



RHAEGAR

AZARINTH HEALER

BOOK ONE

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*Hey all. This is Rhaegar. The book is out. I decided to have the dedication
and thank you note at the very end.*

Thank you for reading Azarinth Healer.

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ONE

Where is the Magic?

Ilea focused on the dull sound of her fists hitting the bag. Her world narrowed. Her own breathing and heartbeat grew distant as she pummeled blow after blow into her inanimate enemy. Nothing mattered but the moment, every bit of thought focused on the single-minded task.

She loved it.

A shrill beeping sound woke her from her trance. Her phone, lying on the padded floor nearby, announced the end of her final set. Sweat poured from her brow as she looked around the gym.

She smiled, feeling that some of the tension in her body had finally faded. It would've been nice to continue, but responsibilities called.

She picked up the phone a moment later, then grabbed her towel as she made her way toward the exit.

"Bye Mark," she called out to the bald man engrossed in a conversation with another customer near the counter.

He smiled at her, pausing his discussion to flag her down.

"Ilea, hey, I just wanted to ask again about you joining the local tournament prep classes. Are you sure you don't want to give it a shot?"

She stopped and looked at him, wiping her face with the towel.

"I appreciate the offer, really. You know I'd love to, but with uni starting next week I just can't."

The younger man who had been chatting with Mark raised his eyebrows.

Ilea noticed his stare and locked eyes with him until he shifted his attention away from her.

“Mark, are you kidding me? I’ve been training every day for the past two weeks and you won’t let *me* join the locals,” he said, his voice a slightly higher pitch than he’d likely intended. He wasn’t quite whining, but it was close.

The new guy was obviously upset, but Mark just smiled at him.

“Jon, be careful, or she’ll show you the reason why I want her to go instead of you or anybody else. Two weeks doesn’t make a tournament-ready fighter. Ilea is the real deal.” He nodded to Ilea and smiled.

Of course, she knew Mark understood her situation. Still, she couldn’t help but feel a little bad about repeatedly turning him down.

Mark had always been there for her. He never interrupted her sessions other than to correct her form. He constantly crowed about her ‘potential’, but it didn’t matter. She had crunched the numbers already and didn’t plan to end up as a thirty-year-old still working in a fast-food joint – with a fucked-up face to boot.

Even if she somehow won at the locals and moved on to become a professional, she wasn’t ready for destroyed knees at the age of forty. Not to mention the risk of more severe injuries.

She shook her head and continued toward the exit. The petulant sound of ‘Jon’ still complaining behind her nearly made her stop and reconsider the whole thing. But she didn’t. She had already signed up for a different life.

It’s a hobby, and that’s what it will stay.

With what she had in mind, she could at least help people who *were* willing to risk destroyed knees.

Walking out of the gym, she was met by the bright afternoon sun. The inner-city street was lined with parked cars of differing colors, gray blocks containing offices rising up behind them. A sports car blasting rock ’n roll skidded to a halt as a kid ran past, the shouts and curses ignored in turn.

Ilea smiled and crossed the street herself, checking briefly for any other cars.

The walk back to her small one-room apartment was brief. Once inside, she dropped her towel on the pile of unwashed clothing near the door.

Sunlight filtered through the half-closed blinds and illuminated the battlefield of a room that hadn’t seen much cleaning in the past couple of days or even weeks. Dirty bowls, food wrappers, and empty bottles littered

the table, piled around two screens and a half-covered keyboard. The ground was covered in clothes, books, and various other debris.

Tomorrow I'll clean up, I swear.

The thought wasn't meant for anybody in particular but was simply a reminder of the trained shame she should feel at the scene before her.

Ilea closed her eyes and smiled. It wasn't the largest place, nor the most organized, but hey, it was hers.

She undressed on the way to the shower. Some cold water was exactly what she needed after her workout. The bliss was short, mostly to save a little bit on utilities. After she had dried off once more, she started looking for her work uniform.

"There you are."

She found it stuffed in a corner of the room. She frowned at the wrinkles on it before throwing it on the big pile near the door alongside her previously discarded towel. Luckily, she had three sets, one of which had been washed and was at least somewhat folded in the drawer below her bed.

"Time to get to work."

She sighed and left her mess behind.

* * *

"Good day and welcome to shitty fast-food place 87. What would you like to order?" she asked, greeting the person in front of her in a monotone voice.

"Did you just say shitty fast-food place...? Well, whatever... I'd just like a coffee and the cheeseburger deals. And only a little sugar, I'm on a diet." The man winked at her as she typed the order into the computer in front of her.

"Anything else?" she asked.

The man shook his head. "Your company with the coffee, if that's on the menu?" He smiled at her. It was every bit as creepy as she'd expected.

"I'm afraid slavery is illegal, sir, although I hear the chicken nuggets can tell some interesting tales."

He frowned at her, brow furrowing as he attempted to process her response.

Small jokes helped pass the time a little. At first, the repetitive job had offered a kind of meditative quality, but at this point she'd been doing it for too long. It was mind-numbing. She hoped for a robbery every day, thinking of scenarios where she could show off some of her kickboxing prowess. Alas, the real world was dull. And she was stuck for now, if only due to the greatest endboss of all: bills.

They'd just shoot me anyway. Not like I could actually do anything. She sighed at the thought.

"That'll be 3.99."

The man, still frowning, put the money on the counter, and Ilea placed the requested order on the tray in front of her before handing it to the man.

"Have a wonderful day," she said without meaning it in the slightest. She saw her own radiant smile and piercing blue eyes reflected in the man's thick glasses.

He marched off in a huff, clutching his low-calorie meal of burger and fries.

Just one more week... Well, not quite.

The monotony continued until her reverie was broken by the sound of Jeff's voice as he came to take over her place a couple of hours later.

"Hey Ilea, you're not coming in tomorrow, right?"

"No, I have orientation at my college. All day."

He smiled. "Oh, interesting. So we'll be seeing less of your beautiful face around here from now on then? Major?"

She grunted and replied, "Medicine."

She knew he studied philosophy, but Ilea needed something a little more... hands on. Contemplating the nature of existence definitely had its place, but it wasn't quite as immediately useful to her as punching a bag of sand. She wanted to see some progress. The field of medicine at least had clear uses and results.

"Oof, that's a tough one. Didn't think you'd go that way," Jeff said, making her raise an eyebrow. Ilea had thought about what to choose as her major for a while and knew she definitely wanted to go into the health sector. Nursing school was an alternative, but her snarky comments would likely cause problems with the potentially stuck-up doctors. So why not infiltrate their ranks? The tuition was the same, and she could always change her mind in the first semester. Maybe something with nutrition

might be interesting. Working in a gym would be acceptable. Or maybe therapy or something.

First, though, she had to survive the organizational nightmare that was entering academic life.

“Might change it after a semester or specialize. A lot of the basic classes overlap.”

He nodded and smiled thoughtfully, as he always did. Philosophy majors had a reputation, after all.

“Well, good luck either way!”

* * *

A solid ten hours of sleep after her shift had ended, Ilea lay dozing between the numerous pillows on the bed. She was only semi-conscious and was enjoying the feeling. It would have taken the full force of the sun to force her to shift even an iota. Not leaving waking up to chance though, the small alarm clock next to her bed sprang to life, and the room was filled with an ear-splitting noise.

Ilea groaned and, with an outstretched arm, swiftly disabled the hated device.

“Fuuuuck, it’s too early.”

Going back to her pleasant dozing, Ilea lay there for another fifteen minutes until the first of her five back-up alarms on her phone sprang to life. After another half an hour, the final one had been disabled, and with another groan – and all of her willpower – Ilea finally managed to sit up in her bed.

“Mornings suck,” she declared to the world and any gods that were listening.

Not quite awake, Ilea grudgingly left her warm nest and entered the small bathroom in her flat, her morning autopilot helping her dodge all the stray items strewn across the floor.

Only after standing in the shower for ten minutes did her eyes slowly begin to open. Then she snapped fully awake when she nearly slipped upon getting out of the shower. Her whole world tilted and her stomach lurched, but she caught herself at the last second.

“Avoided death there...” she murmured, leaving the bathroom with a toothbrush in her mouth.

Fighting to get her socks on, sniffing some clothes that had only recently been added to the pile, and going back shirtless to the bathroom, she spat into the sink.

This is going to be every single day for years now. Are you ready?

After finally locating a semi-clean outfit, Ilea made it out of her apartment, grabbed a coffee on the way, and got onto the bus. She watched the houses and streets fly by as she sipped from her first cup of the morning.

The disheveled young woman staring back at her from the murky glass of the bus window looked anything but ready to her.

* * *

The orientation day went by in a blur of introductory speeches, new faces, fancy buildings, and teachers of all shapes and sizes. By the end, it was all just one big multi-colored educational blur in Ilea’s mind. A typical boring college day.

It was just the first day of hundreds, maybe thousands like it. *Great.*

Ilea returned home with her new, packed schedule, including a bunch of papers she didn’t know what to do with. Her floor was already filled with detritus, so she was forced to choose the chair instead to dump them on.

“Why aren’t they giving us these in digital form?”

The mountain of paper was at least a tree’s worth. Something like the fabled internet could really improve the archaic school she had chosen. Or at least its impact on local forests. Sinking onto the bed, Ilea decided to check out the latest trends in cat videos. It had been a long day.

Her friend Rory texted her a few times, but Ilea ignored her. They had chosen the same college, and Rory was downright ecstatic to start what she called ‘the next big part of their lives’.

Ilea wasn’t quite as enthusiastic. Sure, she wanted out of her dead-end job, and the various majors she had been considering provided some interesting options. But really, she just wanted to do whatever felt right. She didn’t want to feel stuck, and right now, that’s what she was.

Sure, she had some choices, some freedom, but not to the extent that she wished. There were other options, but they came with their own issues. Studying something in the medical field presented the most reasonable choice.

The 'next big part of my life'? What then? Meet some guy, get married? Get a fucking house?

It all felt so suffocating. So *normal*.

She decided to look at more cats instead of confronting her existential dread. She wondered if Jeff could offer some insights, but she assumed he would just offer to share some of his weed instead.

Sooner rather than later, a rumbling reminded her of the purest primal need. With this thought driving her forward, she forced herself to get up and check the fridge. A single pan covered loosely with an ill-fitting lid laughed at her, filled with the curry she had tried to make two days before. It wasn't a good one.

Adding some more chili and pepper as well as a dash of pure hope, she heated up some of the meal before turning on her computer to check if her favorite producers had uploaded any new videos.

Nothing new today. Man, that sucks. Streaming it is then.

She first wasted nearly half an hour with indecision, but in the end, she sat through four short episodes of a new show about forging.

Eventually, another primal need reared its head, and Ilea decided it was time for bed. Lying on the bed, she stared at the ceiling and frowned.

Tomorrow, university life starts. Grinding for years on end. To continue grinding afterward. Maybe I should've chosen kickboxing after all. Still, safe and boring isn't too bad... maybe the excitement would fade if I fought professionally. Eventually that would become a grind too... One day at a time...

When sleep finally came, she dreamed of academic papers about chicken nuggets and the pricing of sweet and sour sauce, all coming to a close when the class decided to have a sparring match instead.

It turned out to be a good night after all.

* * *

Ilea awoke to the chirping of birds and the sun shining on her face. Her eyes opened slowly.

Only to be greeted by grass. Not something one expected when they fell asleep in their bed. In a house. With walls.

“What the actual fuck?” she said as she took in her surroundings.

Trees rose all around her, and the sun was shining through the gaps between them. She could hear a small stream in the distance. This wasn’t her house. This wasn’t even her city. The nearest forest was miles away.

Or at least it should have been.

Ok, what the hell is going on? The adrenaline of the unexpected situation woke her up far faster than any shower could have managed. *Did someone kidnap me? Or is this a very, very bad prank? Maybe one of those famous prankster YouTubers made me his target?*

Looking around, only trees could be seen, their trunks thick and high reaching. Not a species she could place on the spur of the moment. Moss covered parts of the ground, the color a deep green. She spotted a strange blue flower growing at the center of such a patch.

Well, where’s the idiot screaming about it being a prank and recording my reaction?

Ilea began to shiver despite the relatively moderate cool morning air.

Should I stay here?

After ten minutes of utter disbelief followed by nothing happening, she grew impatient. Confusion and fear crept into her mind, telling her that this might not be just some unfunny yet harmless prank.

Let’s move then, I guess. Maybe it’s a new survival show or something? They’ll hear from my lawyer if it is... as soon as I hire one.

Her thoughts trailed off in her head, her eyes going back to the strange blue flower. It didn’t look right. The leaves curved to the side in a strange manner, and the top bit seemed to be glowing.

Where am I?

She began to walk toward the sound of a nearby stream.

Where there is water, there is life, people, and towns. So I’ll start there, I guess. Maybe some human traffickers kidnapped me but then somehow weren’t satisfied with me? Huh... Well... Wait, why am I disappointed in them not liking what they got? I’m fucking fabulous, for fuck’s sake!

Trying to distract herself from the growing urge to panic, she walked toward the stream. The forest was seemingly untouched. There was no sign

that anyone else had been there. No sign of civilization. No remotely unnatural or man-made sound could be heard at all.

Part of her knew this was weird. Getting this deep into the forest, where you could no longer hear signs of humanity, took a really long time. She had been hiking many times, even spent a week camping in the woods once, but it was often hard to escape the sound of cars, phones, and other people. Here she heard nothing.

It's not that strange. It looks like I'm pretty far out, after all. At least I have my pajamas.

She looked down at her striped white shorts and plain blue top. The uneasiness in her stomach settled, though there still wasn't anyone to be seen. Ilea walked toward the stream, her only comfort in this unfamiliar place. Head toward water, she knew that much.

A roar broke the serene atmosphere.

It was like nothing she had ever heard. Freezing in place, she turned her head toward the source of the noise. Nothing. Just branches and leaves. Her mind went blank as she stood there for a whole minute.

What was that? What the fuck was that?! A bear? No, they sound different, I've seen a few videos...

Finally making herself move, she snuck up to a tree and hid behind it.

Whatever I do, I need to be quiet and still... I don't think my kickboxing will help a lot against a bear.

Another thunderous roar, much closer this time, caused her to freeze again. Her whole body was trembling, and she could feel her heart trying to hammer its way out of her chest.

Then she heard footsteps. Fast-moving footsteps. But this was not the soft pitter-patter of some tiny mammal. These were loud, meaty thuds. *Huge* was the only thing she could think of as the sounds came closer. A high-pitched cry filled the air, and another roar swallowed it right after, as well as all other sounds around her. A final immense *thud* reached her ears as the steps came to an end.

Next came a sickening crunch. Then silence.

What... what the... fuck... what the fuck...?

Sneaking a glance around the tree, Ilea stopped moving entirely. Her eyes fixated on the sight before her. Barely registering the shaking of her hands, she looked at the dragon before her, which was biting into the mess that was left of whatever the creature was it had just killed.

Three meters in length, it had the head of a dragon and no wings, and its maw was bloody.

Then it looked in her direction. Its yellow reptile eyes locked with hers.

[Drake – lvl ??]

‘ding’ Congratulations! You have learned the general skill Identify – lvl 1

A strange noise reverberated in her mind, followed by a line of text that appeared at the bottom of her vision. Neither seemed real. But she didn’t have time to properly register either of them, given the gory scene before her.

Losing interest in Ilea, the drake continued its meal, bones cracking under the strength of its massive jaws. The smell of blood suddenly brought her back to herself as her senses seemed to amplify.

Run.

Instinct taking over, she started to move. At first, her movement was stumbling and slow, then every step was steadier and faster than the one before.

TWO

Big Bad Wolves

After running at a full sprint for over half an hour, Ilea finally collapsed on the banks of a small pond. Catching her breath for several minutes and trying not to puke, her thoughts were in complete turmoil. Tears came to her eyes as she rolled up into the fetal position.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no...”

After a moment, her kickboxing training took over and her breathing slowed, her body starting to blend this situation with the mock fights she used to have with other people at the center.

She lay there for another two minutes as her mind calmed down.

‘ding’ Reached limit of Endurance – Recalculating initial value assigned – Endurance +3

Again she heard the noise and saw the text. It couldn’t be real. A part of her refused to recognize it as reality. Had she gone mad?

Calm your mind Ilea. There’s a beast out there. It just ate, but it could still find you. You’re lucky nothing else was on your path. The trail is there though... and it has your scent...

I hope that thing had enough for dinner...

I need to move away from here.

Careful not to tread on anything that would make too much noise, Ilea started to walk in a different direction.

I need to focus on my surroundings, I’m obviously somewhere weird. Maybe some island with dinosaurs or some military testing facility... that

wouldn't explain the weird noises in my head though, or the text... if any of that is even real.

She rubbed at her head, feeling the beginning of a headache.

Think. A magical fantasy place in a different world? I always liked the multiverse theory, not when drakes want to eat me though... Although I'm not even sure if it wanted to, maybe it's friendly?

She shook her head. That seemed unlikely.

The messages almost sounded like a game, or some sort of system. Perhaps I'm in virtual reality? A simulation? Gaming consoles have made a lot of improvements lately... nothing to this extent though. Not that I ever heard of anyway. Even if this isn't real, or if it is some sort of game, I don't want to risk dying on the off chance of a respawn...

She walked on for another fifteen minutes before coming to a stop at the edge of a broad clearing. Grass and moss were growing around fallen trunks of old trees, and rays of sunlight filtered through the canopy at regular intervals, illuminating the place and giving it an almost serene atmosphere.

Sitting down next to one of the trees, she gathered her thoughts.

I'm in an unfamiliar place. There are drakes, and I have notifications in my head. Maybe it's a new social media product. Those asshole tech companies would definitely do this for money.

Looking at the sky, now free of any obscuring canopy of leaves, she noticed something different. Two fiery orbs hung in the sky. Neither looked familiar. She blinked her eyes and looked down at her hands. She paused and checked again to see if she had really just seen two freaking suns. She had.

Two suns. So we can rule out a military facility or an island on Earth. So either a completely different world or virtual reality. Or some weird drug? Mental illness? There are too many possibilities.

She felt overwhelmed, to an almost childlike degree. She had felt like this before and always dealt with it the same way. When life threw out curveballs, some people froze, some cried, but Ilea had always just *acted*.

The last time she had felt like this was back when her primary school got flooded after heavy rainfall. Water had come bursting in through the windows, teachers were screaming, and kids were crying as their desks started to float away. But not Ilea. Ilea had just found a bucket and started to throw the water back out, not questioning the strange occurrence – but doing what needed to be done. After all, her socks had been getting wet.

What I know is that I'm here now. In a fucking forest. With fucking drakes. In my pajamas.

Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. "Fuck."

Mark had called it her 'fighter's instinct'. It was part of why she was good at kickboxing. She tended not to overthink but to move instead. Action helped her to feel in control.

Energy filled her, and the world came into focus. All she needed to do right now was survive.

One step at a time.

"I'm still not thirsty or hungry, so those aren't immediate concerns. I've read somewhere on the internet that shelter should be your first concern when you find yourself in an unknown place in the wilderness. I'll walk around and do that first, then. No idea what would be considered 'shelter' though. For all I know, a cave here might be hiding another one of those monsters..." she said, trying not to speak too loudly, but feeling slightly comforted at the familiar sound of her own voice in this foreign place.

I did get a skill though, didn't I? What was it? Something related to the drake I saw. There must be a way to see what I got, like in RPGs.

Feeling somewhat silly, she thought of different words and actions that would allow for some kind of input, a way to interact with the strange text she had seen before. What did the trick was simply thinking of her own name: *Ilea Spears*. A list formed in her mind.

Name: Ilea Spears

Class 1: None

Class 2: None

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language lvl 5

- Identify lvl 1

Status:

Vitality: 5

Endurance: 8

Strength: 5

Dexterity: 5
Intelligence: 5
Wisdom: 5

Health: 50/50
Stamina: 36/80
Mana: 50/50

Holy shit. It's real. And I've got fucking nothing. She closed her eyes, but the numbers didn't go away. Steady breaths. Think and survive.

The only reference I have to understand these stats are the games I've played. Vitality is usually connected to Health. Endurance is self-explanatory, as is Strength. Dexterity is probably more for subtle and intricate movements, or maybe speed. Intelligence and Wisdom... are usually there for magic.

If these stats are real, the question is, how much do they influence other things? Like my actual intelligence, my ability to process, react, think? Does Vitality change my organs and muscles to make me healthy? Maybe toughen my skin so I can take more hits? Or is it something less graspable?

I've got 36 stamina for now, I'll check it in another minute and see how much it grows. A minute passed. Checking her stats again, Ilea saw her stamina was now sitting at 44. So 8 per minute, or at the moment, 10% of my maximum. Might be a coincidence. Doesn't seem too bad though, compared to my usual recovery phases.

Ok, so it's like an RPG, it's just that everything feels like real life. So basically, real life with numbers to show how fucking dead I'd be against a drake. What does this all mean? Will I be able to start chucking fireballs or pop back to life if I die?

"Wait!" Ilea yelled out loud, excitement filling her, "If it's a game, then... log out!"

Nothing happened.

Log out, she thought, hope still fluttering in her chest.

Still nothing.

No matter what variation of words she used, no matter which hand gesture or thought she tried, she could not wake herself from this game.

What kind of game is this? Is it even a game? How long will I be stuck here?

She shook herself. *Well, those are thoughts for later. First, I need to find some form of shelter.*

The existence of these numbers was troubling, but they also meant that she had a way to improve, to gain tools to survive. Ilea focused on the now, deciding to consider the implications at a later time.

Standing up, she started to walk in a random direction. *I'm not going back to either the pond or wherever that drake was last.*

Ten minutes passed without anything happening. Ilea relaxed slightly and began to take in her surroundings. The forest was alive. Insects chirped and birds sang from nearby branches. It sounded normal, but she couldn't help but imagine bugs the size of cars or birds big enough to swallow her whole. What other creatures might exist in a place where drakes were real?

The hot sunlight was broken by the sea of leaves above as she left the clearing and entered the forest once more. Sweat was dripping down Ilea's brow before she realized that the ground wasn't flat.

It's a slope. Going further up might lead to more rocky terrain and maybe shelter. Yeah, that makes sense. I read that somewhere, right?

The forest itself would mostly shelter her from rain or the sun's heat, and so far, the temperature didn't seem much of an issue. She was neither freezing nor overheating. Yet, to Ilea, it felt wrong to sleep where something like the drake might tread. Not that going higher up would dissuade such a beast if it decided to hunt her, but she knew that feeling even remotely safe in the forest would be difficult after what she had seen.

Walking on for another twenty minutes, the forest didn't seem to change at all. She was sure though that there was at least some incline. She made good progress but found herself stopping and holding her breath whenever she heard the now familiar roars in the distance. They came from different directions, so she was sure there was more than one of them out there. Her only goal was to walk upward and perhaps out of this forest without getting eaten first. One step at a time. Everything else came after.

The drakes seemed to be spread over a rather large territory, so she would have to be quite unlucky to become lunch. When she took the time to really look, Ilea saw several other animals too. Most of them even looked familiar. There were enough creatures in this forest to feed even creatures as large as the drakes.

Using her Identify skill on every creature she saw didn't really grant any useful information. *[Red stag lvl ??], [Woodpecker lvl ??], [Worm lvl 3],*

and several other animals were identified by the weird skill that popped words into her vision.

Seems to work on any living creature. How important is the level though? Even that worm is at a higher level than me, but it doesn't seem like much of a threat. However, I wouldn't want to fight even a level one drake...

Thinking on the world around her, she continued upward, the ground continuing on a gradual incline. Her thirst was starting to grow as she climbed the slope, but that thought was soon overshadowed by the sight before her.

A high-reaching stone structure, battered by age. Broken stone pillars barely held an overhanging ceiling in place, ivy and moss growing up its side as nature reclaimed what had been abandoned. Large crumbling wooden doors, open and barely hanging onto their hinges, led into a dark interior. Strange symbols remained etched into some of the walls. One prominent depiction was set into the stone above the entrance, all of it faded.

Ruins... looks like a temple. Damn, this place is super fantasy. Well, let's hope it's not a dungeon or something. I don't even have a knife or anything.

Carefully walking around the temple, or what was left of it, Ilea realized that this was the highest point of the slope. She found herself on the top of a hill, once again standing in front of the broken-down entrance to the temple, surrounded by chunks of broken pillars, overgrown stone, and a few fallen trunks. Little sunlight managed to get through the thick canopy of leaves above, the forest around her dense with trees and bushes. And, coming from somewhere nearby, she heard a low growl behind her. Turning around carefully, she checked the intruder.

[Red Wolf – lvl 4]

Three more of them with similar levels, the highest being 5, emerged from the trees and slowly advanced on her. They were larger than most dogs she had seen, their fur tinged with a rust-like color, maws open to show sharp teeth. She knew that wild animals wouldn't usually go for something larger than themselves, and something uninjured to boot, but these wolves looked determined.

So the drakes aren't the only predators here... figures. I'm lost in the forest, they'll tire me out and kill me. Only one place to go then...

Ilea wasn't surprised by how calm she was. Compared to the drake, these wolves weren't as frightening. She had fought plenty of men before, their weight and ability likely quite a bit higher than those of a wolf. They even had a sort of calming normalcy about them, like some of the aggressive street dogs she had encountered before. She had only seen wolves in zoos before coming here, but they still held a familiarity that made her less scared.

Of course, wolves could still kill people, but, on Earth at least, Man was king.

A bit of that previous uneasy feeling welled up inside her at the thought. She knew that in *this* world, wherever it may be, that might not be the case anymore.

The wolves advanced as she slowly retreated backward to the entrance of the temple. The growling intensified as they began to encircle Ilea. To completely surround her was impossible now, but she had only one way to go. Ducking under a broken pillar, she entered the temple, breaking into a run. The wolves howled and gave chase.

She emerged into a light-filled hallway, the sky partially visible through the many cracks in the ceiling and walls, none large enough for her to fit through. Stone was everywhere, but she couldn't look closely at the statues or anything else as she ran.

Need a way out of here...

There were several doors in the room, but they seemed sealed shut. One was thankfully cracked with age, and the bottom half was entirely missing. She darted through the gap. Running down a new hallway, she heard the wolves' paws scraping on the stone behind her.

She entered another room, this one largely empty. Inside, a statue affixed to the back wall depicted a lightly-dressed man in a fighting stance. His arms were held high, poised to attack his adversary. Which it seemed was Ilea. The statue's eyes held empty sockets. Remnants of a campfire could be seen in the corner of the room.

Searching the room with frantic eyes, Ilea couldn't make out any way to leave other than how she had entered. There was a hole in the ceiling, perhaps big enough to climb through, yet it was much too high for her to reach.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of claws skittering on stone directly behind her. The first wolf was entering the room.

She turned toward the sound, and any prior feelings of calm melted away. Replaced by a primal dread.

There was no way out.

Backing up to the wall next to the statue, Ilea felt terror beginning to rise. She pushed it away. She was stronger than this. Perhaps she was on some crazy alien planet or in a mad virtual simulation, but she was still herself. She had always faced her problems head-on.

Is this it already? Do I die here? Well, at least I can test if I have more than one life in this crazy place.

Looking at the statue next to her, she smirked and copied his stance. "Not too far from kickboxing, I guess..." she muttered.

Facing down the wolf, she set her feet and put on her best intimidating scowl.

"You're just a puppy... with sharp teeth..." she said, with more confidence than she felt. A growl was the only response.

Then a streak of fur and fangs shot toward her. The wolf was fast, but not too fast for her to handle. Ilea took a deep breath and focused. Nothing but the wolves mattered.

Her foot caught the wolf's head on the side with all the weight and force she could muster from her years of training. The powerful kick sent it sprawling to the floor on her left side. Looking up, Ilea saw that two more of the beasts had entered the room while she had been occupied with the first.

Concentrating on the newcomers, Ilea ignored the whimpers from her left and prepared for another charge. The wolves broke into a sprint and jumped at her from two sides. Both animals snarled, flecks of saliva flying from their open mouths. Her foot flew up again and collided with the left-hand wolf. Instinctively, she brought her arm up to block the other creature. But this was no boxing match.

The wolf bit deep. Pain rippled through her senses, but she gritted her teeth and ignored the angry throb of the injury. Several punches to its stomach were needed to make it release her. Then the final wolf entered the room as Ilea nursed her wound.

Regrouping, the four wolves stared at her, now more wary of their supposed prey. Blood dripped down her arm as she prepared herself for the

next onslaught.

She felt numb. The pain was a dull feeling in the back of her mind, adrenaline helping her cope with it. She knew she would not last long against four attackers, especially while losing blood.

A sudden loud humming cut through the silence. The shock and volume of it made her lose concentration, and her defensive stance faltered. Luckily the wolves were just as startled and began yipping and whimpering while they scrambled to leave the room and escape the sound.

“Hahahaha, got you, you shitbags!! You overgrown puppies can go to hell!” Ilea yelled. She didn’t care how or why. She had won. She had survived.

Wait... was something glowing?

* * *

Ilea felt the world shift violently before her. It tilted and whirled like a carnival ride. Nausea gripped her, and she immediately knelt on the ground, retching up whatever was in her stomach.

When her vision cleared, she was somewhere else entirely.

“What the...” she gasped, wiping her mouth after puking again, “... fuck?”

‘ding’ You have proven Strength and Dexterity beyond your initial assigned values – Recalculating – +2 Strength, +3 Dexterity

“At least I got something for that fight...” she muttered. “Not that I have any idea what any of that actually means. I don’t *feel* any different.”

Looking around her, she found herself in a long hallway. There were more statues like the one from the wolf room. The only illumination was a faint blue light that came from the moss growing on the walls, all of which – including the ceiling – were carpeted with it.

What exactly had just happened? Was that some sort of magic? Teleportation? This place was getting stranger by the second. Thinking about it only made it worse. She needed to keep moving. For all she knew, the wolves might still be nearby.

Ilea scanned her surroundings. The statues looked the same. Different stances, though. A fountain, entirely made of stone, stood in the center of the hall. It reached about a meter in height, and it was in the shape of an hourglass with an open top. Water dripped from a stone extension that reached out of the side before it curved down toward the basin. She figured she was still in the temple. Maybe one of the closed-off rooms she had seen in the main hall on the way in?

Standing up made her wince.

“Fuck that hurts...”

She cursed a few more times, if only to distract herself.

Her arm was still bleeding. With the adrenaline gone, it quickly became the worst pain Ilea had ever experienced. *This is worse than when I broke my leg, for fuck's sake!*

Trying to steady her arm, she focused on the fountain. It looked as ancient as the rest of the temple, but the thing was still functional.

“I’ll have to clean this...” she said, walking up to the fountain. She dipped her arm into the water that pooled around the fountain. It looked fresh and clear despite the dilapidated nature of the rest of the temple. She shrugged. “Seems safe. Can’t be worse than wolf spit, I guess.”

To her surprise, the pain lessened immediately upon contact with the water, the wounds closing faster than anything she’d ever seen, not even leaving scars behind.

“What the hell... Is this the Fountain of Youth or what? This is amazing!”

Elated by her discovery, she bent down and started drinking the water. Fighting for one’s life built up a thirst after all. A feeling of relief washed through her with every gulp.

“Wow, this tastes amazing...” she said. Feeling much better than before, Ilea sat with her back against the wall a few feet from the fountain.

“What a day...” she murmured, focusing on her breathing as all the questions and thoughts she had pushed aside came crashing down.

Not now. I have to check the hallway.

She decided it wasn’t safe to stay in one place for long. Forcing herself to her feet again, she got up and started to walk down one side of the hallway. An open door greeted her, aged wood that barely remained upright. On the other side, it was dark. No moss seemed to be growing inside the room.

Backtracking into the hall, Ilea ripped some moss from the wall and entered again. She was pleased to see that the moss continued to glow. It illuminated what once might have been a bed in the center of the room. All that was left was a sagging wooden frame that looked perhaps marginally more comfortable than the rough stone floor. The space was otherwise empty.

What a weird room. Seems like a cell.

Walking back into the hallway, Ilea inspected the glowing moss in her hand. That alone was pretty weird. But with everything that had happened since she woke up, it now seemed practically mundane. Still, glowing moss was not something she had ever heard of.

I wonder...

She looked at the moss in her hand and used Identify.

[Bluemoon Grass]

“Well, that’s not really helping me, now is it?”

Walking to the other end of the hallway, she checked out the statues on the walls every couple of meters. Both sides of the hallway were adorned with them.

Each statue had a certain stance, which she assumed was some kind of fighting style. The detail was insane. And the eyes... They weren’t empty sockets like the statue in the room she had fought the wolves in. In the sockets was some kind of jewel. A blue gem unlike anything she had seen before. They were in fact quite hard to see because of the blue glowing moss growing all around the statues.

Reaching the other end of the hallway, another open door greeted her. Inside was something far different from just a bed.

“Books...”

A large room littered with hundreds of books stood before her. Barely standing shelves with piles of ancient tomes, some covered in thick layers of dust and others entirely returned to it. All color that had once been present had long since disappeared.

The only light source was the slowly fading Bluemoon Grass in her hands. No other entry or exit could be seen.

“This is weird. Like a study for some sort of hermit or maybe a cult?” Just touching one of the books caused it to instantly crumble to dust. “This

place is old... how old does a book need to be before it literally disintegrates?"

Checking out the rest of the pile, she realized that some of the books were in better condition than others. Getting closer, she noticed weird writing on some of the shelves

"Runes, maybe? I'm assuming if there's magic here, there should be some kind of runes. An enchantment, maybe? That seems in line with most magic I've read about. Then again, who knows how things work here..."

Looking back at the shelf from which she had removed the first book, she saw that all the books looked deteriorated in that section. Could magic be used to preserve books? She didn't see why not.

"Maybe the magical preservation mojo went out or something... these others look fine though."

Taking out a book from one of the few shelves where the enchantments still seemed to be working, she walked back into the hall to look at it in a better light, only then realizing that there was no way out of the place. She was stuck. In a basement with no stairs or ladders.

She looked up at the ceiling, trying to find an opening somewhere, but nothing stood out to her. Ilea walked backward and hit the wall, sliding down until she was sitting on the floor.

There's no food here. How much air do I even have?

She felt her chest tighten and quickly tried to steady her breathing. She was annoyed that a part of her wanted to contact her parents.

They're not here. Nobody is. It's just me... in a basement. With a bunch of old books.

She was at her limit. She knew the feeling well, but she knew just as well that spiraling down the path she was on would only lead to more issues.

Focus. What can you do? You're stuck in a hallway. There's a fucking magical healing fountain and a bunch of books. Water I have. Which means I should be fine for a few days.

She looked down at the cover of the book in her hands. At first, all she saw was a bunch of weird symbols, but after a moment, the meaning seemed to pop into her mind.

Azarinth Advanced Stances Part III.

She sighed. "Oh good fuck, I can read it. Don't think Part III of some advanced stances manual helps me a lot here though. Maybe there's

something more useful in there.”

Going back inside the library, Ilea grabbed all the books that were still intact. Sadly, not many remained out of the once hundreds of tomes. The one that caught her eye was a thin volume that looked like it could be a journal.

“Gregory Pale – Days of Awakening,” she read aloud. Flipping through it, there seemed to be dates. A diary of some sort, perhaps? She continued reading.

“Day 1 of my Awakening, or shall I call it imprisonment? I question my decision to join the Order, but such thoughts are for naught at this point. To think I was offered access to their elixir and class. I entered the Chamber of Awakening of my own free will and shall either succeed or succumb. I intend to become a warrior of Azarinth, more powerful than any before me...”

Reading the first couple of days’ worth of entries, it seemed that this place belonged to an Order of some sort who called themselves the Azarinth. Mages, fighters, and healers were mentioned.

“I have yet to unlock the required skills, but surely my growth will outpace most mundane healers and mages. War is raging, after all, and opportunities are abundant. I hear the Domains have joined our efforts. We can no longer be stopped.”

War? Domains? Skills? Ilea shook her head. *I’m in the Chamber of Awakening myself now, eh? So I’m really stuck here? Expected to become a warrior of Azarinth? Well that’s just great.*

She stood up and checked the walls and ceiling one more time, but it all remained just as unrelentingly intact as before. She glanced at the book and sat down again.

Continuing to read, Gregory thankfully described the process of awakening in great detail. Apparently the Order had classes regarding a special form of magic they called Azarinth.

The whole Order is named after the magic... Bunch of nerds...

Grinning to herself, she continued to read. The Bluemoon Grass seemed to be of great importance to that magic and the process of awakening the class and training the related skills.

It could apparently be reached via other means too, with a lot of study and time, meditation, and patience. Most of the people reaching the class in this manner were very old. After what sounded like a horrible testing phase,

the Order had discovered a way to speed up the process. Being enclosed in the chamber where they were only able to eat the Bluemoon Grass and drink from the Fountain of Clarity enabled many people to reach the class far faster, not to mention the speed of their skill growth would also increase, whatever that meant.

Fountain of Clarity... holy shit, this is so bad... they should get better writers...

The method had downsides too. For one, around 35% of the initiates would immediately die upon eating the grass. It changed parts of the body and was highly poisonous if not compatible with the initiate's body.

Magical weeds... that kill one-third of those that eat it. Man, that is messed up...

The fast skill growth would also leave many of the fighters overconfident, able to use the skills but not having trained with them enough. The faster skill growth was mostly dependent on how long a person could stay in the chamber. The grass grew very slowly, so only a limited amount could be used by the Order.

Leveling skills up to their third stage in the chamber was apparently not possible. The grass needed to level up would increase dramatically after the second stage was achieved, such that it showed no discernible effect anymore. Most would only advance to the early second stage because of the limited availability of grass.

The journal also described the hall as only having a few patches of grass remaining. Ilea looked up at the luscious blue glowing walls, entirely covered by the coveted elixir.

Guess it's been a while.

Gregory speculated that the restrictions to join were eased as what he called the "great war" progressed. He had seen fewer of the Azarinth in the streets, and there were rumors of hundreds dying in single battles.

Gregory had apparently advanced some of his skills up to the later second stages and then left. Ilea didn't know specifically what that meant. Leaving was apparently only possible by using a particular skill acquired from the Bluemoon Grass.

"Well fuck... means I have to eat it. If there really isn't an exit anywhere. But based on everything in the journal, I'll need a class to survive out there anyway. If classes work like they do in RPGs, I'll still be level 1, since I've not killed anything..."

She looked at the glowing moss suspiciously and went through the books with growing unease: *Azarinth Basic Stances I*, *Azarinth Basic Stances II*, *Azarinth Basic Stances III*, *Azarinth Advanced Stances III*, *History of the Order Part IV*, *History of the Order Part XII*, *Azarinth Healing*, *Azarinth Healing Advanced*, *Mana Conversion and Flow* by *Magus Izalar*... In addition, there were dozens of diaries from members of the Order. Apparently, it was a must to write one when in the chamber to help guide initiates following in their footsteps.

“I’m glad some useful ones remain... it’s a shame that so many of the books were lost.” She scratched her cheek and looked at the moss. *Not yet.*

Ilea searched through the chamber and rooms again to see if there was any way out or food other than the grass on the walls. After nearly two hours of searching every nook and cranny, she sat back down next to the pile of books by the fountain and sighed. Skimming some of the diaries gave her the same insights. Eating the elixir was a must. The books on stances and other theories were more akin to textbooks, dry explanations aided by illustrations. The few pages she read in the history book read like propaganda.

Looking at the Bluemoon Grass on the wall, Ilea got up and glared at the glowing weed.

“Well... might as well get it over with. Either I live and become a badass fighter or... well, let’s not be negative, shall we?”

Grabbing a healthy fistful of the moss from the wall, she put it into her mouth and chewed. Then she swallowed.

* * *

A minute passed. Then another. After ten minutes, still absolutely nothing had happened.

“Well, that’s wei—”

Her voice cut off as her whole body began to convulse.

Falling to the ground in a sprawl of limbs, Ilea started to scream. The pain was worse than the wolf’s bite. Nobody had mentioned the pain in the diaries. Likely out of consideration for the initiates. Ten minutes passed and Ilea was still writhing there screaming, the pain not diminishing in the

slightest as each beat of her heart ended only to bring a new eternity of torment.

She stopped screaming after half an hour when her voice gave out, yet the pain didn't relent. She twitched every couple of minutes as she felt each and every nerve in her body tear itself apart.

After an hour, she feverishly noticed a blue glow start to radiate from her skin. It wasn't all over but geometric, forming a pattern not unlike the runes found on the shelves. The glow died down after another hour, and Ilea groaned weakly from her position on the ground.

"I hate this world..."

THREE

Glowing Moss

*'ding' The Bluemoon Grass has changed your body permanently.
You grow more resilient: +10 Vitality.
The flow of your mana has changed: +10 Intelligence, +10 Wisdom.
You recharge Mana at a faster pace: +100% mana recovery rate.*

“Holy shit, that seems pretty good for two hours of the worst pain in my entire life.”

Still breathing heavily, Ilea sat up and checked her stats. As far as she could tell, those were some decent increases, many times what she'd gotten so far. Plus, she didn't want to assume the bonuses were bad, not with what she had just gone through.

Name: Ilea Spears

Class 1: None

Class 2: None

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5

- Identify – lvl 1

Status:

Vitality: 15

Endurance: 8
Strength: 7
Dexterity: 8
Intelligence: 15
Wisdom: 15

Health: 4/150
Stamina: 12/80
Mana: 0/150

4 hit points? That explains why I feel like I'm dying. I need some Clarity... heh...

Walking over to the fountain, she started to drink. Her health reached 150 in a matter of minutes, moving up a few hit points with each gulp.

Wow, this is great... I still have the worst headache though – the mana, maybe? Or the low stamina? Or just... nearly dying from some glowing grass?

Her mana was slowly recharging, as the change had apparently used all of it up initially. Stamina was creeping back up too, but it would be a while before she had enough energy to do much of anything. She needed sleep.

No class or skills yet, hmm... well, I'll find out why tomorrow. First thing to do is sleep.

Lying down on the floor, she immediately fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

She awoke sometime later. Without sunlight, there was no way of knowing how much time had passed. But based on her parched throat and the pain in her back, she assumed it had been quite a while. Maybe even days.

The blue glow was still in the air as Ilea sat up, her head heavy and her whole body hurting.

There was a room with a bed, you idiot... ugh, so thirsty.

Getting up slowly, she went and drank some more of the fountain water.

She checked her stats and found she had still not acquired a class. That was strange, because the notes all mentioned classes. She had assumed she would just manifest one after eating the grass. Like discovering a superpower. But there was nothing. Before she allowed herself to fall into a negative spiral, she instead focused on what she could do.

Time to check the diaries.

None of them mentioned anything about not getting the class after eating the grass.

“What’s different then?”

She looked around her, and her gaze fell upon the books still lying on the ground.

“I haven’t read them... They all probably have something to say. Well, let’s start there then.”

Ilea began by picking one up called ‘The Will of Azarinth Magic’ and opening it to a random page.

“... Reconstruction can be trained by using it on the prepared golems. Simply heal the statues and they will activate once enough mana is collected. Make sure you’re ready for a fight. They’re made to train the stances they depict.”

She looked up from the journal and glanced at the statues, their stone bodies unmoving. She felt chills and a strange kind of excitement before she continued reading.

One of the other journals mentioned knowledge of stances and basic magic theory to be relevant to entering the chamber in the first place. That line confirmed her suspicion. She had done it the wrong way around. *Study, then eat the death grass. Not eat the death grass and then study.*

She groaned internally. She was starving but wasn’t keen to experience the mind-numbing pain all over again, not that there was anything else to eat. But the diaries suggested only the first time was special. Eventually, she plucked up the courage to eat some. Grabbing some of the grass off the wall, she hesitated slightly and finally ate it. Nothing happened. This time, though, she noticed the flavor and texture far more. It was like a cross between a cabbage and a mushroom. It was slightly earthy but with a crunch and a spicy aftertaste.

Ilea started to read through the books she had available as she chewed. The books on stances were what one might expect. Detailed descriptions of the fighting styles used by the Order. Some of them seemed familiar to Ilea, but other things looked rather weird.

This is impossible, no human could do that... she thought as she looked at one particularly colorful illustration of a man deflecting arrows fired from his blind spot. Another showed someone shattering their foe’s blade with a punch. There were tactical theories on how to approach a group of

fighters too, the illustrations showing bows, swords, and spears. Some of the people depicted were using what looked like projectile magics. That or they were throwing stones.

Ilea saw some similarities between the illustrations and some role-playing games she had dabbled in some time before. There were melee fighters with weapons, mages at the rear, and healers. The ones depicted as Azarinth always fought without weapons.

They all look human. Or at least humanoid. And the tools suggest their technology isn't exactly on Earth's level. After all, there were no guns or other modern weapons she would have expected to see. She paused on an illustration depicting what looked like a barrier controlled by a mage. Perhaps such ideas had been considered, but there had already been counter-measures so they never got invented? Or perhaps magic just replaced certain advances? She wouldn't know until she got out of this place and found some form of civilization.

