her armor and through half her arm. She didn’t move an inch backward, the dull pain not worth a reaction.

Grabbing the blade of his axe, she ripped it out of his hands, then threw it into the forest. Metal clattered against wood as the last warrior attacked her with a flurry of halberd swings, forcing her a couple of meters back.

She danced and dodged around the weapon as the wound in her arm healed. Finally, she twirled into one of his attacks, coming face to face with the warrior before a headbutt sent him staggering backward with more than a broken nose. A hard punch to his chest dented his armor inward, breaking several ribs. Blood shot out of his mouth before he fell, coughing as tears came to his eyes.

A calm came over the surroundings as Horrus walked toward his axe and Ilea waited. The warrior she had just fought quieted slowly, more blood coming to his mouth with each cough before, finally, he stopped.

“You will regret going against the Forkspears,” Horrus said, grabbing his axe from the ground as mana flowed around him, his muscles tensing.

[Warrior – lvl 178]

Ilea just shrugged. “You will regret going against a friend of mine.”

The man chuckled, gripping the axe even more firmly as he prepared to strike.

“Yes, I do,” he said before he rushed toward her, the blade coming sideways as Ilea blinked behind it. A sudden force changed the direction of his axe almost immediately, and Ilea jumped upward to avoid the strike. The momentum of his swing left him open to the kick she delivered out of her jump, sending him tumbling backward and his helmet flying into the undergrowth.

His weapon was flung toward Claire’s shield and scratched against it before landing in the snow with a thud. Slowly he got up, breathing heavily as he clutched his shoulder. Then he grinned at her.

“I am Horrus Daemon. Let’s finish this, Lilith,” he said, putting his arm to his chest as Ilea blinked toward his weapon, flinging the heavy thing at him as if it were a mere toy. He caught it.

She had considered letting him live. But judging from the way he looked at her now, she knew he wouldn’t stop. And now he knew what she could do, he knew who Claire was, and he would return. With whatever the Forkspears could summon.

And he knew this as well.

“Ilea Spears,” she said.

He spat blood onto the snow-covered ground and rushed toward her.

Ilea equipped her bladed gauntlets and let his strike rush past her veil. When it changed direction, she blinked next to him and slashed through his neck with all her strength, her overcharged State of Azarinth flowing through her.

Her gauntlets vanished again into her necklace as she turned around to see the man falling, his head coming off at the last second, blood coloring the ground.

Ilea breathed out and closed her eyes for a few seconds.

"Alright," she said, opening them again and walking toward Claire, who was still watching her. Claire's shield cracked and turned into small lights that vanished a moment later.

"May I?" Ilea asked. She crouched down after not receiving an answer and touched the old woman gently. She was a little cold but healthy, though seemingly unresponsive. Because of the violence her rescuer had just displayed? She wasn't sure.

"She's fine," Claire said.

Ilea looked at her and got up from her crouch. "Ravenhall's clear, but we're only just starting to burn the demon corpses. There's a lot."

"Tell me about it. We just finished burning some a few days ago," Claire said. "Thanks."

"No reason to thank me. We're friends, after all. Besides, this happened because of me."

"They made their choice, as did you and I. Go burn your demons, I'll join you soon. Are the others there?"

"I came here to avoid doing exactly that. Trian and Kyrian are there, yes. And a new friend we made. He's... well, let's say he's different,"

"Why would you mention that...?" Claire squinted at her, then raised her eyebrows. "You befriended a demon. Of course..." she murmured to herself as she put the blankets away and helped her mother to stand.

How did she guess that?

"We'll have to get rid of these corpses as well," Claire said, walking over to the first.

"Sure. Not the bearded guy, though. I'll bury him," Ilea said.

"Are you sure? They might find us that way."

"They already know who you are, and they'll know their team never came back. I'll give him the respect he deserves. I'll bury him far away, at least."

Claire gave her a nod before she made the first body disappear.

Ilea's wings sprouted from her back as she grabbed Horrus' head and the rest of his corpse, then made his axe vanish into her necklace.

"I see you also got a storage ring, congratulations," Ilea said. Mostly to change the topic.

"It's not all good news... I guess this is better than what I expected though. I see you got a bunch of levels," Claire said as she moved on to the next corpse.

"Yeah, not gonna stop anytime soon. See you in the city?" Ilea asked as she flew upward.

"Will do, after I take care of her," Claire answered.

"It's good to see you, Claire," Ilea said.

Claire looked up to her and nodded. Ilea thought she looked exhausted now, but a weak smile tugged on her lips.

Ilea flew high and far, holding onto the two pieces of a man she had killed mere minutes ago. It was a strange life she had come to live, she thought as she lifted the head up and looked at it. Not a bit of regret or fear plagued her mind. There was only respect for the warrior he once was and anger at the noble family that had caused him to come here.

At some point, she'd visit Dawntree again, and she already knew of at least one person who would likely join her. Well, two, if Alice actually survived and reached a suitable level of strength for an undertaking such as the one she was considering.

Ilea flew for a couple of minutes through the snowy mountains until she reached a small clearing inside of a patch of forest. The snow crunched as she landed and took a couple of steps into the middle of the clearing.

Holding out her hand, ash came into existence. Ilea thought of it more like her mana transforming into the element, almost like alchemy. She let the ash flow for a minute and then concentrated.