Finishing up the books on stances, she started reading the books on Azarinth healing and mana conversion. The basic ones she at least understood on some fundamental level, if she accepted the existence of magic and made some assumptions based on what was written. The advanced books went entirely over her head.

Getting through those seven books took her the better part of a week, as best as she could tell anyway, taking the necessary time to understand what she was reading. She ate grass and drank from the fountain. In between, she trained her body with everything in her usual sets that could be accomplished with what she had in her little hall. She didn't get any notification about stat changes.

At night, she slept on the ancient bed. It was barely a bed anymore but, as she had assumed, it was still better than the stone floor. She was grateful for the hole she found in the same room, intended, it seemed, for nature's call. As the days went by, she fell into a routine. In fact she actually found herself enjoying the single-minded mental and physical grind. She had a purpose, even if it was just to survive and get the hell out of this chamber.

It helped distract her from the questions on her mind. The uncertainty of this place. She wondered what Mark thought, if her few friends had indeed noticed her sudden disappearance. Was her body still there? Or a clone? Such thoughts came to her when she woke up and went to sleep, but they were forgotten as soon as she resumed her training.

Ilea found the Azarinth stances to be a challenge. There were more similarities to eastern fighting styles she had seen than something like kickboxing. She was glad Mark had introduced her to a few moves from a variety of styles over the years. That knowledge, coupled with her focused breathing and control of her body, allowed her to get used to the differing style quickly. She missed a mirror to see how well she was actually doing, but her experience pushed her through. The statues helped as well, clearer in their depictions than the simple illustrations.

The theories on healing and magic were quite a bit more confusing. It felt a little silly to sit down and ‘feel the magic flowing through her’. Especially when nothing happened on the first few days. Her doubts were obliterated when a change finally occurred. A combined effort of her usual breathing techniques and suggestions found in some of the journals. The power was there. Not imagined but something graspable, something new that she hadn’t felt before. An energy inside herself, ready to be drawn upon. The discovery was exhilarating.

It was on what she estimated to be her fiftieth day in that alien place when things changed. Ilea had finished up the book on advanced healing, but when she grabbed the first book on history, she was interrupted.

‘ding’ You have met the requirements for a class change: Azarinth Healer – Gained knowledge about the basics of Azarinth fighting stances and Azarinth healing, Survived the change invoked by the Bluemoon Grass. The Azarinth Healer is not exactly what the name might portray. A Healer is a close-quarters fighter who chooses an unarmed style of combat to both heal and destroy. Enhanced by an ancient technique of magic, their bodies become resistant to even the strongest of attacks and heal at a rapid pace.

Would you like to change to this class? Bonuses and skills will be applied after doing so.

Yes! Finally... Please let me break swords with my fist!

Nothing happened.

Then more messages appeared in her mind.

New Class: Azarinth Healer

Vitality +10

Strength +5

Dexterity +5

Endurance +5

Intelligence +10

Wisdom +10

Body enhancement magic is improved by 100%

All healing magic skills are improved by 100%

Natural regeneration increased by 1% per minute

Skills gained as an Azarinth Healer:

Active: Destruction – lvl 1

Send a destructive pulse of mana into your enemy with every punch or kick. Your Intelligence stat enhances the damage potential.

Category: Healing

Active: Reconstruction – lvl 1

Send a healing pulse of mana into yourself or your ally with a touch. This skill can be continuously channeled.

Category: Healing

Active: State of Azarinth – lvl 1

Your body glows with the power of Azarinth, increasing your resilience, speed, and strength by 35% [70% after bonuses].

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Passive: Body of Azarinth – lvl 1

Your body has been changed by magic. All pain is reduced by 25% [50% after bonuses]. You heal even fatal injuries without the help of healing magic. Your natural regeneration is improved by 50% [100% after bonuses].

Category: Healing

Passive: Azarinth Fighting – lvl 1

***You are familiar with the fighting style of Azarinth. Damage inflicted with your own body and related skills is 75% higher [150% after bonuses].
Category: Body Enhancement***

Reading all of the notifications, Ilea was stunned. Then she felt it. Power surging through her veins, as if her blood had been brought to a boil. She gasped, then clenched her teeth and fists. She heard a sizzling sound and looked down. Strange runes had appeared on her arms, glowing with a blue hue. It all came and went in moments. She was left in a cold sweat but felt stronger than before.

The feeling was intoxicating. Like the one you get after a hard workout, when you managed to push yourself harder than ever before. That feeling that your body is capable of more than it was before – but without the usual resulting fatigue. She wondered how much of it was the new stats she'd got and how much was the class itself.

Well, I don't know what other classes in this world are like, but this seems fucking amazing. I'm like a mix of three different archetypes, if we go by traditional RPGs. I hope it's strong enough to fill any of those roles in a group... or maybe the common composition of teams is different in this world? I'll see. I must say, for a solo thing, this is fantastic. Can't wait to try all of those skills.

She caught herself in the middle of her thoughts. Was she really getting excited about all this strangeness? Such abilities sounded great, but using them, forming a party... that meant... *Do I want to stay here?*

Her considerations in the past weeks had shifted, the initial fear and uncertainty replaced by ideas on how to combine the stances, thoughts on rationing methods for the Bluemoon Grass, and growing amazement at the magic found in the fountain.

The question of staying had lingered somewhere at the back of her mind. It had been there since she realized that magic truly existed in this place. Ilea didn't have an answer. She still knew too little about this place. But if she could figure out how to throw magic around and explore a wilderness filled with interesting creatures and places? The choice between that and a dead-end fast-food job with years of studies on the side was easy.

Getting up, Ilea felt powerful. She felt light on her feet, could feel her muscles tense and slacken as she jumped up and down a few times. Ilea had

never felt this healthy, this quick. Walking into the library that now only collected dust, she went to the far wall.

Now let's see what I have...and cross my fingers that I don't break my hand...

Taking proper form, Ilea threw a solid punch, resulting in a sharp crack that echoed briefly through the chamber. She checked her hand. There was not a scratch on it. It looked fine, and she didn't feel as though anything was wrong. Looking at the wall, she realized that the sound had come from there. A hairline crack had formed in the solid stone.

"Aww shit. I'm awesome."

She continued to punch, the noise reverberating through the Chamber of Awakening. Pieces of the stone wall started to collect at her feet. It was amazing. She wanted more.

Time to test her new skills.

Let's see if Destruction does anything to inanimate objects.

Activating the skill with a simple thought, just as she had learned with the Identify skill, she punched the wall.

The noise was the same as before, but this time, spiderwebbing cracks spiraled outward in a one-meter radius. Checking her stats, the punch had only used up 5 Mana.

Which means, with my current supply, I can use it 50 times in a row... nice.

Using the skill a couple more times, she wondered if this was how the other members of the Order had gotten out.

Nah, I can't see dozens of holes in the walls around here... Or maybe they had a magical way to fix it again? A wall-repairing spray? Earth mage? Or the walls themselves just straight up healed...Never mind. Let's try one more thing...

Ilea's body started to glow in a faint blue. Luminescent patterns like blue tattoos appeared on her body, written in runic symbols. She saw them on her torso, arms, and legs. She felt, rather than saw, one tattoo that went along her spine up to her neck and under her hair. They shone faintly through her pajamas. Slowly breathing out, she formed a fist with her right hand and punched.

The walls shook, dust fell from the ceiling, and her fist created a dent roughly the size of a basketball.

Man, I'd destroy the kickboxing Locals now. Hell, I'd be pretty good at any sport with this body ...

With the aura of State of Azarinth still active, she ran all the way to the room with the bed and back. It took seconds.

"This feels absolutely amazing," she cried, before exhausting the rest of her stamina on the poor library wall.

She couldn't stop, her power and excitement overwhelming her completely. Once her stamina was gone, she eagerly returned to her studies.

She wanted more.

* * *

Over the next four days, Ilea read the remaining books and some of the diaries while eating Bluemoon Grass and practicing her new skills.

The first time she used her Reconstruction spell on one of the statues was quite scary. It took more than half her mana to activate it.

The stone in its forehead finally started to glow a faint blue, its stone body moving with cracking sounds, then the golem stepped out of the wall as Ilea backed off. It moved its hands into the same stance it had depicted in its unmoving form, and then it charged.

Ilea had no time to marvel at what she had done. That she was face to face with a living statue. Instead of trying to understand the incredible technology and magic behind it all, she focused on protecting herself. As the creature began its attack, she smiled.

I've been itching to try out these new moves.

The golem threw a stony fist at her face, and she only just managed to pull out of range of the strike. The thing was faster than it looked. She tried a sweeping low kick and struck the golem solidly in the shin, but it was only off balance for a split second. Next, she threw a few combinations, but the stone man blocked most of the attacks with fluid motions.

Not bad, as far as sparring partners go. Let's try the new stuff. Seems like the golem is using it too.

A grin came to her face as she mimicked its stance, the first Azarinth stance she had learned.

Let's see who's better at this.

* * *

Her abilities slowly improved as she trained both with and without the help of the statues. The mana cost to activate them was considerable. When Destruction reached level 3, she received an unexpected message.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 2. 5 stat points awarded.

So I can level without having to fight anything. That’s good then. Guess I’ll stay down here for a while... a long while. Especially considering I have no idea where I am or how I’d get out...

She had read about monsters, wars, and the wilderness. Apparently forests here were more dangerous than the average forest back on Earth. Her survival before had been more luck than anything else. She didn’t plan on testing her luck a second time.

Playing around with her status, she figured out that the points she had gotten could be used to improve her stats. For now, she focused on Vitality. Her health went up by 10 for each point she spent. When she got out of this hallway, she would need everything she could get, and being harder to kill was the first thing she wanted to focus on.

The weeks passed, Ilea’s days were spent eating, fighting the more and more worn-down statues, and reading diaries. She studied the stances in detail and tried to use her healing magic. Punching the walls didn’t hurt her enough to use Reconstruction though, and the golems didn’t seem to count, so the skill didn’t level. But her other skills kept improving. She could keep up her Aura skill for longer and longer as time went on. According to the diaries, it would normally take weeks, if not longer, of constant training to improve a skill even by one level. The Bluemoon Grass helped speed up the process a lot.

I’ll just get as strong as I can down here until I can get out. There doesn’t really seem to be a downside to it. Even if it might get boring. I’d rather stay a couple months longer in boredom than die immediately out in the forest.

There was no map or any geographical information in the remaining books whatsoever, so she still knew as much about where she was as she had when she’d arrived. It was frustrating, but she found herself caring less

and less about what this world was as time went by. The constant struggle to improve felt far more rewarding than anything she had experienced back home. She generally felt less strained, less exhausted. The lack of human interaction didn't bother her either, which she thought a little strange. Normally she'd get a little grumpy after about a week. She attributed it to her magical changes, unsure how else to interpret the circumstance.

Three weeks of constant training later, she had exhausted all the books, and the days became slightly more tedious. Without anything to occupy her mind apart from physical exercise, boredom was now a real danger. Sitting down, Ilea again read through the mana conversion book, but her mind was wandering.

The main problem here is that I'm bored while I wait for my mana and stamina to recover...

Reading through the whole book again, exactly what it was about was still a mystery to her. It talked of regulating the flows of mana, but her understanding of mana itself to begin with was nothing. The concepts were foreign to her even though she understood the words. One constant was the mention of trance-like states and magical concentration. Coupled with a few other ideas, it led to a theory. The methods all sounded a little like something she'd done on Earth. Meditation.

Might as well try to meditate, maybe I'll gain some sort of clarity...

Looking suspiciously toward the fountain, she sat down and tried to clear her mind. Nothing happened at first. She tried repeating the meditation in every break between training for the next two days. It felt relaxing, and she really had nothing else to do while her body recovered. At the end of the second day, she received a message that woke her from her meditative state.

'ding' You have learned the general skill Meditation – lvl 1. While in a state of meditation, you cannot move. Your base mana and stamina regeneration are increased by a factor of three. This factor is improved upon leveling up the skill.

“Well, this'll make my days a lot less boring.”

Even though she was mostly just punching walls, fighting stone statues, or practicing stances, it was fun to her. Her body had an incredible strength that she'd never even dreamed of. Even on Earth, she had enjoyed simply

attacking a punching bag for hours on end. The only reason she hadn't spent longer on such training sessions were her annoying responsibilities, other interesting hobbies, and her bodily limitations.

She didn't have the internet or even new books here, so this was what was left, and it wasn't bad. With the level 1 Meditation skill, her training speed improved threefold. After another month, she had improved her Destruction skill to level 8, State of Azarinth to level 6, Body of Azarinth to level 2, Azarinth Fighting to level 7, and Meditation to level 5.

With her last advancement in Azarinth Fighting, she received another level up, bringing her to level 5.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 5. 5 stat points awarded.

Initially, she had decided to focus on Vitality, but she also wanted to boost Intelligence and Wisdom. Part of this was simply because those three stats were the ones that had been focused on by her class change bonuses, so they were likely the most important ones for an Azarinth Healer. Destruction scaled with Intelligence after all, and her Wisdom seemed to boost her mana regen rate – which helped with her training.

With that in mind, she knew stamina was holding her training back a little, as she often grew tired more quickly than she would have liked. So she had decided to put points there too, though slightly less frequently.

'ding' You have learned the skill Magic Perception

Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 1

This skill lets you see magic. It can be activated or deactivated on command.

Category: Body Enhancement

“A skill... huh, seems useful, but I can't really picture it.”

Activating the skill, she immediately had to shield her eyes from the intense radiance surrounding her. Even looking at the usually softly glowing moss was like looking into the sun.

Deactivate Magic Perception! she yelled in her mind.

“Well that was stupid,” she said to herself as the radiance faded. “Could've guessed the Bluemoon Grass was magical...”

Going into the library, she activated the skill again and looked at the runes she had discovered on her first day in the chamber.

Interesting... they're clearer. And they glow a faint blue. I wonder if all magic is blue with this sight.

For the rest of the day, she kept the skill deactivated in the hallway but tried to use it sometimes in the library or when she was using her Destruction and Aura skills. Her day came to an end and she checked her progress again, as she did every day before sleeping.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 5

- Active: Destruction – lvl 8***
- Active: Reconstruction – lvl 1***
- Active: State of Azarinth – lvl 6***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Passive: Body of Azarinth – lvl 2***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – lvl 7***
- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 1***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***

Class 2: None

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5***
- Identify – lvl 1***
- Meditation – lvl 5***

Status:

Vitality: 30

Endurance: 18

Strength: 12

Dexterity: 13

Intelligence: 30
Wisdom: 30

Health: 300/300
Stamina: 8/180
Mana: 13/300

After spreading her stats from the last three level-ups across Vitality, Intelligence and Wisdom, the effect was clear – her abilities hit harder and she was able to fight for longer. She was tempted to boost Strength and Dex, but for now she wanted to focus on stats that would help her train for longer and level up faster. Those and Vitality – because drakes were fucking scary.

Another three months passed like this. Meditation was helping to tremendously reduce the mental strain such a rigorous lifestyle would've had on her otherwise. Talking to herself became the norm, and she even started to miss her coworkers at the fast-food joint.

As she got more used to her ability to perceive magic, she soon realized the statues had runes on their necks. If she activated them while touching the specific areas, the statues changed their behavior, became more aggressive, and even used more than one stance. It was a fresh challenge but one that was soon overcome as well.

As the days dragged on, she lost some of the peace she had found in repetition. Her goal also slowly shifted from becoming stronger to simply getting out of the chamber. Many of the diaries contained pages and pages of how thankful the past occupants had been to be granted access to the Bluemoon Grass and the chamber. Ilea was thankful, she really was. She knew her chances of survival were greatly improved. But...

I can see how this is an incredible privilege to have, training with the Bluemoon Grass and all that – but I'd still like to see the sun sometime.

A quarter of the grass was already gone from one of the walls when Ilea reached level 10 in her class.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 10. 5 stat points awarded.
You have learned the skill Blink – lvl 1.

Immediately appear at a distant place. Distance based on the level of the skill.

Category: Teleportation Magic

“This is it, I’ve finally got my way out! Maybe... hopefully...”

Activating the skill with the will to move across the hallway, Ilea teleported around fifteen meters away. Instantly.

Holy shit. How many times have I been sat in bed just wishing I could teleport to the fridge instead of getting up? This is my kind of superpower.

“Man, this is grea—”

A familiar feeling of nausea swept over her and bile rose in turn, but she managed to keep it down. The feeling wasn’t nearly as bad as before.

“I’ll have to get used to that.”

Holding her stomach, she went and drank some water from the fountain.

“Now the question is, can I teleport to places I can’t see, and what happens when I teleport into something?”

Going into the library, she considered teleporting into one of the shelves. Only her arm would theoretically be inside the shelf.

“Would hurt like hell, but maybe then I’d have a way to level up my healing...”

The teleport worked, but her hand was pushed away from the shelf. No weird human-shelf creature was born that day.

“Which means...”

Trying a few times to teleport halfway into the fountain, she either appeared next to it or above it.

“Next step...”

Teleporting halfway into the wall failed too, as she always appeared next to it.

“Now the leap of faith...”

Blinking fully into the wall, she found herself simply standing in front of it.

“Yes! It works! Now I just have to level it up and try to teleport out of here...”

So she tried teleporting away from the chamber in any direction. There were a lot to try, and her skill slowly gained levels over the weeks, increasing the range and reducing the cost.

After another month in the chamber, Ilea was successful. On appearing in a closed room, the first new room she had seen in months, she was elated.

“Fuck yeah!”

Jumping up and down, Ilea looked around the room. It was a small space with only dust and stone in it – but it was new. After months in her unchanging box of stone, this new one was a blessing to her. And there was a closed door made of roughhewn stone in front of her too.

“Well, well, well... my old nemesis. We meet again. But what’s a door against this...”

Raising her fist with her Aura spell activated, she punched right through the thick stone. It exploded into shrapnel and shards as well as a cloud of dust.

Outside was a familiar room. The hall she had entered after being ambushed by the wolves outside the temple.

“Oh yes... yes!”

Not able to repress her excitement, she ran outside.

It was night. An ocean of stars was shining bright overhead, illuminating the sky. There were two moons, and they shone with a dazzling light. Ilea simply stood there stunned, her head held up to the sky. Tears fell from her face as she breathed her first breath of fresh air in months. The wind caressed her body, blue tattoos faintly glowing through her worn clothes.

Standing there with tears in her eyes, Ilea couldn’t help but laugh with sheer joy.

When the laughter ended, Ilea cracked her neck, then stilled. She listened to the forest around her. Nothing significant caught her ears.

“I want food... something other than that bloody grass...”

She couldn’t hear anything nearby, so she entered the forest. It would be easy to find the temple again as it was on a slope. Starting to run, Ilea crossed the forest at a speed she’d never dreamed possible, the muscles in her legs vibrating as her heels dug into the soft earth and grass. Her perception was even more surprising, as the light of the moon was more than enough to make out any details around her.

Trees rushed past in the dim light, small adjustments enough for her to avoid the trunks. Ilea found herself changing into the various stances she had learned, striking the air with a grin on her face as she ran and danced

through the forest. It was quite difficult to contain her laughter, but she knew she had to because she knew there were monsters around.

Not long after, she came across a small creek.

“Food can wait. I need some non-magical water first.”

Jumping into the creek, she splashed around in the cold water and drank long, cool mouthfuls. She must have looked a rather curious sight to anyone watching, a grown woman splashing around in a creek in the middle of the night, laughing maniacally. Perhaps even scary, considering the magical world she was in. Did witches exist here?

Stopping after fifteen minutes, Ilea resumed her search for food. Soon she came across some appetizing red berries. They almost seemed to have a dull glow to them, like a dying fire.

Ilea ate one of them. Which was perhaps not her wisest decision.

Immediately, a sharp cramp in her belly made her double over. She took a step forward to steady herself. Her mouth burned. Her entire body burned.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Cinderberry, -3 HP/s for 5 minutes

Curbing her enthusiasm for another berry, her mind focused.

That can kill me like three times over. I need to heal. Shit. I don’t know enough about my Reconstruction spell yet.

Grabbing a handful more of the berries, she started to run back, occasionally using Blink while keeping an eye on her mana. The weird, warm, sickly feeling in her chest didn’t help her mind calm down either. She counted the seconds under her breath.

One and a half minutes later, she was back at the temple and had taken over 270 points of damage. Using Reconstruction on herself healed her considerably, which took the edge off the pain.

That ability should be enough, really. I have the mana to keep using it, but best to be safe.

She could feel her life force still slowly ebbing away. Going into the room she’d smashed the door in, she blinked in the direction of the chamber. Reappearing in her familiar training space or ‘prison of clarity’, as she’d started to call it, she immediately went to the fountain and drank. Without any possibility of external danger, she used her mana freely to power up Reconstruction.

It wasn’t long before she was back at full health.

“Man, this world is insane. One berry would’ve killed me if I didn’t have a fucking healing spell and a fountain of health...”

Looking at the berries, she wondered aloud.

“Maybe I’ve been a little overconfident... I don’t even know what level one of those drakes is. Even if I’ve grown stronger, there’s stuff out there that can kill me in one hit, like a bloody berry... wait, no, Cinderberry.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at the ridiculous situation she was in. After meditating and recovering her mana, she looked at one of the berries... and ate it.

“Mhm... at least they taste great.” It was sweet at first, followed by some considerable spice.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Cinderberry, -3 HP/s for 5 minutes

Smiling, she started to use Reconstruction on her own body. The drain of the berry felt weird, but it didn’t hurt much.

“A good way to level up Reconstruction... and eat delicious berries!”

Repeating the steps for the other six berries she had, she leveled up Reconstruction and even received a special message at the end of her endeavor.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Poison Resistance – lvl 1. You are either a target of assassins or are not very good at distinguishing berries. By surviving, you have developed a general resistance to poisons.

“Man, this is stupid... a general poison resistance? That doesn’t make sense at all. Then again, a lot of things here don’t seem to make sense and I’ve barely scratched the surface.”

Looking up, she blinked outside again. This time she blinked again and found herself on the roof of the ruined temple.

Again she was stunned. Standing above the trees she could see for miles, even at night. The forest was huge.

“Beautiful...”

Ilea stood there for an hour and simply enjoyed being outside. *I’ll be more careful tomorrow. I can’t be overconfident. Even though I’ve made incredible progress.*

Blinking back downstairs, she got herself ready for sleep and checked her status. By playing around with the stats over the weeks, as well as by reading the diaries, she had confirmed that her initial suspicions about what each stat did had been correct. She had felt a little physical improvement from her initial increases in Strength and Dexterity but found that when she activated her Aura and utilized Destruction, the benefits from those spells and her Intelligence far outweighed those of her more physical attributes. Wisdom of course let her use those spells more frequently and for longer.

Plus, utilizing Blink made her highly maneuverable without the need to increase her Dexterity much for now. In the end, she decided to continue her focus on Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Oh, and a little Endurance, so she didn't run out of stamina too quickly, though she had realized that wasn't a major issue. Since none of her abilities utilized stamina directly, she could already fight for quite a while before it ran out.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 5

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 12

- Active: Destruction – lvl 14

- Active: Reconstruction – lvl 2

- Active: State of Azarinth – lvl 10

- Active: Blink – lvl 7

- Active: Free Slot

- Passive: Body of Azarinth – lvl 4

- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – lvl 12

- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 3

- Passive: Free Slot

- Passive: Free Slot

Class 2: None

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5

- Identify – lvl 1

- *Meditation – lvl 8*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 1*

Status:

Vitality: 40

Endurance: 23

Strength: 12

Dexterity: 13

Intelligence: 35

Wisdom: 40

Health: 400/400

Stamina: 228/230

Mana: 323/400

She had decided to keep one level's worth of points unspent, just in case.

Because tomorrow I'll start to finally explore this weird world.

FOUR

Exploration

Waking up, Ilea felt a feeling of warmth suffusing her. For the first time in months, she was truly and utterly happy.

“I might still have no idea where I am or what’s going on, but at least I’ll survive. I’m pretty tough at this point, and I can heal myself too. Blink is perfect for fleeing if needed, if there’s something too strong for me. Just need to remember not to eat any weird berries...”

Blinking upstairs and onto the roof of the building, she instinctively looked up at the sky. The suns nearly blinded her. After months in the Chamber of Awakening and last night’s quick romp, she had totally forgotten that the suns were this bright. Her eyes hurt, but a smile was on her lips. After a couple of minutes of adjusting, she pulled her arm down from in front of her face and took in the true view of the forest around her.

The trees were still just as densely packed as they had been on her arrival, the bushes were the same, and the suns only reached small patches of the ground she could see. And yet it all felt different. Her elevation wasn’t just literal in nature. The forest didn’t look suffocating anymore. It felt alive, full of things to discover. Birds chirped as the leaves rustled in the wind. She was finally outside.

Activating her Aura, her tattoos flared to life with their signature pale blue light, barely noticeable in the sunlight. She scratched a simple compass rose into the roof of the temple with one of her nails. It took some effort, but, enhanced by her Aura and stats, she was able to carve narrow furrows even into the rock itself. Obviously, she didn’t know where north was. There were two suns, after all. But it helped her orient herself, so she did it.

Northward, according to her randomized compass, was a carpet of dense treetops until a chain of mountains could be seen in the distance. They were far away. Too far to reach on foot without considerable preparation and gear. She could tell that much, given her previous hiking experience.

Eastward was also forest until, barely noticeable given the distance, grassland started.

“Plains... If I want to find humans, I’d probably have to search there. Another question is if they’ll be friendly toward me. At least I know humans exist somewhere thanks to the diaries and statues... or they used to.”

Looking southward, Ilea could see a couple more mountains. These were closer than the others, and behind them was another full mountain chain like in the north. There seemed to be rocky plains in the valley between the rocky slopes – she could even see a river.

“Definitely the most reasonable thing to reach for now,” Ilea surmised, given that the valley was much closer than the plains in the east or the mountains in the north.

Westward was only trees as far as the eye could see. The green expanse was only occasionally broken by streaks of blue water, rivers likely originating from one of the various mountain ranges.

“So the closest way out of this drake-infested forest is southeast or directly south.”

Going in one of these directions seemed like a more reasonable distance to cover, but Ilea had no idea how long exactly it would take.

“I don’t have any supplies, no backpack... I don’t even have a knife or a water bottle, or whatever they use here. Most fantasy lands I’ve read about are medieval. But it’s not like that means anything. For all I know, they could be using laser rifles and cloaked airplanes...”

Ilea then blinked back into the main hall of the temple and began to look around. *Might find some supplies around here.*

“I do have a feeling that this is a rather medieval world, though. I mean, come on... drakes?”

Walking up to one of the closed doors lining the hall, she felt the wall and blinked inside.

Only to come face to face with a corpse.

Ilea's scream reverberated through the temple. She heard the fluttering of wings and surprised squawks from the trees outside as she stared at the skeleton in front of her, heart hammering in her chest.

"Holy shitballs skelly, you scared the crap out of me."

After smacking the skeleton on the head like an old friend, she looked around the room. It was almost claustrophobically small, the skeleton itself sitting in a chair wearing rusted plate armor that reminded her of a knight. Its skull didn't look quite right. One eye socket was entirely smashed in, and one of its arms lay a meter to the side. Light came in through cracks in the wall and ceiling, and a broken wooden shelf lay on the floor at the back covered with vines that were growing into the room through a few holes in the stone.

There were some books too, but they all turned to dust as soon as she touched them. No runes prevented their decay. Removing the skeleton from the rotting chair, she saw that it was still wearing boots.

"Well, look at that..." Carefully removing them from the skeleton, she appraised them. "They're still in alright shape... not bad. Identify!"

'ding' [Old Sturdy Boots – Common Quality]

"Hmm... no +15 walking speed or anything like that? That's disappointing. Oh well."

Ilea shook the boots to remove all the dust inside, then blinked back out of the room.

"I'll just pile the stuff here."

Leaving the boots on the ground in the main hall, she continued to investigate the rooms. There were eight in total. One was the one where she had broken the door to get out, and one was the skeleton room.

The next three rooms only held dust and stone. Whatever may have been stored in there had long since turned to dust. Blinking into the next room, Ilea looked around in surprise.

This one was lined with shelves containing clay pots and bowls caked with years of cobwebs and dust. An ancient stone oven stood in the corner, damaged by a chunk of stone that had fallen from the ceiling ages past.

"A kitchen. Very nice. Maybe there's a water flask or a knife for me to use somewhere."

Looking around, she realized that most of the things inside were rusted beyond use. The design reminded her of what she had seen in museums. Every item looked a little different. She assumed they were all handmade. The pans were heavy. *But everything is ruined. This place might very well be a time capsule.*

Trying to use Reconstruction on the items didn't help. Destruction seemed to be able to affect inanimate objects, whereas Reconstruction didn't. Except for the statues, but they were perhaps somewhere in between.

"Figures... would be way too convenient a spell. No more visits to any tailor or blacksmith. Couldn't have me getting something like that, eh universe?"

Searching through the kitchen, she found a not too rusty canteen.

[Rusty Canteen – Common Quality]

"Of course. Well, it's better than nothing," Ilea grumbled to herself.

The few knives she found were sadly completely unusable. The thin shards of metal were too worn by time to be used for anything other than making more rust. She decided she had found everything that could be salvaged and continued her search.

The next room was empty again.

"Why are there so many empty rooms? Hmm, what if..."

She tried to use Blink to get downstairs. The third spot she tried worked, and she found herself in a chamber that at first glance looked very similar to her own.

"How many of those do they have? Well, let's finish up upstairs first."

The last room held some barrels without any contents. Other than the dust inside.

"Beer or wine? Maybe Cinderberry wine?" Laughing at her own joke, she went back into the main hall.

Walking through the broken-down entryway she'd used when she fled the wolves, she checked the room again. It looked exactly the same, with no indication as to how she was teleported away the first time she had visited.

Activating her Magic Perception, she saw runes all over the ground where she had fought against the wolves months ago.

"Interesting..."

She went back and checked all the other rooms again, this time with Magic Perception activated, but made no further discoveries.

“I guess downstairs it is then.”

Warping back into the unexplored chamber, she soon found this floor had the exact same layout as hers. Bluemoon Grass was growing on the walls, and the bed was just as old as hers. The library, however, held more books than her own had held at the start. And, even better, many were still intact, the shelves glowing brightly with numerous runes

It took a couple of hours to sort through all of them. A significant portion of them was even more diaries. She took them all with her upstairs. Two books were actually useful to her: *Azarinth Fighting – Advanced Stances I* and *Azarinth Fighting – Advanced Stances II*.

“Seems like the stock is rather similar though. More history books.”

She wasn’t too fond of the Order’s history books. They depicted themselves as some sort of savior mages without any flaws.

“Guess that happens when you write your own history down. Bunch of arrogant pricks.”

Blinking back to the main hall, she tried to Blink downstairs from all eight rooms. Ilea found only one more chamber. It was much like the other two, except that only one shelf of books remained, none of which were new to her. Having an idea, she tried to warp further down.

To her surprise, she succeeded.

She found herself in a rather large hall. After the warp, she fell a couple of meters before hitting the ground.

There’s no dust here...

The room was illuminated, yet not by moss on the walls. There was some sort of artificial light source at the top of the room and some of the walls. Small circles of steel with four metal prongs extending from the plate. At their center glowed a cool near blue light.

Magic lamps... fancy. At least they do have some sort of technology. I’ll try to dismantle one of those after I’m sure it’s safe h–

Her thought was interrupted by an arrow whizzing past her head. Ilea’s tattoos flared to life, and she dodged at the last fraction of a second, though it had been close enough that she’d felt it sting her cheek.

“Did I just...”

Another three arrows flew in her direction. She could not yet see who was firing or from where. Leaping to the right, Ilea avoided all of them with

ease.

“...dodge arrows? Fuck I’m awesome.”

Looking for the origin of the assault, Ilea saw a patch of shadow in a corner of the room start to shift, and a humanoid form slowly unfolded itself to a height of about three and a half meters.

“Oh shit.”

[Guardian Golem – lvl ??]

Using Identify, she jumped back a couple of meters to get some distance from the golem. Activating Magic Perception, her enemy glowed a dark red.

“Well, that answers the question of if all magic is blue...”

On the golem’s left arm was a seemingly automatic crossbow and in his right fist was a mace as big as Ilea.

“I *really* don’t want to get hit by that,” she murmured to herself, taking in the large creature now shambling toward her. The drake had terrified her, and the wolves had damn near killed her. She gritted her teeth and circled around the monster, much like she would a human opponent in the ring.

Should I flee?

She felt tense, could see and feel the magic emanating from the ancient guardian of this forgotten place. And yet she found she wasn’t afraid. On the contrary. She could hardly keep the smile off her face. *A challenge for my new abilities.*

“Well, let’s see what I’ve learned... I can just teleport out with two Blinks if I can’t handle it.”

Getting into an advanced Azarinth stance, Ilea prepared herself as the golem slowly walked toward her. Ilea rocketed forward, leaving her position in a rush faster than any Earth human could possibly manage. She reached the golem’s right side in an instant. She felt a thrill like nothing she had ever felt before. She felt powerful.

The golem turned slowly and tried to hit her with the mace.

She easily shifted her body to the side, allowing the massive weapon to swing harmlessly past her. Her laughter echoed through the hall. “You’re pretty fucking slow...”

Then it was her turn.

Ilea landed a flurry of punches, each blow leaving dents in its metal shell, even without Destruction. The construct was still trying to turn and attack her with its mace, but Ilea simply danced around the golem, staying out of reach.

These skills are seriously no joke... I've never fought against anything with them, and they enhance my fighting so naturally...

After another series of punches to one of the golem's legs, she decided to use Destruction.

Her punch landed on the golem's left leg, and half of it exploded backward as her fist collided with it. The metal was badly dented, and the golem had difficulties standing upright. Another punch disabled its right leg. As it fell to the ground, Ilea jumped backward.

"Well, seems like your question marks aren't really that scary after all, Guardian."

Doing a small mock curtsy in front of the downed golem's head, its eyes suddenly flared a bright red. Caught in an awkward position, Ilea could only look at the golem as it raised its mace and smashed it right into her. Ilea was sent flying backward into the wall fifteen meters behind her, the impact knocking all the air out of her lungs.

Blood dripped down her chin as she smiled.

"Oh man. That hurt. Yup, I am rather stupid sometimes." She felt a deep ache from the hit, but for some reason she couldn't stop herself from smiling. *This* was living.

Checking her stats, she saw that she had lost over a third of her HP from that hit. Quickly using Reconstruction, she healed back a part of her lost health, blinking past a few crossbow bolts fired her way.

"Why am I having so much fun? You are a literal metal giant, I should be terrified. Nice move though, mister metal. If I wasn't so fast, you would have splattered me easily. Lucky for me you seem ill-suited for reacting to speed-based attacks... like this one."

Blinking above the golem, she did a front flip, landing on top of the golem's back with a powerful kick. The guardian exploded downward, its eyes immediately losing their light.

'ding' You have defeated the [Guardian Golem]. For killing an adversary 10 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience. Access to the treasure room is now possible.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 13. 5 stat points awarded.

“Nice!”

Sitting down on the defeated golem, she breathed out.

“This is way too much fun. I nearly died there...” Her heart still pounding in her chest, she lay down completely on the golem’s broken body. “I feel amazing. Is this what being an adventurer in a dangerous world feels like?”

Lying there for a while, Ilea simply enjoyed the moment until a detail from one of the notifications came back to her.

“Wait... treasure room?”

Jumping up from the motionless enemy, she looked around the room. She could see a huge double door at the end of the hall, right behind where the golem had been hiding. Walking toward it, she glanced back over her shoulder and noticed that the body of the golem hadn’t disappeared.

If this was a game, wouldn’t it fade away? Seems like it’s not like a game after all... or at least not like any I’ve played...

Turning back toward the door, she continued down the long corridor. Using Magic Perception, she could see bright runes written on the double doors at the end of it.

“Let’s find out what’s in there,” she said with a grin on her face.

She reached the double doors and looked on as the runes faded. A resounding crack echoed through the chamber, and the entrance opened.

She was greeted by a cloud of stale air that triggered a mild coughing fit.

How can the air in here be even worse than out in the corridor? It’s just as old...

Waiting for the stale air to disperse a little, Ilea entered the supposed treasure room.

Looking around, there were a lot of shelves and a few chests. Two were open and empty, while the shelves held nothing but cobwebs and rubble.

“Not a lot left in here, eh? Well, let’s see if there’s anything in the chest.”

Ilea approached it. It was unlocked, and the lid came away easily. In fact, it came away in her hand, rotten with age. Looking inside, she felt herself tense with anticipation. A handful of metal coins glinted at the

bottom of the chest on top of some sort of folded cloth. It wasn't exactly a dragon's horde.

"At least it's not empty..."

Taking the five silver coins and one gold coin from the chest, she held them in her hand. They were heavy, more so than most coins she had held. Then, picking out the last item, she marveled at the quality.

[Cloak of the Night – High Quality] [You are harder to detect in the dark]

She hugged the cloak immediately. "Oh my, it's so soft! I love it!"

Putting it on, the cloak covered nearly all of her. She would have looked a bit like a wraith, had it not been for the pajamas underneath.

"I'm the pajama death!"

Tattoos flaring to light, she teleported to the nearest wall and punched it. Cracks formed all over it, and some chunks of stone fell to the ground after she removed her fist. The blue light of her tattoos didn't penetrate the cloak from within.

"I like it," she said with glee.

* * *

Ilea tried to use Blink from every room in the cellar, but sadly there was no other destination she could find. She looked at the ceiling and squinted her eyes. Before going back upstairs, there was one thing that had been bugging her that she had to try out. This room was the perfect size for it, one of the largest she had found.

Not really sure what she was doing, she tried to use Blink twice in a row without touching the ground or walls in between. It didn't work, which meant no teleportation flying. It was a sad realization, but one that was worth knowing before she tried it in battle. Which she may have nearly tried against the guardian...

"Hmm, let's see..." she murmured, blinking into the air while still in the same hall. This time she aimed right next to the wall, and when she appeared in mid-air, she touched it and used another Blink. This time it worked, and she found herself back in the third chamber upstairs.

Yeah, I do have to touch something before I can use the skill again.

Going back up to the top, she looked at the small horde she had collected from her searching, all of it placed inside of an improvised cloth bag. Checking her cloak thoroughly, she was happy to find two small pockets. Putting the coins inside, she noted they would be clinking around all the time, so, heading into the kitchen, she removed some metal wire from one of the pots and bent it around the coins.

Grabbing the shoes from her pile, she was confronted with how filthy they were. The chest had at least protected the cloak from centuries of dust and cobwebs.

After a moment's thought, she ran outside and headed for the stream she'd found before. Once there, she cleaned the boots thoroughly before putting them on. For the first time in a while, she was at least mostly dressed. Pajamas didn't count, after all.

"Nearly clothed now. I hope these ancient boots don't break when I kick something."

The boots fit quite snugly, so at least they were unlikely to slip off while she fought. Grabbing some more of the Cinderberries, Ilea returned to the temple. Sitting on the crumbling roof and looking out at the forest, she planned out her next steps.

I should prepare to go toward the mountains in the south. Looking at the distant target, she sighed. That's gonna take a while... I'll also need to find some clothes... and food... and herbs and spices!

Looking into the distance, she once more thought of her past. Ilea enjoyed the freedom she had here, all the time spent improving her fighting skills, but she did miss her other hobbies, her bed, and, most of all, good food.

She was glad not to be getting lectured by her parents anymore, though it did feel a little strange to know they might think her dead.

The sad part is, I don't even want to know how they would react. Rory would be devastated if I didn't return... but at this point she's probably gone through at least four equally devastating moments. That's just how she is.

Ilea realized she actually missed Mark, her trainer, the most. She smiled. *Guess he was more important than I thought.*

She sighed, looking at the endless forest.

He would get this. I'm not even sure if this is better or worse in the end. Training in itself is fun but fighting against that golem... I can see myself getting into that. And I have no responsibilities really, no annoying fast-

food work. Plus I could heal people... if there are any, that is. Guess I'll find out tomorrow.

Going back downstairs, she removed some of the Bluemoon Grass from the walls and stored it in her cloak. It would help her keep the faster training up for a while whilst she traveled.

I can check how fast my skill progress is without the Bluemoon Grass too. There isn't really any indication of it even improving anything. I do hope the Order actually tested its effectiveness beyond the body change.

Sleeping early, she dreamed of a cozy, well-cushioned bed.

FIVE

Civilization

Ilea felt ready the moment she woke up. Today she would finally leave the temple.

She filled her rusty canteen with water from the fountain, put on her boots and cloak, and left.

Ilea entered the forest in the direction of what she had defined as south. It was a beautiful day. The suns were dimmed by the thick forest. Birds were chirping in the trees, filling the air with constant song, except for when an occasional distant roar sent them flying away.

Ilea walked at a normal pace, enjoying her finally achieved freedom. Not just simply being outside, but being confident enough to not die on her first encounter with some wildlife.

She walked for half an hour until she heard a roar that filled her ears. It was not a distant sound.

That one's close. I really want to know its level.

Quietly running in the direction of the roar, she soon came across a drake. It was eating whatever was left of its prey.

Hellooo there. Now let's check...

[Drake lvl ??]

Hmm, still can't see its level. I beat the guardian though, so I'm not really sure about this. Hmm. I don't think I'll mess with any until I know how important the level of a creature even is.

The drake looked up and roared in her direction.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry for interrupting your meal. I’ll be on my way.”

Leaving, she looked back and saw the drake continue its meal. Once again, she was surprised by how calm she felt. Was it part of her new powers? Or just the confidence of knowing she could now punch holes in solid stone walls? Either way, the drake no longer made her bladder quiver.

Seems like they don’t really care as long as there’s food. Kinda reminds me of myself... as long as that food isn’t grass.

Leaving the drake behind, she continued on through the wilderness. She didn’t encounter many other animals, only some wolves that left promptly after growling at her. They seemed to sense that she wasn’t afraid, and that bothered them.

“Yeah, you better leave, puppies.”

After four hours of walking, Ilea started to run. *As long as I stay mindful of my stamina, I should be fine for a couple hours like this.*

She felt the wind against her face, her hair flattening back as she reached speeds beyond what she thought a human on Earth could manage. It was strange but just another thing to get used to. Her body was empowered by magic. She sped through the forest, occasionally climbing a tree to check she was still going in the right direction. Climbing wasn’t hard with her Aura spell and enhanced body. A simple use of Blink would remove the need for climbing altogether, but she wanted to save her mana, just in case.

The mountains gradually crept nearer, but Ilea soon realized that something was wrong. *Either I’m tripping or these mountains are ridiculously huge... I should have reached them by now.*

Shrugging, she continued on. Night eventually fell, and Ilea climbed a monstrous tree to find a place to spend the night. The slope had ended a few hours ago, and Ilea wasn’t sure if she should continue on.

I have to find out if someone is out there though. And I won’t do that if I stay here and fight drakes. I suppose I can always come back, if that’s what I want to do.

If she could find people, that would mean information, a way back home perhaps. Ilea looked at her glowing tattoos, felt the magic that flowed through her veins. She had never felt better.

A way out.

Is that what I want?

It took her three more days to finally exit the forest. It didn't end abruptly; the trees simply gradually became less and less dense until only a few remained in the vicinity and Ilea was facing mostly open grassland.

Hopefully I'll be able to find my way back again.

Eating only berries and drinking from any stream she could find, the three days had passed without any major incident. The roars had stopped after the second day. The forest became more populated after that, mostly wolves and harmless animals. Nothing that dared bother her.

Reaching the valley between the mountains, she once again marveled at their size. *This journey won't be over for some time now, will it?*

Continuing on, a worry that had bothered her subconsciously was vaporized in an instant when she spotted evidence of civilization.

"A street! Well, a road... I guess."

Her mood now sky-high again, she started to follow the road. For three hours, she didn't come across any travelers, but the mountains now seemed far closer, the terrain becoming steadily rockier.

Seeing movement in the distance, Ilea strained her eyes.

People!

Starting to walk a little faster, she saw wagons and a lot of figures walking around next to them. *Why have they stopped though? Maybe something broke?*

She continued to walk toward them, finally freezing when she heard someone scream. Two men broke from the crowd, running away before they were shot down by arrows. Ilea watched with horror as a woman fell to her knees with a piercing wail, her scream cut short when one of the figures stabbed her in the neck with a bloodied sword.

Ilea was slowly backing up, more stumbling than walking, when she heard a noise from her right. In the bushes, a middle-aged man in leather armor motioned her to come closer and to be quiet. He had a well-kempt beard half-hidden below a helmet that covered part of his chin.

His armor looked well made, thick leather strung together on top of brown clothing. Steel bits protected his chest, head, and thighs. He held the handle of a longsword still in its sheathe and looked at her with some confusion.

A human. Thank fuck. I'm not an alien here. And it looks like they haven't developed laser guns since whenever that knight died in the temple.

She used Identify on him.

[Warrior lvl ??]

He didn't ambush me, so I'll trust him for now. He's the first human I've seen in months and he didn't immediately try to kill me. That's good, right?

Crouching lower and creeping over to the man, she nodded in acknowledgment. He nodded too and whispered a welcome.

"Greetings, you're lucky we caught you just now. There are some rogue adventurers down the road. We're about to ambush them and could use a healer in the battle. If you accompany us, we'll compensate you for your services."

"Who are you?" she replied, realizing he had identified her class.

Looking around, she now saw around ten more people hidden in bushes and crouched behind rocks. Some wore armor, some robes, but their attire was similar, the crest on their chests suggesting at least some official business. Despite what she had just seen, she felt calm. Using Identify on them told her there were warriors, mages, and rogues, but, surprisingly, no healers. That meant she could help. She couldn't see any of their levels, though.

Seems like being level 13 isn't that impressive after all...

"A guard team from Riverwatch. Been hunting these guys for a week now already. Seems like today's our lucky day."

The guard glanced curiously at her attire but concentrated on his quarry.

Don't know what Riverwatch is or who exactly is hunting whom, but at least these guys aren't slaughtering what seems like random people.

"I can help," she said.

The guard motioned her to stay behind the team. Slowly they started creeping toward the people she'd seen before. The smell of blood grew stronger. They were now only around twenty meters away. The adventurers had lookouts, scanning their blind spots as the others looted the wagons, so as soon as the group left the cover of the undergrowth, Ilea figured they would be spotted in seconds. The guard made some signals with his hands.

Two of the guards nocked arrows while a shimmering wavelike distortion started to gather around the two mages. Even from this distance, Ilea could tell it was caused by heat. In a flash, the arrows were released, and shortly after, two scorching fireballs flew away from the mages like bullets.

One bandit keeled over immediately, an arrow protruding from his throat, causing a new fountain of blood. Another caught an arrow to the shoulder, and he stumbled backward. One of the fireballs slammed into a heavysset man with a patchy beard, and he went down screaming as his limbs were set aflame. The other spell hurtled toward a slim adventurer with curved daggers at his waist. He rolled under the fiery projectile with ease.

Noise filled Ilea's ears as battle cries shook the air all around her. The guards charged as more arrows and fireballs rained down. After being stunned by the carnage for a second, Ilea started to make a plan.

I won't use any skills, just punches and maybe heal my allies. Shouldn't reveal too much about my abilities without knowing more. Her cloak fluttering a little behind her, she ran behind the guards. All around her, the battle raged. Swords flashed in the sunlight and arrows thudded into earth and flesh. The smell of smoke and fire mixed with blood penetrated the air.

Ilea didn't feel afraid. Surrounded by strangers and enemies, on an unknown world with humans who seemed to have jumped straight from the pages of a fantasy novel, she felt nothing but exhilaration. Despite having no idea where she was or what was going on, she felt like she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Jumping over the rock she had crouched behind, Ilea found herself standing on the road. Looking around, she barely dodged an arrow as it whisked past her thigh.

"You fuck!"

Ilea was already running toward the attacker as he drew and fired another arrow. The man had a thick scar on his chin and grinned a blackened grin as the arrow sailed toward her.

Dodging to the right, Ilea found herself next to a one-on-one fight between one of the guards, an obscenely tall woman with a claymore, and the lithe man who had dodged the fireball earlier.

The rogue managed to sink his dagger into the guard's bicep, who answered with a heavy swing of her claymore. The blade cleaved through the rogue as his shoulder split. Blood sprayed across both the guard's armor and Ilea's face.

Human blood. She had another person's blood on her face.

A quick scream escaped her lungs as she fell backward in shock, hitting the wagon. The guard barely took notice of her as she looked for her next

target, her shining metal armor now spattered red.

Her senses overloaded, Ilea tried to calm her breathing, nearly hyperventilating in the process. Not able to take her eyes off the newly made corpse before her, she closed them. Covering her ears with her hands, she simply sat there, tears forming in her eyes. She had thought she was ready for this. But a real battle was nothing like sparring in the gym.

Come on, Ilea, move! You'll die here if you don't!

Getting a hold of herself, she started running back to the large stone she had hidden behind earlier and jumped over it. Retreat seemed like the smartest option. She couldn't afford to freeze again.

Walking back to the mages and archers she had started with, she simply stood there, watching the carnage from afar while her heartbeat drummed in her chest. The mages had stopped using fireballs, probably because of the splash damage the attacks appeared to cause, and while the archers still fired arrows, they were becoming more selective as their quivers ran low.

Calming down, Ilea's eyes glazed over a bit. After ten minutes passed, the noise came to an end. The smell was still there, worse than before. A hand on her shoulder woke Ilea from her dizzy state.

"First battle, is it? I'm sorry to say this, but our healer was injured last week and we do need your support here. Do you think you can work your magic?"

Ilea looked up and saw one of the mages standing next to her. After locking eyes for a couple of seconds, she hurriedly nodded.

"Can you walk on your own?"

She nodded again to his question. He motioned her to follow, and she did. Trying not to look too closely at the corpses around her, she knelt down next to a guard with a huge cut on his thigh. The man only grunted while nodding to her.

Activating her Reconstruction spell, her hand glowed a pale blue. She touched his leg and watched as the wound closed. The blood stopped pouring out, and slowly the cut disappeared. She was too shell-shocked to marvel at the magic she had just performed. Before she could finish though, a rough, calloused hand stopped her.

"That's enough for me. Save your mana for others."

The man once again nodded to her and then lay back and closed his eyes. Continuing in a kind of fog, Ilea healed three more people in immediate danger. None of the guards seemed to have died.

She was removing an arrow from a particularly hairy guard's arm and applying her healing when she received a notification.

'ding' Reconstruction has reached lvl 3

"That's everyone, I think. Thanks."

Holding his hand out to her, the guard who had talked to her first over by the bushes offered his name, along with a weary smile.

"I'm Dale. You saved us some expensive potions by being here, lady healer. And that blue magic is very interesting. Haven't ever seen anything like it."

She shook his hand and offered her own name.

"Ilea Spears, no worries. Glad I could help. I can finish up healing the badly injured people if you want me to."

He shook his head.

"They'll heal in time. Let them suffer a bit. Even though they're all experienced, it's sometimes good to be reminded that you're not immortal."

She nodded at that and looked around, unsure what to do next.

Dale must have seen her expression because he continued. "You can come back to Riverwatch with us. Maybe we can get you some proper clothes," he said with a wink and a genuine smile. "We'll clean up here and then move back. Don't stray too far if you want to come. Payment for your services is in the city."

Nodding at him, she started to walk down the road, quickly finding what she was looking for.

The corpse still lay there, blood coloring the road. Guts protruded from the open wound. The shoulder was split, nearly to the stomach. Trying to keep herself from retching, Ilea made herself look at the corpse.

This was all it had taken to end her elation. Make her freeze like she had when she first saw the drake. She never wanted to feel that way again. She had thought she had moved past that. Apparently, there was still work to be done.

She stood there for a long time. The guards around her stripped the adventurers of any gear and loaded both the corpses and the gear onto some of the wagons that were still working. The broken ones were burned. Someone nudged her shoulder. Turning to the source of the touch, Ilea saw the overly tall female guard. The guard motioned to the corpse.

“You wanna keep that?”

Shaking her head, Ilea simply turned around and nodded to herself.

This'll need some time to get used to. Fighting against people as a sport is one thing, killing though...

The road was cleared fast, the guards obviously experienced. Ilea guessed they were all veterans. *They clear the corpses like it's a job.*

“Let's get moving, people!” Dale shouted, making Ilea look up.

And so they did.

Walking next to some of the guards, Ilea stayed silent. She was still processing the recent events. They joked around but still seemed poised, ready to react at a moment's notice.

Ilea didn't exactly know what she should say to these people. Asking about their location would raise a lot of flags she didn't exactly want to present. Asking what world this was would create even more...

“So what makes a healer travel these roads alone?” Dale said, suddenly appearing next to her, not giving her the time to think of something.

“I've been traveling alone for quite a while now. I'm a pretty fast runner,” she finished with a smile.

Laughing, Dale continued, “I suppose you are. Heard you darted in and out of the fight at the start. Impressive. I won't ask why you did that. Just don't recklessly risk your life.”

She nodded as he continued.

“And, just saying, if you were one of my own healers, you'd get cleaning duties for a month for a stunt like that.”

Feeling a bit ashamed, Ilea only nodded again.

I did freeze in the fight, and I suppose with him not knowing about my abilities, it did look like a helpless healer joined in close-quarters fighting, which is incredibly stupid. Clerics are usually very vulnerable in RPGs. Assume that's true in this world too. I get the feeling I'm a lot sturdier than most healers, but better not say anything else about that.

However, Dale didn't pry further and simply walked on.

“Can I ask you to show me a place where I can get some cheap clothes and a backpack?” she asked, eager for a change of subject.

Hearing her question, Dale nodded. “You'll get a couple silver for your service today. And I suppose nobody will miss a couple things looted from the adventurers. There are several shops if you don't want to search through the leftover stuff.”

“Thank you. I’m a bit short on money at the moment. Would be glad to take that opportunity.” Thinking on it, she smiled.

I don’t really know how I’m doing on money exactly. Guess I’ll find out soon enough. This guy is a good man though, thankfully. Wouldn’t want to stand against this squad.

Walking for two hours, the sound of running water grew in her ears. It slowly became louder until a roaring river could be seen in the distance. Some trees dotted the green landscape. It was already early evening, the sky darkening into a deep orange.

After another half an hour, Ilea spotted Riverwatch: a walled city half built into the mountain she’d been trying to reach for the past week. *I was right after all... rivers and plains mean people.* The river flowed up to the city and then turned a sharp right, running alongside the high outer city wall.

Ilea didn’t talk much with the other guards for the rest of the journey. She was still processing the fight – especially the rogue dying in front of her.

On arriving at the city, the group was greeted at the gate. Simple stone walls, reaching at least five meters in height, protected the settlement. The gateway was open, but guards were stationed there to check arriving travelers. Some stood atop the walls, checking the vicinity with their bows at the ready. The guards were similarly dressed to Ilea’s new companions and waved them in without a second glance.

The noise instantly changed when they went past the walls, muffled sounds becoming clearer as they walked from the dirt road onto cobbled stones. The houses were all made of wood and stone, murky glass windows preventing a view of the inside. Brick roofs covered most of the buildings, but there were outliers with more flat designs that were purely made of stone. Ilea raised a brow when she saw a building with perfectly even walls, not something she expected in the otherwise quite medieval town.

They came to a large square and walked through a market district with hundreds of people milling around and merchants shouting to advertise their wares. There were fruits, meats, furs, and weapons and armor, including knives, swords, shields, and leather cuirasses. To the side of the square, Ilea spotted a smithy, a burly mustached man hammering away on a glowing piece of metal held against an anvil. Enormous greatswords, hammers, and plate armor were somewhat visible behind him until he

cooled the piece, steam rising and obscuring his store. Other people peddled potions of various colors, trinkets lined with colorful stones, and strange contraptions she couldn't quite place made of wood and steel.

Ilea wanted to check everything out but was swept along with the determined guards as she moved her eyes from here to there. The smells of grilled meats were enticing, dozens of people cooking away at their stands with the occasional customer coming along to buy a piece or three. The quality of their clothing differed greatly. Some were walking around with dull robes that were barely made to fit a human, while others were wearing vests and well-fitting pants made of leather, woolen cloth, or various furs. The colors were varied too, not something she had expected, though they were more prominent among the well-dressed crowd.

She turned her head when she spotted a group of five people armed to the teeth. One massive man wore full plate armor with an enormous bloodied sword strapped to his back, and another was clad in elaborate leather armor, six small crossbows and a variety of knives strapped to a collection of belts and straps. The third among them was a woman with a mask. Blonde, near-white hair flowed out from behind it, a dark blue robe with inlaid metal bits all that protected her body. Ilea was unable to catch a proper glimpse of the last two members though as the guards walked on.

They soon entered a separate walled-off section of the city. Dale was walking next to her again.

"I assume you've never been to Riverwatch?" After not getting a response, he continued. "This is the southern guard station. You can have one of the barrack rooms for the night. It's not amazing, but it's better than outside. With the festival so soon, most inns are probably full too."

Ilea just nodded. "Thanks, appreciate it. About the clothes...?"

He looked at her ragged pajamas. "I assumed you wanted to sleep first. You can search through the stuff now... leave some for the others though!" He laughed and walked off. "I'll be in the common room for another couple hours. Find me there as soon as you've got your stuff. Just follow the wagon!"

Watching his back, she turned around and followed the wagon with the gear. A quick glance around made her realize that the corpse wagon wasn't there anymore. *Church? Or maybe burned? I wonder if there are zombies or something here. Would be amazing for necromancers to have that wagon. I assume they exist here. Hell, maybe they sold them to one.*

Reaching their destination, the two guards leading the wagon got off and started to move the things into an empty room.

She grabbed a sack of boots and lugged it inside, wanting to be helpful.

“Thanks,” said one of the guards, a slightly younger man. “We’ll leave the stuff in here till tomorrow at least. I’ll wait outside for a while. Just show me the stuff you get afterward. We might have to deduct some of your pay if it’s too valuable. I hope you understand.”

Ilea simply nodded. *If I find anything good, it’s even better. Won’t have to search through all the shops to get what I need.*

There was a lot of stuff. At least twelve adventurers had been killed in the attack. *Now let’s hope there were some people my size.* It took the better part of an hour to search through the things. She found a rather nice intact set of leather armor and some brown traveling clothes for underneath. There were some black leather pants that fit a little loosely, a simple brown shirt, leather bracers, and a chest piece. The last one she’d have to figure out, as there were quite a few strings attached to it. She got a belt too, of course. In addition, she took a small backpack with a clean canteen, some blankets, rope, and a sturdy-looking knife.

She kept the boots she had on already, liking them more than any of the ones available here. Stepping out of the room, she showed the things to the guard who had talked to her before.

“Hmm, I’ll have to report the leather armor. That’s pretty good quality. The rest you can keep, wouldn’t want you to keep walking around in those rags.” He winked at her.

“Anywhere I could wash all this?” she asked.

He simply pointed her in a vague direction.

“There’s only the well. There should be some cleaning tools at the hut nearby. Use that stuff freely. If anyone asks you what you’re doing there, just mention Dale.”

Ilea said her thanks and went to the well. Cleaning the clothing took an excruciatingly long hour. There was plenty of blood on it.

I hate not having a washing machine. But man, I’m cleaning blood off of leather armor. She paused, sitting on the ground as she looked around. She heard horses, the clang of metal on metal, likely swords, and a drunkard singing out of tune. It took a while to process it all, but in the end, Ilea smiled.

This is fucking awesome. Like some kind of fantasy town with adventurers and magic. And I just made friends with the local guard. Hope that wasn't a mistake. The food smelled nice, at least. I think I even saw some sewage drains, but that could've been anything.

Finishing up, she took her things and went to the common room. There weren't many people in there. *Might be nicer to go to an establishment outside of the guard center.*

Dale was drinking a beer and talking to two other guards. Both were short and stocky with copious scars. He nodded at her as soon as he saw her. "A drink first or your room?"

Nodding back, she closed in on the table and sat down. "A drink would be nice right now, actually."

"Oi, Robin! A drink for the healer!" An affirmative shout was heard from somewhere behind the bar, and soon she was drinking mead from a huge jug. It was sweet more than anything else. She barely noticed the alcohol.

Wow, this is actually pretty good stuff.

She finished half of it in one swig. One of the scar-covered guards stared at her and then started laughing.

"Been a long day, eh?" the woman asked.

Ilea nodded. "Never seen a man get killed..."

They all went quiet for a moment after that.

"To surviving," the man next to her said, lifting his clay jug.

"Aye," Dale agreed, and they all took another swig.

She listened to them talk about the day and some gossip. Apparently, they were still trying to find a guy selling potions in the city. Most of the talk was about the coming festival that was three months away. For the guards, it meant a lot more work. The city was already fit to bursting with trading caravans and merchants selling their wares in preparation for the event.

Stepping away from the table, Ilea laid out her clothes to dry next to the fireplace in the common room as she had noticed a few other guards doing. Dale had noted that she'd got some nice things but wouldn't deduct anything from her pay.

I don't know why he's so nice, but I'll take it nonetheless.

They stayed there for a couple of hours. After that, Dale showed her the room she could stay in for the night.

“Thanks, I appreciate the help, Dale.” He only nodded.

“No worries, Ilea. You were a great help today.”

Closing the door, she looked around the room. There was a simple wooden bed frame, straw poking out of the mattress in a few places, a mirror, and an empty chest.

The bed is still better than that old thing in the temple.

Putting her things into the chest, including her cloak, she glanced at the mirror and was immediately startled. Spatters of blood covered her, dirt clung to her cheek, and dark bags showed under her eyes. Her hair was an absolute mess, and she refused to look at her pajamas.

“What the fuck?” Looking away, she nearly cried. “I’m a fucking mess!”

Library

Ilea stood in shock at her miserable appearance, quickly moving to change.

Dressed in her traveling clothes, she immediately went outside again. The guards on night duty looked on with amused expressions as Ilea took a bucket of water and marched over to the shed next to the well. Ilea undressed and thoroughly cleaned herself. It was quite the task, and not one that was completed quickly.

After half an hour of cold water and hard brushing, she got into her slightly dripping new clothes and went back to her room. Looking into the mirror, she found a more recognizable face staring back at her. A clean one this time. Ilea was relieved but also found herself exhausted, now that the shock and exhilaration of the day's events had passed.

Shuffling over to the straw bed, she removed most of her traveling clothes again and lay down. It was far softer than she had expected.

This is the most comfortable I've felt in months...

Sleep came easily, even though her day had held some very jarring experiences. No dreams came to her that night, and she slept deeply. So she was quite annoyed when a knock on the door woke her up rather early. It was barely light outside, for God's sake.

"Ilea? Sorry to wake you this early but I'm leaving in an hour and would like to finish my business with you before I go." Dale was standing outside the door.

Dressing in under a minute, she put on the traveling clothes and her cloak. All her other things went into the backpack, which she slung over her shoulder. Looking into the mirror, she smiled at her new traveler's outfit.

Looking like a real badass there, mate. Her cloak was down, and her black hair flowed freely. There hadn't been any shampoo, but the washing had still done wonders.

Finally, Ilea opened the door. Dale stood there for two seconds with wide eyes before he caught himself.

"Oh, morning. Sorry, you look... different. Very good, actually." He scratched his beard. "Guess we won't have to check your magic for witchcraft or necromancy after all... a few of the lads were a bit suspicious, what with that 'wild' look you had yesterday." Chuckling, he motioned her to follow him downstairs. "I do hope you burned those old rags."

She chuckled at his joke. "They actually hold some sentimental value, otherwise I would. Anyway, I won't keep you long. I intend to look around a bit. How can I stay out of trouble in the city?"

Better not be too open about how little I know about everything. Hopefully I can get a feel for things first. Saying I'm not from this world is just as likely to get me put into some kind of medieval sanitorium as anything else...

They left the accommodation and exited into the courtyard. Most everything in the guard center was made of stone. Stone buildings, stone walls and archways, even stone pathways through the dirt underfoot.

"How to stay out of trouble, eh? Doesn't take much, really. No crime, obviously, or you'll have me hunting you down. The east side is a little rougher, but you can run very fast, right?" He winked at her, flashing a smile.

Not fast enough to run away from you. You were damn quick in that battle yesterday, so I'd rather stay on your good side. Only problem is I have no clue what kind of laws they have around here...

Eventually, Dale led her into a small building that housed something akin to an office. He opened a drawer and, after searching for a while, removed a couple of coins and handed them to her.

"Three silver is the standard fee for a healer in the employ of the city."

She took the coins and added them to her own.

"What about the gear?" she asked, but he just looked at her with feigned confusion.

"What gear? I'm not sure what you're talking about, Ilea. The things on your body are yours."

She nodded slowly. "Alright. Thanks a ton, Dale, you really helped me out here."

She held out her hand, and he shook it.

"No worries, healers are always welcome, no matter how crazy they look." Winking at her, he motioned her to the door. "Any plans from now on?" He followed her outside and locked the door behind them.

"I'll check out the city for a while and then leave again for a couple weeks, or maybe months," she answered. "Might be back for the festival though. Three months, right?"

He nodded. "Don't get yourself killed out there, Ilea. Yes, the city festival starts in three and a half months. Would be nice to see you there. Maybe you can join the tournament and run around a bit." They both laughed at that, and she bade him farewell before leaving the guard center.

It was early morning, and the city was slowly coming to life. A bell could be heard in the distance, and some dogs were barking somewhere nearby. She was suddenly hit by how little she knew about this world. That sound could be dogs, but it could just as easily be some magical animal that just *sounded* like a dog. She needed to find out more about where she had ended up.

It continued to surprise her how easily she was taking to her magical transportation. There was just something... freeing about this new place. There wasn't really anyone depending on her back home, few would miss her. So she intended to at least explore this strange world now that she was here.

Ilea turned around and walked back to the young warrior who was posted at the entrance of the guard center. She asked if there was a place she could get general information about the local wildlife, geography, and the city itself. He directed her to the main library of Riverwatch. Apparently it was pretty much in the center of the city. Thanking him, she left and began to make her way through the slowly filling streets in the direction he had pointed her in.

She soon found herself lost in the small alleys, side streets, and thoroughfares. It didn't sour her mood though. She was surrounded by people, by conversation and laughter. After so much time in solitude, the bustling atmosphere was comforting.

I'll get sick of it again in a day though... She chuckled to herself and kept walking.

The architecture was medieval and practical. No fancy decorations or statues adorned the buildings, at least not in the district she was currently in. Children were playing in the alleys, and people were starting to prepare their stalls to sell meats, vegetables, tools, clothes, and many other sundry items. The closer she got to the city center, the more people and stalls surrounded her.

There's so much food...

Holding herself back because of her limited finances and fear of getting taken advantage of, she hurried to the library.

The guard had described it pretty well, and there was a fancy statue of a woman holding a battleaxe in front of it, which made it hard to miss given the lack of other statues in the area. It was a large stone building, quite a bit larger than the others nearby, that reminded Ilea slightly of a church.

Upon entering, the air was immediately much cooler. She found herself in a wide, atrium-style room with high ceilings. There were shelves stacked with books that stretched far into the back of the main room.

A lone librarian was sitting at a desk and scratching away with a quill on a sheet of paper. Walking up to the desk, Ilea coughed once.

"What?" the man said without looking up. He was quite old, his skin as dry as the parchment he was scribbling on. He did not seem enthused by her presence.

Shrugging at his tone, she started talking. "I'm not from around here and need information on the wildlife, the geography, and some details about the city itself. I'm looking to be an adventurer someday." That was not the real reason, but she figured it would not be an unusual question. She tried to sound like a foreigner, which she was. And like a greenhorn adventurer, which she also was.

"Another life wasted to adventure..." the man mumbled, nearly sneering at the word 'adventure'.

Probably lost someone close to him to it...

The man finished what he was writing and then rang a bell that was on his desk.

"An attendant will... tend to you. And now, shush."

Ilea walked a couple of steps back and waited. *At least he doesn't pretend to be nice.*

Ten seconds later, a girl of around sixteen years appeared and looked expectantly at the librarian. He simply pointed at Ilea. The girl walked up to

her and held out her hand.

“Hi, I’m Maria. How may I help you? Oh, it’s five coppers an hour if you need help finding books or information about anything. Oh, and welcome to the Riverwatch library!”

Shaking the small girl’s hand, Ilea looked around. “Hi Maria, nice to meet you. I’m Ilea. Do you have somewhere we can sit down? I need to know quite a few things.”

Maria nodded and beckoned her to follow. Sitting down at a table in a separate room, Maria looked at her expectantly.

Wow, she’s motivated. Did she just start today?

“Alright, as I said, I’m Ilea. I just arrived here in the city. I grew up in a small village so remote that nobody has ever heard of it, and we weren’t really taught much about the outside world. Only my grandfather traveled outside the village, and he died when I was little. I learned some things from the books we had, but as I said... very little.”

The girl just sat there and nodded. Ilea was rather proud of the lie, which she’d been crafting the entire walk here.

“Well, there are a couple very basic things I need to know,” Ilea continued. “Please tell me if anything I say or ask is offensive or forbidden. I really don’t know about that stuff.” She tried to look innocent and ashamed, which she was in a way.

“Sure, just ask me. If I don’t know something, I’ll find it in a book or ask someone.” A bright smile accompanied her assurance.

Letting out a breath she didn’t know she’d held, Ilea started.

“How does the money system work? I got some money from my village to help me on my travels, but I have no idea how much a silver coin or a copper coin is worth.”

Raising her eyebrows, the girl sighed.

“That basic a question?” she mumbled very quietly. Ilea could practically hear her thoughts of ‘this is gonna be boring...’. Then, speaking out loud, Maria answered her.

“It’s one to one hundred, with copper being the lowest, then silver, then gold. Wait... do you... know numbers? Basic math?” She had the worst fake smile on her face that Ilea had ever seen.

“I do, don’t worry. Can you tell me a couple things that would convey the general worth of money in this region? Like how much does an iron sword cost or a piece of bread?”

Seemingly relieved, Maria continued. “Well, it’s different from place to place. And with swords and stuff, it’s super different, right? ’Cause they have very different qualities. A basic meal costs around two to ten coppers. You can easily pay several silvers for a meal though if it’s amazing. Clothes... hmm, a full set of normal leather armor would be around ten silver or so. A minor healing potion goes for a gold or two, depending on availability. An armor set like the city guards wear can be a gold or even several. Again, it depends on the quality, enchantments, the material, and who made it. If you’re looking to not get cheated in the city it’s difficult though. You’d have to know all the products, the current market value, problems in other cities, trade routes...”

Wow, so those clothes and leather armor were a lot more than Dale owed me. Considering the prices for potions, I don’t feel too bad though. Worth considering the water in the fountain, actually... Can I just bottle that up and sell it?

Ilea stopped the young girl, who was still listing things that might influence the cost of goods like this was some kind of exam.

“I’ve got the idea. Thanks. Now, what are the big countries around the continent... What do you call the continent, by the way? And what are some big organizations in each country I should know about?”

Maria blinked. “You’re quite weird... Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean to insult a customer! It’s just...”

Ilea smiled at her. “It’s fine. My knowledge is only bits and pieces of whatever I could get. That’s why I’m here. I’d be thankful if you just tried to answer the questions as simply as possible though. I promise there’ll be something in it for you too.” Ilea winked at her.

This seemed to elate the girl again. “Alright. Well, we’re in Elos. That’s the continent. There are a lot of books on its geography. Very very broadly put, we’re in Riverwatch, one of the independent cities to the west of the Plains. Most of that territory is occupied by human kingdoms and empires up to the sea, notably the Empires of Lys and Nipha and the Kingdoms of Asila, Kroll, and Baralia.

“Northward is the great Naraza mountain range. Northeast are the Northern Plains – tribes of lawless humans and lizardmen occupy that territory. It’s said that dwarven cities can be found within the Naraza mountains, but I’ve never met someone who has actually been there. The climate supposedly gets harsher the higher up you go, with more powerful

monsters occupying the territory. Beyond that, there are mountains as far as one can see. News of adventurers pushing further reaches us every couple years, but not a lot of it is charted yet. Of course, before that is the Navali forest. It stretches all the way to Riverwatch and around Karth, the largest and closest mountain you can see from the city. Few adventurers go deep into the forest, and you should avoid the western parts.” She continued in a whisper. “That is elven territory.”

“Elves?” Ilea asked.

The girl raised her brows. “You don’t know about them? They come at night... and they kill and... eat humans.”

Now that’s interesting.

“There are stories of them attacking settlements, but it’s been a long while since the last raid. Other than them, there are many different species of monsters in the forest. They’re mostly just normal monsters. Few travel through the forest to the north and northwest. You should be somewhat safe staying south of Karth. There are rumors of strong monsters and supposedly even cults and practitioners of forbidden magic in the northern parts.”

Wow, I was right with my compass rose. That’s pretty cool.

“Anyway, just remember that the western part of the forest is basically elven territory that should be avoided. Technically the ‘war’ is still going on. You don’t know about the war either, right?”

Ilea simply stared. Shaking her head at Ilea’s clueless expression, the girl sighed, took a deep breath, and continued.

“Elves are at war with basically everyone else. Because they’re bloodthirsty and crazy. There aren’t many of them though, so the other races were able to push them back into the forest. Many tried to go in there and attack, but nobody made it back alive. It’s their domain, and most humans at least are fine with that, it seems.”

So elves are bloodthirsty creatures? Interesting. Not everything matches the stories and games from back home then...

“As I said, this is Riverwatch. We’re an independent city just like four others located south of Karth. Should I go into the kingdoms and bigger cities in the east or continue with the independent cities here?”

Ilea shook her head. “That’s enough geography for now, thanks. I can look things up when I travel. Can you go into more detail about the monsters nearby?”

“I haven’t studied that a lot, and I don’t go into the wilderness. There are monster encyclopedias, but maybe it’s better to ask an experienced adventurer... or the guards?” the girl said.

“I see... maybe I’ll do that,” Ilea replied. A part of her just wanted to explore things herself, though knowing some things about local creatures and the like would surely be useful. “Another thing I’m very interested in is levels and skills. You see, I’m a healer from my village and nobody else really trained to be a warrior or mage there. Can you talk about that a little?”

Maria nodded. “Well, there are a lot of different classes obviously... if you reach certain requirements, you can acquire one. A person can choose two classes. Just tell me if I’m being too basic here...” Ilea motioned for Maria to continue.

“Well, every class has certain related skills, either active or passive. I’m sure you have some too. They level up by you using them. You can level your class and skills up by killing monsters or even other sapient beings. The stronger, the better. You could just use the skills a lot, but it’s way slower that way. You want to become an adventurer, right? So you should know this too. To join the guild, you need to be at least level 10 for the lowest rank. For higher ranks, you’ll need higher levels. At least ten for each rank higher that you go.”

“An adventurer’s guild? To get jobs and such?” Ilea said.

Maria looked on with a confused expression. “Yes. Most adventurers join one.”

“What’s the highest known level of a person or skill?” Ilea asked.

“Well, here in Riverwatch, there are several adventurers known to be over level 100. Some elite guards are in that bracket as well. Some old mages are said to be above 200. Many nobles are supposedly that high too. Skill-wise? I’ve heard about people having skills in the second tier at level 10 or even higher. If you didn’t know, once a skill reaches level 20 and levels again, it goes into the second tier. They change slightly and become more powerful. There are probably people with higher levels or skills, but even low-level adventurers are reluctant to share their information. It’s not everything, but you know a lot about a person if you know their stats. I can’t even guess about other cities, especially in the bigger kingdoms. Oh, and once you reach certain milestones, you’ll be able to evolve your classes. They change and get stronger based on achievements you managed

to accrue before reaching the required level. The milestones and achievements differ greatly though, so I can't really give you any advice there."

"That's very helpful, Maria, thanks. In that sense, how important are levels of humans and monsters anyway? Let's say, for example, I want to fight a drake."

Maria didn't show a major reaction to the word, so Ilea was relieved.

"You mean if I had to fight a drake, how I would fare?" Maria asked.

Ilea nodded.

"I see. Well, a level 1 person with a high enough leveled skill could hurt or even kill a level 100 adventurer... technically. I wouldn't advise trying something like that. At all. It's unlikely, but levels don't mean everything. With monsters, it's even more apparent. The drake you mentioned is a very strong beast. A level 5 drake could be a tough challenge for a level 30 adventurer. I did hear there have been sightings of them only a week or two to the north, by the way, so be wary of that place. So, a level 30 drake could probably fight against a level 80 wolf, but there are so many factors involved in fights it's hard to say really... As I said, levels are just an indication of strength. That's what I've been told and what I've read, at least. If one monster is ten times as fast as another, it can kill the slower beast even if the slower one has one hundred levels more."

"That makes sense," Ilea said.

I guess my Blink spell alone skews things a lot. Even if I don't have the same level, I can still outmaneuver a stronger opponent easily. If, that is, they don't have a similar teleportation ability. Yay for me.

"You did say there are lots of classes... what kind of magic is there? And what types aren't allowed?"

The girl looked up at the ceiling and raised her hand, starting to count down. "Fire magic is very common, ice magic too, water, air, earth, various warrior types, body enhancements mostly. Healing is rarer, which means you will be sought after in an adventuring team. I've been told about lightning magic, arcane magic, blood magic, even something like bone magic. Oh, wood magic too! There are a lot. As for forbidden things, death magic, I think, and necromancy, some blood magic... but I don't know for sure. You would have to ask a guard, or I can search for an appropriate book."

"That's fine," Ilea answered.

So there are quite a lot of options. And she doesn't seem like the kind of girl who knows about everything that's out there. I feel like my class is pretty special though.

“What about gear? General weapons, armor, and clothing. You mentioned enchantments before. Are there ways to get them with additional powers, maybe even so that they improve stat points?”

“I’ve never heard of armor with stat improvements, honestly, but it wouldn’t be too weird. The best things I’ve heard of are pieces of gear that add some special ability to the wearer, but they’re very rare, and people tend to be super secretive about them. Mostly adventurers wear that stuff because they found it in a dungeon. You can maybe buy equipment here that has been enchanted to be more resistant or lighter. Maybe a sword that has been made to be sharper.”

“Sounds good. One last thing, you mentioned dungeons just now. What are those exactly?”

“Well, there are places where the natural magic is very strong,” Maria replied. “Monsters tend to gather there or are even born of the magic itself. Little is known about the process of why or when an area becomes a dungeon, but whenever one is discovered, adventurers tend to go there to explore or fight monsters. Many old ruins are dungeons as well. They’re important to the cities too, otherwise monsters could be too numerous and attack settlements or travel routes.”

Ilea felt herself getting uninterested in the dry explanations and was now just keen to go out and explore for herself. She could always come back and ask more questions later.

“Well, I guess that’s all for now. Thanks for the help, Maria.” Ilea left a silver piece on the desk. “Keep the rest, that old geezer doesn’t need to know.”

“Wha—,” Maria started to say, stumbling over her words.

“It’s fine,” Ilea said, waving away the girl’s stunned protests as she got up and walked back to the main hall of the library. The talk had barely been an hour long, but having such an enthusiastic girl help her had been the best.

She didn't go into too much detail. I wouldn't want to hear about every single monster or settlement in detail anyway. Exploring most of this place on my own seems more fun. Heh, thinking like a true adventurer already... I'll have to find a way to ask subtly about travelers from other worlds or

something though. Just seems a little risky right now. Who knows how people would react to that? Might just think I'm crazy?

Leaving the library, Ilea frowned. The noise was almost like a physical blow. Hawkers yelled the virtues of their wares, children wailed, and passersby greeted each other at full volume to be heard over the racket.

It's barely been an hour, and look at all the people! I want my temple back...

Starting to descend the stairs to the central square, she began to smile. *I guess it's not so bad in this world. Now for some food...*

It was still early in the morning, but many stands already had food on offer. The smells filling the streets were mouthwatering compared to the musty scent of Ilea's grass-only diet. Grabbing some grilled meat from a grisly bearded man with a cart, Ilea walked on while eating. A nice-looking salad, several interesting juices, two sausages, and what she thought was a kebab later, she sat down in a park overlooking the city. The food was surprisingly complex in comparison to the more medieval-looking city walls, swords, and plate armor.

"Ooof, I'm having a food baby....," she muttered. The suns were shining bright on the city below her, but a tree provided Ilea with some shade.

The question is what I should do from now on. I could try to get a job with the guard, maybe become a healer in town? It's so crowded though... and now that I have magic, why should I do the same thing I did back on Earth? Earth... right. I should find out if there are other people from different... worlds. Subtly, though. I could also just go back to the temple and train more, maybe test my skills against some more monsters.

The thought surprised her. The reasonable thing to do would be to stay in the city, now that she had finally found other people. Humans, adventurers, wielders of magic. On the other hand, she already found it suffocating. People were living far too close to each other here, and the rancid smells of humanity were only just barely masked by the food, and not on all the streets she had walked through. Plus, she'd need accommodation.

What if I just don't settle anywhere? I've camped before. Now that I can heal injuries and get stronger by fighting monsters, why not become a traveling adventurer?

The idea intrigued her.

Is the adrenaline getting to me? Or is it the magic somehow? Either way, the idea of renting a room, getting a job... Why would anyone choose to stay behind these walls when there is so much out there? The library girl sounded like she hadn't ever even seen any of the creatures she talked of, let alone felt magic flow through her veins.

Ilea made a fist, quickly activating her aura to feel the increase in her physical ability. Looking up, she saw the suns high on the horizon, basking the wild landscape beyond the city walls in daylight.

I can heal myself and teleport, for fuck's sake. Why not take a nice vacation out in the forest? My magic will only improve, and I might even get to evolve my class, or even get a second one. Getting information from personal experience should be quite a lot easier than asking around too.

A part of her knew the arguments she'd told herself weren't perfectly logical, but it felt right. Like nothing had felt right before.

She grinned to herself and squealed a little, the sound eliciting an annoyed stare from a bearded carpenter working nearby. Ilea didn't care. She couldn't remember the last time she had been this excited.

SEVEN

Broken Bones

That evening, Ilea got ready to leave the city. She had visited the library again and bought a lot of food on the way to the gate. Enough to fill her new backpack to the brim. She had also visited a tailor and asked them to show her how to put on the leather armor. It was surprisingly complicated. In addition, she bought a piece of flint for fire-making and a small pouch for her money, leaving her at 1 gold, 1 silver, and 25 copper coins.

Seems like I'm ready for now. I'll continue to work on my skills till the festival. Hopefully I can fight and kill some drakes...

The thoughts from yesterday came back to her. Did she really want to fight those massive creatures? They had nearly killed her when she arrived. Not to mention the fact she had never killed anything before – golems not included. She had never even been hunting back home. She had never risked her life, never been in a true battle until a few days ago.

Fighting the drakes should have terrified her. Yet the fear gave way to excitement. Maria had said that killing a creature as tough as a Drake would be a fast way for adventurers to level, but few did so because of the intimidating nature of the beasts. That just made her more eager to go out there and try her skills against the creatures.

With that thought bouncing around in her head, she left through the same gate she had come in just the day before. Sadly, compasses weren't exactly a thing here, but some questions she had asked some of the merchants – about the positions of the suns and stars – had left her with a vague ability to navigate.

A few subtle mentions made her think that travelers from other worlds or summoned beings weren't exactly commonplace, but she didn't want to outright ask yet, even if it was just someone at a food stand.

The new gear fits. Perfect really, with my cloak, she thought while heading down the same path she had trudged along after the battle. She could likely join an adventurer team but was still unsure if any of her abilities were uncommon or even forbidden. Sharing information on her specific class and type of magic seemed a little dangerous to her. Getting killed because of her strange class wasn't on the top of her list of things to do. *I'll probably see a ton of abilities at the festival tournament.*

Running nearly the entire way back, she was faster than before. She sped out of the rocky foothills and quickly found herself back on the incline that led deeper into the forest. Trees passed in a blur, and she found her new travel gear made the whole experience far more comfortable.

She had put her remaining ten stat points into both Vitality and Intelligence before leaving. After talking with Maria at the library, the way she had been applying her stats still seemed like the wisest choice. Intelligence would help her spellcasting and perhaps make some of the books at the temple easier to comprehend. Also, Vitality was seen as one of the most important survival tools for an adventurer.

The other stats functioned pretty much the way she had thought. Which was to say, similar to most video games. It seemed a little more fluid than a simple RPG system though. For example, Strength increased the power of physical attacks, but the power of certain spells could be improved by Strength too, not just by the magic-related stats like Wisdom and Intelligence. Similarly, there were physical skills that might grow more powerful with higher Intelligence or Wisdom rather than just Strength. Stats could interact with abilities in unexpected ways and function differently for different classes. Thus, all stats could be potentially useful to a person's skills and class.

Having found the slope again, she was quite pleased with herself for not getting lost. She had known how long she had traveled for and more or less in which direction, but this was a foreign world, after all, so making her way back so quickly was still an achievement. As the ruined temple came into view, Ilea did a quick check for prowling wolves but then wasted no time teleporting back into her old training ground. She smiled.

Home sweet home... or ruin. Whatever.

Depositing her new stuff on the ground next to the wooden bedframe, she used the blankets she had procured from Dale to make it a bit more tolerable. Next, the shelves were dusted and stocked with the food she had bought.

I'll have to ration this for the next three months. Hopefully, the preservation runes work on food as well as they do on the books. And I do have to eat the grass.

According to Maria, skills normally gained levels only after weeks of training – without killing anything, that is. Expensive elixirs could supposedly speed up the process. Only very rich or powerful people had access to them though.

I mean, using the grass and killing things can only be better, right?

However, she had already eaten a considerable amount of the grass, and it wouldn't last forever. At her current rate of consumption, it probably wouldn't last much longer than the festival. She could always ration it, but, having tested the effects by eating different amounts on different days, the effects seemed to multiply the more she ate. So slowing her use of it would just slow her progress. And Ilea was not the patient sort.

Which means there are ways to power-level skills here, if enough resources are available. Not sure how many people can do that though, considering the time it took for all that grass to grow.

The thought of selling it had crossed her mind, but with the risks involved, it seemed downright evil to do so. *Better not let this stuff get into circulation. Don't want a bunch of dead wannabe adventurers on my conscience.*

As night fell, Ilea warped outside to enjoy the view and the return of the silence. Sitting on top of the temple and looking at the forest and the stars, Ilea enjoyed some of the smoked meat she'd bought in Riverwatch.

I do like it here. The feeling of freedom is something else... I never felt like this on Earth. If this is virtual reality, then they fucking nailed it.

Lying down on her rather comfortable cloak and using one of the blankets as a pillow, she appreciated the sky nearly as much as the meat.

Tomorrow I'll find one of the drakes and fight it. Maria said they can breathe fire to an extent and are very fast and tough. We'll see if they're too tough for Destruction. She glanced at her fist absentmindedly. *That golem certainly wasn't.*

She wanted a proper fight. A true test of her new powers. Blinking back down to her chamber, she couldn't help but grin. She had food, blankets, and even a backpack.

Damn, I should get candles or something. Not for down here though. This place is a fire hazard. Maybe in the main hall though.

She realized that the temple already felt more like home than her old apartment had. She *liked* it here. And for the first time in a long time, she was excited about what tomorrow might bring. Finally, Ilea fell asleep to thoughts of candles and a burning Chamber of Awakening.

* * *

Morning came, and Ilea left for her hunt, though not before eating a generous amount of Bluemoon Grass. Blinking upstairs, Ilea looked at her hands and wondered.

Hmm... I'm not nauseous anymore. At least not with Blink.

Looking suspiciously toward the room she had teleported from, she turned again and left the temple.

Now I just have to wait for a roar.

Ilea moved through the trees, watching for signs of movement and listening for the heavy thud of footsteps. As she ran, she also collected any Cinderberries she could find, which helped pass the time as she patiently waited for her prey. Or predator. She wasn't quite sure yet.

After half an hour, she heard the first echoing roar.

Running in the direction of the sound, Ilea found it difficult to locate the source of the noise. The forest was a kind of echo chamber, and the trees bounced the cries such that, at times, they seemed to come from all around her. Other times they muffled them entirely. She soon lost the trail.

Back to square one, I guess.

Waiting again, she used Magic Perception to survey the area. There was only a general faint glow, nothing especially bright.

I really have to use it more often... Another roar broke through the thought. *That one's closer.*

Speeding off in the direction of the roar, with her Aura skill active, Ilea soon reached the origin of the raspy bellow.

A horse-sized drake was curled up in a clearing, its snout bloody from a recent victim that lay before it. Ilea wasn't the only hunter today.

[Drake – lvl ??]

It eyed her suspiciously as she crept forward out of a clump of bushes.

"Nice kill you got there..." She gestured toward the corpse of the now unrecognizable animal on the ground. The drake opened its maw and roared at her.

You have heard a mighty beast's roar. Movement is slowed by 15% for 1 minute.

"Well, it seems your food is g—" She cut off as the beast opened its mouth again, but this time it wasn't to release a roar. An infernal glow began to build in the creature's maw. Ilea wasted no time in blinking ten meters to the right. The patch of bushes she had recently vacated was obliterated by a torrent of fire. Heat filled the area, and a smell of burnt wood and leaves penetrated her nose.

"Let's play then!" Ilea shouted, with a smile on her face that she felt might have seemed uncharacteristic on her to everyone in her old life but her kickboxing friends. The drake turned its head toward her and sent forth another spray of fire. This time she was ready and launched herself to the side with as much force as she could muster. It wasn't quite enough to dodge completely though, and her left arm was bathed in flame. Pain lanced through her as her skin blistered from the heat. She immediately began using Reconstruction on herself, and the arm started to heal as the drake advanced.

Its speed was just as described. Ilea barely managed to dodge to the side again as a swipe from its maw ripped past her head. *Damn, those are big teeth*, she thought as she kept channeling Reconstruction into herself. As the healing magic was absorbed by her burnt arm, the damaged skin reformed and turned a bright pink.