First, she formed two big walls of ash and solidified them. The thin walls floated downward and cut into the snow before they pushed outward, revealing the frozen ground below.

Earth... she thought, then changed the ash into four separate tendrils ending in spikes. Hovering them over the ground, she used as much force as she could and stabbed down. The compressed ash smashed into the ground, breaking in the process.

Ilea lifted the ash up and compressed it again, fixing the broken parts. She saw through her sphere that the spikes did have an impact. So she repeated it, over and over. After twenty times, the frozen ground was starting to crack slightly. After a hundred, she had cut half a meter into the ground. Soon the patch she focused on was filled with cold but loose earth. Putting the corpse aside, she bent down and picked up a handful of the soil, moving it around in her hand.

Her ash manipulation skill was marvelous. She smiled at the success and continued attacking the ground with ashen spikes and other forms she deemed suitable. The spikes had the most success though, and she soon found herself in front of a grave-sized patch with easy-to-move earth. Sneaking a thin layer of ash under the earth, she solidified it and lifted it up. Or at least she tried, finding it rather difficult because of the weight.

Ilea's mana was dwindling fast as she concentrated on the taxing magical labor. It took another fourteen tries and three sessions of meditation to move out the earth in one go.

She continued her training by keeping the ash in the air next to her as she moved the corpse inside the hole. Putting the head close to the neck, she closed her eyes and stepped back. Next, she moved the earth over the grave and slowly released it, covering the body of the deceased man.

Ilea stepped away a moment later, her wings forming on her back. Looking down, she frowned at the state of her armor.

Not something another fast fix will repair. Balduur better be able to do something about this.

The set of armor had really grown on her, even though she had already liked it a lot upon finding it.

"Aight, back to corpsefield..." Ilea sighed, glad that another member of her team had returned.

Now we just have to find Eve.

SIXTY-THREE

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Reminiscing and Planning

Ilea returned to the workers outside Ravenhall and joined their endeavors. Several holes with burning corpses were spread around the countryside, and the Imperial company had also joined the cleanup. Ilea overheard someone grumbling about priests and blessing the city and the field.

She tried to continue her ash training but found the process of moving corpses across the fields with her ash incredibly slow compared to just chucking them into nearby holes. Instead, she kept a few tendrils of ash connected to her back and a slow-moving floating whirl around her.

Falling into a sort of trance, she threw corpse after corpse into the holes. A mass of ash whirled around her at all times, pushing some of the bodies toward the nearest hole as her hands grabbed and threw others into the pits of fire.

Her Embered Body Heat worked overtime as well, now that she didn't have to keep all the fighting skills active. With State of Azarinth losing its usual cost, she could work on everything else with a little more focus.

The smell was bad, even with her reduced senses and a cloth bound over her nose and mouth. At least the monsters usually didn't have a lot of hair. That might've been a completely different beast to bear.

It took a good part of the afternoon to clean up just a part of the field. Ilea decided to pause for a while and flew to the city to eat. Smoke was still rising in some places and rubble covered many of the streets. The path of destruction left behind by the whale was a reminder of what had happened here. There were more Imperial soldiers in the city itself, moving corpses and rubble away just like the ones outside the walls.

Ilea received nods and greetings from both soldiers and mercenaries as she made her way to the central square, where she found officers from the scout company and members of the Shadow's Hand. Campfires were burning in the square, and several groups of people were eating, talking, or sparring. Ilea passed tables with card games going on and bets being placed on two warriors fighting with their fists. Perhaps that was something to join later.

"The architecture was marvelous, vast. Not something you'd see even in the capital. What did you say you called them? Old Ones, right?" Trian was explaining in an interested voice, glancing at Weavy. "Ah, there she is," he said, spotting Ilea and waving at her. "I'd probably still be there without her."

"Not just that, you'd be dead and a demon by now, Sparky," Ilea said as she sat down at a table with Trian, Claire, Kyrian, and Weavy.

"Ilea, you have returned. We heard how you saved Claire," Weavy said as he awkwardly lifted his mug of ale.

"Why was I the only one of us still cleaning up outside?" she sighed.

"You actually get paid for that. I think that's why so many of the Hand are still out there," Trian said.

"Really? I just thought I'd help out," Ilea said, taking the meal Trian had graciously summoned from his storage ring and handed to her. The man used his ring like a status symbol. Still, the steaming soup was exactly what she needed right now, and she removed the cloth from around her mouth.

"Vihal was attacked as well," Claire said. "The reports are still unclear, but it seems like a lot of towns and cities have been attacked by demons, many of them falling as a result."

Claire was playing with a runed stone, scratching at it with a small knife. Two empty bowls and a mug sat in front of her.

"Creating more demons in the process. I just hope this can be cleaned up without completely destroying Lys," Trian commented, summoning a notebook.

"Not just Lys. They've gone farther. The impact will be less severe, but we probably have the strongest military. I don't think the response in Kroll or Baralia will have come close to what the Imperial army managed to do. And with the refugees coming from the west..."

Claire stopped talking as Trian showed her the contents of his notebook.

“Are those...” she murmured, taking the book. Ilea recognized the design of the runes.

“From the demon realm?” Ilea asked and looked at Trian, who nodded.

“Yeah, we sketched most of them as well as we could,” Trian said. “Most of these come from a teleportation device that moved us, though we don’t know how far. Maybe you can find something, especially with everything left behind from the summoning in Eregar’s Haven.”