Gritting her teeth, Ilea was glad for her pain reduction bonus, otherwise she wasn't sure if she would even have been standing. She didn't have long to contemplate it though, because the drake was rushing at her again. This

time she was ready. She sidestepped at the last moment and kicked the beast in its flank with Destruction.

The force of the kick allowed her to spring backward, and she landed a few feet away, locking eyes with the beast. It roared and breathed fire again. This time she didn't just dodge, she blinked directly above the monster and planted her foot into its neck. It turned to chomp at her with its teeth, but she was already out of range, the kick having propelled her away again.

Seeing its prey had escaped again, the drake charged. Again she used her speed to dodge and land a counterattack that launched her out of its reach. Again it charged, and again she dodged. Eventually, the creature learned to be wary. Ilea was starting to tire too, though, for she had never used her Destruction this many times in a row.

Come on, I've hit it at least ten times now, no reaction?

Just as she was starting to become frustrated, a trickle of blood leaked out of the monster's maw, dripping onto the grass below.

It's hurt!

Her smile broadened. After ducking under another gout of fire, she appeared next to the beast and delivered a series of Destruction-fueled jabs. The drake staggered, neither able to dodge the teleporting mage nor able to hit her with its fire.

It's definitely weakening!

But in this moment of elation, Ilea missed a flash of movement, and a powerful kick of the drake's leg sent her flying. Blood spurted from her own mouth, and she rolled to a stop on the ground ten meters from the reptile. Wincing, she activated Reconstruction.

Ribs broken, eh? Great. Now it's getting interesting.

She felt her bones shifting back to their original shape and knitting together, but she had to stop healing because of the pain. Even with the 50% reduction, it was too much for her. Losing concentration in a fight like this could prove fatal. Still, she was smiling.

"You're one tough motherfucker, you know that?"

Talking to the beast only made it more infuriated. Roaring at her, it charged again. Its steps were not as sure as before. Just when Ilea dodged, landing a devastating blow to its head and feeling its skull fracture, the beast used a sudden pivot to slam its body into her. Her half-healed bones cracked again and she fell to the ground, the crippled monster now on top of her.

Both of them were barely breathing, blood pooling on the forest floor. The air was thick with smoke, and the smell of blood, burnt wood, and flesh lingered around them. Coughing up blood, Ilea tried to push the drake off her, but it was too heavy and her injuries too limiting. The glow of her Aura spell faded as she was no longer able to sustain it. All her mana was going into Reconstruction, barely keeping herself alive.

They lay there for what seemed like hours but was probably only ten minutes, and her HP was going up and then back down. Finally, the drake stopped breathing.

‘ding’ You have killed [Drake – lvl 48]. For killing an adversary 30 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 14. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 15. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Destruction reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Reconstruction reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ State of Azarinth reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Blink reaches lvl 8

‘ding’ Body of Azarinth reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting reaches lvl 13

The smile never left Ilea, even though the pain was terrible. *Why do I feel so good when there’s so much pain... I’m not into that kinda shit... Whatever, fighting is the best!*

She marveled at how calm she felt, how free. Despite the injuries and how close she had come to death. This felt *right*. Coughing up another load of blood, her partially regenerated mana went directly into healing her body.

Slowly she stabilized. After that, she entered a meditative state and restored a third of her mana. Healing herself up to her full HP, she activated her Aura again and pushed the drake off of her. The body was heavy.

Looking down at it, she spoke aloud, "Can I eat you?"

Trying to lift it, she barely managed to drag the beast a few feet before tiring. Using Blink left the beast behind, so that wasn't an option.

Well, I guess this is training too...

In the end, it took nearly an hour to drag the corpse back to the temple. Luckily, though, nothing else attacked her on the trip back.

Arriving at the temple, she deposited the drake in the middle of the main hall – the part of the temple that was accessible without blinking. Gathering wood in the forest, she returned and built a fire. There were enough holes in the ceiling for there to be plenty of airflow. The flint worked like a charm with the knife she had acquired from the dead adventurers. Trying to slice into the drake proved hard though. Impossible really.

"Well, only one thing to do then..."

Activating her Aura spell, she used several jabs to loosen the scales and finally penetrate them. It was a rough wound, but it was enough. Making the opening bigger, she made a huge mess as drake blood oozed all over the place.

After half an hour of struggling, she had finally removed enough of the scales to cut some of the meat inside. Then she used some rusty remnants of kitchen utensils to build a makeshift grill above the fire. As the meat cooked, she continued her work on the scales.

These scales could be amazing as some sort of protection. Maybe someone can help me affix them to my leather armor. They're dark red though. I'll have to find a blue drake, she thought as she peeled off some leftover skin from a severed scale.

Having arrived back at midday, it was evening by the time she was done. The meat tasted horrible, even after applying the salt that she had brought from the city.

Too much muscle. I should hunt some domesticated cows.

Finishing up, she stored the scales in the chamber library. There was plenty of space after having removed all the rotting shelves. Ilea had to use Blink several times to get all the scales downstairs, seemingly having a

limit on the number of things she could carry with the skill. Weirdly, this didn't apply to things inside the backpack she had used before.

Next time I'll put the scales in there and then use the skill.

Putting out the campfire, she looked at the bloody corpse of the drake. Only flesh remained. *The bones... I bet I could use those.*

Being too tired to remove all the bones from the drake though, she dragged the corpse outside and dumped it in the forest. *Dinner for someone.*

Pausing only to dump her new stat points into Wisdom, she blinked to her chamber and was asleep as soon as she hit the bed.

* * *

The next morning, Ilea was ravenously hungry. She ate more grass than she had ever eaten before, followed by some smoked meat. *I eat too much meat.* But she still continued to chew. Once she was satisfied, she warped upstairs, intending to go for a cleansing swim in the river. However, once upstairs, she was greeted by a roar that emanated from the nearby woods. Precisely where she had left the remains of the drake.

Oh man, this day is starting wonderfully... Let's nearly die again!

Smiling already, she put her ten new skill points into Vitality – you couldn't go wrong with more health – and walked outside.

[Drake – lvl ??]

A new drake, this one with green scales, looked up at the human who had intruded on its breakfast mid-bite.

“Eww, cannibalism! You are gross...”

Glaring at her, the drake growled and prepared to breathe fire. Tattoos coming to life, Ilea immediately blinked to the drake's side and punched it three times in quick succession. Warping to the other side to avoid a retaliatory kick, she repeated the punches.

The kick came again, and she dodged to the left, now standing right under the drake's head. A strong uppercut sent destructive magic through the beast, and right when it tried to bite her, she blinked above it and sent a powerful axe kick slamming into its neck with both power and the assistance of gravity.

Blink at level 8 cost only a little mana to use, less if the distance was short. Combined with the hits of Destruction, it was still a considerable mana drain, but with a newly increased mana pool at her disposal, Ilea wasn't stingy.

The drake retreated a couple of meters and swung back around while breathing fire behind it.

Blinking next to the beast, she managed to hit it three more times before she had to back away from a kick. Growing weak, the drake came at her more carefully, sometimes including bursts of speed to make her use her teleportation spell. But it was no use. Blood was already visible on the drake's leathery lips, and it took only another two minutes for it to go down.

"This time, not on top of me!"

'ding' You have killed [Drake – lvl 27]. For killing an adversary 10 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 16. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Destruction reaches lvl 16

'ding' State of Azarinth reaches lvl 12

'ding' Blink reaches lvl 9

'ding' Azarinth Fighting reaches lvl 14

"Nice!" Ilea exclaimed. "Reconstruction didn't level, but in fairness, I wasn't hit."

Deciding not to move the corpse inside the temple this time, she dragged it to the clearing out front. With some experience, it was a little easier to remove the scales. Getting them all into the backpack and then using Blink actually worked.

She settled into Meditation for a while to restore her lost energy, then she blinked back outside. Checking the bodies, she realized that the one from yesterday had less meat on its bones.

I mean, the green one did eat some of it... maybe I can let the beasts do my work. Leaving the corpses there, she went in search of more drakes.

My skills and levels are growing astronomically fast compared to what Maria and Dale mentioned was normal... It kinda feels like cheating. Is that all due to the Bluemoon Grass? Or maybe because I'm fighting alone against monsters with a much higher level?

Ilea did another loop through the nearby forest, grabbing every Cinderberry she could find. She listened for another roar. After another hour of walking around, she heard one. The fight went much the same. Knowing the drakes and their abilities now, she overwhelmed it with her Destruction and blinking, but there was no familiar 'ding'.

No level up this time, huh?

Sitting down next to the downed drake, she started to remove its scales again while restoring the lost mana and stamina.

"And so the grind begins..."

Standing up with a smile on her face, Ilea ran back to the temple to get her backpack. This process was repeated another four times that day, her levels progressing steadily. Coming back to the temple, she ate some grass and cheese on the roof while looking at the sunset.

Only one more thing for today.

Finishing up, she blinked down into her chamber. Going to the library, she ignored the already sizable mound of scales. Crouching down next to the pile of Cinderberries she had collected, she smirked.

Reconstruction, here I come.

Eating one berry, then two, then three, she healed herself steadily while her health depleted and then came back again. Half an hour later, she received the message she'd been waiting for.

'ding' Reconstruction reaches lvl 5

"Well, it works... but it's fucking boring. Maybe I can let the Drakes hurt me a bit more... Nah, that'd be crazy, right? This is safe and easy. I can read some of the other diaries from the other chambers and get some books from the city during the festival. Hopefully they're not too expensive."

That night, Ilea smiled and dreamed of fighting drakes.

* * *

Three months passed like this. The amount of drakes she killed increased every day, even though she had to search farther and farther for new prey. The time needed for rest after each fight lessened with each increase to Endurance and Wisdom. The rapidly leveling skills and her additions to Intelligence amplified her damage as her training continued. After a few weeks, she even stopped collecting the scales, as the way back was too far to justify the repeated journey.

The first of her skills to reach the second stage was Destruction, which became far stronger than before.

Second stage: The amount of mana used per strike can be regulated with a maximum of 20 mana per strike.

The ability to choose how much mana to use per strike was very handy, allowing her to pump mana in for bigger damage at the right moments or even to reduce it for precision strikes. Most of her frequently used skills reached the second stage after around another week of fighting, the progress slowing down significantly after that.

Running through the forest at full speed with her Aura activated, Ilea scanned her surroundings, the trees flying by in a blur. Ignoring any wild animals, she searched for more of her prey.

Where are you, drakes? She had only found two so far today. *I'm behind on my daily quota, the first time in three months I'm behind. They don't seem to respawn as they do in video games, that at least is sure.*

Soon after this thought, Ilea broke into a huge clearing. Trees lay strewn about the forest floor. This space had only recently been created, it seemed. The architect of the destruction was the biggest drake she'd seen so far, its body covered in black scales. Its bulk easily eclipsed that of a fully grown rhino, perhaps even a small elephant. It looked right at her and roared its outrage at her presence.

[Drake – lvl ??]

Not a different name, looks different to me though.

Heat gathered around her as the drake unleashed its fire breath. Comparing the blast to what Ilea had experienced before would be like comparing a small fountain firework to a military-grade flamethrower.

EIGHT

Death

The blast engulfed Ilea's entire right side before she managed to blink away, coating her with heat and searing pain. The immense spread of the flame was more than anything she had seen before. Not only that, but the creature was much faster than its size suggested. She could barely keep out of its way as she healed herself from the burns.

The clearing was large, but even so, it left little room to maneuver against such a beast. Ilea found herself having to blink away nearly constantly and still didn't manage to avoid every attack. She was also pumping mana into healing due to the damage she received in between the teleports. Her clothes took the brunt of the heat, but the leather armor and traveling clothes were definitely not looking as good as they had three months ago.

Blinking again, Ilea crouched low as a jet of fire passed above her head.

"You're annoying..." she muttered, rapidly advancing toward the beast. As she approached, she blinked left and right occasionally, weaving back and forth to confuse the beast. Closing in. She had learned that the drakes would not use their breath if the target was moving about too fast for them to follow.

Reaching the beast, she prepared a punch to its left side, but the drake was ready. It angled its head toward the ground and spat out a huge gout of fire. The flames struck the ground with such force that the fire exploded outward, covering the drake completely in a dome of flame.

Ilea's extended hand burst into flame mid-punch, and she had to blink backward, shaking it out.

Might be why it's black...

Smelling the burnt flesh, she grimaced, even as it began to heal. *Been a while since one of them got me that badly...*

A smile returning to her face, she moved into a higher level Azarinth stance.

It's also been a while since I was this excited to fight one of them. Finally, a challenge!

She closed in again, trying to land her attack before it had time to react. But the drake created another explosion of flame that drove her back. She didn't get burned this time but still couldn't reach her adversary.

I don't have any ranged attacks, and I doubt I can outlast it with my current mana...

Blinking back toward the drake, she appeared above it. It responded with another wall of fire, but she ignored it. She kicked down from above while the fire spread around herself and the beast.

The only thing I have that it doesn't—

The flames engulfed her, and she screamed. Her kick connected and she warped away, immediately using Reconstruction.

—is healing, but fuck that hurts...

The beast looked at her with anger in its eyes. A deep roar filled the clearing.

Ilea dodged two more cones of fire while she was advancing again. Her Reconstruction spell was working overtime. Given her current level and mana quantity, it wasn't really an issue... yet. She couldn't outlast the drake with mana alone – but she did have enough to heal herself and fight through the fire to land her attacks.

It occurred to her that this was insane. Being burned alive in order to kill a wild beast was not something she would ever have considered back home. And yet she still felt perfectly calm, exhilarated even, at having found a way to go toe to toe with the gargantuan lizard.

Perhaps getting hurt on purpose isn't such a bad idea after all. Or I really am crazy.

Reaching the drake again, Ilea forced herself to attack despite the flames that engulfed her. Two punches staggered the beast as Ilea gritted her teeth through the fire, her clothes and armor getting thoroughly scorched in the process.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Heat Resistance – lvl 1. Ignoring the warnings of your parents and friends, you refuse to not stand in the fire. This skill will help lessen the damage and pain a little.

“Perfect timing...” Ilea panted, and, blinking in again, she kicked at the monster. The drake didn’t try to burn her this time, but instead, in a flash of movement, its dagger-like teeth snapped closed on her outstretched arm. Ilea screamed as her arm was crushed by the beast’s powerful jaw. Finding herself unable to blink away, she used her free arm to punch at the drake’s head.

Her mana was rapidly draining as her Aura spell, healing spell, and Destruction spell were all active simultaneously. This continued for a few excruciating seconds, her health declining slowly as she bludgeoned the creature’s face with her free hand. Blood splashed across her face as the attacks began to take their toll. The drake, seeing itself at the losing end of the exchange, let go of her arm and jumped back to release a cascade of fire.

Sensing an opening and blinking directly above it, Ilea managed to land a kick before the drake could angle its head to the ground to cover itself in flames. She pumped as much Destruction into the blow as she could, sending destructive energy coursing into its body. Then she blinked back to the ground.

The monster glared at her with bloodshot yellow eyes and trickles of red oozing from its mouth. Ilea didn’t look much better as she returned the stare. Burned, bloody, and low on mana, she locked eyes with her opponent.

Suddenly, and unceremoniously, the drake collapsed.

It’s still alive... barely.

Ilea was working hard to heal herself and fell down to one knee, breathing hard. Her eyes never left her adversary as her burnt body slowly formed new skin. Patches of her once nice traveling clothing were blackened or completely missing now, but it still held together.

After a minute of healing, she blinked to the beast and kicked it hard in its unprotected belly. Then she blinked away again. She did this two more times until the drake stopped moving completely.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Drake – lvl 79]. For killing an adversary 30 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 47. 5 stat points awarded.

“Damn, that guy was level 79...” she muttered.

Quickly going into Meditation, she slowly walked up to the downed drake. She had noticed in the past couple of months that she could use Identify to see any beast’s level that was up to twelve levels above her own. When she leveled Identify, the limit increased to fourteen levels above her own. This meant she could see most of the drakes’ levels after a while, and some were even below her own. They did vary greatly though, likely a product of their territorial behavior.

Reaching the drake, she started to remove its scales. *This is much harder than any others so far.*

Finally penetrating the closely connected scales, she removed one.

[Charred Drake Scale – High Quality]

Nice! So far, they’ve all just been ‘Drake Scales’.

She kept removing scales for the better part of two hours, enjoying the heat from the suns in the clearing. Even though the height of summer had passed two months ago, it was still rather hot. At least she thought of it that way. The climate and seasons could be different here than they were on Earth, after all.

“Now, how the fuck am I going to move them? I don’t have my backpack here, and I’m like two hours away from the temple, even at full speed.” Looking down at the pile of scales, she sighed. “I really want them though...”

Filling any pockets in her burnt clothing and her cloak, she managed to gather around a third of them.

Guess I’ll have to come back tomorrow.

Seeing as it was already late in the afternoon, she made her decision. *Don’t want anyone taking them... even though I haven’t met a soul around here so far.*

Leaving the clearing, she used her hands to dig a hole in the soft earth and put the remaining scales in there, then covered them again so that they rested below half a meter of dirt. Scratching a nearby tree with a nail, Ilea marked the spot.

Time to go home then. Speeding up, she ran through the forest toward the slope with the temple. On the way, she also scared off some wolves. They seemed to have retaken a big part of the forest after the drake population had suddenly plummeted for some weird reason.

Stopping sometimes to grab any Cinderberries in her path, she reached the temple around two and a half hours later. Grabbing some grass from the chamber, she sat on the roof of the temple and enjoyed the sunset.

Eating berries and Bluemoon Grass had become the norm again after her supplies from the city had run out a month ago. That and meat from whatever animals she managed to hunt. *Cinderberries still taste great... I love them.* The damage she sustained from them was now reduced greatly by her high poison resistance. She didn't even have to use her Reconstruction spell anymore while eating them. The other fruits, nuts, and berries she found didn't come close to the strange spicy taste, though some were rather nice. It had taken a while for Ilea to get used to the sometimes sour or bland tastes compared to the cross-bred and optimized fruit she'd had back on Earth. At least the stuff here was free.

Bottling the fountain water sadly didn't seem to retain its effects. She had tried various containers from her pack and from the ancient kitchen, even leaves. Ilea assumed the fountain itself made the water into something akin to a healing potion. Not that she was complaining – the thing had saved her life, after all.

Having finished her meal, she warped down to her chamber and deposited the Charred Drake Scales. Nearly a third of the library room was now filled with various scales and bones. The new population of wolves was also helping her greatly by removing the meat from the dead drakes. The bones were too dense for them to eat and probably even hurt their teeth when the poor beasts tried to gnaw on them.

“Bone armor, here I cooome!” Ilea said as she lay down on her bed. “I think I'll go back to Riverwatch tomorrow. It's been a month since I had any good food, and the festival starts soon anyway. Guess I'll finish up here in the morning, pack my backpack, then go get the rest of the Charred Scales. Maybe I can sell them in the city or have something made from them, though I doubt I've got enough money for that.”

Checking her stats as she did every evening, she grinned. The incredible progress she'd made in the past three months was a testament to the

Bluemoon Grass and her ability to fight much higher-level beasts nearly all day long for all that time.

I'm glad the drakes are such a bad match for my class and skills. If I were a swordswoman or a simple fire mage, I'd be dead a hundred times over... and with no healing...

Shuddering at the thought, she continued to review her progress.

Over the last thirty or so levels, she had focused more heavily on Vitality. Fighting the drakes had taught her the importance of being able to take a hit. And health was a sort of armor for her, given the relatively low cost of Reconstruction. As long as a creature couldn't one-shot her, then she could always blink away and heal.

Blink also used very little mana. Stamina, on the other hand, was most important for moving around the battlefield, so Blink meant she needed far less stamina than the average fighter. She had initially intended to keep buffing her Endurance but each time found herself favoring Intelligence, Wisdom, or Vitality instead. It just made more of an impact.

Arguably, Wisdom was her most important stat, as it fueled both Reconstruction and Destruction, although her Meditation skill balanced this somewhat. And Intelligence allowed her to hit harder and end fights faster. She had also invested a few points into her physical stats so that they wouldn't fall behind too much. With her Aura affecting both her speed and strength, she felt it was worth it. The only reason she hadn't focused on the physical stats more was because Intelligence had an even bigger impact, and it boosted nearly all of her other skills as well.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent Stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 47

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 17

- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 8

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 14

- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 10

- Active: Free Slot

- Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 3

- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 15

- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 8

- Passive: Free Slot*
- Passive: Free Slot*

Class 2: None

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5*
- Identify – lvl 3*
- Meditation – 2nd lvl 4*
- Poison Resistance – lvl 16*
- Heat Resistance – lvl 1*

Status:

Vitality: 97

Endurance: 41

Strength: 20

Dexterity: 20

Intelligence: 73

Wisdom: 92

Health: 970

Stamina: 348/410

Mana: 878/920

On reaching their second stage, many of her skills had gained new effects in addition to their increased power and reduced cost as the skills leveled up. Ilea had also noticed that all her Azarinth Healer skills with percentages would grow about half a percent higher with each level.

Skills: Azarinth Healer

Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 17

1st stage: Send a destructive pulse of mana into your enemy with every punch or kick. The higher your Intelligence stat, the higher the damage caused.

2nd stage: The amount of mana used per strike can be regulated with a maximum of 20 mana per strike.

Category: Healing

Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 8

1st stage: Send a healing pulse of mana into yourself or your ally with a touch. This skill can be channeled.

2nd stage: Your control is increased greatly: you can now focus your healing on specific parts of the body.

Category: Healing

Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 14

1st stage: Your body glows with the power of Azarinth, increasing your resilience, speed, and strength by 51.5% [103% after bonuses].

2nd stage: Your sense of smell is also affected by State of Azarinth.

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 10

1st stage: Immediately appear at a distant place. Distance based on the level of the skill.

2nd stage: The time between blinks is reduced greatly.

Category: Teleportation Magic

Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 3

1st stage: Your body was changed by magic. All pain is reduced by 25% [50% after bonuses]. You heal even fatal injuries without the help of healing magic. Your natural regeneration is improved by 61% [122% after bonuses].

2nd stage: The magic of Azarinth settles inside your body. Your resistance to magical damage is increased by a static 15% [30% after bonuses].

Category: Healing

Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 15

1st stage: You are familiar with the fighting style of Azarinth. Damage inflicted with your own body and related skills is 92% higher [184% after bonuses].

2nd stage: By getting used to fighting in close quarters, your reaction time has increased by a static 10% [20% after bonuses].

Category: Body Enhancement

Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 8

This skill lets you see magic. Can be activated or deactivated on command.

Category: Body Enhancement

Compared to the Azarinth Healer skills, her general skills hadn't grown as fast, except for Meditation, which she used between every fight and every eaten Cinderberry to restore her mana and stamina. Meditation's effectiveness grew by 3% per level, which was likely because of its high starting point. She noticed that, with her growing Wisdom stat, Meditation didn't multiply her regeneration but instead added to it.

General skills

Elos Standard language – lvl 5

You can speak and read the Standard language of Elos.

Identify – lvl 3

You can grasp general information from someone or something 12 levels above you at level 1 and 2 more per subsequent level.

Meditation – 2nd lvl 4

1st stage: While in a state of meditation, you cannot move. Your base mana and stamina regeneration are increased by a factor of 369%. This factor is improved upon leveling up the skill.

2nd stage: Your familiarity with Meditation lets you move slowly while the skill is active.

Poison Resistance – lvl 16

You are a target of assassins or are not very good at distinguishing berries. Surviving either of those, you have developed a general resistance to poisons.

Heat Resistance – lvl 1

Ignoring the warnings of your parents and friends, you refuse to not stand in fire. This skill will help lessen the damage and pain a little.

The progress was quite impressive and made her excited for what was to come. She went to bed that night with a broad smile on her face, ignoring the creaking of the ancient piece of furniture as she recalled the thrilling fight. A woman equipped with strange healing magic against a massive fire-breathing drake.

How's that for local tournament tryouts, Mark?

She dozed off to the thought, entirely exhausted from the training.

* * *

Ilea woke up in the morning and felt ready.

“Doesn’t really make sense to hunt drakes around here anymore anyway. Most are below or around my level at this point. The grass is coming to an end too.”

Checking her own chamber, it was empty of the valuable herb. She had removed the lamps from the hall below two months ago and was happy to find they worked without any external source. Thus, the chamber was not dark. Opening one had revealed a crystal inside. It pulsed a dark red when viewed with Magic Perception.

The diaries had told Ilea that the Order had regulated the use of the grass strictly, some people staying in the chambers for years to reach the second stage of even one skill. Gregory, whose diary was the first she had read, had stayed in the chamber for over five years. The other chambers were nearly empty too, only one of them still holding a small amount of grass.

Looking at the roots with her Magic Perception, she could see that there was still magical energy there and the grass would grow again. Not for a *long* while though, according to the diaries.

Stashing one of her blankets and the remaining grass in her backpack, she blinked above.

She glanced down at her blackened, hole-ridden garments. Only the leathers were still mostly intact. She looked like she’d been through a blender... made of fire.

“Man, my clothes are messed up. I’ll need new ones as soon as I reach Riverwatch... if they even let me in like this.”

Chuckling to herself, she thought of all the fights she had had with the drakes and all the times she nearly tasted death. She packed up all the Charred Drake Scales into her backpack, but other than that, she only brought the bare necessities – as she needed space to collect the rest.

“I’ll exchange the scales for food.” Smiling, she left her temple.

Ilea walked toward the clearing she’d fought the drake in yesterday. She was in a great mood, so she decided against running to really take in the journey.

The forest was seemingly more alive than ever.

Killing all those drakes seems to have created a lot of room for other animals.

Bowing to a deer that immediately darted away at a full sprint, she shouted after it, “You’re welcome!”

Entering the clearing, she saw that some of the drake’s meat had already gone.

“See, I’m even feeding the animals... a true saint of nature.” Smiling to herself, she identified the bones but found them to be of the same quality as those of the other drakes.

I’m actually kinda glad I don’t have to carry them back.

Lifting her head, she looked for the place she’d buried the scales. Having unearthed the treasure, she was packing the last one into her backpack when she heard a crack behind her. Turning around, she found a young man looking at her. His focused appraisal turned to annoyance as his posture relaxed.

“She found me guys!”

As he spoke, two more men and two women came out from hiding spots further inside the forest.

What the hell? I never see people out here... and these guys don’t look like they’re out for a stroll in the woods. Better keep my guard up.

Quickly using Identify on them all, she checked them out. The man in front of her was a level 52 warrior of average height and features that seemed set in a permanent state of alert. The next man was a mage at level 41 who was a bit older and quite thin, and the other was a black-masked rogue at level 48. The first woman was a level 45 ranger with a long

ponytail, while the last of their group was a healer at only level 18. She was petite and didn't meet Ilea's eye. She seemed terrified.

The ranger punched the healer mockingly and said, "Hey look, we found another one – and alone this time. What a lucky coincidence! Wait, what the fuck is a 'battle healer'?"

The healer only looked to the ground, trembling slightly.

"And at such a high level... today really is a very good day," said the warrior with a smile on his face.

"Stop looking at me so fucking creepily, you twat," Ilea said after confirming their levels.

He didn't react at all, looking at her as if she was as irrelevant as the tree behind him. "Come on, Hog. Grab her and we'll move on. It's a long way back."

Ok, so these guys definitely aren't looking for directions. They're assholes. Kidnappers.

The rogue simply grunted in response and twirled his knives, looking at the healer in their group. The woman just trembled and seemed to stare at the ground even more intensely.

"Did you find an interesting worm down there, kid?" the skinny mage heckled. The other bandits laughed in response.

"Nah, the only worms around here are standing in front of me. You have to be pretty slimy to make fun of scared teenagers," Ilea said, at which they all grew quiet.

"She's pissing me off, Tom. Can we start?" the ranger asked the warrior. Apparently the one checking the trees behind Ilea was called Tom.

"Why are we doing this again? We only needed to get that first one," the mage asked carefully, staring at the warrior with a tired look on his face.

"Well, now she knows too much anyway. And why not? I doubt she'll cause any problems. Maybe we can sell her to the army. They've been looking all over the place for healers and any type of support mages," 'Tom' said as he looked at her.

Ilea tensed up a little as she focused on the people around her.

So you're surrounding me, eh? I don't think this will end well. The healer girl isn't moving though. I guess she went through a similar situation? She's definitely not the fighting type, and she's scared shitless to boot.

Locking eyes with Tom and nodding toward the healer, she asked, “Who is she?”

Tom ignored her question, “Why are you out here alone?”

Ilea didn’t reply. She felt he was trying to gauge if anyone would come to her aid.

“Not entirely stupid then,” Tom continued. “The girl is none of your concern. Don’t resist, or we’ll be forced to hurt you.”

The ranger released an arrow at that moment, faster than any human had any right to draw a bow.

Ilea’s Aura activated in an instant, and she blinked behind the ranger and punched her with all her strength. Destruction released on impact, and she felt the ranger’s spine splinter instantly. A quick yelp left the woman’s throat as she slumped to the ground. Silence filled the space around them as every pair of eyes focused on the corpse before Ilea.

One thought thundered through her mind.

I k... I killed her...

The realization froze her in place.

“You bitch!!” Tom screamed as he sprinted at her with his sword extended. His face was red and contorted in rage.

The yell jerked Ilea out of her paralysis. She felt the air behind her change and immediately dodged to the right. One of Hog’s daggers sliced her left arm.

You have been poisoned by [Dreaded Wyrmgrass]: -1 HP/s for 5 minutes. Natural regeneration won’t heal wounds for the duration.

Activating Reconstruction out of instinct, the wound on her arm closed. Feeling the air cool around her, Ilea blinked to the left. A stream of ice froze the dirt she had been standing on just a second ago. Seeing the mage lower his arm, she blinked toward him.

No time for thinking. I can think about this after I kill these fucking lunatics. It’s self-defense, after all.

She needed to act, or she would be the one who was killed.

Reaching the mage after another Blink, she sidestepped an explosion of ice and kneed him in the stomach. Destruction surged out from her knee. The mage fell to the ground, immediately coughing up blood. Another punch to his head cracked his skull, killing him on the spot. She felt the air

distort next to her, and just as she withdrew her fist from the mage's skull, a dagger pierced her side.

Grabbing the hand on the end of the dagger, she squeezed with a surge of Destruction. Bones were crushed as Hog screamed, struggling to get out of her hold. He attacked her with his other dagger, but Ilea blocked by grabbing his hand with hers. Dragging him closer, she head-butted him with her full force and a full blast of Destruction. The sickening crunch of his head made her reel back. Blood and bits of his head still on her face, Ilea stumbled away as the rogue's now lifeless body fell to the forest floor.

Using Reconstruction on herself, she focused on the open wound in her side and wiped at her face with one of her arms. So far, the battle had been going on for mere seconds – it all seemed like a blur.

Then Tom was on her, his sword already descending. She blinked behind him, but he turned with supernatural speed. A slash of his sword sliced open her stomach. Another swing cut only air as she blinked twenty meters away. Pumping mana into healing, she stopped the bleeding. The wound slowly closed.

I need three more seconds for that cut...

Then another power enveloped her, speeding her healing.

"Stop that, you idiot!" Tom roared.

Understanding the situation, Ilea began to shout a warning at the healer. But it was already too late.

Tom's angry grimace turned toward the girl, and with a dash of insane speed, he reached her, his sword stabbing into her stomach. Ilea's blink followed a split second after. She appeared in front of him and caught his second stab with her right hand, fingers closing over his vambrace.

When she squeezed, applying Destruction, his metal armor dented. He grunted in pain and let go of the sword. Blinking behind the man, Ilea grabbed his head and snapped it to the right. The move was rather simple – one just had to apply enough force. Something she could do easily with her enhanced body.

The crunch reverberated through the forest, and then there was only silence.

Sinking to the ground, Ilea removed the dagger from her ribs. Tom had managed a parting shot in those final moments, but she had barely registered it. Checking her health, she was down to a third, the poison still in her veins.

Might as well have used Cinderberries, you idiot. Starting to laugh, she healed herself.

A soft whimper broke her from her hysterical daze. Looking down at the bleeding young healer, Ilea tried to compose herself. Feeling the tears streaming down her own face, Ilea wiped them away and crouched down next to the girl.

NINE

Graves to Dig

Ignoring the messages she had received from the fight, Ilea started to heal the blonde girl before her.

“Fuck, don’t die, you idiot!”

The wound on her stomach slowly began to close, but she wasn’t getting better. Using Reconstruction on a target didn’t just heal them but let Ilea assess them as well, to an extent.

I can feel the life draining out of her... she won’t make it... fuck... isn’t there something...?

In a last-ditch effort, Ilea blinked to her backpack that she’d lost somewhere in the fight and removed some of the Bluemoon Grass.

Plus 10 Vitality... if she makes it.

Blinking back, she chewed the grass in her own mouth and then put it into the girl’s mouth, making her swallow it by holding her mouth closed. After that, the girl stopped moving. Ilea kept up her Reconstruction, and ten minutes later, the healer twitched. Her face was distorted by agony as she opened her brown eyes and started to scream.

“Guess you’re not one of the 35% who die. Lucky you.”

Still not letting up on the healing, she watched the girl thrash around, tears leaking from her closed eyes. The screaming stopped after a while, but Ilea knew the pain was still there. Half an hour passed of Ilea stroking the woman’s hair and applying constant healing. Stopping the spell, she meditated for five minutes to restore some of her mana and then continued.

The girl’s breathing became weaker in those five minutes but started to pick up again when Ilea resumed the Reconstruction spell.

Fuck, I'm glad I didn't kill you there, girl.

Repeating the same process two more times, the smaller healer finally relaxed. When she opened her eyes, Ilea saw they were red from the pain and tears.

"I... I..."

Ilea stopped her.

"Ssssh, don't talk yet. You're safe now. Just sleep."

A shudder ran through the healer as she closed her eyes and immediately fell asleep.

Setting the girl down slowly and resting her head on the blanket she had brought, Ilea sat back and checked her health.

"Still half-full. Man, I'm glad that guy didn't have a more potent poison..."

Looking toward the corpse of the rogue, she started to meditate.

Healing herself with the recovered mana, she resumed her healing spell on the girl. *Better safe than sorry.* Ilea watched her sleeping patient, and now that her charge was out of immediate danger, she allowed herself to consider what had happened. What she had just done.

After five minutes, she got back up and finally forced herself to look around the gore-spattered clearing. A chill ran through her.

Man... I really killed them...

The air still smelled faintly of blood.

...all of them.

With an uneasy feeling in her stomach, Ilea made herself look at each of the corpses. Turning them to look at their faces.

They were awful people, and they attacked me first. I know my actions were justified, but man...

Looking to the sky, she could feel tears coming to her eyes. The feeling was slightly removed, as if muted somehow, but it was powerful nonetheless. It grew until it was impossible to hold it back.

Ilea looked down again and walked toward the girl. Laying down next to her, she started to cry.

Two hours later, Ilea got up again. Her throat was dry and her eyes were red. Walking up to the ranger, she looked at the face, distorted by death. Crouching down, she closed the woman's eyes, fingers lingering for a long moment.

Breathing in deeply, she walked to a tree nearby and punched it, using just her raw strength without any skills. She continued until she had exhausted her stamina. The process took over an hour, the tree barely surviving the assault. Slumping down next to it, Ilea slowly breathed in and out.

“This is difficult.”

Looking at her hands, tears started forming at the corners of her eyes before being blinked away.

“No. Not again. Time to clean up.”

Getting up, she walked over to the ranger and undressed her, piling all the clothes and gear next to the younger sleeping girl.

Shit. She looks like she's barely seventeen or so.

She went through the same process with the three men, although she didn't remove their clothes. Only their weapons and other valuables were dropped on the pile. Identifying their clothing and armor revealed no special gear. Walking into the clearing, Ilea activated her Aura and started to dig.

A short while later, four meter-deep holes were produced. Getting out of the last one, she moved a corpse into each of them. They weren't close to being as heavy as a drake, and with her Aura, she could easily lift their combined weight. Still, she carefully moved one after another. She buried each of them with their face looking up, their eyes closed. She stayed silent throughout the whole process, looking at each of them for another minute before covering them with earth.

Sitting back down on the ground, Ilea waited for a while.

Maybe I should get some sticks for crosses. Dismissing the idea as quickly as it came, she got up. No, I don't want a necromancer to find them... Wait, maybe I should have burned them? Oh well. I hope zombies take a couple days to wake up.

Going back to the girl and the pile of gear, she started to undress. Her cloak, seemingly unaffected by all the fire and bites from the past three months, was removed first. *Damage still gets through... I guess the High Quality thing has something to do with it not falling apart.*

Washing the ranger's clothes with a little water from one of their bottles, she put them on. They were a very similar style to her old traveling clothes but seemingly more sturdy. Keeping her old boots, she moved through the group's other stuff, which included 84 silver and 15 bronze. Adding the

money to her pouch, she used Identify on all the weapons. Though the mage had been unarmed, the others' weaponry seemed in pretty good condition.

[Iron Sword – Medium quality]

[Eldwood Bow – High quality]

[Poisoned Dagger – Low quality] x2

Looking at the bits of food and three canteens they had with them, Ilea realized they had only been lightly geared.

They must've had a camp somewhere. Impossible for them to travel with only this much. I mean, I've traveled with less, but they didn't even have spare clothes.

Her eyes returning to the bow, Ilea started smiling. *I've always wanted to try one of these...*

A full day passed as Ilea realized that her bow and arrow skills were severely lacking. Her Aura allowed her to shoot arrows fast, but she still missed nearly all her shots. At a tree. From ten meters away.

Occasionally she walked over to the girl and used her healing spell on her. Some wolves wandered nearby every so often, sniffing around. Some arrows fired in their general direction sent them running off though.

Remembering the messages from the fight, she checked them.

Azarinth Fighting has reached 2nd lvl 16.

Body of Azarinth has reached 2nd lvl 4.

“Two level-ups. They were only my level though. Maybe fighting all of them at once changes something?”

Looking back at the girl, she wondered when she would wake.

I hope she wakes up soon. I'll have to sleep at some point. Using her Meditation skill, Ilea could postpone sleeping for a couple of days, but it would weigh on her mind.

Luckily, after another day, the girl woke up.

She's finally awake... Did I sleep that long after eating that glowing moss?

Moving next to the trembling girl, Ilea grabbed one of the canteens. Opening it, she held it to the girl, who, after a doubtful pause, started to

drink. She didn't stop until the bottle was empty. Handing her another, the girl continued. She was sweaty and disheveled, but each gulp seemed to add a bit of color to her features.

As she drank, the girl made brief eye contact but immediately turned away again. Patting her head, Ilea smiled at the girl.

"You're safe now. They... they're gone now."

The girl's eyes widened at the physical contact and she panicked for a second, looking around frantically until Ilea grabbed her hand.

"I won't hurt you," she said, trying to sound as comforting as she could. "I'm Ilea. What's your name?"

The girl's eyes widened a little as tears slowly formed.

"I'm A... Alice... Th... thank... thank you!"

Holding Alice's hand while she cried, Ilea felt a little awkward.

I'm not good at this stuff. This girl has probably gone through some traumatic shit, and I'm supposed to help her? I was just a college student working in a fast-food joint, for fuck's sake...

Sitting down next to the girl, Ilea just let her cry for a while.

"Alright, it'll get dark again in a while. Let's get moving."

Helping Alice stand up, Ilea heard the poor girl's stomach rumble.

"Here," she said, giving her some of the remaining food from the group she'd killed. Ilea put the sword and daggers into her backpack too. They joined the charred scales already resting in there.

Pulling on her cloak, she also shoved the blanket, food, and canteens into the backpack. There wasn't space enough for the bow and quiver, so she handed those to Alice.

"Can you hold on to these?"

Alice's eyes widened again as she looked at the bow but then nodded a moment later.

"Now, I know you've probably been through some horrific shit, and frankly I'm the wrong person to talk to about that stuff so I won't even ask."

Alice simply looked at her.

"So, fact is, we're out here and I'm tired. I know a safe place, but it's hours away and I don't think you can run as fast as me... no offense." Looking around, Ilea locked eyes with Alice. "I think I heard you speak before, so I assume you do have that capability?"

A second later, Alice nodded again.

“I... I mean... yes. I can speak, yes!”

Looking at the descending suns, Ilea put on the backpack.

“Congratulations. Those fuckers, did they have a camp? I mean, if it’s close...”

Alice was seemingly a little uncertain about the proposition, so Ilea changed tack.

“We can burn it down when we leave again if you want to.”

Thinking it over, Alice nodded. “That would be nice, yes.”

Standing there awkwardly for ten seconds, Ilea inclined her head while looking at Alice. “You’re aware that I don’t know where the camp is?”

Twitching a little, Alice pointed in a direction. “I’m sorry... it’s somewhere that way. It’s not far.”

Ilea started to move, and Alice followed her. “Tell me when we have to change directions.”

They continued for a short while without talking before Alice spoke up. “We have to go this way,” she said, her voice subdued.

Changing direction a little, they soon reached the campsite. Three tents and a campfire.

Seems rather basic to me. Let’s check their backpacks.

Glancing behind her, Ilea saw Alice staring at something with an unreadable expression on her face. Following her gaze, Ilea’s eyes fell upon a thin tree. She watched the healer rub her hands.

Her stare stayed focused. Activating her Aura, Ilea walked over to the tree. Kicking it sideways, her shin ripped right through the dense wood, her leg coming out on the other side. Splinters flew, and a groan cut through the air as the tree slowly fell. Ilea directed it with her hand, so the tree smashed into another one and then to the ground.

Looking behind her, she caught a flash of a smile on Alice’s face. It vanished as fast as it came, and the girl looked down again. Ilea made a decision.

“Change of plan. Let’s get what we need and burn it down now.”

Moving to the tents, she searched through them. A couple of backpacks with food and other things one might need for traveling was everything that could be found.

Emptying all the backpacks, she filled her own and one more with food and spares of her own necessary utensils. Handing the backpack to Alice,

she moved everything else the bandits had owned – tents and all – together in a pile.

Getting some small sticks and wood, she silently started a fire with her knife and flint. Alice watched on, not uttering a single word. As the flames grew, Ilea saw a spark in Alice's eyes. Not finding any words to say, the two women simply stood there as the fire consumed the rest of the campsite.

The suns went down as they stood there, the crackling of the fire the only noise in the vicinity. An hour went by, by which point only the light glow of embers illuminated Alice and Ilea.

"We should move," Ilea suddenly stated. She shouldered her backpack and started to walk.

Alice followed.

After walking for around fifteen minutes, they found a clearing with a fallen down tree. Ilea stopped. "We'll stay here for the night. You're on watch for four hours or so, then wake me. If there are any beasts that get close, wake me immediately."

Alice stared at her, frightened.

"Don't worry, just wake me. I really need to sleep." Laying down with her head on her blanket, Ilea fell asleep in a matter of minutes.

She woke up what seemed like moments later as something tugged at her shoulder.

"M... Miss I... Ilea... please wake up..."

Looking up at a frightened face and a pair of big brown eyes, Ilea groaned and shook off the fog of sleep. Her eyes focused on Alice. The girl was thinner than she should be, her slightly rugged brown robes were hanging loose, and her blonde hair was greasy and unkempt, just long enough to reach the fabric of her clothes.

"It's been four hours?" Ilea asked.

The girl shook her head. "N... no, it's... I couldn't sleep anyway. It's a... already nearly morning, but--"

A growl stopped Alice. Blue light illuminated the still dark clearing as Ilea got up, and her tattoos flared to life.

"Alright, come on out, whatever you are," Ilea hissed. As if answering her call, four wolves emerged from the tree line. She lifted her foot and stomped down, and the loud impact made the wolves flee immediately. When Ilea looked at Alice, the girl's eyes were the size of dinner plates.

“Already morning, you say?” Sitting down again with her back to the fallen tree, Ilea opened her backpack. “Might as well have breakfast.”

Ilea offered some meat and dried fruits to Alice, which the girl accepted.

“So, what’s your story?” Ilea asked.

Gulping down the bite she was eating, Alice cleared her throat.

“I’m studying magic in Dawntree. My classmates and I were on our way to Riverwatch for the festival next week when...” Gulping once, she continued. “My carriage had to stop because of a broken wheel... They k... killed the driver and t... took me. They... they said if I resisted, they w... would kill me too.”

Waving this off, Ilea tried to smile at her.

“It’s fine. The rest is history, and they’re dead now. Just to be sure, there were only four of them, right?”

Alice nodded. “Again... thank you. I owe you my life, miss... Ilea.”

Shoving a piece of fruit in her mouth, Ilea nodded.

“No worries, they were... not good people. I’m on my way to Riverwatch myself. Maybe we can find your friends there and watch the tournament together.”

Alice brightened a little at that.

“Well, it’s going to be very full. We have pretty good places though, even a whole house to stay in!”

It was the most enthusiasm Ilea had heard from the young girl. Hopefully she was getting excited at the prospect and starting to forget the past week with her kidnappers.

“Well then, let’s do this. As repayment, you’ll get me one of those spaces.”

Alice nodded vigorously, seemingly happy to be able to repay her savior at least a little. “You can even stay with us!”

Shaking her head at that, Ilea smiled. “I’ll be fine somewhere in the woods outside the city, don’t worry. Not the biggest fan of roommates.” Thinking on it, she continued absentmindedly, “Maybe Dale has a spot free.”

Alice perked up at that but didn’t ask anything.

“What kind of magic can you do?” Ilea inquired. “All I know is that you’re a healer. Sorry if the question is rude, I’m not from around here.”

Alice shook her head. “No, no, it’s not rude to ask that. I’m a Corinth Healer.” Seeing Ilea’s lack of reaction she added, “It’s an order of healers in

Dawntree. I go there half the week, and the other half I spend in the College of Magic. I'm studying to become an enchantress as my second class."

"That's quite impressive actually. I'm an Azarinth Healer." The girl's expression didn't change, so Ilea assumed she knew as little about Azarinth Healers as Ilea did about Corinth ones. "It's an order of healers quite far away from here. We heal and fight at the same time."

Alice nodded. "I've never heard of that order... or any healers fighting for that matter. Well, old man George was an adventurer once, and his second class is something related to fighting... You're very strong though! You won against all four of them alone!"

"Yes, yes, I'd rather you kept all of that to yourself though. Let's say I sneaked you out of their camp or something, alright?"

"Of course, I won't say a word about your abilities."

Ilea smiled. "Thanks, appreciate that. It's apparently a great trump card to have if everyone thinks you're just a healer. By the way, did you get a message regarding some Bluemoon Grass?"

"Yes! The bonuses are amazing, but that was very painful... very..."

"Yes, trust me, I know. That's another thing I'd like to keep a secret though. You could actually become an Azarinth Healer yourself if you like now. There are only a couple books you'd have to study."

Shaking her head, Alice declined. "Thank you. I know it's very special for an order to share something like that, but I'm sworn to the Corinth Order. And I really don't want to fight things like you do – no offense!"

Ilea chuckled. "None taken. I'm surprised *I* enjoy it so much. Just tell me if you change your mind."

Standing up, she dusted off her clothes.

"You sure you don't want to get some sleep?"

Alice stood up too. "No, I want to get as far away from this forest as soon as I can."

Putting her backpack on, Ilea nodded.

"Sure, let's get moving then, Alice. To Riverwatch."

As the suns started to shine through the dense trees, two women could be seen walking southward while the birds greeted a new day with their songs.

TEN

Catch a Ride

The miles passed in silence. The bushes and flowers of the forest were flourishing with the new lack of fire-breathing neighbors. Blues, purples, and greens colored the landscape while birds and insects filled the trees with sound.

Once she grew bored of the views of the forest and its recuperating wildlife, Ilea used the opportunity to ask Alice a few questions. It was clear the girl would remain quiet if not prompted, but she didn't seem to be averse to conversation.

"Hey Alice, I was wondering. I know this might sound weird, but my order was sometimes really restrictive with basic information. Is yours the same?"

The girl smiled.

"Yes. Most healing orders are like that," she said, touching her lip.

"Do you mind if I ask you a few things? I learned most of what I know from my order, but I'm getting the feeling that that wasn't a lot."

Looking briefly in her direction, Alice kept walking. "Ask away. I'll gladly answer if I can."

Putting a piece of dried fruit in her mouth, Ilea chewed and swallowed before responding.

"Thanks. Well, I was wondering how skill growth is influenced by how you use the skill, the things you fight, how many people are in your group... and do you know about elixirs?"

"Well yeah, elixirs are super rare. I think our order has some, but they don't tell me that stuff. Only the genius students would get them anyway. It

increases the growth of certain skills, often related to specific classes. That's what I know. Skills level faster in combat situations, even if you just heal someone. Additionally, the general growth of levels is decreased a lot by how many people are in your group. It's still generally more effective to be in a group though, as you can defeat more creatures. That's why adventurers go to dungeons together, for example."

"So, if I'm fighting something alone instead of with four other people, I level five times as fast?"

Alice nodded. "Yeah, well, theoretically... only crazy people do that though because you normally really need a healer or someone to block damage from beasts as a mage channels his or her spells. Hmm... now that I think on it, you're really not limited by that are you? Is that why you travel alone?"

"Yeah, that's one of the reasons..."

"You asked about the levels too, right? Well, you get a lot of bonus experience for both your class levels and your skills by fighting monsters or people much higher in level than you. Again, that's kind of crazy because of the inherent risk."

That explains my fast growth. A combination of all those things... Well, we'll see how fast my skills level once the grass is used up.

Feeling her backpack, Ilea was a little saddened by the small soft lump at the bottom. The last remains of grass were in there – it wasn't much. Enough for maybe a week of training. She had learned that even though the light of the grass would fade after a while, the effects from eating it were still there.

"You mentioned wanting to become an enchantress as your second class. Does your order restrict what second class you can choose?"

"Not really. As long as we have one healer class," the girl said.

Ilea thought about that for a moment. "Is there even a limit? I haven't considered it yet, but could I be a healer and a fire mage at the same time?"

Alice looked at her with a bit of a strange expression, but she answered nonetheless.

"There isn't really a limit, no. You can be a swordsman and a cook if you like. Or a water and fire mage at the same time. In general, it's more common for people to choose two classes that complement each other. Like, for example, a swordsman and shieldbearer. Or a fire and wind mage."

Thinking on it, Ilea had another question. “Which class is seen by Identify? And can people with a higher level of the skill see both classes?”

“Not really. Well, I mean, I don’t know anyone with the skill in the second stage. It’s very hard to level that one up. They will see a generalization of your highest leveled class. I can only see ‘healer’ when I use the skill on you.”

Ilea motioned for Alice to stop. “We’ll eat lunch here.”

Sitting down on a mossy rock, she opened her backpack and took out some nuts and dried meat. They both ate in silence.

“What would you suggest to me as a second class?” Ilea asked after she felt the silence had gone on long enough.

Alice’s eyes widened, slightly taken aback by the question, but then her brow furrowed in concentration, and she sat in quiet, intense thought for a minute or so.

“Hmm, I don’t think I know enough to be of much help here. You fight with your body, right? And you require touch for your spells? So definitely nothing with weapons. Some other magic, perhaps? It’s usually best to focus on similar bonuses... so maybe something with body enhancement spells?” Alice smiled, but it was a timid smile.

Ilea nodded, giving her new companion an encouraging grin. “That sounds pretty cool... I’ll look into that. Thanks for the suggestion.”

They completed their meal in silent contemplation.

Something like lightning or rock enhancements combined with my current skills... that would be amazing. Or something to further increase my mobility... wait...

Looking at Alice, her eyes sparkled a little.

“Is there magic that would let me fly?”

Alice only nodded while she peeled some fruit.

“Sure, I mean most classes have a ton of skills to choose from. Only five actives and five passives can normally be chosen though. I think a lot of magic schools have flight spells too, but they’re pretty advanced. High-level mages normally travel that way. Not very high though, there are some nasty creatures higher up in the sky, and they don’t like to share. At least, that’s what an old mage once told me,” she finished with a chuckle.

Giddy with excitement, Ilea listened intently to every word Alice uttered.

I’ll be able to fly... Oh my God, that’s fucking amazing!

Calming down again, she continued her questioning, trying not to betray her excitement.

“What about teleportation magic, like the skill I used in the fight?”

“Well, again, there are a lot of spells like that too, they’re even more advanced than the flight spells though. You must be a very high level to have one! Normally they’re nowhere near as fast as yours either. Yours helps you fight, like some warriors. For most mages, it is used to flee.”

Well, I got it at level 10, so that’s awesome... although I didn’t get any other skills after that. I guess it’s a quirk with this class.

“Oh, what about gear and stuff I carry while I teleport?” Ilea asked. Again, Alice knew the answer.

“Normally you can teleport the things you’re wearing, including a backpack and some additional equipment. Here the spells differ greatly though. I’ve also heard it’s not very nice on the stomach...”

A wince from Ilea confirmed the rumor, and Alice nodded apologetically.

Finishing up, the girls got ready again. Alice began walking, but Ilea stopped her.

“Wait a second, I have an idea. I really don’t feel like walking for two weeks to Riverwatch.” Moving her backpack to her front, she crouched down. “Get on my back, darling.”

Alice just looked at her and raised her eyebrows. “Are you kidding me?”

But the stern look on Ilea’s face made her move quickly over to her.

With Alice on her back, Ilea’s runes started to shine blue as she began to run with a large grin. Alice just screamed. Wild animals scrambled out of the way as what must have looked like a large, glowing, howling, agile predator careened through the woods. The two women tore through the forest at an incredible pace, Alice’s screams soon turning into laughter as she tried to hold on to her mighty steed.

Grinning, Ilea tried to blink – to further enhance their speed – but found the spell failed to activate. She slowed. “Weird.”

“What is it?” Alice asked after catching her breath.

“I can’t use my teleport.”

“Well, yes. We’re touching,” Alice said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Teleportation doesn’t work when I touch someone?” Ilea asked, glancing back.

“Did you get the skill recently? I haven’t heard of any teleportation spells that work when a monster or a person is touching you. Even when wearing armor.”

“Any clue why?”

“Something about the magic flow being disrupted by that of the other person. You should keep it in mind.”

Suppose I will. Ilea shrugged and started running once more.

Four hours later, they stopped for a rest. Lying on her back, Alice smiled at the sky.

“You’re fucking crazy. You know that, right?”

Eating something, Ilea smiled. “Oh girl, you have no idea. You feel like sleeping?”

“I don’t...” Alice mumbled. There was a haunted look in her eyes.

Ilea put her backpack on again. “Me neither. Let’s continue then.”

They ran through the rest of the day and the whole night, occasionally stopping to drink, eat, or relieve themselves. The suns came out again, yet Ilea didn’t stop. It was midday when the forest started to thin. Soon they were standing in a familiar open field, mountains taking up half of the skyline.

“Already out? Have I gotten that much faster?” Ilea grinned mischievously. “Even with all this weight...”

Tapping her on the head, Alice frowned down at her. “Hey, that’s not a nice thing to say to an eighteen-year-old girl!”

“You’re eighteen? Better eat some more then, girl. We’re only a couple more hours away from Riverwatch. Ready to see your friends again?”

Alice’s smile slowly waned as she nodded. “Let’s get there then... my mighty steed.”

Sprinting off again, the two reached the roaring river in half an hour. Following the dirt road going alongside the waterway, they soon found a stone bridge, the green at the bottom of the supports showing its age.

“Let’s walk from here. It’d seem weird for me to be seen carrying you, and I hate attracting attention.”

Letting Alice climb down, they walked over the bridge side by side, the water rushing below them, a warm late summer breeze blowing through their hair.

After walking for a few minutes, they saw the city of Riverwatch in the distance. Differently to last time, there were now hundreds of tents in front of the city and all along the river. It made the already large city spill out into the surrounding landscape and forested areas. The thrumming anthill of activity, normally hidden behind the high-reaching stone walls, was now clearly visible from without. Smoke from a hundred fires reached the skies, and the shouts and laughter accompanying the musical performances was both impressive and downright jarring. Ilea saw a group of people dancing in a circle, their faces flushed, while several merchants were unloading their carts and armed groups were sharing drinks after a presumably long journey.

“Seems like this festival is the real deal,” Ilea said, slightly in awe.

Nodding next to her, Alice said, “They do this every ten years, ever since the founding of the city. This was supposed to be the first time I...”

Getting closer to her, Ilea squeezed her hand lightly. “You’re here now.”

With those words, the two entered the mass of people. It was a free for all. No sooner were they in sight than a dozen street hawkers began calling to them, proclaiming the superiority of their wares. Food and ale were being sold here, far out in front of the actual gates, as adventurers, guards, and farmers mingled, everyone in a merry mood. Ilea spotted grilled meat kebabs dripping with grease, foam-topped tankards, and children eating sticky caramel-covered apples.

As they reached the city gates, a guard stopped them.

“We are full. Names and business, please. Or you can pitch a tent outside,” the slightly portly guard grunted after appraising Ilea’s freshly pilfered second-hand outfit.

Ilea had intended to use Dale as her ticket into the overfilled city, but looking at how crazy things were, she was suddenly doubtful that would work. As she hesitated, she was surprised when Alice took over.

“Alice Forkspear, with the Corinth Order, and my lovely assistant, Ilea,” she said, voice far more confident than Ilea had heard it before.

The guard’s eyes went a little wide, and his posture straightened considerably.

“Lady Forkspear, please excuse me. I expected a more... well, a bigger entourage.”

Alice waved him off and walked through the gate. Turning toward the portly guard, she asked for someone to lead them to the house they were

staying at. He happily complied and had another guard lead them through the busy city.

“Excuse me, what?” Ilea asked, leaning closer to the girl as they walked through the streets.

Alice looked down a bit sheepishly. “I... sorry. The class trip thing... wasn’t true. I... I didn’t know what you would do if you knew who I was.”

Ilea looked at her with some confusion. “I would’ve brought you here, obviously.”

“I...” the girl started, then looked at Ilea. “It’s better to be safe.”

“I guess,” Ilea said, shaking her head slightly.

Let’s see what she’s about then. Expected her to trust me a little more at this point, but then I didn’t grow up here.

The streets were packed with people, and progress was slow. Everywhere Ilea looked, there were colorful flags and pennants, and some houses had been entirely repainted in beautiful floral shades. It was like an entirely different place to the one she had seen on her last visit.

Walking for half an hour, they finally reached an imposing mansion near the mountain. The guards outside of it had much shinier armor than the city guards and stood to attention as Alice neared the gate.

“Who exactly are you?” Ilea asked.

The girl turned to her and smiled, her head held a little higher.

“Alice Forkspear, Healer of the Corinth Order and nobility from Dawntree. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of my family before.”

“Yeah, as I said, my Order left out a few things,” Ilea said, following the young noble.

Another guard behind the gates ran to the mansion door. As they reached the gates, several people rushed out of the building.

A middle-aged woman with graying hair nearly tackled Alice as she enveloped her in a hug.

“We worried *so* much! Where have you been? Wait, let’s get inside first.” Her demeanor changed entirely when she spared a brief glance at Ilea. “Thanks for accompanying her adventurer. You’re dismissed,” she said in an offhand manner.

Alice interjected immediately.

“Tell Inna I have to speak with her, alone, and this is Ilea. She is to be treated as *my equal* and is to be taken care of in one of the guest rooms. That will be all.”

The woman went through around thirteen different facial expressions, ending with a bow to Alice and then to Ilea. “At once, Lady Forkspear.”

Motioning a younger blonde woman over, who was dressed in the simple clothes of a housemaid, the older woman told the girl to take Ilea to one of the guest rooms. Raising an eyebrow at Alice, Ilea shrugged and followed the woman inside.

* * *

“Oh my God...”

Standing in the supposed guest room, Ilea simply stared at the bed in front of her.

“Is everything alright, miss?” the woman next to her asked.

In near shock, Ilea managed to reply, “Well... yes... more than alright, to be quite frank.”

The woman nodded. “Would you like something to drink or perhaps eat?”

Nodding at the request, Ilea stammered out a heartfelt ‘yes’. Bowing deeply, the woman left the room.

Ilea walked closer to the bed and touched the corner – and then jumped on top of it with a squeal. The food arrived shortly after. Ilea was nearly drooling at the hearty smell alone as the aromas of vegetables, herbs, meat, and more than a hint of wine and garlic hit her nostrils.

“Thank you so much!” Ilea responded. With tears in her eyes, she shook the servant’s hands, who just stood there looking slightly confused and more than a little uncomfortable.

“It’s fine, my lady. It’s only food from the festival. The cooks haven’t had time to prepare anything proper yet. I hope it’s acceptable.”

Getting close to her ear, Ilea whispered, “It’s perfect, darling.”

Then, giggling, she took a bite from the potato dish in front of her.

How the fuck did I survive on grass? she wondered as she tasted the rich, savory flavors. She ate and lounged around for some time before collapsing back onto the bed in a state of pure bliss.

Before she slipped entirely into a much needed nap, a knock on the door snapped Ilea out of her reverie. As the door swung open, Ilea saw it was the woman who had run outside to greet Alice.

“Miss Ilea? Lady Forkspear wishes for your presence.”

Getting up from her perfect bed, Ilea nodded and followed the woman to a bigger room on the second floor of the mansion. The walls were adorned with lavish paintings and exotic-looking plants.

Entering the room, Ilea saw that there were only two women in there: Alice and an older-looking woman with a sorrowful expression. Her eyes were large and watery, and her lips trembled slightly.

Ilea stopped in the middle of the room and greeted the women with a simple, “Hey there...”

“Hello, Ilea,” Alice said, rather formally. “So, Inna, this is the woman who saved me. She would like to keep the circumstances of the fight to herself, and I shall respect that request.”

The woman named Inna approached Ilea and abruptly hugged her. Releasing her two seconds later, she locked eyes with Ilea.

“I thank you from the deepest reaches of my heart for what you have done for us. We would be happy to reward you with anything within our means to provide.”

Shaking her head, Ilea looked at Alice. “She promised me some seats for the tournament. Food would be nice too. Oh, and... the bed... the one in the guest room, I’d like to have it.”

Inna just glanced at her and then toward Alice questioningly, who shrugged.

“I told you,” Alice said.

Looking back at Ilea, Alice continued. “Ilea, I want to thank you again too. I’ll leave today for Dawntree rather than stay for the festival. I’d like to be with my family after what happened.” Opening and closing her mouth, she caught herself again. “I’m afraid I’ll likely not see you for a while... a long while. I hope you do understand.”

Nodding at her, Ilea smirked. “Things will get better, and I believe in you. Don’t worry about me, I’ll find my way. And you, find yours.”

Alice ran to her, hugging her as deep sobs reverberated through the room while they stood there for a full minute.

“Thank you. I will,” Alice whispered eventually, the look in her eyes a little different as she let go. She brushed away her tears and nodded to herself. “Come visit sometime in the future.”

With one last look at Ilea, Alice straightened and left the room. Inna looked solemnly at the door for some time after Alice’s exit.

“She’s not quite the same anymore, is she? And she was so happy to visit Riverwatch...”

“As I said, I believe in her,” Ilea said, also still watching the door. “She’ll find that spark again.”

Nodding after a while, Inna turned toward her. “I do hope you’re right, Miss Ilea. We’ll get you the best seat we can at the tournament. Food will be supplied to you directly from our best cooks, and the bed is for you to do with as you please.”

Shaking her head, Ilea smiled. “A normal seat at the tournament is fine. I’d prefer not to attract too much attention. I won’t say no to the rest though.”

Nodding at that, Inna thanked her again and excused herself. Leaving the room soon after, Ilea went back to her new treasure. Sitting on top of it, she removed her cloak, covered herself in a soft blanket, and went to sleep in total comfort for the first time in what seemed like forever.

ELEVEN

City Life

Ilea awoke a few hours later, but, nestled in the many pillows and silk sheets, she felt like she was still dreaming. It was the late afternoon of the same day, and the suns were already setting outside the room's ample windows.

"I love this bed." She stayed in it for a while longer, luxuriating in the feeling of softness and comfort she had taken for granted before entering the temple.

Getting up, she checked her things. Both backpacks were there. *Alice didn't take anything with her then.* Stretching and arching her back, a yawn escaped her lips. *Might as well just leave my stuff here. Seems they have better guards than most banks.*

Putting on her cloak, she left the room. As she made her way through the massive hallways and velvet cushioned reception room, every servant greeted her, and one of the guards even saluted. Out of curiosity, Ilea identified the guard.

[Warrior – lvl ??]

Nodding at him, Ilea made her way to the gate.

"I can come back whenever?" she asked, stopping by one of the gate guards.

He nodded at her. "You're welcome here as long as you live, my lady."

I don't blame Alice for lying to me about her having some sort of class trip. With guards like these, she's probably worth a ton of gold.

“Well, that’s kinda creepy, but thanks. When does the tournament start?” Ilea asked with a slight smile.

The guard didn’t react to her cheeky comment, his face impassive as he spoke. “It’s supposed to start in two days, my lady. The seating arrangements are being taken care of as we speak. You will be informed about this tomorrow.”

Thanking the guard, Ilea departed and began to explore the city. She was now at a higher point than she had ever been during her last visit, so she had a good view of much of Riverwatch. The city was built partially into the mountainside, with the larger houses and mansions creeping higher and higher to separate themselves from the riffraff. Wanting to go higher, Ilea blinked on top of one of the nearby houses. Three jumps later, she had a view of most of the city. The suns were slowly setting on the horizon, yet they still provided enough light to see by.

“Breathtaking... The noise and smells are still an issue, but hey, there’s good food here. I’ll check out the festivities at the very least.”

Jumping down from the house just as one of the guards noticed her and shouted something unpleasant, she dropped into one of the nearby alleyways, out of sight. *I guess standing on top of other people’s houses isn’t exactly allowed.*

Turning a couple of corners, she pulled up her hood and joined the crowds.

“Now what to do, what to do...”

Deciding to just stroll around a bit and see what interesting things she could find, she soon found herself entering an impressive looking blacksmith’s shop. Smoke billowed from a sizeable chimney, and its stones were caked in a layer of soot, even outside.

Inside, there were various weapons on display, which were impressive too: battleaxes, broadswords, daggers, scimitars – all manner of war implements were represented. And Ilea was just one of a small crowd appreciating the wares. *Look like adventurers.*

Identifying the people inside told her there were warriors with levels ranging from 30 to 50. One of them identified as a rogue, and there were a few mages too. They looked at her with mild surprise but soon continued their inspection of the goods on offer.

“And what might a level 47 healer be doing in my smithy?” a burly man with a mighty beard said to Ilea from behind a wooden counter. “Not just a

healer but a ‘battle healer’. Funny that.”

Did he single me out because of my class?

[Smith – lvl 55]

Grabbing his outstretched hand, she smirked as he tried to squeeze it. She did not go easy on him.

“Oho, as I suspected! You don’t exactly have the eyes of a support healer.” Leaning closer to her, he whispered, “Very rare to get one of your type around here.” Smiling at her, he let go of her hand. “Well then, what exactly do you use to smack your foes’ heads in while you heal your own wounds?”

So battle healers are not as foreign a concept as Alice had me believe. Showing the smith her hands, she answered, “These babies right here.”

Laughing, the smith stroked his beard. “What a rare sight... Well, you’re the first battle healer that has graced my shop in years. Always liked the idea... but you use your hands?” He clapped his own hands together, resulting in a boom that caused the other customers to look up from their business. “I love it!” the smith roared to the whole shop and part of the street outside. “I’m Earl. I like you already. What are you looking for?”

“Glad you like me, Earl. Ilea’s the name. I was looking to sell a sword and some daggers. Might I be able to do that here?”

Shrugging, Earl smacked the counter. “Sure, you got them here?”

She shook her head. “Not right now, no. Can get them here tomorrow though. Oh, and any ideas what to do with some Charred Drake Scales?”

One of Earl’s eyebrows rose. “Well now, those are certainly rare... and very hard to work with. Best used for armor improvements. I wouldn’t suggest weapons, though arrowheads would fetch quite a price. If they have a solid enough base, a shield improvement is worth it too.”

“That sounds great. I’ll go with some armor improvement, I guess. But I’ll need decent armor to improve first. What would you suggest for a fast-moving, close-combat... healer?”

Smiling at that, Earl stroked his beard again. “Hmm, well, you need mobility, so nothing full plate. Something light, to be sure. Hide armor maybe... the scales are great at deflecting slashes, fire, and even magic. Something that would absorb a lot of shocks, then. A windpuma’s hide

would be perfect. That's something even rarer than your scales though. Hmm, there are cheaper alternatives, of course. We could look at--"

"How much would the windpuma's hide cost? And how much for the manufacturing of the armor?"

Calculating in his head, his response was as expected. "The hide itself, maybe four gold if you're lucky. The armor I'd make for you for an additional three."

Frowning, Ilea looked down and then back at Earl. "Well, where can I find a windpuma?"

Earl looked her dead in the eye, then burst out laughing.

A few minutes later, Ilea had another goal added to her list. Hunt down a windpuma on the mountain of Karth. Which was apparently the nearest place one could find such beasts. Karth was literally the mountain Riverwatch was partially built against, but in terms of height... Looking up, Karth stretched higher than she could see. *At least I'm at the mountain's base already... yay.*

With night falling, Ilea returned to her bed. She wasn't particularly tired, having slept most of the previous day, but the chance to return to that bed was too good to pass up.

Sleep took her in moments.

* * *

She got up bright and early the next day, somehow managing to sleep the whole night even with her growing ability to need less of it. She had noticed this addition from one or several of her magical abilities but hadn't yet figured out which exactly. Stretching her arms, she yawned and left to explore more of Riverwatch.

Getting some food from a stall, she ate as she explored the city. As she rounded a corner, she nearly ran into a trio of spear-wielding guards on patrol. They glared at her briefly but continued on through the crowds. She had noticed a number of the classier establishments had guards stationed nearby, and she encountered patrols on most of the streets she ventured down.

There are more guards around than last time I was here, it seems. Different colors and types of armor too.

Shrugging it off, she entered a shop that seemed interesting. It was painted in bright colors and even had what appeared to be orange stained-glass windows to filter the harsh sunlight. Once inside, Ilea found herself in a deserted bookstore.

“Greetings, young adventurer,” the old man behind the counter said.

“Good morning, sir. This is quite a nice store you have here.”

Looking around, Ilea saw that the shelves were stocked with books, and there was not a speck of dust on any of them.

“Why thank you. It’s not every day an adventurer like yourself comes to a literature-only bookstore.”

“What do you mean, literature only? Aren’t all books literature?”

He looked up at the ceiling and then nodded. “Well, you’re not wrong, but most adventurers seem to differentiate between a novel or history book and a book about magic theory or fighting stances. They’re more of a tool to them. I think the difference is how you read them, with a goal in mind or simply for the pleasure of reading.”

“Seems like a wild generalization. Surely plenty of fighters like to read? Mages in particular would probably want to be educated, no?” Ilea asked.

The man sighed. “One would think so. But it’s nice to see your enthusiasm at the very least.”

Nodding to him, Ilea grabbed one of the books nearby, *The Dragon’s Tail*.

“Yes, I suppose a lot of people don’t appreciate a good story.” Putting the book back, she looked over at the bookseller. “I’m new in the city and was wondering how much one of these books might cost. Can you give me a generalized price? I’m sure they differ in worth greatly.”

“The lowest-priced ones are around 30 silver, though I’d say most books in here are in the 50s. There are some that cost much more because of their rarity or special materials used. Or simply their historical worth.”

Walking up to the counter, Ilea wondered aloud. “Hmm, well, that’s not really in my budget right now, but I’m sure I’ll return sometime. I have a question though. You seem rather knowledgeable. Ever heard of the Azarinth Order?”

After tapping his chin and thinking on it for a while, the man nodded.

“I do believe so, an old order of healers if I recall correctly... very old. They’re mentioned in a story I once read. But I don’t think anyone could prove to you that they really existed. Magical orders like that are very

secretive. I don't doubt that many such as them are hidden away and long forgotten in some ruin." He looked at her inquisitively. "Might you know of the Azarinth Order then, miss...?"

Ilea smirked. "Ilea... and perhaps. Hypothetically speaking, what might one get for some diaries and history books from such an order?"

She had no intention of sharing any of the stances or healing books. *If anyone finds the chamber and has a similar experience as I did, then fine, but I won't go out of my way to share my skills and abilities with the rest of the world.*

The bookseller leaned in closer. She had the man hooked now.

"Miss Ilea. You may call me Splicer. And that is quite some hypothetical proposition you have there. Well, *hypothetically*, finding such books could prove rather valuable to the historical and literary communities. I would say they'd be worth as much as some expensive armor or a high-quality sword might be. Perhaps a few gold each."

"Even diaries?" She would have to go through them and maybe remove some bits about the Bluemoon Grass and the specific class abilities.

"But of course, diaries are likely even more valuable. An original account of events could be used in many ways. If very old, it could prove or disprove current historical theories. The story I know the Azarinth Order from is over a thousand years old."

She smiled at him. "Well then, Splicer"—*what a peculiar name*—"I guess we'll hypothetically see each other again someday, and I might or might not sell you some old diaries."

Waving to him, she made to leave the shop.

"Just one moment..." he said, making her stop in her tracks, one hand on the door.

Ilea turned around and looked at him. "Yes?"

"You... are part of a healing order?" he asked, his voice a little different.

"What if I'm not?" she asked carefully.

Splicer sighed and rubbed his brow. "Do close the door for a moment. You found a ruin and learned and got that healer class, didn't you?"

He figured it out! Well, I do probably come off like an adventurer who stumbled on some old ruin and found a strong healer class... which is exactly what happened. Well, I wasn't an adventurer back then, more a frightened college girl.

“Hypothetically...” she started.

“Hypothetically, you should know about the dangers of operating as an independent healer. Some of the established orders do not like people offering their own services. Joining the guard, a country’s military in the east, or even one of the orders would probably be safer,” he said.

“How dangerous is it exactly? I’ve not been attacked or even questioned so far.”

“There are others like you, yes. Just... be careful. Especially around other healers and outside settlements.”

Well, it’s a good thing I just rescued and brought back a healer. Is that why she was captured? Or because she was nobility?

“I’ll keep it in mind, thanks Splicer,” she said, turning and heading outside again.

Won’t join a military or some order though, that’s for sure.

“I’ll be here, Miss Ilea of the Azarinth Order,” Splicer called after her.

Out in the street, Ilea turned right and continued her exploration of the bustling city. Festival-goers lined the streets, shopping, drinking, and generally making merry. It was quite a pleasant atmosphere, if a little loud. Checking out some more stores, she tried any food she didn’t recognize and grinned at all the new flavors.

Her next stop was the Adventurer’s Guild. It was a huge building, near the center of the city. It looked something like a medieval community center.

Inside was some sort of pub. A bar and many trestle tables lined one side, while more business-orientated counters were built into the wall on the other side. Bored-looking people processed the lines of adventurers that had formed in front of their counter, handing out papers, money, and information. Other people in the room were drinking and laughing at the many tables. Two men in the corner were playing instruments very similar to guitars.

I like this... a lot.

Using Identify, she found there was quite the spread of people with a lower level than her, but also a fair few whose level only showed two question marks. Alice hadn’t been kidding about it being hard to level up Identify. She had used it on hundreds of people in the city today and yesterday, yet it hadn’t leveled even once.

At the back of the room was a wall covered with several dozen pieces of parchment. Checking the notices, Ilea read about odd jobs ranging from collecting rare flowers to helping to seduce a certain woman. Things like requests for killing rare beasts, exterminating pests, or groups looking for additional people were the most common ones though. And many parties seemed to be missing the same thing.

Lots of people are looking for a healer it seems... heh.

It wasn't long until a gruff-looking level 58 warrior approached her.

"Excuse me, miss, are you perhaps looking to join a group? We'd be happy to accommodate a high-level healer like yourself."

"I'm not looking for a group currently," she said, shaking her head. "But thank you for the offer."

He looked like he'd expected that answer and returned to his group at one of the tables with the news.

Standing in one of the lines, Ilea was approached twice more, once by a mage with a very wizardly hat and once by a knight in shining armor. They only had question marks where their level should have been.

Seems like even higher-leveled groups lack healers, Ilea observed while she waited for what seemed like an eternity but was really only ten minutes to get to the front of the line. Finally, the attendant greeted her.

"How can I help you, miss?"

"Hi, I'm pretty new here and wanted to ask about becoming an adventurer. What's the process and payment involved?"

The attendant rattled off the options and prices in a professional and practiced manner.

"Depending on your level, you can become an adventurer immediately. A minimum of level 10 is required for Bronze Rank, 30 for Silver, 50 for Gold, 75 for Crystal, and 100 for Ruby. Higher than that needs approval first. I see you are level 47, so joining with that level has a fee of 10 silver to enter at Silver Rank.

"Once you join, you'll get a tag that will identify you as an adventurer of the corresponding level. You won't get any bounties or payments if you don't have a badge. That's basically the main function. It's just a fee that keeps us going. If you lose it, you'll have to get a new one. We get 10% of every job you do, but you'll be able to take official jobs posted on the board.

“Additionally, you can take a test. Basically, you can fight someone we provide to get a higher rank than your level. That costs 50 silver, plus the 10 silver to get a tag.”

Seeing no reason to wait, Ilea took ten silver from her pouch. “I’d like a silver rank badge please,” she said, handing over the money.

The attendant grabbed the coins and searched through something below the counter. “Ahh, seems like the silver healer badges are out. Rare to have any in the first place. Give me a second, please.” Going over to one of his colleagues, the attendant there handed him a badge. The first attendant hurried back over and passed the badge to Ilea.

“There you go. Good luck on your journeys.”

“Thanks. By the way,” Ilea asked, “Why are healers so rare here? I got three requests to join teams in the past twenty minutes.”

The man looked at her quizzically for a moment.

“Oh, right, you aren’t from around here. Well, healers are either part of an order or employed by the cities, military, or colleges. It’s a much safer prospect for them, and the pay is very, very good. They’re integral to any fighting formation, really, and are thus a very valuable asset to have. Not many adventurous souls choose to pursue healing either. Not being able to defend oneself effectively is, by and large, why many choose other paths. Even though your team might value you.”

“What about hybrids? Like a warrior with a secondary healing class?”

Nodding, the man answered, “Well, it’s not unheard of, but sacrificing your second class for that is often just as bad as simply being a pure healer. At least from a fighting capacity per level perspective. Body enhancement or weapon enchanting multiplies the capabilities of an already graceful swordsman or woman. Losing out on that multiplier isn’t often a wise path to choose. Some still do it, but I haven’t seen a battle healer in a long while.”

Ilea nodded. “What about—”

He cut her off and slapped his forehead in an exaggerated manner. “Oh, I forgot to tell you about the *prices* for general information. That one was free, but if you need more, it’ll be 10 copper per question.” He nodded pointedly at the long queue forming behind Ilea.

Waving him off, Ilea prepared to leave, putting the tag around her neck. Checking it with Magic Perception revealed nothing. A small herb was engraved into it, likely the symbol for healers.

“That’s all, thanks for the info.”

Ilea spent the evening eating various festival foods and enjoying some live music in a pub near the city center.

Well, I guess all music here is live, she giggled to herself, already feeling a slight buzz from the ale.

The moons were high in the sky when Ilea walked back to the mansion, only occasionally staggering because of her drunken state. In a bout of drunken brilliance, she used Reconstruction on herself and found the effects of the alcohol swiftly vanished.

That’s reassuring, but now I’m not drunk anymore...

She still smiled, knowing she had a fluffy bed to return to.

TWELVE

The Arena

The next morning, Ilea packed her spare backpack with the things she didn't need. Hog's daggers were already in there, and she had Tom's sword strapped to her back. She added all the Charred Drake Scales too.

I won't be able to drag them around with me all the time, best to sell them now. Looking at the other things she still had, she frowned. *Do I want the ranger's bow? I mean, it's fun, but it's a bit bulky. Also, I kind of suck at using it.*

Shrugging, she took the bow and quiver with her too. The city was even more alive than on the day prior. The talk seemed to be of an arena event with battles and shows. She decided to see what it was about later, but first made her way to Earl's shop. The burly smith greeted her with a huge grin.

"Ah, the battle healer. Well well, here to sell your precious things?"

Nodding, Ilea removed the sword and daggers from her backpack. She placed the bow and quiver on the counter as well. "Do I need to find an archery shop to sell that?"

Earl shook his head. "It's ok. I do have some people asking for bows from time to time, so I can sell it just fine."

The smith checked the items intently, starting with the bow and ending with the daggers.

"The bow is very high quality. With the quiver, I can do 3 gold. The sword is worth 2 gold. The daggers, 1 gold each. And Ilea, I'm not trying to rip you off here. These are very good items. I don't haggle, just wastes time. I'm confident you won't get a better price elsewhere though."

Having checked some of the prices for similar swords and daggers in the shop, Ilea believed him.

Less stressful for me as well, so it's fine.

Getting out various items from her backpack, Ilea answered, "That suits me, but only if you take these things too. Basically, all the usual necessities for an adventurer."

Earl boomed a loud laugh. "Well, I won't ask you why you don't need it anymore or where you got it. Fine, I'm sure I'll find a buyer. Half a gold for that stuff. That makes 7 gold and 50 silver for the lot."

After shaking the smith's bear-sized hand, Ilea removed the Charred Drake Scales from the bottom of the recently sold backpack.

"Wanted to ask you this... that armor for me, how many of these would I need?"

Earl's eyes went a little wide. "Wow, that's a lot... you have about 10 golds worth there. I think half of those would be sufficient."

Perfect, I still have more of the regular scales back at the chamber too. Those can act as backup, I suppose. Right now, I'd like to offload all these chonkers.

"Alright then, I'll sell half of them to you now if you're interested. The other half I'd like you to store, if possible, for when I get that hide."

"I like how direct you are. I hate the business side of this job. So that's 5 gold for half of them. 50 silver for indefinite storage. Plus the money from the other deal. Which means 12 gold for you."

Taking the scales and storing them, he handed her the money, which she quickly put in her pouch.

"Happy to do business with you, Earl," she said, shaking his hand again.

"The feeling's mutual. Come by whenever. I'll think of some other material you could use for the armor instead of windpuma, might save you a trip. Maybe I'll use the scales you sold me to create something else while I wait for you to get the materials for the main piece..."

Seeing that the smith's mind had wandered back to his forge, Ilea said farewell and left the shop.

With that taken care of, it's time for second breakfast.

A short feeding frenzy later, Ilea was holding her overfull stomach as she slowly made her way toward the arena.

There's no big building anywhere here, just normal houses...

However, when she stopped a passerby to ask for directions, she was told she was in fact very close. Turning around another corner, she finally saw a large entrance: a stone archway with large wooden doors, set into a round structure that didn't reach as high as the surrounding buildings.

Strangely enough, there was nobody waiting to enter, but cheers could be heard from within. Two guards blocked the way inside, and an official sat next to them inside a booth. Ilea made her way over to them.

"Greetings, is this the arena where the tournament is at?" she asked them.

The official nodded. "Yes, yes. I didn't think a healer was scheduled for today... or all tournament, really," he replied, checking his books.

Ilea stopped him, "Oh no, I'm just a spectator."

"Ah yes, another foreigner, I see. The entrance for spectators is further down the street. This one's only for the fighters. Enjoy the show!"

Excusing herself, Ilea walked along the outer wall of the supposed arena, soon finding the main entrance to the round structure. The noises of the city grew louder, and soon she found herself before a mass of people, all trying to get in. She saw people from all walks of life, from scullery maids in worn petticoats and city guards in armor to what she assumed were nobles and wealthy merchants dressed in fine silks and robes.

The mass was moving quickly though, so it took her only ten minutes before she was standing in front of another official. A line of ten of them were handling the masses at a surprising speed.

"Welcome, normal fare is one silver piece," said the balding man in the booth.

Handing him the silver, he nodded and handed her a small ticket. "Sector 14, row 28, number 31. Please don't move seats, or you'll be removed. Keep the ticket on you while inside. Enjoy the show!"

The man was already greeting the next spectator, and Ilea was shoved forward by the overeager, unruly mob. Walking through a small dark corridor, she emerged to the cheers of more than a thousand people.

"Oh wow..." she whispered as she took in the view. A circular, bowl-like structure had been set into the ground, the arena itself far below street level. Seats ran all around the edge of the structure, with a sand-covered battleground at the very bottom. It was like a coliseum dug into the earth.

The scale of it confused her for a moment, for it was far larger than anything she had expected in the medieval-like city. Someone bumped into

her and she moved to the side, and she looked up to see the suns shining down.

There were thousands of seats and just as many people continuing to fill the structure. It seemed the closer the seats got to the arena floor below, the wealthier the occupants. There were also slightly elevated sectioned-off seats occupied by well-dressed or heavily armed individuals, who were surrounded by groups of guards with different colors and styles of gear.

Even more spectators streamed in from other entry points as she stood there. Magic flashed up from the sand-covered grounds far below as mages summoned fire and ice in a performance. Looking around, Ilea spotted her sector and soon found her designated seat. It was in the middle of it all.

Not too suspicious or flashy, but still a nice view...

People selling food and drinks were walking down the aisles carrying trays of delights. Motioning to one of them, Ilea soon had an ale and some grilled chicken. *It's pretty early, but I mean, it's a festival, right?*

Tearing into the chicken, she watched the performers. An ice mage and a swordsman were working together to create beautiful ice sculptures. The two performed for another fifteen minutes until an announcer started to speak, the man situated behind a podium on the slightly elevated stage at the top of the round arena. His voice echoed clearly throughout the entire arena. In fact, it sounded as if the man was right next to her. Using Identify revealed that the speaker was some sort of mage.

He's still incredibly loud... maybe there's some sort of specialized sound magic in this world or something?

"Welcome, everyone, welcome to the fifth decade of Riverwatch! Let us celebrate this momentous day. Now for your pleasure, the magnificent Chalene from the distant Thordain! The main show will start in an hour as soon as everyone has found their seats."

A mage with colorful clothing entered the arena, waving at the people. Cheers erupted from many of the spectators as his magic flared to life. Colorful waves, bursts of light, and even rainbows filled the arena.

Neat, it's like a laser show.

Watching with Magic Perception, it was even more impressive. Obviously, a lot of preparation, work, and skill had gone into this performance.

Some sort of light mage? Or maybe illusions?

Both were mentioned in the skill books she had checked, but Ilea couldn't tell the exact difference. She assumed some illusions worked with light in the first place. The spectacle continued for another twenty minutes, the crowd silently watching on as Chalene spun inside a colorful tornado of magic. As his show came to an end, cheers and clapping filled the arena. Bowing several times, the entertainer left the stage.

The announcer returned to his podium.

"A wonderful performance! Thank you, Chalene! And now for the last performer before the tournament. Please help me in greeting Jyrai, the great fire sage!"

The temperature in the whole arena suddenly increased, and everyone stood up, some people screaming at the top of their lungs.

This Jyrai's a big deal then...

Finding herself interested as well, Ilea stood to crane her neck over the roaring crowd.

Fire erupted from one of the entrances below, and a man wreathed in flame came blasting outward with bright, fiery wings streaming from his back. He rocketed in circles spanning the entire arena, gently increasing in altitude with each complete circuit. A tornado of fire followed his ascent.

Beautiful... was the only word in Ilea's mind as she watched, spellbound, with thousands of other spectators. Jyrai paused his flight a little above the arena, visibly concentrating. Releasing his spell, a flaming lotus formed in the sky, burning above the heads of the crowd.

The lotus then seemed to split into smaller pieces that began to rain down, but, just before hitting the people watching, they all grew wings and flew toward the center of the arena. Circling around the mage, hundreds of streams of fire followed him in a magnificent choreography.

It's like a jet and firework show combined... and those wings...

Not able to tear her eyes away from the man's wings, Ilea was transfixed. Soaring above the arena for about two minutes, the fire-formed birds then formed into bigger targets, flying behind the mage. Seemingly threatening to eat him, he masterfully dodged them. A fiery lance appeared in his hand, which he threw at one of the birds. Hitting his target, the bird exploded in a beautiful display of fire.

This is the best!

The show reached its climax as all the small firebirds reappeared, forming a monstrous phoenix above the arena that crashed down toward

Jyrai. A bow made of pure fire appeared in his hand with a massive arrow made out of nearly blinding white flame. Releasing the arrow at the last second, the phoenix exploded from within, creating fireworks that would rival the best Ilea had seen on Earth.

Jyrai bowed elegantly in the air, his wings keeping him afloat, to indicate his performance had ended. The crowd didn't calm down for a whole five minutes, and as the announcer was unable to start his next sentence, he simply waited and smiled.

Man, I want those wings... I don't even care how, but those wings are fucking amazing. Looking at the descending mage, Ilea watched, transfixed by the intricate detail of the wings visible with her Magic Perception. *It's even more beautiful like this...*

"Alright, ladies and gentlemen!" Finally getting the crowd's attention, the announcer spoke up. "Thank you, Jyrai, that was magnificent to say the least! Now we're ready to start the main event you've all been waiting for. The great tournament of Riverwatch!"

Thunderous cheers accompanied his expected reveal.

"Anyone with both classes between level 50 and 100 was allowed to qualify this time. They fought in up to five preliminary matches, and now we have only sixteen people remaining. They will fight until but one remains. We have healers standing by to help the contestants recover from pretty much anything but instant death. Intentional deathblows will lead to immediate disqualification. However, our competitors know the risks. So, now we start!"

Only disqualification for straight-up murdering someone? Well, this is hardcore.

"In the first match, it's Aaron the bard against Silvis the rogue!"

They're not revealing anything else... I guess to keep it interesting. A bard, eh?

A man in light armor holding a short slightly curved sword emerged from nowhere in a puff of smoke. *Teleportation... that seems rather similar to my spell. This must be the rogue.* Teleporting around a couple of times, the man bowed to the crowd.

[Rogue – lvl ??]