“No, these are different, even from those. Intricate, yet simple. A teleportation device, you say?” Claire said, raising her eyebrows. “I’ll study them. What do you want for this book?”

“Take it, I can’t think of a rune mage better suited to study this. But... if you find out how to make a teleportation device, think of me,” he said with a casual wave of one hand.

Claire stared at him, opening her mouth before she closed it. “Thanks, it means a lot,” she said eventually, making the book vanish, getting a raised eyebrow from Trian and a chuckle from Ilea.

“We’re advancing. Soon we’ll all be noble families, Trian...” Ilea said, winking.

“Oh, gods no,” Trian said, leaning back. “Speaking of which, I’ll go back to my family for a while, now that Ravenhall has been retaken. I want to make sure the capital and its surrounding lands are safe. You’re all welcome to visit me, of course. Even Eve...”

“Yeah, where is she anyway?” Ilea asked. “You don’t think she actually died?” She tapped the bottom of her bowl with her spoon, glancing at the others.

“That one? I doubt it,” Trian said with a chuckle.

“I don’t think so either. She probably vanished to avoid paying back the Hand,” Claire said in a quiet voice.

“That does sound like her,” Ilea said, then she frowned.

Kyrian touched her shoulder.

“You know what kind of business she’s probably up to,” Trian said. “One misstep and she’s dead. Can’t afford friends as an assassin.”

“We don’t know exactly what kind of business she’s taking part in,” Claire said.

“With her magic and Classes? I was surprised she even joined the Hand. Probably used it to hide for some time,” Trian said, then looked at Ilea. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

Ilea finished her soup with a slurp. “She’ll contact me. And I’ll see her again. You’ll see.”

Fighting words, and she really wasn’t sure if they were true. Friendships, even good ones, could fizzle out with time. People changed, and perhaps Eve really did have to worry about assassins and the like. Hell, there were even Forkspear mercenaries hunting Ilea.

She paused and looked at her empty bowl. “It just hurts. I thought she’d actually started to rely on us, you know?”

Trian crossed his arms.

Claire smiled, touching Ilea’s hand.

“We’re still here,” Kyrian said. “And we’ll get stronger in time. As will she. Maybe at some point, we won’t have to worry about such things anymore.”

Trian smiled but didn’t comment.

“We’re going to stick together,” Ilea said. “No matter where we are or what we do. How does that sound?”

“I’ll have responsibilities, but sure,” Trian said. “If you need anything, I’ll help out as best I can.”

“Of course,” Claire added.

Kyrian gave her a nod.

“I will stick with you all too,” Weavy said.

“As will I,” said Aki.

“Who was that?” Claire asked, looking at Ilea.

“I’ll show you later,” Ilea said. “Been a long week.”

Claire smiled. “Sure has.”

“What are you all planning to do now?” Kyrian asked.

Claire sighed and leaned back a little on the bench. “I’ll stay with the Hand, permanently if possible. Do you guys know Sulivhaan and Dagon? The ones who seem to have taken the lead? Personally, I mean. This is a good time to get a position in the Hand or the city’s administration.”

“I do, both of them. Don’t worry about it,” Ilea said. She was ready to put in a good word for her companion. Claire was capable, after all, and a position in the Hand’s administration or even leadership definitely wasn’t outside her capabilities.

“I’ll be at my house for a while, take some time to read and relax, then who knows?” Ilea said.

She wasn't sure if she should look for Edwin or Eve. The latter likely didn't want to be found, if she hadn't died during the summoning and subsequent chaos. Then there was Edwin. Ilea didn't know if she was strong enough to involve herself in whatever his group was doing. Or if she wanted to get involved in the first place. But she did at least want to know what was going on, and she wanted to meet Felicia again.

"Maybe I'll run more jobs for the Hand for a while, maybe go somewhere new," Ilea continued. "Anywhere dangerous with high-level monsters you know of?"

"Typical. Well, if you stay with the Hand for a while, I'll gladly manage your missions," Claire said. "Dangerous and unknown? The north might be an option. I hear you dove head-first into that massive demon outside the city, so you might just be crazy enough to try it. North of the Navali forest and over the Naraza mountain chain. Expeditions try to break through now and then, so maybe you can join one. You're sure to find danger there."

"I hear none of the ships going east have ever returned," Kyrian said.

"I'm not looking to board a ship," Ilea said. "But it doesn't sound like any of you are too keen on joining?"

"It's safer for me and my mother to stay here for a while. As soon as things change... maybe I'll think about adventuring again. But for now, I've had my fair share of danger," Claire said.

"Danger is fine, but not the kind Ilea is looking for," Trian said. "Our foray into the demon realm was quite enough. I prefer more comprehensible risks and battles, like here in the Plains."

"I can join," Kyrian said. "I like to be away from settlements. An adventure sounds nice."

She felt a little upset that it seemed the team wasn't going to run any more missions together, but she supposed they could support each other in different ways. It had been clear to her that Claire didn't exactly enjoy constantly fighting dangerous creatures. Trian had his whole nobility thing going on, and while she would've liked to work with him more, she thought he'd grown a lot since they'd first met. If he wanted to return and take up a post with his family business, she understood that.

As for Eve, she didn't really know what to think.

And Kyrian, she knew he would stick around, but at the same time, she felt like he was still figuring things out. Ilea was happy to support him in

that, wherever it took him. She noted that he had nearly stopped stuttering, at least when he was around them.