Throwing his weapon into the air, he caught it skillfully while his opponent slowly entered the arena. The new contestant was a huge bulky man with a metal hammer or something similar concealed under a cloth on his back.

[Bard – lvl 60]

That's all muscle... he's a bard? He certainly didn't look like bards from the games Ilea had played or books she'd read.

Removing the cloth that had covered his weapon, Aaron unslung a huge lute. It was a monstrous thing with a dull metal color and spikes protruding from it. He then bowed slightly to his opponent, who did the same.

"Let the match begin!" the announcer cried.

Instantly vanishing, Silvis appeared next to Aaron. *Will this be over that fast?*

But instead of landing a killing blow, Silvis had to jump back before he could even swing his blade as he was pelted with a barrage of small pebbles. A cloud of dust kicked up around the bard.

When the dust settled, Aaron was covered in thick, rocky armor. The harsh grinding of stone against stone filled the arena as he turned toward the rogue. As the bard started to play his massive instrument, Ilea watched on with Magic Perception. The shine over Aaron intensified as the notes left the lute.

Silvis tried the same 'teleport and strike' approach and got a couple of shallow cuts in, but Aaron ignored him and simply kept playing. The rogue's movements became slower and slower the longer the sound continued.

The rock around Aaron started to crumble from the constant assault. Stomping a rock-coated foot into the ground, spikes of earth shot out of the ground all around Aaron. He renewed his rock armor and stopped playing.

Turning the lute around, it now seemed more like a mace. He dashed at Silvis with incredible speed for his size and what should have been at least several kilos of rock.

A teleport saved Silvis as Aaron's lute crashed into the sand covered floor and became wedged in the ground below. The spikes were a disadvantage in that regard. The bard paused for a moment to extricate his weapon.

Rushing at his foe, Silvis was forced to disengage as spikes erupted from the ground once again, nearly skewering the rogue.

When the same attack-spikes-disengage process was repeated two more times, Silvis seemed to catch on. He rushed at Aaron's flank, who was once again removing his lute from the ground, but then teleported right in front of the bard at the last moment. When spikes hit him, he grinned while slashing at his opponent's face.

Lightly stomping on the ground, Aaron took the hit as a surge in earth magic shot the lute from the ground in a burst of motion. Silvis was right in front of its path, and the musical instrument slammed into the rogue and threw him upward.

A sickening crunch reverberated through the arena as Silvis landed, body flopping down like a lifeless doll. Rushing into the arena, a team of three healers hastily worked their magic on the downed rogue. Ten seconds later, the man coughed and tried to sit up. One of the healers pushed him down again and motioned to some other people on the sidelines.

Silvis was removed from the stage on a stretcher as Aaron recovered his lute, then bowed slightly to his opponent and then to the crowd.

"The winner of the first match is Aaron, the stoic bard!" the announcer proclaimed.

Not seeming to mind the added adjective, Aaron simply walked off the stage.

So that's rock enhancement, I'd guess? Seems pretty cool, but I think it'd remove too much of my mobility. The skills he used seemed mostly defensive in nature too, and I probably have enough of that with my Azarinth Healer skills already. With earth magic, I'd probably become a slow tank healer or something. I'd rather be a bit more mobile.

After a ten-minute break to repair the arena and provide some more food to many of the spectators, the announcer started the second match of the day.

"For our second match, the lovely Eleonora, a beast tamer and traveling enchantress! Her opponent is Marco from the Prancing Falcons adventurer team! Please welcome the contestants!"

Walking onto one side of the arena was a heavily built man with an even more heavily built shield.

[Warrior – lvl ??]

Arriving on the other side was a rather petite woman wearing a colorful yellow and red dress. She had long, flowing hair and piercing blue eyes.

Oh wow, she's like a princess from a children's movie.

Following behind the girl was a plethora of small birds in dozens of different color combinations.

[Beast tamer – lvl ??]

Waving to her opponent, the woman smiled and looked at the arena around her. Grunting, Marco took up his shield and unsheathed his short sword, taking up a defensive stance. Ilea saw magic flow around him and concentrate on his shield.

He's just gonna wait? I guess he's the tank of that adventurer team then.

Eleonora sat down on the ground, and the birds simply chirped and flew around her, some landing on their master. Opening her bag, Eleonora removed some stones.

They're glowing.

Ilea deactivated her Magic Perception and only saw normal stones. Some of the birds grabbed them and started flying around in higher and wider circles. Getting more of the stones from her bag, Eleonora repeated the process until nearly all the birds held one of the enchanted pieces of rock.

"I've heard about you, girl," Marco said. "I've tanked the repeated magical assault of a level 130 night stag. Now show me what you got!"

Eleonora ignored him and started to draw in the sand.

"Did you hear m—"

His shout was interrupted by the sudden need to raise his shield. One of the birds circling above him released its stone. When it hit the shield, the magic was unleashed. Marco's knees bent hard as the force of a magical explosion rocked him. More of the birds started circling above him, and, one after another, they dropped their payload.

Some sort of pressure magic, fire magic, and even lightning landed on his shield as he struggled to keep his balance. *His magic is weakening...*

Seeing the amount of magic on the shield, Ilea rooted for the small woman. *I like her dress, therefore she should win.*

Eleonora was now drawing on the ground around her with her back to Marco. Five minutes of bombardment later, Marco apparently lost his

nerve. Ilea knew the real reason. His shield wouldn't have held for another ten seconds.

Getting out of the direct strike zone of the birds, he ran toward Eleonora. Reaching her, Marco raised his sword and was about to strike when the ground around the woman started to glow.

Instead of hitting the enchantress, Marco's sword struck a small dome shield around her. His confused expression melted into shock as he raised his battered shield. The remaining birds had all gathered above, no longer content to attack one at a time, and half of them released their payload all at once onto the two competitors.

The entire arena shook as a myriad of different magical effects landed upon the tank. Ilea could make out a glow coming from him right before the first stone hit. Several dozen impacts in the span of two seconds later, the dust slowly cleared.

Standing there was a disheveled Marco and a calm Eleonora, still sitting inside her small dome shield. Jumping backward, Marco dodged a late explosive stone. The birds followed him this time, unlike when he had approached the enchantress before. Like a bombing squadron, they peppered the ground around him.

He tried his best to block the impacts with his shield, but one of the strikes eventually slipped through his guard and an explosion of lightning propelled the huge man into the wall of the arena. The healers rushed to his side as the birds collected their stones and returned to Eleonora, her shield dissolving with a colorful shimmer.

What a cool combination... She's like heavy air support, and she can even bomb her own position if needed.

Eleonora stood up and waved at the spectators, her birds happily chirping and jumping around.

"And the second winner is Eleonora!" Clapping and cheering filled the arena as Eleonora left through one of the entrances below. "We will now pause the event until this afternoon, when Iris will face Atur! Be here one hour after midday, ladies and gentlemen!"

Leaving the arena, Ilea went on the hunt for some food again. She found a table outside one of the restaurants nearby and had just ordered some mead when a group of lizardmen strolled past her. They had dull green scales and yellow, reptilian eyes but were otherwise dressed in what appeared to be traveler's garb.

Wait... what?

Looking past them, Ilea noticed some other people were staring as well. However, most were ignoring them completely.

Bringing the ordered beverage and noticing the direction of her gaze, the waiter smiled at Ilea. "Never seen any lizardfolk, eh?"

Nodding at that, she took a gulp from the mead. She watched a group of armed guards run past, ten people in heavy gear, whose leader was shouting at the travelers to let them through. She heard something about a guard patrol going missing.

Wonder what's gone on there.

"The lizardfolk mostly stay in the plains to the northeast and are famous for their warlike society. They rarely travel, so this is quite the rare occurrence," the waiter continued.

I was just looking.

"They just really like to compete in tournaments, so... Oh, you're yawning, right. I'm really sorry, you know. I happen to have studied lizardfolk... ahem. Do you want anything else with that mead? We have a great ham dish at the moment and some amazing fish, just caught earlier today!"

She finished her mead while he stood there talking. After her morning at the arena, she had filled her quota of human interaction for the day. When the waiter ended his pitch, Ilea politely declined his many offers and laid down a silver piece. She thanked him before she left.

That's why I tend to prefer my temple. I just need to find a way to produce mead there...

THIRTEEN

A Relaxing Afternoon

Back in the arena, Ilea was eagerly waiting for the fights to restart.

I really don't think my abilities are special or dangerous enough to show off anymore. It might surprise people to see a fighting healer, but it's not witchcraft or necromancy. Maybe even that isn't too frowned upon. I still don't know if Dale was only joking about all that stuff of me being a witch.

Feeling the heat of the afternoon sun, she put up her hood. It instantly dampened the heat and in fact caused a waft of cool air to wash over her. *Ah, nice and cold. This wasn't mentioned in the item description. Maybe it's the material? Whatever it is, it's great.*

“Welcome back to the arena! I won't delay proceedings any further,” the announcer shouted from his elevated position. “Let's start the third match for today. We have Iris, the templar of light, and her opponent is Atur from the distant mountains of Naraza!”

A knight in full plate armor, gleaming white, entered the arena. Drawing the claymore from her back, she rammed it into the ground. Making a welcoming gesture to the crowd, she spoke, “Children of the light, I welcome you! It's not too late to turn from your sinful ways! Join me in the crusade to enlighten everyone to Ataniel's word!”

Oh boy, Ilea thought. I hope fighting healers aren't some sort of sacrilege to the Church. I'd hate to run into some inquisitors.

Entering on the opposite side to the fanatic, a barbaric-looking man with two small axes greeted the arena.

“You speak of a god that doesn't exist, fanatic!” he shouted. Chatter and laughter could be heard around Ilea. Nobody seemed too offended. “Who is

this Ataniel you speak of? Are you trying to found a new religion on your own, mighty templar?"

Mocking her, he spat on the ground.

So there's no church of Ataniel then? Ilea sat there confused.

"And lo, Ataniel said, 'The heathens shall fall to your blade. You shall gut them and hear their screams of agony as you cut away the foul stench of *sin*.'" Pulling the claymore out of the ground with a yank, she held it out toward her opponent. "You shall burn in his fire, blasphemer. This is Ataniel's will."

Shaking his head, Atur only chuckled. "You're crazy, woman. Let us fight, then, me against you and your made-up god."

Iris started to shine a little as some magic settled on her. The two fighters circled each other for a while until she rushed at him. The claymore struck at Atur in a blur. Sometimes a clang could be heard when one of the strikes was parried, but the movements were too fast to follow.

The knight's assault continued for a full five minutes until, suddenly, a red mist burst out of the man. The word 'berserker' was whispered around Ilea as, even from her seat, she could feel the power of the man, her hair standing on end.

I want to fight too! These guys are strong... A smile crept across Ilea's face, and as she watched, the tide began to turn in the fight below.

Atur was now on the offensive, but still the two didn't give each other an inch as blades were dodged and deflected. A bright flash sometimes filled the arena as Iris tried to blind her opponent. He reacted to each flash by jumping back and then closing in again immediately.

Iris's armor was dented in many places, while shallow cuts lined Atur's chest, arms, and legs.

"The longer the fight goes on, the more your loss is certain," he chuckled and continued the fight.

Iris didn't seem to tire either, even beginning to laugh after a while, joining her adversary as they became one with the fight. Deflecting one of his axes with her sword, Iris ignored the second one, letting it ram into her side as her fist smashed into his face. Removing the axe from her side, she kicked the still dizzy Atur in the side of the knee, who lost his balance and fell.

Light formed below Iris' standing form and the bleeding from her wound slowly stopped. The now kneeling Atur looked up to her and lashed

out with his remaining axe, but a swift cleave of the knight's sword removed his arm at the elbow. Blood spurted to the sandy ground before he could land his blow.

The healers started to run toward him as Iris spoke, "For insulting Ataniel, you shall pay with your life."

"Fuck you and your god," he spat at her, light red mist forming around him as he activated some sort of ability and lunged forward.

Lifting her sword, Iris cleaved through Atur's neck. The arena was quiet as his head hit the ground, his body following shortly after. When the healers reached the corpse, they tried to reattach his head.

Are you serious?

One of the healers started shaking his head after a few seconds, and another then signaled something to the announcer.

"Well, it seems Atur is no more," the announcer said. "Which means Iris is hereby disqualified from the tournament of Riverwatch."

Bowing to the crowd, Iris strapped her sword to her back and left the arena to a mild chorus of boos.

Holy shit. Not exactly the outrage I expected... Some people are even cheering for her!

The corpse was quickly removed, the announcer informing the arena about the last fight of the day, adding that the next matches from the first round would be fought the next day.

After a ten-minute pause, the fight was finally announced. "And now for the final fight of today, our magical exhibition match! First from the esteemed college of magic in Riverwatch, a professor who many here might know, please cheer for the shield and light mage Esteban!"

Many people joined a tidal wave of standing ovations. The man was seemingly quite famous in the city.

"This is a rare treat, as Esteban long ago surpassed the maximum level for competing. However, he and one of his star pupils have agreed to a friendly bout for our enjoyment!"

The crowd cheered even louder, and the announcer grinned. Ilea was eager to see what these mages were capable of.

"His student and opponent today is Oliver, a pyromancer from the same college. Who will win today, student or teacher?"

The two men entered the arena. One was quite old, his hair mostly white, while the other was young and rather handsome. Easily

distinguishing the two, Ilea first checked out the old wizard in dark blue robes, who nodded toward his opponent. The pyromancer showed his respect as he bowed much deeper. The older man spoke first.

“It is a delight to see you have come this far, Oliver. I hope you will not be too discouraged by losing.” A small smirk played on the old man’s face as he dusted down his robes. Power surged around them and, a colorful display shone before Ilea’s Magic Perception-enhanced eyes.

They seem rather powerful, but it’ll probably be a while until I can actually tell the differences with Magic Perception.

‘ding’ Magic Perception has reached lvl 9

The timely message brought a smile to Ilea’s face.

“Esteemed master,” Oliver replied. “Even if I may lose, my display here will not disappoint you.”

Activating a spell, thousands of grains of sand coalesced in the air and started to take form around Oliver.

Can’t he use the sand that’s already there? Might be an unfair advantage, I guess.

Ilea could feel the heat around the student mage as the sand burned a white-tinged red.

He’s melting it?

Only wicked needles of glass remained where the burning sand had once floated around Oliver. With a gesture, the shards flew at Esteban at an incredible speed.

Completely unmoved by the display, the older mage simply stood there. The shards reached him but scattered against a shield. The spark of each deflection revealed the form of a protective dome around the professor. More shards impacted as the shield took on a slightly blue color, possibly strengthened by the mage controlling it.

While smaller shards were flung toward Esteban, Oliver prepared a larger amount of sand, once again melting and molding it. The newly-created missile looked more thought out and linear than its smaller counterparts. Seeing the monstrous shard approach at much the same speed as the smaller ones, Esteban shifted into a defensive stance, three more blue shield walls forming in front of the first one.

Contrary to what Ilea expected, the shard didn't have time to strike the defensive constructs. Out of the old wizard's hand came a beam of light that lanced out against his own shield. Visibly multiplying in strength, the light beam passed through each of the shields, concentrating its power. A scorching beam of light, around one meter in diameter, connected with the approaching glass shard. The spear exploded into a thousand pieces, then the beam continued on toward Oliver.

But the pyromancer was no longer there. Several smaller shards were floating around him as he stood twenty meters above his previous location on top of a small glass platform.

A beam of light was sent toward him, but a skillful placement of one small, shield-like shard deflected the beam into the sky. *They're being considerate of the spectators, at least.*

Another three light beams later, the remaining shards in front of Oliver crashed together and formed a crude-looking spear. Fire whirled around it, emanating from the mage's hand. Reaching the tip of the spear, the weapon was launched downward.

A beam of light hit the spear, but it didn't explode like the bigger shards had. Flying right through the light, the spear collided with the first shield and shattered it. Another shield was also broken before it was stopped by the third. Seemingly stuck in the air, the spear slowly fell apart.

"Not bad, my young student. Now, let me show you something that I've been working on..." the older wizard croaked.

A distant explosion stopped the old mage from his casting preparations. His creased face turned toward the direction of the sound, then he frowned. The spectators started to murmur as a second explosion, closer to their location, caused the ground to shake.

The ringing of a bell broke the air, louder than the explosions themselves.

"Oh no..." Ilea heard a man next to her whisper.

"What does that mea—" she tried to ask, but he was already running toward the exit.

As were nearly all of the other spectators. It was a stampede.

Being pushed and nearly squashed in her seat, Ilea jumped to her feet. Just as a massive fireball entered the arena from above, causing the heat in the inverted dome to rise to unbearable temperatures almost instantly. The

magical meteor approached the chanting Esteban as a shield formed above him.

This new shield was a radiant blue, clearly much stronger than any he had used before. The meteor impacted the shield and sent a shockwave through the arena, many of the fleeing spectators stumbling from the force of it.

I need space, Ilea thought, and she jumped down into the sandy fighting pit below. The fireball melted and bent the shield before both spells slowly crumbled harmlessly, pieces of smoldering rock littering the sand. Nobody seemed to notice Ilea's descent, as nearly all eyes were fixated on the origin of the attack, save for some from the VIP seats who were also leaping down into the pit, quickly getting into a defensive formation.

They seem to know what's going on, and they're clearly used to working together.

Not wanting to distract the people around her, Ilea noticed that most of the contestants from the fights earlier that day as well as some local guards had joined them on the sand. Other higher-level men and women from among the spectators were there too as they prepared for another attack. But this time, the attack had a different target.

Two more much smaller meteors struck the throng of fleeing people. The resulting explosions sent what remained of dozens of civilians flying, bits and pieces of rock crushing seats, and terrified cries filled the now burning arena. Another two attacks were blocked by magical shields, but the impact still rained fiery debris down on the masses below.

"If there's more than one of them, I want everyone who came down to help but is below level 100 to flee through the tunnels. Up here, you're just targets for their long-range mages. Glenn, you will lead them," Esteban commanded.

One of the guards in full plate armor nodded at the last sentence. "You have the lead here then, Esteban."

The smell of blood and fire wasn't bothering Ilea as much as it would have only half a year prior. That familiar calm washed over her. Without that fear, she was more eager to fight them than to run.

But who are they?

Just as the thought reached her brain, three figures landed heavily in front of the group of around thirty assembled defenders.

Clothed in mystical-looking leather armor made of a sleek dark material and engraved with what looked like runes, the three figures instantly recovered from their forceful landing. They were tall and lithe but not too different in shape from some of the humans standing nearby. Magic vibrated so strongly around them that Ilea had to deactivate her Magic Perception just to see the figures properly.

Elves? she wondered, looking at their long ears. Two had red hair, one flowing and long, the other short and wild. The last of the three standing in the center had near-white hair, two sheaths hanging from his belt.

[Warrior– ??]

With a smile nearly tearing his face apart, revealing pointed, needle-like teeth, the creature spoke.

“A defensive line of little humans. How quaint.” His voice was a whisper, yet so loud in her ears that Ilea had to cover them with her hands. He turned to the elf on his right and continued. “*Var es neirah, sin Val Akuun?*”

“Glenn!” Esteban shouted, just as one of the attackers released a storm of fire from his hands. Four of the defenders answered with their own spells as fire met fire, and the roar of it filled the arena.

“You heard the geezer – with me!” Glenn called as he started to lead a defensive retreat.

Jumping backward, away from the fire, a guard shouted at Ilea, “I appreciate it but you’d be a burden in this fight.”

Not listening to the guard, Ilea saw several shields form in the air above Esteban, who was using the suns’ own rays to channel a beam of light through them.

Another crash shook the ground, two of the elves reemerging from the swirling dust and debris unscathed. A flurry of gigantic fire arrows burst into one of them, and when Ilea looked around, she saw Jyrailu flying a couple of dozen meters behind their group, his fiery bow in hand.

The attacks scorched the ground around the elf, but he simply deflected them with hands tipped by sharp, claw-like nails. Silvis teleported behind him, but the elf twirled around, grabbing the rogue by the neck before he even had a chance to attack. A crunch was heard, and the lifeless Silvis slumped to the ground.

Oh fuck, teleporting to attack is not safe... noted.

It was clear that sub-level 100 adventurers stood no chance against these creatures. Looking for Glenn, Ilea blinked toward him. Crackling lightning, ice shards, and other magic filled the air as the higher-level defenders tried to keep the elves busy.

A few seconds later, most of the people below level 100 were gathered near Glenn or running in his direction. Not wanting to attract too much attention, he simply motioned for the others to follow as he started running toward one of the arena entrances for the fighters.

Ilea followed him, ready to blink away at any sign one of those monsters might be drawing close. Entering the gate, she found herself inside a softly lit tunnel, but Glenn didn't stop. The group kept running for a few minutes, occasionally turning corners and hearing muffled explosions and roars from the city above.

"There were fucking three of them! What does this mean?" a warrior shouted from the back, immediately silenced by a hard punch to the side from Marco.

The tank from the Prancing Falcons put a finger in front of his mouth. "Keep quiet! I don't plan to die here today."

"That applies to everyone," Glenn hissed from the front, coming to a stop. Continuing in a much quieter tone, he added, "We've come a good distance. Hopefully none of them are following us. We'll continue slower and much more quietly from now and try to get out of the city. One of these tunnels leads to an abandoned mine southwest of here."

"Calys mine is abandoned for good reason," Aaron the bard said, walking up to Glenn. "I've heard that stalker hounds have been sighted in the area."

Some of the fighters around Ilea frowned at the mention of the hounds, while others were still murmuring about the mines.

Haven't heard of those hounds. A small smile tugged on Ilea's lips. *New things to fight and an abandoned mine? If that doesn't sound like a possible dungeon then I don't know what does.*

"Ahh... foound you."

Everyone froze when the voice reverberated in their ears. Turning around, Ilea saw one of the elves standing around fifty meters back down the tunnel. The white-haired one from earlier. The creature carried two wicked-looking swords and glowed with blinding magical energy.

“Where are you hiding the Cursed?” the elf hissed as he approached the group with a broad grin on his face.

[Warrior – ??]

“Prepare to fight! Tanks to the front and back, the rest in the middle. If we die here, we’ll at least take a chunk out of that fucker!” Glenn shouted, and a couple of the men and one woman around Ilea roared at that as everyone activated their skills and got into position.

“Hmm... yes... you’re gonna taste... wonderful.” The elf’s panting voice was strange, unhinged. Suddenly sprinting, the elf smiled as his magic gathered.

“Try to retreat further down the tunnel as we fight, the mine shouldn’t be far!” Glenn called. “Mages, be careful not to collapse the ceiling!”

Spells sprang to life as a shockwave of force slammed into the tanks up front. A crack burst through the air as a woman’s arm broke while trying to hold up her shield against the elven Warrior. Two wicked swords pierced through the new opening and left only a falling corpse behind.

Dodging magical missiles and mundane arrows, the elf spun around and kept slashing at the wall of shields in front of him.

A healer next to Ilea tried to help the fallen tank, panicking a little.

No use. She’s already dead.

Focusing her attention back to the front, the tanks seemed to have stabilized. With supporting magic from behind, the group steadily but slowly retreated through the tunnel while keeping the elf at bay.

Ilea saw some of the people around her shaking. *If he gets through...*

The seconds passed slower than she had ever experienced as the group continued on their way and clangs of metal against metal filled the tight space with noise.

Luckily the elf didn’t manage to break through, and they soon reached a hall of some kind. The walls transitioned to a more rough and natural texture than in the previous tunnel.

“This is it! Mages, trash that barricade over there,” Glenn shouted to the group, “Tanks, don’t exit the tunnel – we hold here!”

At the other end of the hall was a sturdy-looking barrier of piled-up stone and wooden beams that barred the way to the mine proper. Some of the mages were chanting or channeling their mana to break through it.

Around thirty meters away... I should be able to blink that far if I have to.

Just as the first shards of ice and glass rocked the barrier, another one of the tanks went down, gurgling as he clutched at a ragged gash on his neck. The elf's swords then spun and pierced right through another shield held in front of him, where they stuck fast. The man holding the shield, a dark-skinned muscular tank, staggered back. Letting go, he slashed at the elf with a scimitar while the creature's weapons were still lodged in the discarded shield.

The sword stopped in mid-air, the elf having released one of his own swords embedded in the shield to block the attack with his now free hand. The elf caught the naked blade, but the steel failed to penetrate the elf's skin, and his hand cast the blade aside as he grinned.

Letting go of his weapon, the tank turned tail in terror, but before he could even start to flee, the elf was upon him, claws digging into the man's neck.

An eerie quiet filled the room, save for the gory sound of spurting blood as the elf slowly got up from his crouched position above his dying victim.

FOURTEEN

Party Life

As the elf retrieved its two swords from the discarded shield, the room exploded into motion. Most of the mages stopped casting spells at the elf and instead ran toward the barrier of wooden beams and caved-in rock that led to the mine – a potential escape. Many of the warriors followed, eyes wide, as they tried to get away from the monster.

The elf deflected a few more spells with his swords, grinning at the fleeing humans.

Five or six of the remaining defenders prepared to engage the adversary and protect their fleeing comrades, Ilea included. Next to her, Oliver prepared glass shards, while Aaron was playing on his massive lute. She healed an injured tank and switched to the left side of their small formation.

Glenn and another warrior, a stocky man with a puckered scar under one eye, prepared their skills too. Completely ignoring the primary group arrayed in front of him, the elf sidestepped their defensive line with incredible speed. Dodging the glass shards thrown his way, he ran after the retreating members of the group.

“Turn back! Stand and fight, or the monster will cut you down!” Glenn shouted, but few heard his cries over the sounds echoing through the tunnel, and even fewer heeded what they heard.

Magic and weapons alike hammered against the barrier at the other side of the long tunnel as more and more of the assembled group used everything they had to break into the mine and get away from the elf. Fear clouded their minds, and they had their backs to the enemy as they tried frantically to create an exit.

Quickly catching up with his prey, the elf left severed limbs and deep wounds behind as he cut clean through bone and armor with his curved blood-covered swords.

Running after him, the stronger defenders got into a loose formation once again. Glenn, the scarred warrior, and Aaron were in front, with Ilea, Oliver, and Eleonora at the back. The enchantress had a huge smile on her face.

Can't really blame her now, can I? Ilea thought. She was grinning too. Partly from the adrenaline, from the danger, blood, and smoke in the air – but most of all because her ability to actually *do* something about all this and join in this fight filled her with joy.

They ran over decimated corpses, slowly gaining on the fast and skillfully moving elf. Some of the fighters at the barrier turned around to face him, and a similar formation took shape as the mages shot projectiles of different elements toward the fast-moving predator.

The elf wheeled around and crashed into the formation before they could flank him, dodging blows and deflecting strikes as his own swords left a swathe of deep gashes and dented armor.

Ilea blinked forward and managed to land a punch when an opening presented itself, Destruction flashing up and into the elf, but the monster didn't even stop. Before she blinked back in retreat, the creature had followed her with a few steps and a slash faster than she could perceive, nearly severing her arm before she blinked back to her own formation and healed the damage.

This guy rips through people much higher in level than you in one slash. No more stupid teleports. Work together with the others. Focus on healing.

Around fifteen people were now facing the elf at the mine barricade while six approached from his rear, but he continued to advance while dodging or deflecting the magic and arrows of his prey. Turning to the nearest warrior, a lithe older woman with a rapier, the elf ducked under her blade and cut the warrior in half with a single clean slash.

A sizzling ball of lightning managed to hit him in the chest, but it didn't slow him down in the slightest. Two more warriors fell, and, using the opening, he jumped into the group of mages. A whirlwind of blades, blood, and screams followed as he ripped his way through the group of casters.

No longer smiling, Ilea activated her Aura. *That's not a fight... it's a massacre. And the elf was outnumbered fifteen to one. We don't stand a*

chance!

Glenn, seemingly having reached the same conclusion, slowed down a little. “We have to get through the barricade... let’s hope those stalker sightings mean it’s become a dungeon or we’re all dead. Give it all you have!”

His sword started to glow, and a beam of red energy flew over the mangled corpses into the battered barrier. Bits of wood shattered, but it wasn’t enough to break through the thickly piled barricade. Becoming rock, Aaron slowed down as he spun around, throwing the monstrous lute with his full body weight at the barricade. Two massive fiery glass spears followed, the explosion nearly robbing Ilea of her hearing.

A swing of Glenn’s sword sent a wave of wind toward the barrier, clearing the dust and revealing another tunnel that led farther into the darkness.

“It’s open! Run for th—”

Glenn’s shout was silenced when a curved blade slammed through his throat from behind.

“Run!” Oliver cried, the group running for their lives. Only five meters away from the opening, the elf reached Aaron. The bard blocked the two swords with his armored arms, holding the weapons back for a second as he tried to keep the blades away from his chest.

This is my chance!

Ilea blinked above the elf, and, already spinning in the air, she aimed a kick at his head. Unable to block her as his blades were stuck in Aaron’s stony armor, the kick landed.

Pumping a fully charged burst of Destruction into the blow, Ilea’s shin cracked and splintered on impact, but the elf was sent flying. Aaron lurched as the swords were forcibly dislodged from his arms, still in the clutches of the airborne elf.

Ilea stumbled on the landing and crashed into Aaron hard enough to send them both tumbling through the opening. They landed with a clatter, the air knocked from their lungs.

‘ding’ You have entered the Calys dungeon

Silence reigned. After a few tense moments, Ilea realized that no one was following.

After healing her shattered leg a bit, Ilea turned to Aaron and used Reconstruction on his arms. One of them had nearly been cut through completely. The man only grunted as the cuts closed, his flesh forming new connections.

Finally looking around, Ilea saw Eleonora sitting next to her, her eyes sparkling with fascination as she observed the healing magic. Oliver was standing a little behind her, and the warrior that had stood by their side was also with them. He wiped at his face, the large scar near his left eye now caked with blood.

They were in a small cave, and as Ilea looked back, she saw the elf was staring at them from the room they'd just escaped from, annoyance in his eyes.

Dead bodies surrounded the motionless elf. No one else would be joining the group.

Oliver was staring at the motionless elf, arms still raised to cast another spell.

"Why is he not attacking?" Ilea asked.

"We're in a dungeon," Oliver said, his eyes never leaving the elf and arms still raised to cast another spell. "They can't stand dungeons. No idea why, but many a time, people they've hunted survived simply because of this fact. If the elves don't wait at the entrance for weeks, that is... let's hope this one has other plans."

The elf sighed, then a smile once again spread across his face as he reached down to one of the corpses. Lifting the body of the small man, he bit into the corpse's neck.

"Oh wow, that's disgusting," Ilea said.

Finishing her healing of Aaron, Ilea stood up again to test her leg. It was already healed. *I love this skill.*

"That's some very impressive healing. Thank you... for saving my life," Aaron announced, stretching out his newly fixed arm. Then he got up. "I'm Aaron. Bard and rock enhancer."

She clasped his huge hand. "Ilea, battle healer."

I guess...

Nodding at that, Aaron looked around.

"I suggest we go a bit further in. We don't need to honor that monster with our presence any longer," Oliver said. He turned around and stalked

deeper into the cave. Nobody seemed to be against this course of action, so they began to follow.

Taking one last glance at the eating elf, Ilea locked eyes with him. A shiver ran down her spine, but a smile soon came to her face.

No, I won't fear him. In this world, I can become just as crazily strong as he is. Fighting like that must be amazing... and being able to fight against someone like that, even more so. Plus, I now owe those bastards more than a decent beatdown. Gotta get more powerful to return the favor.

Joining her fists together like she had learned in one of the Azarinth fighting stance books, she broke eye contact and left the elf to his lunch.

"Your magic is beautiful!" a female voice said next to her. Turning, Ilea found Eleonora staring at her with big eyes. If one counted the birds sitting on her shoulders, hair, arms, hovering around her, and perched on her bag, it was more than two eyes staring at Ilea.

"Not as brilliant as his..." she motioned to the elf.

"But there's a controlled flow to it... I've never seen anything like it!"

The small woman was suddenly embracing Ilea, and the birds joined in as they landed in her hair and on her arms. "I like you!" the woman exclaimed.

Ilea returned the hug a little apprehensively. She started to shuffle the two of them toward the others as she talked.

"I'm happy to hear that. Let's get moving though."

A minute later, the cave opened up into a larger cavern with several tunnel openings peppering it like honeycomb. Sitting on the ground, the warrior with the scar rested his back against a rock and closed his eyes while chuckling.

"What a fucking day. Hoped to never see those bastards again."

Grunting at that, Oliver looked around the room. "Should've gone east then... and not stayed so close to the forest, you idiot." The smile on his face and his tone removed any possibility of interpreting the jab as an actual insult.

"I know, I know, but the laws are a bit looser here, and the girls..."

The warrior stopped talking as Ilea and Eleonora stepped up beside him.

"Oh, don't worry about us. I do believe we can take a joke without melting," Ilea said as Eleonora finally released her from the hug.

"I probably don't have to remind you, as you are all rather skilled fighters, that we are in a dungeon," Aaron said in a more serious tone. "And

if the stories about the stalker hounds are true, then we better be ready to work together. At least until we find another exit. I'm not risking going back the way we came. Although I am glad we survived that... Any of you lose anyone close back there?"

"I did know Glenn, he was a massive shit though," the seated warrior said. "Don't get me wrong, the elves are worse, but yeah... plus I owed him some gambling money... You didn't hear that though."

"I suppose we should get to know each other, if we're going to be stuck together for a while," Aaron said.

The warrior jumped up and dusted himself off. Ilea noticed now that he wore dark brown leather armor lined with bits of steel, and the two belts around his waist had several small quivers hanging from them.

"Well then, I'll start. Name's Geronimo, warrior and ranger. Around level 60 warrior, 50s ranger. I won't tank, and I lost my crossbow while running for my life." Twirling his short sword around a couple of times, he bowed.

"Oliver. You might've seen me in the arena. Glass mage around 70. Ranged, so I'll stay back with Eleonora," Oliver said while looking at the enchantress. A flame conjured above his shoulder lit the surroundings.

"I'm Eleonora, but you guys can call me Ellie. Wait, I have to check my level... Ah, it's 92 for tamer at the moment and 78 for enchantress. My birds can throw bombs, and I can also make shields and other enchantments!"

"I'm Ilea. Healer and close combat fighter. Both in one class, and it's only level 47." None of the others seemed to be bothered by her comparatively low level.

"I'm Aaron, bard and rock enhancer, both at around 60. Glad to have a healer in the team, and a fighting one at that, apparently."

The introductions over, the group looked around at each other.

"So, what do you guys want to do?" Aaron continued. "We could wait here for a day or two gambling to see if he leaves. Or we could try to find another way out... I doubt this was the only entrance to the mine. It being a dungeon now doesn't change that fact. I also doubt we have enough food and water to stay here." Looking at the group, only silence was his answer. "Well then, I suggest we start moving. Me and Geronimo at the front, then Ilea, then Oliver and Ellie."

Nobody seemed to question the leading role Aaron had assumed, even though he was the second-lowest in level.

Glad I didn't land here with idiots.

Getting into the suggested formation, the group followed Aaron's lead and moved into one of the tunnels.

"Stalker hounds range from mid-double digits to the lower hundreds in level, so let's try not to fight too many at once," Aaron concluded, and the group continued on without another word. All of them were working through what had happened just fifteen minutes ago in their own way. Talking, apparently, was not part of it.

The group continued for twenty minutes in silence, remaining vigilant for any danger. They were in a dungeon, after all. The whole mine seemed deserted. Some tools and wagons remained, rotting and rusting away in the mine tunnels. If it hadn't been for Oliver's fire, it would've been completely dark.

Reaching an old waypoint, they opened an ancient door in the rock to find a rather spacious room. It might have once been sleeping quarters, dug out directly from the earth, though it was barely more than a sparsely furnished cavern.

"There's wood here, and those rags seem good enough for sleeping," said Oliver, motioning to the tattered sleeping cloths and the tools in the room. "Might as well stay the night."

Immediately slumping down, Eleonora seemed to fall asleep almost instantly.

"Oliver – fire. Geronimo, help me close up that door again. Ilea, can you check supplies?"

Everyone started moving at Aaron's words, and soon a small fire was crackling in the room. Light soon danced on the cave walls around them, and the door was barred once more.

"That's not a lot..." Looking over the things Ilea had found, Aaron obviously wasn't pleased. "Guess it's stalker hound and whatever else we find that's on the menu from tomorrow on. We'll plan more in the morning. This is as safe as we'll get. I'll take first watch."

Everyone, including Ilea, got to sleeping pretty quickly, the exhaustion from so many near-death experiences and seeing a whole group of people completely wiped out not easily brushed off – even by veterans.

Waking up a couple of hours later, Ilea motioned for Aaron to get some sleep.

Man I'm glad for my class... I barely need any more sleep than this anymore. Although once I'm in a safe place again I'll sleep for twelve hours... Wait, my bed! Oh no, I fucking hope those shitty elves didn't ruin my beloved! I just got it!

"You seem upset. Bad dreams?" Aaron asked as he laid down.

"Something like that, yeah," Ilea answered in a thoughtful voice. She took his place next to the fire and watched the barricade.

The night passed without any further disturbance. Ilea let the others sleep while she kept her Aura up and moved through some stances as quietly as possible until her mana had fallen by half.

Aaron was the first to get up again, to her surprise. Yawning, he looked at her.

"Still up? Or did you rotate through and forget about me?"

His answer was Ilea's shaking head.

"You have some passive skill or something that reduces the amount of sleep you need?" This time he got a nod from Ilea. "Nice, not too uncommon for healers. Many envy that trait, but then again, few envy healers, unless there's one of 'em saving their ass."

Chuckling slightly, Aaron sat down on the opposite side of the fire from her. She smiled in return.

"A shame what happened to those people," Ilea said after a few long moments of silence. "I'm new around here. How common are attacks like that?"

"Yeah, I knew some of them. Nobody too close, but it's a shame. It's been a while since the last elven attacks, maybe a couple months. We're close to the Navali Forest, so it's a given, but this one was different. Normally, it's just a single elf – it's rare for them to travel in groups. The guards often spot them a mile off, given the destruction they leave in their wake. Usually, they send a full squad of high-level adventurers. The creatures are stopped so far from town that the citizens are none the wiser. Prevents panic. They haven't directly attacked a city in years, maybe a decade or two. Guess they just waited for us to be preoccupied. Something like the fiftieth festival makes for a great distraction."

Staring at the fire for a minute, Aaron continued, "I just hope the city's still standing and that we got some of them. Not likely though, they're great

at fighting and magic but even greater at running away afterward.”

Picking up a stick and playing with the fire, he returned to silence. Trying to change the obviously difficult topic for Aaron, Ilea started again.

“You’re a rock enhancer, right?” She took his silence for affirmation. “I’m from a pretty far away healing order, and we didn’t train in anything else but our fighting and healing. I saw some pretty impressive skills in the tournament though and thought of getting an enhancement class, seeing as I fight with my body. What would you suggest? Oh, and I know very little about all this. My order literally ignored anything not having to do with their own greatness.”

“Hmm... well, first off, you’re rather open about your lack of knowledge. Be careful with that. Folks are likely to take advantage. You saved my life though, so I’ll help you any way I can. Enhancements... well, it’s always a personal thing. There are many elemental enhancements. Like my rock enhancer class. It’s a pretty defensive one. Ice, fire, and lightning, for example, are more offensively oriented. Ice is precise and deadly as well as defensive, fire is solely about damage, and lightning is speed-oriented.

“There are a lot of skills in each one of them though, so you won’t be too trapped in one style of fighting. There is also a myriad of other enhancer classes, non-elemental even, and I definitely don’t know all of them. Any ideas about where you want to go?”

“After seeing Jyrai, I kinda wanna go for fire. Are there differences in class strengths? Also, how do I get said class? Actually, what if I want to change later on?”

Looking a bit confused at her, Aaron stopped playing with the fire.

“There are definitely differences in strength between classes. Some rarer ones, like I imagine your healing and fighting one is, can be acquired through specific tasks or requirements that have to be met.

“There are stories of people getting very advanced classes as their first class. The normal way though is to get the most basic class in the area and work your way up from there.

“So to be a fire enhancer or to be like Jyrai, I think he’s a pyro enhancer, I’d suggest simply being a fire mage. Once you reach certain requirements, you’ll get a chance to upgrade your class. You’ll keep the skills you have, or they’ll change according to the new class. Plus of course the class bonuses themselves change.

“The higher the level, the more specialized people are – at least that’s normally the case. You don’t lose any levels in the class though, so starting as a fire mage isn’t a bad investment. I don’t know much about that, but maybe Oliver over there can help you get started. Usually, a service like that would cost you quite a bit of gold, but our current circumstances might change that a little... I suggest taking full advantage.”

He winked at her before continuing.

“As for the strengths, well, they’re mostly related to the skills you have and what level they are. I won’t pry, but a level 47 shouldn’t have been able to move that elf with a mere kick... I’m assuming your skill level in whatever you used is pretty high. More specialized or higher classes give you access to better or more specialized skills. A very highly leveled normal fireball can win against a low leveled sun meteor, although the base skills are very differently placed in power.”

“Hmm, that’s very informative, thanks. Guess I’ll ask Oliver about some lessons in fire magic later. What skill levels should someone at 47 have then, if you don’t mind telling me?”

Standing up and stretching, another yawn escaped Aaron. “Maybe level 10... at most.”

“In the first or second tier?”

Aaron immediately stopped his stretch, looking at her with big eyes.

“You don’t mean to tell me you have skills in the second tier? What in the hell did you do?”

Looking to the ground, Ilea couldn’t help but smile.

Maybe giving away that information is a bit risky, but he seems trustworthy. Plus I saved his life, and I’m gaining a lot here anyway.

“Mostly I fought alone against monsters with a much higher level than me.”

“Well...” Standing there for half a minute, Aaron seemed to be looking for words. “That would explain it... yeah. Although I’m sure you’re aware of how incredibly stupid and risky that is? People normally go for the safest route possible in leveling. Even in a group of five or more people with a healer and someone to tank the monsters, it’s uncommon to go against anything at the same level, let alone higher level – and alone! You’re one of those crazy people, eh? I mean, I’m not judging, but take my advice here – not many of your kind live through their twenties. You’re a healer though,

so maybe you have better chances. Still, it's *very* dangerous to do what you're doing!"

Smiling brightly at him, she answered, "I know. I love it though!"

FIFTEEN

More Bad Dogs

Aaron stared at Ilea for a moment after she basically admitted to enjoying risking her life. She probably should have been embarrassed because he was looking at her like she was crazy.

But she wasn't. This was her, and she loved it. Eventually, the bard just grumbled and shook his head.

"You people are crazy. Well, suit yourself. Fighting higher-leveled beasts often means having to use skills more often until you kill them. The experience you receive for your skills is enormous when fighting monsters alone... if they're higher levels, even more so. It's very effective, but as I said, very stupid and dangerous. Cost many a new adventurer his or her life. Having someone on watch while you do it is the least you could do, although not even that is a sure way to be safe. We both know how fast a sure-fire fight can result in death. Seeing that elf yesterday should be a lesson to you."

It's like he's lecturing a young girl... Well, I am rather young, but what's he? Thirty?

Nodding at his advice, Ilea stood up.

The idea of having someone on watch is pretty good though. Maybe I could do that. I'd just have to find a fighting nut like myself. Someone who can Blink too so we can save each other in tricky situations.

"I'll think about your advice Aaron. Thanks for the info. I do believe it's time to wake the others."

Agreeing with her, Aaron helped Ilea up, and together they woke the others up.

“Time for a guard change?” Oliver asked, but Aaron shook his head.

“Ilea did most of it, it’s morning already... I think. Not too good at judging the time below the earth.”

Nodding in appreciation, Oliver got up.

“Thank you. I do hope you don’t need much sleep though. Don’t want a tired healer in the group,” he said.

“Don’t worry, I did get my needed sleep,” she answered. She moved to put out the fire, but it suddenly simply stopped burning as Oliver waved his hand, a grin on his face.

“Teach me that,” she said suddenly.

“What? Are you joking?” he replied, a bit of a perplexed expression on his face.

“I’m not actually. I don’t have a second class and I think fire enhancer would be perfect. Can you teach me the basics of being a fire mage?”

“Well aren’t you a direct one? Normally that’s a pretty complicated process. An expensive and complicated process. You know what though, maybe I can distract myself a little by teaching you the basics. I don’t like caves, and I *definitely* don’t like the prospect of my home being destroyed by elves. Yeah, a distraction might be nice.”

Clapping her hands together, Ilea smiled brightly.

“Great, when do we start?”

* * *

Walking together through the tunnels of the mine, it had been about half an hour since the group left their shelter. They had decided to explore the dungeon and map it out as best they could. Their goal was an alternative exit hopefully not too far from Riverwatch.

Ilea was focused on the burning torch in her hand though. Well, it was basically just a piece of wood that was burning.

Infuse the fire with mana... feel the fire... become the fire! Well, he didn’t say that, but that basically sums it up. All I’m getting though is that it’s hot.