Ilea smiled. "At least one of you is willing to live life."

"You might be doing a little too much living," Trian said.

"I told you, I'll be relaxing for a week," Ilea said, pointing her spoon at him.

"I can talk to Dagon and Sulivhaan on your behalf as well, Claire," Trian said. "With your capabilities, you'll fit right in with the new governing body of Ravenhall, whatever that may be."

"Now that *does* sound exciting," Claire said, picking up a pen and underlining something in her notebook with great force.

The administrators of Ravenhall don't know what they're in for...

"How in the world does that sound exciting?" Ilea murmured.

Claire scowled.

"Oh shit," Ilea exclaimed. "Speaking of staying here, Kyrian, I really didn't plan on taking care of a kid."

"You're pregnant?" Trian asked, summoning a mug of ale. "Congratulations."

"Congratula—"

Claire was stopped by a gesture from Ilea.

"I'm talking about Cless, the little girl. She's still at my house."

"I'll find a place for her – if you find a place for me first. Deal?" Claire asked with a sly smile.

"That sounds perfect. Make sure she gets strong enough to rip apart the best of men," Ilea replied, shaking hands with her friend.

She sighed and looked out toward the mountains. The suns marked the passing of the afternoon as they moved toward the horizon, smoke rising high from outside the city where the pits were still burning.

"What about the demon?" Claire asked.

"I have a place for him. We can go there tomorrow, I guess. I'm sure you'll make marvelous new friends." She smiled at Weavy, who looked apprehensive at best.

Claire summoned portions of cheese and bread, distributing them around the table. She hesitated when she got to Weavy, but ultimately she gave him a piece too, which he started studying immediately.

"Another dangerous place you could go would be the Navali Forest," Trian said. "You were in the west when the Elves attacked last, right?"

“I might go there at some point,” Ilea said. *Maybe*. She thought back to Salia, then shook her head.

“What is this made of?” Weavy asked after devouring every last bit of cheese left on the table.

It took a while for the team to explain to him that humans made the chunks of godly taste with the milk of other animals. A foreign and disgusting concept to him, yet he didn’t reject more.

Perhaps our species is even more corrupting than his... Ilea thought as she continued eating.

“It’s time,” Trian said after a moment. “I have to prepare for my journey. But it was good seeing you all again.”

Ilea raised her mug.

“We’d better get going too then, Claire. The earlier, the better,” Ilea said. “Kyrian, can you take Weavy to the house? We’ll bring Cless here tomorrow if everything works out.”

“Will do. I’ll take care of Cless until you’re back,” Kyrian answered.

“You can stay there as well if you like. Until you get your own place.”

“There are still forests and caves in these mountains.”

Ilea raised her eyebrows. “Was that a joke? From you?”

“Learning from the best,” he replied with a wink.

“I will learn as well,” said Weavy.

“And so the infection spreads,” Aki whispered.

* * *

The night was bright and the moons were shining down onto Virilya as Eve ran across dirty rooftops toward her destination.

She had made some progress in her search for the Golden Lily. The organization she thought to be behind a lot of smaller gangs and corrupt government in at least the Empire and maybe even beyond.

Destroying that problem at the root was what she believed in. What she had worked so long for. If she could find and kill a single high-ranking member of that organization, she could destabilize it immensely. Some of the people she had met and worked with over the years would discourage her. They’d just say, ‘Another one would fill the spot.’

But Eve knew that people who held high positions had decades of experience and organizational skills. If it took a month or a year for the replacement to become just as efficient as the one before, then hundreds if not thousands would be spared pain and suffering.

There were holes in her argument, and Eve had learned enough to know it wasn't the right approach at all times, but for the kind of work she did, it was necessary to steel herself. In the Hand, she had finally gained the strength to face the people responsible and to become the executioner in places where no judge was allowed jurisdiction.

The sky was cloudless as she ran; only the sound of her featherlight steps on the stone and brick roofs disturbed the night's silence. Eve calmed her breathing and focused. Thoughts would be distracting.

She soon approached a small patch of land in one of the noble districts of Virilya. Flowers of all kinds proudly looked up at the moons, alive and eager to grow even as winter came to an end. Magically aided, no doubt.

On one side of the plot of land was a small house, at least in comparison to the big noble mansions usually built in the city. Eve ran through the field of flowers, the rustling of leaves filling her ears as she approached.

Laughter could be heard from a distant room as Eve made her way through the dark mansion. The entire building was overrun with plant life. Flowers covered the ground even indoors, but unlike outside, all the species she recognized here were poisonous.

When Eve considered the high-reaching roots climbing the walls and ceilings with sacks hanging from them, she felt the atmosphere inside the mansion was quite different from the quiet yet eerie feeling she'd had outside.

It's coming from below...

She jumped up to one of the sacs, and her dagger flashed before one of the cocoons opened. A slimy substance flowed out, coupled with a half-digested human corpse.

Eve knew she had found the right place and moved down again, careful not to make too much noise. Cutting open the cocoon might've been too much already, but she'd had to be sure. Now she had reason enough to take out whoever owned this place. Any further information or an actual member of the Golden Lily would be a bonus.