When she healed her burns occasionally, the others just smiled a little at her attempts to become a fire mage. Some made it in a day, while others

needed weeks or even years to unlock the class, but at least the atmosphere was a little lighter due to her antics.

Ilea tried again and held her other hand in the flames, but it wasn't long before another whiff of burned flesh wafted through the cavern air.

"Are you sure you're alright? The burns still hurt right? Even if you heal them after?"

Healing herself again, Ilea was much too focused to react to Aaron's question.

"I do believe she knows about that, judging by the rather unpleasant look on her face," Geronimo smiled, and most of the group chuckled.

Five minutes later, Oliver held up his hand.

"Quiet now. We have company."

Just as he finished talking, two large hounds with abnormally long teeth and black fur emerged, seemingly out of nowhere, right before them.

Letting the piece of wood fall to the ground, Ilea identified them.

[Stalker Hound – lvl ??]

"Eleonora? What are their levels?" Ilea asked.

The enchanter broke out of her usual daydream when she heard her name mentioned.

"Oh, doggies!... Their levels, you ask? Hmm... 97 and 99... They're soooo cute though, oh my Good!" she gasped, nearly squealing at the two beasts before them. The hounds just bared their teeth. They were now only ten meters from the group and were still slowly advancing.

Unsheathing their weapons, the party readied themselves.

"They're a lot higher in level than us, so nothing stupid. Ilea, you stay behind the two of us. This is gonna be difficult," Aaron said as his skin became rock.

The temperature behind Ilea got higher as Oliver prepared a spell, and several birds flew in front of Aaron and Geronimo, which started to drop stones between them and the hounds.

"You sure the tunnel won't collapse?" Oliver asked, looking at Aaron with a doubtful expression.

"Yes, these walls are very sturdy. Rock mages seem to have made them stronger to prevent just such an event for the miners."

Suddenly moving into a full sprint, the hounds charged. They had nearly reached the designated tanks of the group when five explosions filled the tunnel with fire.

Two shields flared to life as Aaron and Geronimo held up a set of stones that looked the same as those Eleonora used. The noise faded away, and when the smoke cleared, Ilea saw the two hounds continuing their advance, one bleeding from its snout, the other with a slight limp. The shields began to shatter just as a barrage of glass shards flew at the beasts.

The hail of glass definitely damaged them, but the cuts seemed rather shallow. A quick sword jab from Geronimo cut one of the distracted hounds through its lower jaw. Aaron swung his lute but the other beast simply jumped back, dodging the slow blow. Three birds dropped another barrage of explosive stones down on the retreating hound.

Geronimo failed a dodge and was pounced upon by the hound he had cut earlier. Right before it could bite down on his sword arm though, Ilea appeared next to him and punched the hound on the side of its head.

The beast flew into the wall and Ilea didn't let up. Dashing next to the disoriented monster, she let loose a barrage of attacks, fueled by her Aura, State of Azarinth, and Destruction. The hound got hit at least eight times before it managed to turn toward her.

"Keep it steady!" Oliver shouted.

Biting down on her incoming arm, its teeth penetrated only about a centimeter deep, for Ilea's strengthened body didn't allow the beast to sink its teeth right into her arm.

"Oliver, now!" she shouted as she held the hound to the wall, her arm still in its maw. A moment later, a spear of burning glass buried itself into the pinned stalker hound.

The blast made the beast release its prize. Immediately continuing her assault, Ilea kneed the falling hound in its stomach.

"Geronimo, switch!" she shouted as she stepped back to heal her bleeding arm. *Fuck that hurts*. It had taken a surprisingly large chunk out of her health.

Aaron, meanwhile, was holding off the second hound with rock spikes from the ground and occasional swings of his lute. The monster was also growing increasingly wary of the birds that circled above it. Neither attacking the rock enhancer nor going further back into explosion range was an option.

Another spear of glass and two stabs from Geronimo finished the first hound, its bloody corpse falling limply to the ground.

Not quite finished with her healing, Ilea shouted to Aaron while she ran toward him, "I have an idea. Rock spikes from the wall to your left please!"

Doing as she asked, Aaron released his magic. Ilea blinked behind the hound and grabbed its tail.

They're lighter than the drakes.

With a grin on her face, she spun with the tail firmly in her uninjured hand. The rock spikes appeared just as the hound was smashed full force into the wall.

Most of them shattered instantly, but some managed to penetrate the beast. Aaron followed up immediately with a massive smash of his metal lute to finish off the hound.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Stalker Hound] x2. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

Not even a level-up for that? Is this the group thing they've been talking about?

Finally, the bleeding on her arm stopped and her health regenerated at a rapid pace.

"Those things are tough. I normally only need one spear to kill anything around my level," Oliver commented from the back.

"Yeah, my sword barely scratched them... and I nearly died there. Thanks Ilea," Geronimo added.

Really? That was much cleaner than many of my fights before. I usually get far more messed up. I guess I shouldn't mention any of that to them.

"You really are crazy... although your plan did work and you can heal yourself, so I guess it's alright. I do hope you didn't waste all your mana in that fight."

Aaron removed the lute that was half stuck in the hound and half stuck in the crumbling earth spikes he had summoned.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, I only used a fifth of my mana. Plus I can move while meditating now, so it's not an issue."

The mages in the group stopped moving.

“You have Meditation in the second stage? At level 47? I’m still not there and I’ve been using the skill for years!” Oliver exclaimed.

“She’s a nutter, fighting all the time and immediately using Meditation, then continuing to fight... I’m assuming that’s correct?” Aaron looked over at her as he stated his suspicion. Her nod made him grumble a little. “Yeah, I heard that some of the bonuses from fighting higher-leveled monsters and fighting alone stay for a little while after the fight for certain skills... Meditation seems to be one of them. Lucky her. Still crazy though.”

Thinking the topic closed, he put his lute on his back and checked the hounds. Oliver’s mouth slowly shut, but he still stared wide-eyed at Ilea.

“We should skin them and take some of the meat to eat later. Never had stalker hound, but it can’t be worse than rocks,” Geronimo said. He started to work on one of the corpses with his sword, grumbling about not having a hunting knife and the crazy mages teleporting around.

“That was awesome, Ilea!” Eleonora cried. “When you grabbed the doggy by its tail and smashed it into the wall!”

She laughed with a wide smile, running up to her, and when she hugged Ilea, who was much taller than her, her giggles were drowned by Ilea’s chest.

“And she doesn’t even have a second class,” Oliver grumbled from behind.

“I also can’t throw fiery glass spears from dozens of meters at my enemies,” Ilea responded as she patted Ellie’s back.

“Fair enough... I have to say I normally hate having fighting fanatics in my group, but when you combine it with being a healer, it doesn’t seem so bad,” he answered, a little less grumpily. “Now, get that piece of wood again and train.”

Saluting Oliver, Ilea freed herself of Ellie and started burning herself... or rather, ‘feeling the flame’ again. Her method was just a little more literal than most aspiring fire mages.

“Alright then, I think we should move on. Let’s hope it’s a while before we meet the next group of beasts,” Aaron said after the hounds had been skinned and the meat put into makeshift bags made from some rags they had taken from the old sleeping quarters.

Continuing on, they soon reached a fork in their path. Choosing one side at random, Eleonora whistled while Ilea burned herself. Oliver

sometimes gave her a little not very helpful advice while Aaron and Geronimo maintained focus on their surroundings.

Learning from this guy might not have been the best idea... bet he was a natural.

“Hey Oliver, how long did you need to get the fire mage class?”

“Oh, I immediately got the pyromancer class, skipped fire mage... it was kind of an accident. I was cooking for my then girlfriend, experimenting with the flames, and, well, let’s just say the house burning down didn’t help with our future relationship.”

The story garnered a couple of chuckles from the group, but Ilea just sighed.

Perfect, so he’s just telling me to feel what’s natural for him. Not like I have anything better to go on though.

For the next hour, they explored the mine. They actually managed to map a sizeable portion of it as there were a lot of cave-ins and dead ends. Their eventual second encounter with the mine’s canine residents happened in the form of a group of four stalker hounds.

Although they were a little lower in level than the last hounds, the party was much more apprehensive. Numbers made a huge difference in any fight.

“Oliver, cast a line of fire in front of us, let’s see if they get more defensive,” Aaron said. “Eleonora, full offensive – I want you to bomb them with everything you have before they even think of advancing. Ilea, you can take a hit, so stand between me and Geronimo.”

As Aaron finished speaking, a wall of fire formed before them. The bard summoned some spikes right behind it as a secondary line of defense. A swarm of birds closed in on the hounds as they turned toward the group of survivors.

“Oliver, glass bombs!” Aaron shouted. The idea came to fruition as chunks of glass formed around some stones provided by Eleonora in advance – they hung in the air, ready to strike. The swarm of birds released their payload and explosions rang through the caves. The hounds, disoriented and injured by the blasts, staggered toward the group just as chunks of glass flew into their midst, carried by Oliver’s magic.

“Now, Ellie!” Aaron cried.

When Eleonora snapped her fingers, the chunks exploded and a massive amount of glass shards cut through the hounds, the explosions driving them

faster than Oliver's own magic ever could have. Some of the birds above got caught in the crossfire of the glass shrapnel, and even the party members standing directly behind the wall of fire received some damage.

Charging in a blind rage of pain and anger, the hounds advanced on the group. A spear of glass hit one of them in the back. The fire was no longer enough to deter the beasts, and they jumped right through it.

Not able to see through the flames, they impaled themselves on the spikes that lay behind. It only stopped them momentarily, as the spikes snapped and the hounds dragged themselves forward. Each of the three frontline warriors was forced to fight against one of the approaching hounds while Oliver tried to keep the fourth one further back with his ranged attacks.

Kicking her hound in the jaw as it jumped at her, Ilea punched the falling dog with both fists simultaneously. The beast flew back a couple of meters, and she immediately changed her target to the hound pressuring Geronimo.

Hitting it hard in the side, she gave him the opportunity to strike before she had to focus on her own hound again. Geronimo took full advantage of the opening and cut his hound across both back legs to hamstring the beast, making it much slower.

Having suffered a couple of scratches from the monster in front of him, Aaron activated his defensive spikes. His hound was jettisoned into the air, and as a follow-up, he swung his lute like a baseball bat, hammering the creature away from the party.

Ilea's own hound joined this one soon after, courtesy of a powerful roundhouse kick. Even Oliver managed to shove his foe away from the group with a well-timed spear that hit the hound mid-leap. Explosive stones fell onto the three hounds that had been successfully pushed back, and a massive barrage of glass shards cut into them too. One of them fell to its stomach. Its struggle was over.

Yet the other two hounds advanced again. Dodging another lute blow, one of them bit deep into Aaron's leg. He grunted in pain as he punched the beast with all his weight and power.

"Oliver, spear at me, now!" Ilea shouted, blinking away at the last moment. The spear of glass blasted straight through the beast that had attempted to pounce on her, ending its life in an instant.

Geronimo meanwhile traded cuts with his injured hound. The latter was in a much worse state due to its slowed movements and the warrior's better reach. Ilea appeared behind the hound and kicked it in its side.

Knocking it off balance gave Geronimo the opportunity to cut deep into its neck. The stalker hound died, but not before it managed to dig its claws deep into its killer's right leg.

Checking to see if she had to help Aaron, Ilea realized that the fight was already over. The jaw of the final beast was loosely hanging onto Aaron's leg as he smashed his massive fist into what was left of its head, shouting with every punch.

Walking up to Geronimo, Ilea began healing his wounds. The bleeding wounds closed rapidly at her touch. It took only a minute to heal him completely.

Only the crackling of some fire around the cave and the rhythmical wet blows of rock against flesh could now be heard as Ilea turned back to Aaron.

She walked up to him and started to use her healing spell. Feeling him calm down a little, she grabbed the hound's head and ripped it away from his leg. He growled but soon calmed down more when he felt the wounds healing.

"Fucking *fuck* that hurt!" he said, throwing what was left of the monster at the wall. "I hate fighting things tougher than me," he added as he lay down on the ground.

Two minutes later, his wounds were healed too – at least the physical ones.

"Reckon we should go back now. I don't think we can take another fight like this," Oliver said calmly from behind.

"Agreed, I want to eat and lie down," Geronimo added. Ilea nodded, and Aaron only grunted from the ground.

"I don't have any stones anymore anyway..." Eleonora said. "And my poor birdies..."

Holding some injured birds in her arms, Ellie caressed them as best as she could. Walking up to her, Ilea began to heal them, which only made Ellie more emotional.

"Thank you so much... I... I... Ilea..." she sobbed.

Oh no, please don't cry, woman.

Thankfully, Eleonora quickly calmed down as her birds were healed, and the group soon left that still-burning part of the mine behind to take refuge in their shelter.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Stalker Hound] x4. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 48. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Reconstruction has reached 2nd lvl 9

Yay, more power to meee...

Ilea smiled at the messages, quickly dumping the points into Intelligence. Those hounds were tough, and hitting harder with Destruction seemed like the best solution.

Ilea applied her stats, and the group headed back to their hideout, reaching it another hour later without any further incidents.

Apart from Ilea’s Heat Resistance gaining another two levels.

Ouch.

SIXTEEN

Loss

Sitting in a meditative state with both her hands over the fire, Ilea kept an ear out for anything that might attack the group. After roasting and eating some of the meat – a lot of it – the group had shared some stories for a while before calling it a day. Ilea had offered to take the first, second, and third watches of the night, still trying to learn something from burning herself.

I should at least get an award for being stubborn or something.

The wounds healed as quickly as they were created. Her tough skin and Heat Resistance slowly made it hard for the fire to harm her. Six hours of this earned her another four levels of Heat Resistance and a new general skill called Pain Tolerance.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Pain Tolerance – lvl 1. Being a bit of a masochist, you have learned to ignore a certain amount of pain. You may not feel all of the pain, but be careful – the damage is still being done!

She probably would’ve earned that skill much earlier in her time on Elos, but her passive skill Body of Azarinth increased her pain tolerance by a lot already, which had likely caused the normal tolerance skill to be much harder for her to achieve.

Waking up Oliver, who had volunteered for the fourth and last watch of the night, Ilea finally lay down.

She woke up four hours later. The pleasant sound of her companions' laughter wafted through the space, followed by the smell of even more meat roasting over the fire.

"I really am eating too much meat... aren't there plant monsters here?" she muttered. Sitting up with her hair sticking out at odd angles and partially covering her eyes, she addressed the group.

"Where are the salad monsters?"

The group stared at her and then laughed even harder.

Back in the tunnels, the party continued to map out the mine-turned-dungeon. No enemies crossed their path as they made their way through the tunnels they had already explored and into new territory.

"The creatures don't roam as much as I thought they would," Ilea commented after hours of not encountering anything.

"Dungeons can be strange," Oliver said. "From what I've read, sometimes the monsters inside go out to attack travelers or settlements, but often they just stay inside. The deeper you go, the more dangerous the monsters usually become, so I'm glad they don't roam much."

The day passed slowly as the group mapped out more and more of the darkness, trying to get higher and higher.

They encountered stalker hounds five times that day but with much more time in between the fights than the day before and only in groups of two or three. The now more coordinated team took care of the enemies with little effort.

Or at least Ilea thought so.

They complain about the difficulty of the fights, but barely any of them get wounded more than once in a fight anymore. Where's the adventuring spirit?

She was starting to wonder if she was a bit of a freak for enjoying the danger and the tough battles as much as she did. None of the other adventurers seemed to truly understand.

Grumbling a bit to herself, Ilea kept burning her hand, but the fire was barely doing anything to her anymore. Her Reconstruction skill earned another level though as she continually only healed her hand, apparently due to the difficulty and pain involved. She didn't get the same amount of experience as when fighting monsters, but it made a difference. Fighting monsters that were double her level also earned Ilea a lot of experience. Not

as much as if she were fighting them alone, but compared to a more cautious adventurer, she was rising at a very fast pace.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 49. 5 stat points awarded.

She continued to put all her points into Intelligence so she could punch things as hard as possible.

Punching things is the best...

A couple of hours and two small fights against stalker hounds later, the group entered an expansive cavern, at least as large as the arena in Riverwatch. More importantly, it was brighter in here. The fire they brought with them barely made a difference anymore.

A number of large rocks blocked their vision of most of the cavern floor, but it was clear they had arrived at their destination. Light was leaking in from the far end of the space – an exit, or at least the beginning of one.

“I think we’ve finally found another way out...” Aaron sighed in relief.

Then he tensed as snarls and the sounds of battle reached their ears. Moving with caution through the boulders, they peered further into the room and saw seven stalker hounds facing off an equal number of men.

Wait, those aren’t men...

Their skin was white and sickly. Patches of flesh were missing entirely, revealing the decaying sinew and muscle beneath, while some of them were missing eyes and others entire limbs. They moved with a slow, shambling gait.

A chill washed over Ilea. She had seen enough horror movies to know what lay before her.

[Undead Warrior lvl ??]

She shuddered. Of course zombies were a thing in this world. She had always assumed that would be the case, but it was different seeing them in person. She could *smell* them.

And yet some part of her was already wondering how their deathless bodies would hold up against her Destruction ability. She shook off the thought and continued to watch the fight.

The undead couldn't match the speed of the hounds, but somehow they weren't being overwhelmed. Not responding to any of the wounds they received, they traded blows with the hounds, who didn't have the luxury of being unfeeling.

"What does that...why are there undead here?" Geronimo asked.

"Hey guys, I have an idea," Ilea said. "They're already fighting each other and are distracted... let's do a surprise attack, alright?"

Taking down that group would be worth a *ton* of experience. A smile tugged at her lips, but the others just stared at her with a mix of surprise, anger, and confusion.

"Are you mad?" Oliver exclaimed. "There are over ten enemies there – we struggled against five!"

"We're well hidden here. It's safer to just wait until they're done and then head for the exit, perhaps finish the survivors if they see us," Aaron said in his usual commanding tone.

Ilea just shook her head.

"I won't let this opportunity get away. I'll teleport away if I get into danger. You guys don't owe me anything, and you'll still be hidden. If anything, I'll make getting out of here easier for you. Once you're out, you shouldn't have a problem getting back in, right?"

Getting no answer from the group, she took their silence as a yes.

Turning around, Ilea jogged forward and then immediately blinked to the stalker hound she deemed most injured once she got in range. Her analysis of its condition was confirmed when its head exploded in a red shower of brains and bones as her heel came down on it from above.

Next, she blinked behind the group of undead and scanned the crowd for the most damaged creature. Unable to make out an obvious target, she focused on a one-armed undead that was slightly separated from the others.

If they don't feel pain, I'll just have to incapacitate them...

A kick to the undead's knee snapped its leg in half. It fell face first, and Ilea landed on top of its back. She proceeded to punch its skull with full force. After seven punches, she heard a crack. Another five and the skull gave in with a wet squelch.

"Ew, that's disgusting."

Blinking a short distance away, she shook the goopy, rotten flesh from her hands. Some of the monsters were turning in anger as they realized

there was someone else among them. After all, she had killed one of each group.

“Haha, you’re as stupid as expected,” she laughed as those that had turned toward her were quickly pounced on by their more focused foes and took heavy damage.

“Chaos. Perfect.”

Getting into an offensive stance, Ilea vanished again. She then appeared at the fringes of the battle, sending an already wounded hound flying with a roundhouse kick. Following the monster, she quickly finished it with some more kicks, punches, and the help of the cavern wall.

Twelve to go. Ilea’s blood was pumping. Eager for more, she looked toward the fight.

Unfortunately, the zombies were proving too effective. Three of the hounds had been killed by the undead, not able to handle the tenacity of the unfeeling monsters. *Eight now... damn, don’t kill my experience!*

Ilea appeared behind the line of undead and employed a sweeping low kick that broke several of their legs. Finishing one that didn’t have a hound as an immediate opponent with ten quick, brutal blows to the head, she turned – only to see a rusted blade slam into her stomach.

Fuck.

Kicking at the new undead before her, she pushed herself off the blade and blinked away behind a nearby stalagmite. Still preoccupied with their own battle, no monsters followed.

Falling to one knee, she clutched the bleeding wound in her stomach. Grimacing from the pain, she began to heal. Her mana pulsed into the wound, the gash slowly closing. Half a minute passed before the bleeding stopped.

That took nearly a third of my health... guess that’s the level difference.

The frown on her face that the others, waiting at a safe distance, probably interpreted as a realization of her mortality and frailty was in fact annoyance that in those thirty seconds, another three creatures fell in the fight.

Stupid.

Getting back into the fight, Ilea took more care, watching for attacks and keeping to the edges of the battle. She still received two more cuts and a bite to the shin, but she managed to finish off the remaining enemies.

The battle noise in the cavern had lessened as the enemies fell, leaving a lone, rhythmic thump as Ilea repeatedly stomped the sword-wielding undead that had managed to gut her.

“You”–*stomp*–“stupid”–*stomp*–“fucker!”–*stomp*.

The rib cage finally gave way to her powerful blows, and Ilea stood above it, panting.

“Well, that was... something,” Oliver said, appearing at her side.

“Fucking amazing... Are you looking for some fun later?” Geronimo said. “I’d love to be ravaged like that. Well, not literally.” He looked at her with hungry eyes tinged with a little fear.

“It’s been a while actually. I’ll have to check a few things first though before I ‘get a drink’ with you.”

Winking at the warrior, Ilea gathered the rusty swords of the undead.

Don’t want to get a fantasy STI...

‘ding’ You have killed [Stalker Hound] x3. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ You have killed [Undead Warrior] x6. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 50. 5 stat points awarded.

You have learned the active skill Azarinth Sphere – lvl 1. Perceive everything in a sphere around you while this skill is activated. See without light and through objects or obstructions. The higher the level, the further the sphere reaches.

Category: Aura – Perception Aura

For reaching level 50 in Azarinth Healer and having five class-specific skills in the second tier, you have learned the passive skill Azarinth Perception – lvl 1. Increases your perception and reflexes while fighting. To keep up with your faster-moving body, a healer of Azarinth has to be able to control it.

Category: Body Enhancement

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 51. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 52. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 53. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 54. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Destruction has reached 2nd lvl 18

‘ding’ Blink has reached 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ State of Azarinth has reached 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Azarinth Fighting has reached 2nd lvl 17

Hah, that’s more like it! Ilea thought, grinning at the messages. And finally some new skills! They seem amazing, can’t wait to fight again and test them out.

“The exit’s over here!” Aaron shouted from a little farther down the cavern. “We’re pretty high up though.”

Approaching the group, he looked warily at the corpses. “We’ll have to report the undead. I’ve never heard of any dungeons with both hounds and undead.”

Finishing up with their looting of the battlefield, they stored the skins and swords in some old backpacks they had found in one of the other miner’s shacks on the way there.

Ilea briefly activated her new Azarinth Sphere, immediately feeling a headache coming as she perceived the world not only through her eyes but through the strange magical sensation. A sphere, all around her. She could see the bodies, could see the others moving nearby – from all angles at once. She turned it off again, taking in a deep breath as she closed her eyes.

Wow, alright. This is very strange.

She left her eyes closed and activated the skill once more. It was a little easier on her mind without the simultaneous input of her eyes, but it would

still take some time to get used to.

No color either. It's like some kind of 360-degree sight, but I don't have to focus on anything.

Ilea decided she would activate it from time to time in an effort to get used to the new sensation.

“You guys don’t have to carry that stuff, don’t worry,” she said. They hadn’t wanted to fight, after all, so she wouldn’t make them carry the loot. However, when she tried to take the backpacks from the others, they refused.

Aaron cleared his throat. “I honestly don’t know if we’d have survived this whole ordeal without you. Don’t get me wrong, you’re crazy, and I hope something like this never happens again, but if it does, you’d be my first choice to have my back.”

All of them nodded to her after Aaron’s words. His debt was, of course, a little more personal.

Her healing had saved all of them a lot of pain and potential issues in their time down here, again showing the importance of a healer in any long-term adventuring party.

“No worries guys, thanks for carrying me.”

At least level-wise. I did hold my own pretty well!

“Huh? But we didn’t carry—” Oliver started, but Geronimo stopped him with a pat on the shoulder.

“Let it be man, she’s weird.”

Mistaking her reference for perhaps lunacy, they finally finished packing and left the dungeon. Carefully surveying the surroundings of the entrance, Aaron had Eleonora fly some birds out to check for any danger.

“They didn’t see any scary elves or anything. Yay! Back to the sunshine,” she reported in her usual sing-song voice.

Releasing a breath, Aaron walked through the entrance, his lute ready to block and all his defensive magic activated. After a minute, he signaled for the others to join him.

“Normally, elves would attack immediately. They hate people plundering their oh so holy dungeons, and trust me, they get very emotional about it. Let’s just hope the way to Riverwatch is clear.”

Putting his lute on his back, the rocky surface of Aaron’s skin slowly crumbled away as he started walking.

“If it still exists...” Geronimo noted with a sigh. Nobody replied as they made their way toward Riverwatch. Tension was heavy in the air and they were ready to fight at any moment.

“We shouldn’t be more than a couple hours away from the city. Let’s keep to the forest,” Aaron said. “Eleonora, please send out your birds to warn us about any possible danger... from any direction.”

“Yes, siiir!” The woman exaggerated a salute that made Aaron grind his teeth.

Looking around, the forest seemed to lose density.

I’ll have to ask Aaron how he navigates... there are no stars and I have no idea where we are. He seems to be sure of every step he takes. Maybe it’s just confidence?

“My birds can see the city now,” Eleonora whispered. They were the first words anyone had spoken after two hours of traveling through the forest.

“Can they get closer?” Aaron asked.

The girl shook her head. “I have to follow them.”

Motioning for everyone to lay low, Aaron gestured to Geronimo. “I believe you have the most experience in scouting. Do you mind checking the situation?”

Nodding, Geronimo slowly started walking before he froze, eyes wide with shock.

“Well, I don’t believe scouting will be necessary,” he said.

At least five figures in shadowy black armor appeared around the group. They moved silently, checking the surroundings. One of them floated a little off the ground, a black robe covering a set of worn leathers. A woman in black metal armor looked around with entirely white eyes, a massive battle axe held in one hand. It looked like wisps of shadow emanated from some parts of their armor.

Ilea was the only one moving into a fighting stance, but none of the newcomers were in range for her to use Identify on them.

“Great. The Hand,” Aaron grumbled.

One of the figures chuckled as another moved toward the group. No emotion was shown on his black full plate helmet as he relaxed into a less threatening stance. He had no weapons on him, but he could be identified as a mage.

Creepy... was the only thought going through Ilea’s mind.

“You must be rather on edge,” the figure said. His voice was deep and seemingly just as shadowy as his armor. “Quite a thing to see the healer being the only one ready to attack. A battle healer of all things. Very interesting. Maybe you’ll find your way to Ravenhall in time.”

Two of the newcomers turned her way at the mention of a battle healer. One of them wore a black mask, the hilts of a dozen daggers visible on the belt strapped around her torso.

Glancing around the group from under his full plate helmet, the leader’s gaze rested on Aaron.

“Who are you, and what are you doing here?” the man asked, firmly but not in a threatening manner. Aaron quickly reported everything about their experiences in the past couple of days, to which the shadow-clad man simply nodded.

“We’ll inform the city guard about the losses and where to find anything that’s left,” he said. “The elves left after a couple hours of heavy attack. Some of the city is still burning. More information you’ll have to acquire yourself.”

Aaron nodded. “Good luck on the hunt.”

Taking a last glance at Ilea, the man moved into the forest and vanished. The others were already gone.

Ilea shivered slightly as she finally relaxed. “Creepy troupe.”

Turning to her, Aaron nodded. “The Shadow’s Hand. Elite mercenaries you should hope to never stand against. I hate to say it, but their presence is comforting... although not for Riverwatch.”

Guess their awesome armor justifies the stupid name... I just hope my stuff in the city somehow survived the flames.

Moving on, the group seemed to be much more relaxed. The mercenaries had had quite an influence on the tension that filled the air just a moment ago.

They seem to be quite a big deal around here...

Clearing the woods after another half an hour of walking, the group looked out over a burning Riverwatch. The smell of smoke had started right after they had encountered the Hand.

“Well, that looks fucking awful,” Geronimo’s comment summed up their thoughts. “And I was so looking forward to that tournament. Although I did get to see some of the contestants up close in the end...” Sighing, he

started to walk down toward the city. “Any of you care for a drink? They’re on me.”

* * *

Soon after, the group found themselves in a half-burnt down inn. The first floor was quite drafty after something powerful had taken half of the roof away.

“A miracle that this place is still standing. It’s one of my favorites,” Geronimo commented as he moved towards the counter. “I’ll order the drinks.”

Sitting there, the group enjoyed the rather morbid view over a partially burning city. The house opposite, having been completely destroyed, gave them an unimpeded view of the city, given the tavern was quite a ways up the base of the mountain. The smell of fire and death lingered as their drinks arrived.

“Scuse the wait, lost two of our waitresses in the attack. At least most of the alcohol wasn’t hit.” A tired waiter placed the lemonade in front of Eleonora while the rest received the inn’s own dark beer.

“Cheers, Gary. Appreciate the business still being open.” Raising his beer to the innkeeper, Geronimo gestured to the others. “To surviving... and to one hell of a crazy healer.”

Lifting their mugs in turn, they each took a deep gulp, finally calming down after their rather stressful days underground. After finishing his beer, Oliver got up and bowed to the group.

“It was quite a pleasure to fight at your sides. If you find yourself in need of my services, I’d be honored to give you a more than fair price. I’m afraid I’ll have to go see what’s happening to the tournament and my pay. Thanks for the drink, and good luck everyone.”

They raised their mugs to the pyromancer, and Aaron soon joined him in taking his leave.

“I’ll go see if I can be of use to the city guard. Damn shame. Thanks for the help, everyone. Ilea, I’m in your debt. Find me here or in Dawntree whenever you wish for anything I can provide. I bid you farewell.”

Shaking Aaron’s hand, Ilea got up too.

“I’ll have to go check on my things. You sure none of you want to accompany me back to the mine?” Smiling at them, she didn’t get a response. “And Geronimo... I might come back to you about that *other* offer...” Winking at him, she left right behind Aaron. Nodding to each other one last time, they parted ways.

* * *

Wow, they really hit this city hard.

Ilea wandered slack-jawed through the still smoldering rubble. A lot of the mostly wooden buildings had been burned down, though the majority of the city had been spared. Black soot darkened the stone buildings still standing.

The blood on the streets served to underscore the real impact of the attack and the fact that destroying the city’s architecture hadn’t been the elves’ main goal. Though Ilea was a bit perplexed that she had yet to spot any injured citizens.

Guess I’ll check at the guard center and offer my services. Never a bad idea to build some easy reputation, money, and skill levels. Won’t do to only injure and heal myself. First, though, the mansion.

Arriving at the Forkspear mansion, Ilea was met with utter devastation. She fell to her knees amongst the rubble of the once beautiful building, tasting true despair for the first time in her life.

My beautiful bed... may you rest in peace.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she got back up and started to move the debris. She could only shift some of it with her Aura active though, and when she got to the bottom, she saw only ashes remained of her belongings. She was glad she had stored the scales with the smith.

Let’s hope that smith is still alive...

SEVENTEEN

Bracers and Books

Ilea smiled as she arrived at the still-standing smithy. Earl was working inside and talking to a city guardsman about repairs as Ilea entered.

She leaned back and waited. The shop looked ransacked. Most of the weapons she'd seen only a couple of days ago were gone. Only some older-looking pieces remained.

Guess war isn't the worst for everyone. Earl is making bank.

Finishing his business with the guardsman, Earl looked at her and smiled.

"The healer! You made it! Glad you survived," he exclaimed.

"Been a long few days, glad you made it too. Still working?" she asked, the question kind of answered by the state of his busy shop.

"There's still business to be done, even in this chaos," Earl said, nodding.

Ilea smiled. "I don't suppose you'll have time to be working on anything?"

"You'd be surprised. I honestly lack the metal stock to work on the ridiculous requests that came in from the city and other parties involved in this mess. Without the windpuma or some other decent base material, I'm afraid little will be possible. Little more than what's already been done, that is..."

Breaking out into an enormous smile, the blacksmith placed two beautifully crafted scaled bracers on the table.

"I couldn't resist, and I had some strong hide on hand. I suggest replacing them with windpuma or the like as soon as you get it, but they'll

do the job.”

Her mouth nearly watering, Ilea grabbed the bracers and hugged them close to her chest. Identifying them, her smile grew bigger.

[Bracers of Ash – High Quality] [Additional protection against fire]

“They look fucking awesome, man. I think I love you!”

Earl just laughed as she inspected the bracers. They were long enough to cover nearly all the way up to her elbows but left enough room for her wrists to stay flexible at the front. They were covered in the drake scales, joined together masterfully all the way around, and were fixed to strong leather below.

As Ilea put them on, she was happy to feel they were very smooth on the inside. On the outside, they were a little bit bulky and rough, but that was a given considering what they’d been made with.

“Thought you could use a bit more bulk to block with, and the scales are rigid and extremely tough, perfect for deflecting blades. Just wish I could see you test them out!”

His grin matched her own as he told her about his creation, like a proud parent.

“They’re amazing. Really. What do I owe you?” Ilea asked.

Holding up two fingers, he shrugged. “Two gold would be the price. You get a discount because the work was interesting and you’re turning into a repeat customer. I did need quite a while to make them. Don’t tell the guard I kinda neglected some of their contracts to make this. I love working with scales.” He said the last bit with a whisper.

Handing him the two gold coins, she nodded. “You’ll be able to make more than that as soon as I get you a good hide.”

Seeing the guard Earl had been talking to before leave the shop, Ilea blinked behind the smith and gave him a strong hug, lifting him up a little.

“Thanks for those. It’s good to see you still alive and kicking. I have some other business to attend to now though.”

She blinked back to the doorway and Earl shouted a weak farewell, still catching his breath. Looking back, Ilea managed to catch him nodding and muttering to himself as she left.

“That girl is a fucking monster... Now, about those two hundred new spears and swords. Oh, I have some long days ahead of me...”

But the grin on Earl's face and the glint of gold in his eyes showed how he really felt about this whole ordeal.

Catching up with the guard, Ilea managed to get directions to where the injured were being held. The man pointed her in the general direction of a guard center not too far off before proceeding to yell at her as she jumped onto a partially burnt bakery and began a shortcut across the rooftops.

Apparently, that wasn't allowed.

Still, the guard gave up on his pursuit nearly instantly, muttering about not being paid enough.

On reaching her destination, the guards let Ilea in rather quickly as soon as they identified her class and she informed them that she was here to help with any injured.

The city guard, and members of a task force of adventurers in the city, were organizing the defense, rebuilding, logistics, et cetera, and they assigned Ilea a tent where a number of the injured were being housed. Most of them weren't in a critical condition.

When she finally emerged, hours later, she had a crick in her neck and a bit of a headache, having used up her mana several times. She reported her progress to a guard with gilded armor as he and several other guards were poring over a set of maps of the city.

"Good job, you didn't strike me as so diligent," he muttered, eying her slightly unkempt attire.

What's that supposed to mean?

The guy quickly whispered to one of the normally armored men next to him, and the less fancily dressed guard hurried into the tent Ilea had recently vacated.

"Thanks for the service," the guard said. "The other three healers we have are sleeping off the night shifts they had to pull. I'm sure the injured are glad that they don't have to suffer any longer."

The second guard re-emerged and nodded at his boss. Fancy Armor looked mildly surprised and handed her a small bag with coins.

"Three silver, plus two for a job well done. Mostly for doubting your abilities though. My apologies." He smiled at her and focused on the map in front of him again.

* * *

Guess I'm done here... not as much work as I expected.

Ilea walked through the smoldering city toward where she remembered the bookshop that wasn't Splicer's being. On the way, she bought a couple of things to eat, not really caring exactly what. Standing in front of the thankfully not demolished bookstore, Ilea finished the last of a potato filled with cheese and herbs and entered.

Ah, much fewer people than last time. Let's have a browse then. At least this time I know more or less what I'm looking for.

After nearly four hours and a fee of 20 silver for not buying anything, she approached the counter.

There really are some very interesting classes, styles, and schools of magic. I just hope this rumored 'third class' some of the books mention isn't as mythical as people say and that I get there at some point.

Sadly, Ilea hadn't found anything more interesting than the pyro enhancer class that she'd discovered, but she thought that some of the other styles seemed fun.

Nobody was in front of her at the counter. Only three people, including the attendant, were in the shop at all.

"Business not going well?" she asked as she placed her four books down.

"No, ma'am. After the attack, I'd wager buying expensive skill books isn't on the top priority list for most people."

Ilea nodded at that.

"Any room for haggling, then?" she asked, but the attendant just smiled at her question.

"You're not the best at this, are you?" Sighing, he picked up the first of the books. "Can't really blame you though. We even thought about moving parts of the shop to a slightly more... well... stable city. Considering the value of these books."

He looked over the rest of the books Ilea had put down.

"List price for these'd be 10 gold. I can do 8 gold and 50 silver, but only on the condition that you show me those bracers clad in fire at some point," he said, smirking.

"Sure thing. But I'll need a while for that. As you can see, I'm a bit of a beginner on the subject," she responded, motioning to the book called *Basic Magic Theory*.

"Sure, well, enjoy your reading, and don't get yourself killed out there."

She handed him the money and nodded.

So, got the books. Which means I need to train more and figure things out. Calys mine seems like a good place. I know the monsters, how to fight them, and I know they'll provide really good experience for me. Alright, what else do I need before it's back to that mine?

Leaving the shop and thinking about supplies, she needed more time than expected to find the basic things she was looking for. And it cost more than expected too. Given the dire state of the city, it made sense.

"Thirty silver for a small backpack, some food and another canteen... man."

Looking at her dwindling funds, Ilea decided she would just sleep outside the city so she could start on her way back to Calys mine. She assumed getting permission to go back through the tunnels under the arena would be a pain, nor did she want to see all that carnage again.

She continued on for a few minutes outside the city, finding herself the nicest tree in the vicinity before she jumped up into its branches. Climbing a bit, she got high enough to see the city in the distance.

Most of the fires and smoke she had seen before had already been put out, and the sunset over the previously bustling city in the distance made for a very nice view as she stretched her legs on a large bough of the tree.

"Might as well nap. Let's see if the sphere thingy works while I sleep. But first, I still have a few levels worth of stat points to distribute," she said to herself.

Once she had got out of the dungeon, allocating them hadn't felt like a priority, plus she liked to give the choice at least a little thought.

The zombies could have killed her in a couple of hits, which meant more health would certainly help. But being able to dodge and deliver damage felt just as important to her. Endurance would help too, allowing her to fight for longer without tiring. Given the undead never tired and seemed to take a lot of punishment due to them not feeling pain, she would need to be able to keep attacking for longer if she wanted to beat a large group of the creatures.

Her Vitality was already quite high, so she decided to put fifteen points into Endurance. She split the remaining ten points evenly between Strength and Dexterity.

Vitality: 97

Endurance: 56

Strength: 25

Dexterity: 25

Intelligence: 83

Wisdom: 92

Health: 970/970

Stamina: 544/560

Mana: 883/920

“Next I’ll go back to focusing on Intelligence and Wisdom. I hope this Intelligence thingy also works for witty comebacks.” She paused, raising an eyebrow at the setting suns. “Oh yes, all-seeing gods, I am stranded in a fantasy world with war and monsters and I will use my precious stats to get better comebacks. Deal with it.”

Ilea activated her Azarinth Sphere, hoping to get some levels out of it. Five minutes later, she prepared to sleep. Having checked the mana it took to keep the sphere up for five minutes, she realized it would take a couple more levels in both the skill and Wisdom to be able to maintain it indefinitely. Deactivating the skill again, she closed her eyes as the last light slowly drifted under the horizon to reveal the stars above.

* * *

She woke up only two hours later, but was thoroughly rested. It was still dark, of course.

I mean, it’s nice to wake up so rested after so little sleep, but I kinda miss waking up as the suns come up... maybe I should just go to sleep later.

It was a cloudy night, and mist had gathered in the forest around Riverwatch. That was fortunate, as potential attackers wouldn’t be able to see the glow of her skill from below the tree Ilea was lying on.

She opened her backpack to reveal the books she’d bought with most of her remaining gold, the topmost one being *Basic Magic Theory*.

Guess I’ll start with this one.

She began reading and continued through the night as she had bought three more books as well: *Body Enhancement and You*, *Fire Magic for*

Dummies, and Fire Enhancer: Is the Pain Worth It?

Not having a lot of pages, Ilea burned through all of the books in about six hours, by which point the suns were slowly rising.

Well, Magic Theory didn't help much. Guess I gained that understanding by surviving the Bluemoon Grass. Apparently it wasn't that easy for most mages... or is it magi? Magister? No, wait, that's Latin...

Looking at the last book before putting it back into the backpack, she removed some bread and meat to have breakfast while enjoying the view of the rising suns.

Body enhancement seems very interesting. Didn't learn that much there either because my Aura comes so naturally to me. Guess that's also because of the class and the grass I ate in the ruins. Lucky me. Seems like my class is amazing.

All the examples in the book for class bonuses ranged from 20% to 30% tops for body enhancement. Most also had other bonuses such as elemental damage bonuses, cast time bonuses, and various resistances.

My class only has three bonuses, although those three are so good I don't really care about any others.

The fire magic book had explained different ways to look at fire based on different religions, theories by archmages, and even science-related explanations for different abilities and skills. Apparently, it was paramount to have a great understanding of fire, from different viewpoints, to become a fire mage.

The way mana was released in fire magic was also a little different than the spells Ilea used in her Azarinth Healer casting. The Azarinth style was more explosive, be it the healing spells or the Aura. Once activated, it was certainly controlled, but the initial activation of the skills was rather intense.

Fire apparently needed a more gradual buildup, at least until the mage achieved much better control. That was why having a cast time reduction bonus was important to them.

Apparently, the speed of Ilea's spell activation was incredibly high for her level. The body enhancement book explained that a little though, as it had said body enhancements and the often-associated Aura spells were much faster. It was also theorized that manipulating your body, which was already used to your particular mana type and its flow, was easier than creating a ball of fire in the air in front of you.

Ilea took most of the theories in the books with a grain of salt. In a world where personal power was this important and magic books were this expensive, there was probably quite a bit of non-shared knowledge out there.

Doesn't matter, as long as I learn how to set myself aflame... in a non-dying way.

At the start of each book, it was mentioned that after the book had been read for the first time, it would dissolve within a week so that reselling or simply gifting it to another person wasn't possible.

Couldn't I just copy the knowledge into another book? Eh, maybe there are laws or something, like with piracy on Earth. Seems a bit difficult to enforce though. They do have libraries here, just not for stuff like this I guess.

Getting up to stretch, Ilea realized that most of the mist had been burned off by the suns.

“Back to grinding it is then. This time, no distractions.”

Smashing her fists together, she jumped off the tree with her backpack in tow and ran at nearly full speed until she reached the mine entrance.

Back to the underground, she thought as she entered. The big room she had fought in as her old group had left was now empty.

Guess I'll just walk around exploring.

Ilea had a crude map on a piece of half-burnt paper that she had copied from Geronimo as he was scribbling down the information they had gathered up until the night before they left. She'd basically doodled some tunnels and would continue to occasionally do so as she explored, not trying too hard to maintain scale or accuracy.

There were two ways to go from the big room, and Ilea chose the one she hadn't come from with her party before. It didn't take long to find her first encounter.

[Undead Warrior – lvl ??]

There were two of them slowly shambling her way, holding crude rusty swords in their rotten hands.

Well, here goes nothing. Let's try the new skills I got... The passive should activate automatically once I fight.

Activating both State of Azarinth and Sphere of Azarinth, she blinked right behind the undead that was further away, spinning into a sweep kick. The zombie crashed to the cave floor, one of its legs cracking in the process.

The second undead reacted to the sound and slowly turned toward Ilea, but not before she stomped on the other leg of her downed enemy. It seemed like the zombies were moving even more slowly than usual. Either that or her brain was processing the battle more quickly. She could see their actions as if she was reading a book. It was all calm and measured rather than chaotic.

I still have time before it reaches me. Is this the perception skill I got?

She also found her 'sphere vision' much easier to process, despite the discomfort of seeing in all directions at once. Eventually, she had to accept it as more of a 'sixth sense' than a form of sight. Something she felt or perceived rather than 'saw'.

Not wasting any time, Ilea jumped up and crashed down with a full Destruction-powered stomp on the first undead's head. A slight crack was heard, but the head hadn't given out yet. Four more stomps and mushy flesh covered the ground.

Still fucking gross.

By then, the second undead had reached her. Dodging a swing that felt far too slow, she punched the sword arm of her adversary upward, cracking some bones as it flew above her head.

It dropped its weapon, and Ilea continued with her proven method of leg breaking. She blinked behind the undead, dodging the wild flailing of her foe, and broke both of its shins with swift kicks. The rest of the fight went much like the one with the first undead, and a couple of stomps on its head soon finished it off.

'ding' You have killed [Undead Warrior – lvl 102]. For killing an adversary 40 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 55. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Azarinth Perception has reached lvl 3

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere has reached lvl 2

Well, that was easy.