Eve soon found a staircase, and as she descended, she realized that the lower levels went much deeper than she'd expected. A cavern-like hall

opened up before her, the whole floor covered in a field of flowers. Magical lights came from crystals above her and on the walls. Trees blossomed as if it were spring. Colors from red to blue to green filled the place as Eve stood at the entrance, invisible to most eyes and ears.

The laughter was coming from deeper within, and so she followed the sound. It seemed as if the plants below her were grabbing at her feet, brushing against the unseen invader of their sacred haven.

Moving farther in, Eve found a clearing in a lower section of the cave. Flowers of all kinds surrounded a small altar with a bleeding corpse on top of it. Small cuts had completely drained the body of all blood, and roots pushed into the openings. A woman stood next to it, laughing.

Now that Eve was this close, she realized the woman had tears on her face. Her laughter was joyous, and the flowers around her seemed to move with similar enthusiasm.

The woman was naked. She had a thin frame with a kind face. If the corpse in front of her disappeared, the scene would be entirely different. Eve made her way quietly downward, endeavoring not to be noticed even by the very air around her.

“A visitor! And at such a late hour!” the woman said, turning around in a sudden spin. Her voice was light and clear, the flowers around her mimicking her movement. Her line of sight indicated that she didn’t know exactly where Eve was – just that someone was there.

“Your stealth skills rival the best. Were you outside my domain, I doubt I would’ve even noticed!”

Her voice indicated both surprise and pride. Eve didn’t know if the pride related to her own skills or the woman’s.

“Did you come to play? To kill? Or to talk?”

A minute passed as the flowers around them moved quietly in the wind. Eve nearly forgot that they were underground. Their surroundings seemed like an outdoor field or garden, the light from above resembling moonlight.

“It is not to talk, then? So, it is to kill or to play. What will it be, visitor?” the woman asked as roots started to spring out of the ground.

Eve calmly moved closer to her target, her illusion spells removing the impact her steps had on the flowers from the woman’s mind.

After four more steps, Eve found herself in front of the woman. A flash of steel later, and her cursed dagger had pushed through the woman’s skin and into her heart.

Yet the impact felt wrong to Eve, and she quickly moved backward, letting go of the blade.

Tears came to the woman's eyes.

"To kill... it is always to kill..." she said, her voice breaking. She sobbed as she tried to rip out the dagger with her hands. "You disturbed my ritual. For that, you will take part in it as well," she continued, her tone changing from sadness to anger.

The plants around her shot up angrily from the ground as Eve determined the safest place for her to stand.

It'll start in a moment...

She prepared herself.

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SIXTY-FOUR

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Westward

“The cleanup of Viscera will be one of our tasks,” Sulivhaan said as he wrote down the terms on the paper before him.

“Agreed,” one of the Imperial officers said. “The requested purchases in the city should be fine, though we will have to request permission to accept.”

“Is that all for now?” another officer asked before yawning. The negotiations had taken hours already, and they were barely finished with the immediate necessities.

The Shadow’s Hand would gain a lot of new power in Ravenhall, the new terms accepted thanks to their independent retaking of the city and the Empire’s interest in maintaining good relations with them. Considering the demon problem, they could either blame the Hand or try to work together to resolve it.

Fortunately, the majority of the officers present were more inclined toward cooperation. They knew exactly what the capabilities of their army were and what the Shadow’s Hand could bring to the table. Of course, the Empire had acted tough throughout the negotiations, but ultimately, the finished contracts painted quite a different balance of power from the previous situation.

The Hand had neither the resources nor the desire to take over a kingdom or an empire, but it might have the power to weaken or even destroy one. All the people present knew this, and while the Elders were preoccupied with other things, Sulivhaan and Dagon had plans for their order. Working with the Empire was in the interests of both parties.

“That is all for today. We can offer mercenaries to deliver the necessary documents by tomorrow if you wish,” Dagon said, but the officer waved the suggestion away.

“We appreciate the notion. Two of our fastest squads will build a constant communication network between Virilya and Ravenhall for as long as necessary.”

Sulivhaan gave the officer a nod and stood up, gathering his things as the group dispersed. He glanced up when he saw Ilea enter with another Shadow in tow.

Claire, perhaps?

“Sulivhaan, got a few minutes?” Ilea asked.

He gestured to the now vacant chairs, noticing a few of the scouts glancing at Ilea.

Dagon had gone over to the counter and was pouring himself a drink. “Anything for you?” he asked, but they declined.

“What can I do for you, Ilea?” Sulivhaan asked as Dagon came back and sat down, starting to read through the documents.

“I’m just here to endorse my friend here. I’m sure she can speak for herself,” Ilea said, nodding at Claire before summoning a meal for herself.

“Ilea, please, can you at least move to another table?” Dagon asked, protecting the papers in front of him from the inevitable food shrapnel – she ate like a starving beast.

Then again, perhaps she was.

Ilea rolled her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Dagon nodded thankfully as their attention moved to Claire.

“My name is Claire Russel, I’m on the same team as Ilea.” Claire produced a letter from a pocket in her armor and handed it to Dagon.

After he and Sulivhaan had both read it, she talked for a while about her home town and what she had done to ensure its survival. She went on to describe the current situation in Ravenhall and the measures she would implement if she had the necessary influence.

“So, you want a job?” Dagon asked.

“You’ve got it,” Sulivhaan said immediately. “It’s not like a lot of Shadows will want to participate in the rebuilding of Ravenhall, let alone its administration. Verena still hasn’t returned, but I’m sure she’ll have some plans in place. Maybe you’ll be able to work with her. I found it... difficult.”

That was putting it lightly, but he didn't want to scare off this kind of help. He gave the woman a long look. Her documentation and retelling of what had happened in Vihal gave him some hope.

"It would be my pleasure to try," Claire said and smiled, as did Dagon.

"Is it possible for you to start immediately?" Sulivhaan asked.

Claire gave him a nod.

"Wonderful. Please have a look at these drafts," he said, handing over the contracts set up with the representatives of the Empire.

It was a test, but also a show of trust. She was a Shadow, a friend of Ilea, and the Lord of Vihal had endorsed her. He and Dagon couldn't handle everything on their own, and right now, there was an opportunity to establish the Hand as more than just a mercenary order, and Ravenhall as more than just its home.

* * *

"Great, the administrators have found each other. If you need anything else, I'll be at home. Oh, Dagon, now that I've gotten you a capable helper, care to share some info on ash creation, or element creation skills in general, and their use? Is it possible to fight with it? Kind of as an extension of myself?" Ilea asked, leaning forward again as her empty plate vanished.

"Element creation is highly effective. Most mages with creation spells use them to hurl projectiles at enemies or to create traps and defenses. However, there are many ways to use such skills for a more direct approach in a melee battle. If that is what you're looking to do, it's certainly worthwhile."

"I'll keep testing things then," Ilea said with a smile.

One way or another, she had to increase her levels and skills to get more usability out of them or perhaps unlock something that would increase her ash's power.

"You're planning more than just a return to before," Claire said, her voice neutral. "I suggest a change to paragraph six. Both the third and fourth streets house some very important stores that could easily be rebuilt and restaffed. Their reputation goes beyond even the lands of the Empire."

Claire started making revisions even as she spoke, and the trio were lost in details a moment later, so Ilea excused herself to finally find her bed. It

had been a long week.

Stepping out into the open, she noticed it was already dark. The air smelled of smoke and death. That wouldn't change for a while. There was too much blood in the streets, too many corpses.

Two near-black wings formed on her back before she started ascending. The city's houses below her became smaller and smaller as she watched the mercenaries and soldiers work outside and inside Ravenhall to clean up what was left of the demons.

She flew off toward the sea, replacing her armor with her more comfortable set of leathers, and her wings flapped merrily as she enjoyed the wind on her body and face. A little wariness remained as she checked to see if a certain flying demon was anywhere to be found, but the skies were clear.

There was nothing further she could do right now. She just hoped he was as simple-minded as he'd seemed. He was strong, and if she wanted to best him next time, she needed to get some upgrades. She doubted her new levels and the change to State of Azarinth would be enough to overpower that demon, not with what he had done to her in just a few attacks. Plus, next time, there probably wouldn't be another lucky paralyzing scream from a nearby abomination.

A short while later, Ilea landed near her home. The Swordmouth Tiger was nowhere to be seen as she headed toward her house, a faint light coming from within.

A shower would be nice, to be sure.

"I'm back!" she called as she stepped inside, and she heard scrambling feet coming from downstairs.

"Welcome back, Ilea!" Cless cried, something in her arms. Was that an electric... cat...?

"Woah, I'm not sure if carrying... whatever that thing is... is the best idea," Ilea said, eyeing the beast. The 'cat' cuddled up closer to the girl when it heard Ilea's voice. "Where did you find that thing?"

"It's not a thing, it's Squiggly!"

"We found it in Morhill while you were going to the capital," Kyrian said, stepping out from the stairwell leading to the kitchen and drying his hands with a towel. "Some of the nobility kept strange creatures in their houses. I'll have to find a place for them in Ravenhall, now that it's back under our control. Cless really liked that one."

“Is it... using mind magic?” Ilea asked, feeling a slight mental pressure when she looked at the cat.

“They’re fine. I found a record in one of your beast encyclopedias. They make mental suggestions to make other creatures feed them, no danger really. Long-term exposure is fine as well. Some people keep them as pets in the southernmost towns near the Isanna Desert.”

“You look good,” Ilea said, appraising Kyrian while he spoke. “Almost like you’re not a mercenary battle mage.”

“And you stink. I didn’t see a bath in here, but I wouldn’t believe you if you said there wasn’t one.”

“I actually forgot to ask for one. Will have to remedy that. You staying for dinner?” she asked, walking past him and patting Cless on the head.

“Sure. I’ll start cooking,” Kyrian offered. “You should just jump into the ocean.”

“I’ll do that,” Ilea said, then blinked outside. After fighting all those demons, the waves didn’t feel quite as scary anymore.

Even so, she stayed very close to the cliffs and didn’t go too deep.

Once she’d finished cleaning up sometime later, she put on a comfortable set of clothes and blinked back into the house. She was happy to find a marvelous smell wafting through her home, the fireplaces adding warmth to the room.

As she joined Cless at the table, her strange cat shifted into a strange glowing blue creature with several dozen eyes before transforming back into a cat.

Ilea rubbed her eyes and rested her chin on her hands. “You ever had pets?”

“Only Nelke,” Cless said, then she petted the strange creature. “Did you fight the demons?”

“We did. You didn’t get too bored here?”

Cless shook her head. “I like reading. Sometimes. And I painted!”

Ilea smiled. “You want to show me what you painted?”

Cless smiled and rushed down into the armory. Ilea followed to find half the space already full of paintings, although there were a few empty canvases nearby.

Ilea saw both abstract renditions of runes, strange creatures, and what she thought were demons. “You’re improving,” she said, ruffling the girl’s hair.

Cless giggled and ran back upstairs, the cat creature following close behind.

Ilea smiled to herself and followed, and Kyrian soon joined them once dinner was prepared.

After all that fighting, this is a strange experience, Ilea thought as she started eating. Even the cat was sitting casually on its chair, eating the food with its paws.

“Cless, tomorrow we’ll leave for Ravenhall. You’ll be staying with Aunt Claire for a while,” Ilea said.

Cless’ face took on a confused expression. Ilea didn’t know why she’d added the aunt part, but it felt right.

“You know I’m barely ever here, and I won’t be able to stay in one place,” Ilea continued. “I’ll come visit, though. Aunt Claire will be able to train you and teach you about the world. We’re not in England anymore, but I think you’re smart enough to have figured that out already.”

“So it’s true? I thought so... Nobody knew anything about home, not even what films are. I just don’t understand.”

The girl shook her head, apparently more disoriented by the lack of knowledge about movies than the existence of magic and actual knights.

“You’ll understand soon enough. Staying with Claire will be the best bet for you. Just promise me you’ll keep drawing and working on your spells, okay?” Ilea said, and the girl’s face lit up.

“I will!” She mimicked a salute, likely copying something she’d seen in a movie back on Earth.

“Are you from England as well, then?” Kyrian asked as he continued eating.

“No, not England,” Ilea said, smiling.

“So, what are the plans? You’re going to Ravenhall with her tomorrow?” Kyrian asked, having finished his meal. He got up and started cleaning up, Ilea joining a moment later.

“Yeah, and I’ll bring Weavy someplace new. The Imperial soldiers were already looking at him like he’s a monster,” Ilea said as they started to clean the dishes.

A magical dishwasher would be nice.

“I understand. He’s up above now. He seems to have an obsession with snow.”

“I mean, didn’t you? It’s his first winter, after all.”

* * *

Eve gritted her teeth and breathed hard as she ripped thorns from her arm. Each one was fitted with barbs that tore out a piece of skin, cutting deeper into her. She hissed and concentrated to keep her illusion spells going. Shakily, she opened her pouch and downed her third health potion – the last one she had.

Fuck that woman...

She allowed herself to sigh as the wounds on her back and arm slowly closed.

The poison was potent; her foe wasn't playing around anymore. Even with her second-stage resistance, the substances weakened her considerably. Her natural health regeneration was nullified, but luckily no more than that for now.

Eve was leaning against the rock wall, no flowers or trees nearby. She wasn't the only one who was injured, but she had to move quickly; the woman had already regenerated a half-removed head and three stab wounds to the heart, stomach, and neck. The only thing that had stuck was the curse, which was still growing inside her. Without it, Eve didn't think she'd still have a fighting chance.

"Where are you, damn bitch?!" the woman screamed as the ground moved, full of roots and visible thorns. The beautifully placed flowers ripped apart as the enraged mage unleashed her spells.

Everything quieted down again as the poison mage and druid started coughing hard. Something wet hit the ground, and Eve knew a chance had presented itself. But she waited for a full minute, even after the coughing had stopped.

And then she moved. Her body trembled as the pain of her foe's poisonous mixtures flowed through her veins and the half-healed wounds ripped open again, but Eve advanced at a terrifying speed. Her remaining dagger flashed in the crystal light shining from above as the roots and thorns around her started moving, responding to the attacking rogue.

A high-pitched hum filled the cave-like cellar, and the roots aiming for her shot into the ground around her target, some even injuring the druid herself. She only had a moment, but a moment was enough for Eve as she dashed over the remaining distance to sink her blade into her opponent's skull, using her other hand to rip out the second dagger still stuck inside her.

The curse would spread one way or the other, and she needed a weapon to continue the fight.

Jumping backward, she avoided the onslaught of roots forming a cocoon around her enemy, which had nearly cost her her life a few minutes earlier. This time, she was prepared. She heard the scream even through the defense and allowed herself to kneel down.

Eve suppressed a cough, focusing on the druid before her as the cocoon of thorns and roots opened up. Before her was a terrified woman, her hands clutched on the handle of the dagger stuck in her head.

A moment later, a cloud of pink mist exploded outward, and Eve ran. She ran for her life with all the energy she had left until she reached the wall of the cave, crouching down and covering her face with her arms.

The mist still reached her, landing on her armor as a sizzling sound reached her ears. She remained still and counted. The attack lasted for seven seconds, burning through her armor in places. Eve watched her skin dissolve as the mist landed on it. Her pain perception was turned off as she waited, hoping the damage wouldn't end her.

When the mist passed, Eve turned around, shedding the remaining corroding armor pieces as she used her dagger to cut out the parts of her flesh still covered in mist. Her work was surgical, the lack of pain a boon paid for years past.

She would kill her. She would end her, no matter the cost.

Her clothes and armor in tatters, she advanced through the cave. Its flowers and lush trees were dead or dying, their colors faltering under the mist of death and poison. Eve's feet were light as she moved through the dirt. Her boots were still holding together, her footing solid.

Her foe was sitting on the ground, crying, still clutching the dagger in her head. She had been beautiful, a lone figure surrounded by flowers, but now she'd been revealed for what Eve knew her to be.

Eve walked up to the druid while she hummed, putting pressure on her mind before thrusting her remaining dagger into the woman's neck. There was a yelp as Eve ripped out the weapon and stabbed a different spot. She did so again and again until she'd ripped the woman's head from her shoulders, throwing it to the side as both of them collapsed.

Her breathing was harsh – her lungs must've been punctured at some point. But at least she was the one still breathing.

A small smile formed as she ignored the notifications about her level rising. She had to move. If she stayed here without a healer's help, she'd die. Her wounds didn't stop bleeding, not a single one. Her enemy's poisons and magic had ensured as much.

Eve focused. All the remaining skills she could afford to keep active were burning through her as she forced herself up. She coughed up blood, but still she continued.

Half a minute later, she was standing. Each step hurt her as she looked forward, her vision hazy. She'd have to get back to a hideout. To get another potion. Her mind focused only on that. She ignored her desire to lie down, to sleep, to die.

There was more to be done.

The absence of pain felt strange. She could hear her own blood dripping to the ground as she advanced slowly and with unsteady steps through the now empty manor. She had won, and the dull realization put a wide grin on her face.

Another one of them dead. Another one removed.

* * *

The next day, Ilea's group, comprising Cless, Kyrian, Weavy, and the strange mind magic cat, returned to Ravenhall. Weavy got more glances from the Imperials now that the cleanup had progressed further, despite him being clad in dark hooded robes obscuring most of his demonic features.

"I'll find a place for her, don't worry about it, including the cat. If we have anything in this city right now, it's space," Claire said to Ilea before turning toward Cless and kneeling down. "Until then, you'll stay with me. You can be my assistant. How does that sound, miss?"

"At your service!" the girl yelled and saluted. Ilea smiled at the scene. She was glad that Claire was not only unbothered by the child but seemed to actively enjoy her presence.

"You'll be off then?" Claire asked as she casually dropped a bunch of documents and books into Cless' arms. The girl wobbled a little but caught herself a moment later.

Ilea nodded.

“Do come back soon,” Claire replied. “I’ll have missions for you. There’s enough to do right now, but I doubt you’d be interested in cleaning up for weeks on end.”

“Will do. You got the job, then?”

Ilea watched as Claire looked through some documents she had summoned.

“Fourteen silver, for the help you already provided. It covers your services as a healer and your part in the cleanup,” Claire said, handing some coins to Ilea. “And yes, I’m part of the new government of Ravenhall and already quite busy with work.” She smiled. “As it should be.”

“Thanks. Losing you will be tough, but if it’s for your true love, administrative work, then so be it,” Ilea said, taking the silver and handing it to Weavy. “Weavy, take this. It’s your starter kit. You can exchange these for goods and services.”

She enjoyed the confused look on his demonic face.

“I didn’t join the Hand for the same reasons you did, Ilea,” Claire said. “But don’t think I won’t have your back just because I’m not taking part in your missions anymore. I’m already looking at ways to support the four of you. And Cless, of course.”

“I know that,” Ilea smiled. “I’ll be back soon enough.”

“*Oooh, so this is the ‘gold’ people have been talking about,*” the demon said, marveling at the coins.

Ilea just looked at him. Not her job.

“Well then, I’ll be off. See you around, Claire. And you, Cless.” She hugged each of them in turn.

“Thanks again for coming to help us,” Claire said. “Whenever you need anything, just write to me or come to Ravenhall. I’ll make sure to be influential enough to crush a country for you if needed,” she joked.

Ilea smiled. “Don’t worry about it, Claire. I’ll make sure to become strong enough to fight an army by myself.”

Kyrian said his goodbyes to Claire and Cless before the two made their way outside the Hand’s headquarters.

“Where to now?” Kyrian asked as he put on his helmet. It looked like he’d already cleaned his armor thoroughly. A task Ilea was still dreading, though she needed to repair hers first.

She spread her wings and motioned toward Weavy, who walked up to her before grabbing her arm and shoulder. They ascended together, Kyrian

following close behind.

“Riverwatch, and some friends nearby. I’m sure they’ll like Weavy just fine,” Ilea said as she increased her speed.

As the cold mountain air rushed through her hair, a smile blossomed on her face. Flying would never get old.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to therapy and the importance of mental health. It is not weak to show vulnerability and to seek help. How could something so difficult be considered anything but strong? I believe in you, because I am human, and so are you.

I would like to thank my editor Brook for the yet again insane amount of work he did on this book. Another big thanks to Anthony for the copy edits.

Thanks to Taran for coordinating the cover creation and thanks Andrea for the wonderful Audiobook.

Another thanks to all of you who gave the book a chance, and to those of you who have read my writing throughout the years. It means a lot to me.

I hope you liked book two, more to come when it is ready. If you're looking for something else to read in the meantime, I like these stories, so maybe you'll find them to your tastes as well (:

First, *[Liches get Stitches](#), by HJ Tolson*. "Reborn as a powerful lich, Maud just wants to be left alone. The neighbouring villagers, paladins and busybodies have other ideas."

And *The Calamitous Bob, by Alex Gilbert*: “An Isekaied witch finds a golem and baby dragon, then embarks on a quest to resurrect an evil empire.”

And that’s it. Thank you for reading and have a good week. See you in book 3.

Rhaegar

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