Deactivating the sphere, Ilea realized how dark it was inside the cavern. *I saw them perfectly fine though... must be the skill.* Activating it again, she perceived the broken bodies of the un-undead in her radius perfectly.

It's not exactly sight, but I know where they are. I'd argue it's better than sight. I can also perceive what's behind them, and I have no blind spots... this skill is phenomenal. Then again, it was the first skill I got in the class in a while, and that was at level 50. Still, it costs quite a bit of mana... Guess it'll change as I level it.

She dumped her newly gained stat points into Intelligence. With her new enhanced perception, she doubted she would be getting hit very often.

Having allocated her points, she grabbed the two rusty swords but then thought better of it, throwing them away.

This is stupid. I don't want to gather this rusty junk and carry it around for the scrap money I'll get.

If I continue like this, I'll get better stuff to sell at one point or another. Plus, the only thing I need money for is food, books, and maybe stuff from Earl.

Looking at her bracers, she realized that she hadn't used them at all in the fight and grinned before descending deeper into the dungeon.

EIGHTEEN

Through the Fire and Flames

Nearly five hours later, Ilea had fought seven stalker hounds and ten undead warriors and reached level 62 in her class. She continued to focus on her four core stats and could feel herself growing stronger. The fights usually didn't last long; her sphere and perception skill made them too easy.

Even the quicker hounds weren't much of a challenge as she could 'see' behind her and react much faster than before. It took quite a few hits for the kills – which was understandable due to her lower level – but most of her time was simply spent searching for more enemies to fight as she explored the enormous cavern system.

Her skills grew steadily as well. The ones in the second tier progressed painfully slowly, but still presumably much faster than most other adventurers leveled theirs. Her two new skills leveled rapidly, and she noticed the difference after every fight, making them even easier.

Taking a break after her latest fight, Ilea took a bite of bread and sat down between the two stalker hounds she had slaughtered without so much as a scratch on herself.

I have to be careful not to become overconfident, lest I forget how easily these creatures could rip me apart if I make a mistake. Well, at this point, maybe not these exact creatures, but there's enough out there that could end me, I'll bet. I probably won't stay here long enough to reach level 100 though. That would take too long, and fighting these beasts is already not very exciting anymore.

Thinking she should take a break, Ilea walked back to one of the miner's stations she had passed half an hour before and settled down there.

There were plenty of dusty camping materials still there, and she started by making a fire. It only took her a few minutes to get a nice cheery blaze going.

Now to apply what I've learned.

She watched the fire, thinking about all the different interpretations she'd read about in the fire magic book. On a hunch, she closed her eyes and activated her sphere, watching the fire closely in its entirety.

Ten minutes later, she also activated Magic Perception, noticing that it affected her sphere too. She sat there with closed eyes, sensing how the mana flowed within and around the fire, and soon she tried to emulate a similar flow in herself.

The flame flickered as it consumed the wood, feeding on it and growing like a living thing. When the fuel ran low, the flame guttered, rising greedily when another log was added. Ilea began to attune more and more to the nature of the flames, or perhaps she was just turning mad. Minutes passed, then hours, as she sat there totally immersed in the flickering flames.

She had to take several pauses, meditating when her mana ran out. Luckily, there was enough wood stored up to keep the fire going for another day at least. After hours of silent study, Ilea had the flow down. She could almost predict the movement of the crackling flames.

Using that knowledge, she thought about forming a flame atop her palm. The mana flowed out of her, and a tiny spark of flame came into existence. Then it vanished just as quickly as it had appeared. Ilea doubted she would've even noticed it had it not been for her sphere.

She slowly stood up and stretched, breaking out of her meditative state after the better part of a day had passed.

"Fuck yeah!" Pumping her fist into the air, the blue light of her tattoos flared up.

She sat down again to eat a little of her food, then she set it aside to continue. She thought about going out of the cave to work, as the view was nicer, but decided against it as more distractions meant less focus.

I'll need to concentrate. Getting the second class has priority. If I can level both classes in this dungeon, I'll grow insanely fast in strength.

No more getting beat up by elves.

Next time, my leg will crack the elf's skull...

* * *

Days passed. Ilea didn't know how many as there was no sunlight, but she was finding she needed less and less sleep. When her food ran out, she would go out into the forest surrounding the caves to hunt wild animals and forage for berries and fruits.

There wasn't much available. Fall was slowly drifting over Elos, turning the scenery from green to brown. Ilea simply continued with her meditations, and her control over the flow of her mana got better and better. The flame lasted nearly nine seconds in her hand now before it snuffed out.

What felt like weeks passed like this. Ilea made steady incremental progress until, finally, after she had managed to keep her flame alive for half a minute, the long-awaited message appeared before her.

'ding' You have met the requirements for a class change: Fire Mage – Manipulated mana into fire for more than thirty seconds. Basic understanding of fire.

The Fire Mage is the most basic of fire-based mages. She controls the flames and leaves only ash in her wake.

Would you like to change to this class? Bonuses and skills will be applied after doing so.

Attention: You only have one class slot free. Choose wisely.

Ilea simply confirmed the choice in her head, and then more information popped up.

New Class: Fire Mage

Vitality +5

Intelligence +10

Wisdom +10

Fire magic is cast 50% faster

Fire magic is 25% stronger

You gain the general skill Heat Resistance

Your mana regeneration is increased by 20% around fire

Skills gained in Fire Mage:

Active: Flame – lvl 1:

Create a flame from your mana to attack your enemies or heat a pot. You can control the flame through your fire manipulation.

Category: Projectile Magic – Area of Effect

Passive: Fire Manipulation – lvl 1:

Your control over fire increases dramatically. Bend it to your wishes and burn whatever lies before you.

Category: Body Enhancement

Failed to learn Heat Resistance (skill already available).

“I did it!”

Ilea jumped up and down a bit before carefully reading through the descriptions. Her elation dimmed a little – the bonuses weren’t even close to as good as those of an Azarinth Healer, and she hadn’t gained nearly as many skills.

Well, hopefully I’ll learn more skills from leveling or experimenting. Should be the case with a more normal class.

A flame burst from her hand, much brighter and stronger than any she had conjured before, and she moved it easily from hand to hand. She could even make it float through the air over a very short distance.

I wonder if the Azarinth Healer bonus applies to this class’s skills as well? If so, I can’t wait for the body enhancement bonuses! My power will multiply...

The flame still dancing about her, she grinned and checked out all her current stats.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 62

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 19

- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 10

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 16

- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 11

- *Active: Azarinth Sphere – lvl 9*
- *Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 17*
- *Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 9*
- *Passive: Azarinth Perception – lvl 6*
- *Passive: Free Slot*

Class 2: Fire Mage – lvl 1

- *Active: Flame – lvl 1*
- *Active: Free Slot*
- *Active: Free Slot*
- *Active: Free Slot*
- *Active: Free Slot*
- *Passive: Fire Manipulation – lvl 1*
- *Passive: Free Slot*
- *Passive: Free Slot*
- *Passive: Free Slot*
- *Passive: Free Slot*

General Skills:

- *Elos Standard language – lvl 5*
- *Identify – lvl 3*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 4*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 7*
- *Pain Tolerance – lvl 1*

Status:

Vitality: 117

Endurance: 61

Strength: 25

Dexterity: 25

Intelligence: 103

Wisdom: 112

Health: 1003/1170

Stamina: 550/610
Mana: 609/1120

Well that looks pretty good compared to when I arrived in this shithole, though I have to say I'm starting to like it. It's like a fun shithole... wait, that sounds wrong.

She stopped her train of thought and focused on the task at hand, which was to evolve the fire mage class into the fire enhancer class.

Several methods on how to do this were mentioned in the fire enhancer book. Some were fast but dangerous, while others were slower and safer. Ilea figured no one would be surprised about which method she intended to choose.

So, how do I set myself on fire...?

Continuing her meditations, she focused on the mana flow inside of her again. It was similar to before and the Fire Manipulation skill definitely helped, even internally. The difference now was that instead of conjuring a flame above her palm, which was the natural way the mana tried to exit her once she willed it, she had to get the mana out all over her body. All at once.

The book mentioned pain – a lot of it – but it was definitely the fastest and easiest method to access an enhancer class. Having a healer on hand was advised, so Ilea had already fulfilled that requirement.

Oh boy... increased Pain Tolerance, here I come!

* * *

Two undead warriors shuffled through the dark cave, unmoved by the distant screaming. Light flickered at the end of their tunnel but they paid it no heed. Unfeeling and uncaring, they trotted on.

A stalker hound slowly crept past them, a glint of fear in its eyes. The screams had terrorized its pack for nearly a week now already.

Getting closer to the noise, the hound could make out a bright figure. Clad in flame, the creature buckled to its knees, holding its head with fiery arms. The screams soon turned into a hoarse chuckle. Then the light faded and its skin began to regenerate, eyes filled empty sockets, and raven black hair grew at an unnatural speed from the creature's head.

After just half a minute, a naked woman stood where the fire-wreathed creature had knelt before. Her blue eyes twinkled in the light of the campfire in front of her as she laughed and screamed. A hint of madness danced in her eyes.

The hound turned and fled.

* * *

“I did it! Finally! Fuck you, fire! I hate you!” Ilea screamed at the receding flames.

Calming down, she remembered she’d received numerous messages. She had willed a lot away shortly after starting her second phase of meditation because they would have been distracting. It wasn’t like she would have been able to read anything properly with the pain and exhaustion anyway.

Sleep then pain, sleep then pain...

The only respite she’d had was when she used her Meditation skill each time her mana ran out. As time had passed, though, the pain had decreased. Eventually, being on fire barely hurt more than having a deep cut in her arm. Weirdly, as of a little while ago, she hadn’t felt any pain at all, but she’d kept screaming out of habit.

Ilea activated her notifications again and read through what she had gained.

‘ding’ Meditation has reached 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Pain Tolerance has reached 2nd lvl 1

She skipped over the familiar explanation about Pain Tolerance and focused on the new information.

2nd stage: You’ve been through more pain than most. You are now able to completely turn off your perception of pain at will. Be wary, though, as there is a reason pain exists.

“Well perfect timing there, assholes!” she shouted up at the sky. The gods were laughing. At least, that was what she thought.

‘ding’ Fire Manipulation has reached lvl 10

‘ding’ Fire Mage has reached level 2. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Fire Mage has reached level 3. 5 stat points awarded.

So I get the same amount of stat points... which means that when I stood my ground when fighting the hounds with the others in that makeshift party, I had half of their status points?

Ilea was a bit overwhelmed by what that meant but smiled in the end, liking her main class even more.

She added the additional stats into Endurance as it was lagging behind a little, given her class bonuses never seemed to target it.

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Fire Mage becomes Fire Enhancer – Become one with the flame. Clad your body in fire for more than ten minutes while being in control of the flames. Have Fire Manipulation at level 10 or higher.

The Fire Enhancer becomes one with the flame. She controls the flames to strengthen her own body and abilities. Fire flows within her blood.

Would you like to evolve your Fire Mage class to Fire Enhancer? No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Confirming the change, another window appeared.

Class Change: Fire Mage becomes Fire Enhancer

Vitality +5

Strength + 5

Dexterity + 5

Intelligence +10

Wisdom +10

Fire magic is cast 50% faster

Fire magic is 25% stronger

Body enhancement magic is improved by 20%

Failed to learn Heat Resistance (Skill already unlocked)

Your mana regeneration is increased by 50% around fire

Skills gained in Fire Enhancer:

Active: Body of Flame – lvl 1:

Clad yourself in flames, raising your resilience, speed, and strength by 20% [49% after bonuses]

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement – Fire magic

“There goes the multiplier. Now only one question remains...”

Activating Body of Flame, wisps of fire gathered around her and moved slowly in an ever-changing pattern a couple of millimeters away from her body. She looked at her hands and felt the power flow through her, boiling hot.

Not as much as State of Azarinth, but still around half, more with both of the multipliers. Now let's see if it works...

Behind the fiery wisps, her blue tattoos began to shine on her still naked body. Even to her own enhanced perception, her body seemed to vanish before, a split second later, she reappeared and drove her fist into the cave wall. Ilea hadn't used her Blink spell, but with both her auras active and the new bonuses from the Fire Enhancer class, she had become nearly sixty percent stronger and faster.

The walls shook from the impact, and rubble started to fall. *Oh fuck.*

Blinking to get her backpack and clothes, Ilea appeared outside the miner station. The ceiling of the room she had once occupied had now collapsed, but the larger tunnel walls held. They had been constructed to be incredibly sturdy. It was quite surprising that Ilea had managed to create enough force to make even parts of the mine cave in.

I feel fucking amazing...

She slowly breathed out. The auras weren't multiplicative with each other but additive, which meant her State of Azarinth, which gave roughly a 113% increase in strength, resilience, and speed, and her Body of Flame,

which gave roughly 50%, together came out at 163%, which was an incredible bonus.

Considering the State of Azarinth started with a 35% bonus and Body of Flame started with 20%, it was pretty amazing. Given the skills affected her sturdiness, speed, and strength, investing more stat points into those areas would make her power skyrocket.

Although Intelligence does make my Destruction spell make more boom... and seems to power up my auras too. I might still add some points into Strength and Dexterity to gain more from my auras though. One point in Dexterity will equal nearly three points while all auras are active. But enough stats and points, it's finally time to...

“Smash!”

Her fists collided as she spoke, a light shockwave emanating from them.

NINETEEN

The Bigger They Are

Booms echoed through the cave as the battle-crazed woman that Ilea had become appeared and disappeared, leaving behind cracks and craters on the walls around her.

I'm just glad my clothes don't burn up while using Body of Flame.

It turned out that the fiery wisps around her were mostly for show as they didn't even generate much noticeable heat besides a vaguely pleasant warmth. Laughing, Ilea stopped her antics to test her newfound power.

"Are you ready, boys?!" Screaming into the dark tunnel before her, she started into a sprint. "Here comes *Mama!*" Ilea imagined a shiver running through all stalker hounds remaining in the dungeon.

Which made it all the more anticlimactic when she didn't find any enemies after running through about thirty different tunnels. Her glow of excitement dimmed a little, and a slight annoyance crept over her.

Finally, she thought, as she came upon a group of three stalker hounds.

She blinked into their midst and kicked one in its side with the full power of all her skills combined. A reassuring crack resounded through the cave. Another Blink, and Ilea delivered a punch into the snout of another hound while her first victim was still flying toward the nearby wall.

Ten punches later, the hounds – which hadn't known what had hit them – were no more.

"I'm amazing! Did anyone see that?"

Nobody had, of course, and so she went on, deeper and deeper into the cave system. Neither the undead warriors nor the stalker hounds posed a threat to her anymore. Larger groups were whittled down carefully while

smaller groups or single enemies were steamrolled by her epic Fire Enhancer skills.

Stopping sometimes to eat or sleep for an hour or two, her pace continued like this for several sleeps. On the seventh day, she found something abnormal. Or maybe it was the tenth day, Ilea wasn't sure.

She had arrived in a much wider area than any of the tunnels before. It was a high-reaching cavern, water dripping from stalactites above. And in the middle of the cave, nearly one hundred meters away, lay something spectacular. Well, most would have called it terrifying. But to Ilea and her newly enhanced powers, it felt like a beautiful gift.

The hound was ink black, its hide thick and matted, with bulging muscles beneath. Claws the size of daggers extended from each massive paw. Its eyes were dark voids, but even so, Ilea could see a feral intelligence in them that she had not noticed with the other creatures. She could feel the hairs on her neck stand up as she felt the magic all around. The monster was surrounded by an air of strength and power.

Perfect.

She had gained several levels in both her classes in the past week or so, and her Fire Enhancer class had been climbing at an unusual speed. Considering that even her main class was much lower-leveled than her enemies, her second class's growth was absurd.

She stared at the massive ten-meter-long hound before her with a manic smile on her face. A normal, reasonable person would need some justification to approach something like that, even with Ilea's lust for battle. But Ilea was not a normal, reasonable person.

[Alpha Stalker Hound – lvl ??]

Seeing that she couldn't identify the enemy at her level wasn't a surprise to Ilea. Even normal stalker hounds were outside her Identify range.

Not for long, though. As her Azarinth Healer class had reached level 70 not long ago, this thought wasn't a stretch.

As Ilea closed in on the Alpha, she started to emit a faint blue light. This was soon joined by a cloak of fiery wisps. She cracked her knuckles and neck.

The Alpha sniffed the air and lifted its head, growling at the slowly approaching woman before it. A snack, perhaps, delivered straight to its maw. How lovely. Apparently feeling no danger from the approaching human, the Alpha got up and growled at her. The level difference was obvious.

Had its instincts been only a little bit more honed, it would've noticed something was wrong. Ilea guessed that months without anybody challenging him had made the Alpha complacent and sure of itself.

"Let's begin, then," Ilea said as she activated Azarinth Sphere and started running. The Alpha growled and started running as well, only slightly faster than her.

A snap of the creature's immense maw met nothing but air as a sudden impact buckled its right hind leg. Kicking the Alpha left Ilea with a slight throb in her leg, like she had hit steel. Choosing not to remove the pain with her Pain Tolerance skill, she blinked to the other side of her opponent just as the hound's teeth closed right where she had stood seconds before.

Another kick hit the hound's left hind leg. Following up her attack by dodging the hound's retaliatory kick, Ilea found herself ducking below it. Punching upward with her right arm, she found its belly to be much less resistant than its hide-covered legs.

Before the Alpha could squash her with its weight, she blinked out in front of the hound. Having predicted its movements, she landed a punch right on its snout. The hound reeled back to roar at her.

You have heard the Alpha Hound's roar, you are paralyzed for 3 seconds!

She had barely read the message when a swipe of the hound's front paw sent Ilea flying. Landing with a crash twenty meters away, she groaned as blood pooled below her. She was a ragged mess of claw gashes and crushed ribs.

Closing the wounds on her arms and torso, she waited on the ground and continued healing the internal damage.

Those claws are sharp...

The pain was dulled by her tolerance but she still chose not to completely eradicate it. The beast, seemingly content in its victory, approached slowly, giving Ilea precious seconds to work on the damage.

Just when the hound entered her sphere of perception, she blinked in front of it and hit its throat with all she had. Her right arm was at least in good enough shape to punch, and her buffs helped her ignore the still-healing wounds.

The beast recoiled as another hit dug into its tender throat.

No more roaring, my little friend, she thought as she blinked to dodge a swipe of its paw. Kicking into its hind legs again, she managed to break one after the third hit.

The Alpha was slow to respond, still reeling from its wounded throat. A tail swipe sent Ilea tumbling, but this time she landed on her feet, skidding only a couple of meters.

The two stared at each other as the monster turned fully toward her. Both were panting, blood leaking out of their mouths.

Every second that they didn't move, Ilea kept healing. Her unnatural health recovery combined with her Reconstruction magic put her at a massive advantage in this fight.

Seeing as her mana was still relatively high, Ilea also kept up her buffs to be able to respond quickly. As if to justify her decision, she suddenly felt a burst of mana below her and blinked away just as a spike of earth punctured the air.

Starting to run, Ilea weaved back and forth as the Alpha stared at her with concentration in its eyes. *A monster like this having earth magic at its disposal seems kinda unfair.*

Dodging another three spikes, the hound seemed to become irritated that its prey was still moving. Advancing on her, another spike found only air. But this time, Ilea didn't just dodge.

Just as the Alpha turned its head to see where its prey had escaped to, Ilea was already tugging on its tail. With all her strength, Ilea dragged the weakened Alpha and swung its massive form.

Sadly, the result was less impressive than she had hoped for as the beast only slid for a couple of meters on the ground before stopping on its feet.

Guess stuff like that has to wait for a bit longer... or for when my enemies weigh less than a fucking tank.

Her move had more of an impact than she thought though. Her humiliation of the great beast seemed to spark something primal in the Alpha. It didn't seem used to being thrown around, not even over such a

small distance. For the first time, Ilea saw fear in the hound's large black eyes.

Spikes of earth emerged all around Ilea and she dodged them as fast as she could, some even scratching her slightly. The beast was upon her as still more spikes emerged before it swiped at her with its long claws.

Ilea blinked behind the Alpha's left paw and punched into its ribcage. Three more punches landed as she continued moving down the length of the beast before it jumped back. Blinking in front of it again, she punched its face and dodged its nail-like teeth before delivering a crushing uppercut into the behemoth's jaw.

Satisfied at the sharp, cracking sound of bone splintering, Ilea darted ahead and stomped on the beast's front leg. The physical damage alone wouldn't have been much of an issue for the monster, but her mana-enhanced punches and kicks that used her Destruction skill were starting to wear on the Alpha.

Howling in pain, the hound started thrashing, trying to squash the annoying human with its weight and size alone. This didn't pose much of a threat to Ilea though, as her Azarinth Sphere allowed her to see just when and where to dodge.

The faster and more calculated strikes of its paws before had been much harder to dodge – but this was child's play. The wild attacks continued for nearly fifteen seconds as the beast continuously flailed around while Ilea circled its massive form to land strike upon strike on the wounded beast.

Trying to get up and use its paws again, the hound stopped thrashing. Ilea was relentless though, and she didn't stop delivering pain and breaking bones as the creature tried to stand. Its movements were slowed massively by blood loss and internal damage now. It could no longer keep up with her.

Ilea continued her barrage. Not being fooled by the beast's weakness, she stayed focused and didn't get too overconfident. Every strike was calculated for maximum damage. But before, she had only been able to deliver three blows before dodging the beast's retaliation. Now she could deliver five.

With a last blink right in front of the hound's head, she spun and delivered a kick with her heel, the power of her whole body and buffs behind it, right onto the Alpha's skull. This crack was louder than the others, and the Alpha went down.

Growling and gurgling on the ground, its eyes stared defiantly up at her. Another two fully powered stomps on the beast's skull ended its life.

Standing there in the dark and now silent cave, a steaming pool of blood forming around the beast's smashed skull, Ilea shivered. A combination of pain, excitement, happiness, fear, and revulsion came over her.

Pain because of the wounds, which were still healing but now with less and less adrenaline pumping through her body. Excitement because of her massive increase in abilities and future prospects. Happiness at being able to experience a fight like that and live. At being able to call herself strong.

Fear at what she had become. At how much she had changed since coming here to this horrible yet beautiful world. At being able to kill without blinking an eye. Yes, it had been a monster, but there had been intelligence in its eyes, and she knew she would've done the same to a human trying to kill her. Revulsion at the blood and gore around her. She was getting used to it, but the smell sometimes still made her a little nauseous.

An incredible mix of feelings, she thought as the emotions gradually passed and left her in a contemplative state. Smiling and looking down at the monster she had fought and killed, she bowed and closed its eyes – or what remained of them, at least.

“Thank you,” she said.

TWENTY

Superhero Landing

‘ding’ You have defeated the [Alpha Stalker Hound – lvl 146]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 71. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 72. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere has reached 2nd lvl 1

Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 1

1st stage: Perceive everything in a sphere around you while this skill is activated. See without light and through objects or obstructions. The higher the level, the further the sphere reaches.

2nd stage: While your sphere is active, all other senses are immensely heightened. Sounds and smells within your sphere will rarely go unnoticed. You may choose which senses are enhanced while the sphere is active.

Category: Aura – Perception Aura

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 40. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 44. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ A new skill is available for Fire Enhancer

The massive amount of dings and new information coming from her sphere skill woke Ilea from her thoughtful state. Immediately repulsed by the smell of death and gore around her, she found she could reduce the effect by simply willing it.

So that’s the 2nd stage of Azarinth Sphere. I’ve got more testing to do... Quite the haul for defeating a single enemy.

Seeing as she had been alone and less than half the creature’s level, most people would call her insane and the reward not at all worth it for the risk she’d taken, but she was not most people.

Walking away from the corpse, she sat down on a stone and leaned against the wall of the cave, still healing herself.

She also saw there was a new Fire Enchanter skill available from the recent level-up. So far, none of the early-level skills offered had meshed with her fighting style, so she still had quite a few slots available.

Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1:

You are able to see the sources of heat around you. You may disable this ability at will. The distance, penetrative power, and accuracy of this skill increase with each level.

Category: Body Enhancement

Would you like to learn this skill?

Hmm, that one might actually be useful.

She immediately chose and activated it. The only sources of heat around her were herself and the slowly cooling body of the Alpha hound she had killed a couple of minutes prior.

She pumped her new stat points into the usual places, raising her Strength and Dexterity until the impact of her Aura would bring them to an acceptable level. Checking her status, she sighed with a smile on her face.

It’s getting complicated... I’m glad the values aren’t in the tens of thousands though. Can’t imagine the skill management a dragon or god

would need...

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 72

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 13***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 14***
- Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 1***
- Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 7***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 11***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – lvl 18***
- Passive: Free Slot***

Class 2: Fire Enhancer – lvl 44

- Active: Flame – lvl 1***
- Active: Body of Flame – lvl 8***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Passive: Fire Manipulation – lvl 12***
- Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5***
- Identify – lvl 3***
- Meditation – 2nd lvl 12***
- Poison Resistance – lvl 16***
- Heat Resistance – lvl 7***
- Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 1***

Status:
Vitality: 172
Endurance: 106
Strength: 67
Dexterity: 68
Intelligence: 148
Wisdom: 157

Health: 933/1720
Stamina: 828/1060
Mana: 743/1570

Ilea healed herself fully before going back to her last resting place, where she collected her backpack before returning to the cave with the Alpha's corpse.

Should've gotten a knife to get some of the materials off that monster, she thought, but then realized she likely wouldn't have been able to get a lot off with a knife anyway. Most of the creature was crushed or too hard to slice through with a simple knife.

Could you not have dropped me a magical dagger or something?

Chewing on a piece of stale bread, she started moving the creature out of the way to see if any materials or items had been dropped. The creatures she fought previously hadn't, but her RPG knowledge told her that it would sometimes happen in dungeons.

The boss is supposed to drop something at least, come on...

After wading through the ton of flesh and bones, she found nothing of use.

Ok, so no loot drops in this world. I guess it would have been weird if the big dog had been carrying a magic dagger...

Leaving the broken body behind, Ilea checked the rest of the cave. There wasn't a lot of light, but with her advanced senses, it wasn't difficult to see. At the back of the cave were two openings. Choosing one at random, Ilea walked for around ten minutes before the floor fell sharply away.

Not seeing the ground, she decided she should check out the other opening before jumping down.

Before I go though... Getting out her crude map of the Calys mine, she began updating it with a piece of coal. *I hope this stuff doesn't smudge too*

badly.

Heading back to the cavern, she walked down the other passage and quickly reached what seemed to be the den of the Alpha hound. The cave was littered with skeletons and gnawed corpses of all kinds.

“Damn, I’d expected a baby hound or something... this is just creepy.” Ilea’s voice filled the chamber as she tried to disperse the ominous feeling the various dead creatures gave off.

She shrugged and started to go through the lot. The gear that had once belonged to the unfortunate souls now occupying this old cave left much to be desired. Some coins did find their way into her pockets though. Nearly fifty silver.

Most of the items that had fallen from the hound’s previous victims were broken, rotten, or crumbling to dust. But one was untouched. A small dark silver necklace. On it was a roundish form of dark silver lines. She used Identify on the item.

[Hound Master’s Trinket – Rare Quality] – Increased affinity with canines

“Well that’s kinda cool... I wonder how that effect is practically applied. Seems it didn’t help the previous owner much though.”

She had been told by the girl in the library that magical items were pretty rare, and she already held three items with magical effects on them. Admittedly they weren’t incredibly impressive, but still.

Taking one of the better-looking swords, she returned to the main cavern and tried to cut at the more intact parts of the Alpha – but soon considered her efforts to be fruitless. Keeping the old sword, she walked back to the hole she had found earlier at the end of the first passage.

“And down you go...”

Letting the sword fall, she counted the seconds until she heard a clang.

Well, I still have no idea exactly how far that is, but hey, I can heal myself, and I’ve done far more reckless shit than this recently...

Activating her skill set again, she simply dropped down. A couple of seconds later, she landed in a crouch and a wave of dust spread out around her. Her enhanced body hadn’t even flinched at the impact. Even the crouch might have been excessive.

“Wow, that was cool,” she whispered. “Did anybody see... no, of course you didn’t.”

Standing up and looking around her, Ilea’s gaze fell on the bewildered face of a robed man. Their eyes met, and while she cocked her head to the side, his eyes widened in shock.

“So somebody *did* see that badass landing?”

The man’s eyes suddenly focused, and he jumped back while magic started to gather around him.

[Mage – lvl ??]

“Hey man, no need to be so defensive. A simple rating out of ten would be fine,” she said. “I’m not here to fight you... but if you want to, I’m up for it.”

* * *

Indra Sekki couldn’t believe his eyes. Just a moment ago, he had been minding his own business, on his way to the common hall, when he had heard the clattering of metal behind him. A sword had fallen from above, and shortly thereafter, a cloaked figure with shining blue tattoos and flames playing around her body had landed close to where the blade lay.

[Battle Healer – lvl 72]

A healer, hmm? Must’ve gotten separated from her party... why the sword then?

But then the words coming out of her mouth gave him pause. She did not appear hostile.

“Well, are you gonna do something or not? ’Cause if not, I have some questions. Where are we? This is still the Calys mine, right?” the woman said.

Indra stopped moving. His posture relaxed, but he kept a bit of the mana ready.

“Who are you? And what are you doing in the domain of the Vultures?” He gave it a good amount of gravitas. That name would surely make her

think twice about accosting him. It had taken them ages to pick it.

“Vultures? Never heard of ya, no offense. This is your domain? You live underground?”

Indra sighed. Where was the fun in having a secret society if no one knew about you?

“None taken. We’re pretty new at this. But where are my manners? My name is Indra, journeyman necromancer of the Vultures Brotherhood.”

Bother. Probably shouldn’t have said that... but social interactions require introductions. Rules are important. Like proper filing systems.

He tensed himself for her reaction, ready to defend himself when she inevitably attacked.

“Nice to meet you, Indra. Guess you being a necromancer sort of explains why you’re living underground. Isn’t that stuff illegal? Oh well... Do you sell any food down here? I’m really sick of stalker hound at this point.”

She eats the stalker hounds? And... most people would run away or attack after hearing about practitioners of the dark arts. And of course she’s asking about food. These adventurers are so simple-minded. What a happy-go-lucky fool I’ve stumbled into here. Best take her back to the headquarters and let the others decide what to do with her.

“Yes, we do have some food. Necromancy is indeed quite ‘illegal’ as you put it. And yes, that is part of why we live down here. How did you even get here? There’s only one way into this cave, and it’s heavily guarded.”

“Fought the Alpha and jumped down. My name is Ilea, by the way. And I’m intrigued and tempted by this food you say you have. Hope it’s not brains or something.”

She went to pick up the sword as Indra raised his brows.

She fought the Alpha?

* * *

I guess being necromancers means these people might be evil? I’ll check them out further though, if I can. Don’t want to antagonize people unnecessarily. After all, they might have good food or information I can use.

“Y... you fought... the Alpha?” The mage seemed frozen yet again, half-turned away from Ilea. “We sent dozens of undead in there to try and kill that creature... and she... alone?” Indra whispered the last part to himself.

Ilea caught all of it with her enhanced senses, given the necromancer was in the radius of her Azarinth Sphere.

I can probably take this guy. But this explains why the undead are here... though I guess I could've come to that conclusion myself.

“Yeah, I got separated from my group and stumbled upon it. Managed to get away in the end, but the only way I could go was down here.”

Why not give them a bit of misdirection just in case... and maybe some valuable information as a greeting offer.

“The others mentioned they'd report the undead in the city,” Ilea continued. “Just thought I'd let you know. Maybe you want to call the zombos back from the above parts of the cave?”

That seemed to get Indra's attention again.

“Ah, yes, yes... well, it was only a matter of time. We are relatively well hidden though and undead can appear naturally, so it shouldn't be much of a problem. Now, you mentioned food. I was on my way to the common room when you... fell. Maybe you want to accompany me there and we can discuss... our... further relations?”

Got him. Wow it's hard to hold back a smile... I hope he thinks it's the prospect of food that grabbed me. Well, I can't say it isn't... just not exclusively.

“That sounds fair, and food sounds better.”

The mana was still swirling around Indra, and he gestured to the sword in her hand.

“As a token of trust though, I would have you give that to me. Throw it my way with the handle toward me. Otherwise I'll have to treat you as an invader.”

His tone was still normal, but there was a slight tension mixed in with his last words.

Wow, now I'm glad I took the stupid sword. Mate, I'd smash your head in in two seconds if I wanted to. You seem like a pushover anyway, at least if your apprehension isn't some kind of act...

Holding the sword out toward him with the handle away from her, Ilea threw it his way. The flight was a bit wobbly.

“There you go. I know when I should fight and when I shouldn’t. You seem like a decent guy, and honestly, I’ve never met a necromancer. Trying to not be too influenced by stereotypes since people can’t just choose what they have a talent in. Lead the way!”

Smiling at him, Indra seemed to relax at that, and a weak smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. It was seemingly a strained action for the middle-aged man.

“I’d rather have you in front,” he said.

He knows what he’s doing... although is my butt really that great?

He gestured down the tunnel, and she took the lead. They walked for a few minutes until they came upon a cave entrance with a crude wooden door and a torch on each side. A single undead warrior was standing beside each torch, though far enough away not to get burned, each in basic leather armor and holding rusted weapons.

They let the pair in without any hassle, although the undead turned to Ilea and examined her with their lifeless eyes.

“Where do you get all the corpses? Or do you not need corpses for those undead?” she asked as they entered a rather spacious cave. It was nearly as big as the one she had fought the Alpha in.

There were dozens of torches on the walls that cast a ruddy glow over the surroundings. The walls themselves seemed to be a bit more evenly formed than a natural cave would be. Several wooden benches and tables were scattered throughout the room, and pictures adorned the walls along with some pelts. A fire was burning in a hearth next to the bar, making the temperature quite comfortable inside.

All in all, it made for a quite lovely atmosphere, Ilea thought. *For a bar inside a cave at least...*

The barkeeper nodded at Indra as he entered. He appeared to be about the same age as Indra but was in fairly good shape, with intense brown eyes and a chiseled jaw. He lifted his bushy eyebrows at Ilea’s entrance but kept cleaning the mug in his hand as stereotypically as a barkeeper could.

“Who’s she, Indra? New apprentice?” the barkeep asked. Indra gestured to the bar and held up two fingers to the barkeep.

“No, Walter, you know I don’t take apprentices. Or like to hear more than a single word out of your mouth. What a day...”

Walter shrugged at that and put down the glass he was cleaning to fulfill Indra’s drink request.

Standing at the bar, Indra answered Ilea's earlier question. "The corpses come from bounties mostly. We hunt down criminals and keep the corpses. Some of the patrols know about it but are ok with it. Others we get from dead adventurers, morgues, or wars. There's plenty around here."

He perhaps mistook Ilea's silence for disapproval as he continued.

"Don't worry, we don't hunt down townsfolk. We'd be killed pretty quickly. Not worth the risk if there are other ways."

By then, Walter had filled two mugs with a questionable substance and put them on the bar. Taking them and nodding to Walter, Indra sat down at a nearby table and pushed one of the mugs toward Ilea.

"And it's not like any of us want to raise an army of the dead. You don't need many corpses to advance your magic. And many have died trying to summon some ungodly demon or Halthir himself by using too many corpses... especially innocent ones."

She nodded at that and looked down with suspicion at the drink.

Level 16 poison resistance, here we go, she thought as she took a small sip of the brownish liquid.

Ilea didn't think Indra would poison her, but she still examined the liquid with all her buffs applied. As she cranked up the glow of her buffs, Indra only raised an eyebrow at her while taking a sip himself. She found nothing wrong with the drink and took another sip.

Then shock coursed through her.

Her eyes opened wide as she stared at the necromancer opposite her.

TWENTY-ONE

The Unlife

“This is delicious!” Ilea proclaimed, raising the cup to the barkeeper and smiling wide. Walter only smiled back while cleaning another mug. “Where did you get this stuff?” she asked, but the barkeep only shrugged at her question.

“He brews it himself,” Indra explained. “No idea how he manages to do that down here. He’s good with earth magic and one of his helpers has a talent for wind. That’s also how the fire in here isn’t killing us with the smoke.”

She nodded at Walter and turned to Indra.

“This is quite a nice place you’ve got here. Where are the murder and experimentation rooms?” she asked with a smile on her lips.

Indra sighed while Walter chuckled from the side.

“I’ll show them to you later if you like. For now, I’d like to know what you’re going to do next. This wasn’t really a dinner invitation. I just wanted to get you back to our base. There’s enough of us here that even an adventurer twice your level would have trouble leaving without our say-so. You can’t go back the way you came, and I’m not even sure we can let you go with the knowledge you have of us being here. No matter how nice you seem.”

“Oh, I was aware of that. I’m alright with staying for a while... maybe a couple weeks, if that’s alright with you. Sightseeing and learning about your work would be a nice change of pace. I do hope there’s not too many people here... not the biggest fan of large crowds,” Ilea replied.

Indra again smiled his strained smile. The expression caused Walter, who was watching the exchange, to drop his mug.

“Hah!” the barkeep exclaimed. “You smiled, you old bastard!”

Indra growled. “That does seem appropriate. I do hope we’ll be able to find an agreement that includes you leaving this place alive after your stay. For now, please wait here. I’ll inform the others and then get you a room.”

Getting up, he started to head out of the room but stopped in his tracks.

“Oh, you mentioned food, right? Walter can get you something. Just ask. I’ll be back in a couple hours. Hope that’s alright with you.” Ilea simply nodded at that and kept drinking the delicious ale.

* * *

Walter watched the girl drink from one of his best batches so far and smiled to himself. Looking down at the mug he’d been cleaning, he marveled again at the intricate design Lucia had put on them. Her face swam into his mind, as it often did, and he smiled to himself.

I should ask her to work on more than just the mugs...

Looking up again, he was surprised to see the table in front of him empty. Then a chill went down his spine as a soft whisper entered his left ear.

“I heard there was food...”

Turning toward the creepy girl, two bright blue eyes stared into his own. A manic grin was plastered on her face.

“Whatcha got?”

* * *

Indra finished filing his notes on the new mushroom species he had started cultivating last month and got up.

Time to inform the others. They’ll soon be going to the common room, I’ll wager. Even I’m getting a bit hungry. If only I were undead... the time I wouldn’t have to waste on sleeping and eating...

The man hummed to himself as he exited one of his personal rooms. Walking down into another, more moldy section of the cave, he heard a gruff greeting from behind.

“You smell of someone new, Indra. Are you sneaking out? Or is it a new pet you’ve found?” a gravelly voice said to him before a massive hand clasped his shoulder. Indra turned around.

“Harthome, nice to see you. How are your... experiments going?”

The massive man laughed at that. “Experiments? They’re hammers. Just hammers... with darkness in them, yes... but still, just hammers.”

He was, of course, talking about his passion: creating hammers. Dark hammers, to be precise. Indra wasn’t a fan of the crude work of a blacksmith, but even he had to admit that Harthome’s hammers were one of a kind. Especially because they brought a sizable income to the Brotherhood.

“Yes, yes, just hammers. Listen, this new person. She’s a healer who dropped down into our caves. She doesn’t seem to be a danger to the Order, maybe we could employ her services. The effects of healing on the undead is a rather fascinating topic I’d very much like to...”

Harthome stopped him there with a grunt. “Yes, yes, I’ll meet your new experiment later. Did you see Francis? He messed up.”

“I did not see him, no,” Indra answered.

Harthome grunted again and left, leaving Indra standing alone in the hallway.

Well, poor Francis. I wonder if it was fatal? Maybe I can revive him after. An undead necromancer? I do have some theories on the creation of a lich... hmm... Indra thought as he searched the halls for the other members of the Vultures.

He passed Ellie and Naiir, the former speeding off to the common room at once to see the new visitor. Ellie seemed rather excited at the prospect of a guest. Naiir not quite as much.

When he reached the summoning hall, he could hear a heated discussion going on inside.

“You can’t do it, Celene! I don’t give a flying fuck how high your bloody level is and how much you’ve prepared for this shitty moment. Just don’t, aight? It’s not how you think it’ll be. Trust me, I’ve seen one of them once, and they’re hot, yes, but bloody murderous. And not in a good way!”

As Indra entered the room, the woman who had just spoken gathered some notes and stamped out of the hall. She nodded briefly to Indra.

“Lucia, there’s a woman here as a guest in the common room... thought I’d let you know!” Indra said as she walked by him.

“I told you, I know what I’m doing!” the remaining woman shouted at Lucia’s back. She was tall and lithe and wore robes of dark satin. “Oh, hello Indra. How are you doing? How’s the hip? Aren’t you like forty...? Things like that really shouldn’t happen at your age, should they?”

Sighing at her, Indra already wanted to leave again.

“Celene, yes. I told you it’s because of the lingering effects of the accident back when I was an adventurer. You also heard about the guest, yes? So my job is done. You know where Bones is?”

“Yes, I heard you. He’s not here, so I guess he’s digging up something... somewhere.”

Nodding at her, Indra quickly left again, lest he be trapped in one of her lengthy discussions about her hobby again.

Less of a discussion and more of a monologue, to be honest... now, where is that geezer?

Indra needed the better part of an hour to walk through the cave system they deemed their own until he heard the sound of metal hitting stone.

Turning a corner, he came upon a group of skeletons with pickaxes, hammering away at the walls. In their midst stood a man shrouded in a tattered black robe. There was a massive skull where his head should’ve been.

“Grandpa Bones, what are you digging for this time?” Indra asked, knowing that sneaking up without warning wasn’t the best idea around an old man like Bones.

“Aaaah, Indra.” The man turned around in a comically dramatic fashion and opened his arms in a greeting. “I told you to call me Neeto. How often do I have to repeat that! I’m digging for crystals, my dear friend.”

“Neeto, then. What for? As far as I know, they rarely hold any magical power. Did you come across a new theory for their use?”

Indra’s mouth watered as he asked the question. He couldn’t deny his thirst for new knowledge.

“What? No. I just thought I could put them in the eye sockets of my summons. Wouldn’t that be marvelous?”

For the fourth time today, Indra was stunned into silence.

Why did I expect anything different? he asked himself as he informed Grandpa Bones about the guest that would be staying for a while, but the silly man simply kept talking about various colored crystals and how they

would reflect light differently. His message delivered, Indra left him with his skeletons.

Finally arriving back in the common room, Indra heard laughter coming from inside and, oddly, music. When he entered, Indra was surprised to see a table full of empty dishes. Francis, Ellie, and Ilea were raising their mugs to the song Walter was singing while he played his lute. Francis still refused to comb his long, frizzy hair, and it looked like his beard was about to join in. Ellie, surprisingly, had lowered her hood despite the birthmark on her cheek that she hated so much.

It seemed their visitor had made new friends rather quickly. How interesting.

* * *

Love the live music. This is like a personal concert! Ilea thought as she emptied her mug. The drink was incredible. And by using Reconstruction on herself, she had kept her intoxication at a pleasant minimum. *Maybe he has a music-related class and that's why he's so good? If people can even level up those kinds of skills...*

Looking toward the door, she saw that Indra had come back. Waving at him, she gestured for him to join them.

"There's no food left, but the ale is still flowing!" she called while the two initiates she had met smiled in his direction. He shook his head as he sat down at the next table over.

They listened to Walter play for another half an hour. Two more members of the Vultures, who the initiates referred to as Lucia and Harthome, joined them in the meantime. The woman was tall and skinny, while the man was built like an ox and had his robe sleeves folded back to reveal tree-trunk-like arms. When Walter concluded his impromptu concert, everyone started cheering and applauding as the barkeeper jumped on top of the bar and bowed to the crowd several times.

"Fucking brilliant!" Lucia shouted. Ilea noticed the bartender blush a little at that.

"What happened for you to get out the lute again so soon?" Harthome asked the man as he helped himself to some ale.

“Well, we do have a guest, and I didn’t want to make the welcome as cold as the guards standing outside.”

While the group laughed at that, he went to the back and got more food. Apparently, now was the time most of the others would normally eat.

They’re surprisingly nice. Maybe they’re like the guys I knew in the fast-food place who smoked weed on their breaks... doing something illegal that’s not actually bad. Just with corpses and souls instead. Hmm, I’m having difficulties drawing the parallels.

The discussion at the table took her out of her contemplations.

“They’re gonna be bolder in the coming months, I tell you. Moving on Riverwatch like that is no easy feat. Especially during a tournament. It wasn’t a raid, more a demonstration of their power,” Walter said.

Ilea realized they were talking about the elven attack. *Guess they do go outside*, she thought as she bit into a piece of bread.

“I just wish we could get one of their corpses... nobody ever sells them to us,” Indra said, a hint of obsession in his eyes.

“Yeah, but we don’t really have the resources for that either, as much as it pains me to say it,” Walter said with a grimace while bringing over more filled mugs. Inspecting her own, Ilea decided a change of topic was in order.

“What are those markings?” she asked, pointing to the delicate carvings on the rim of the vessel.

Walter seemed to light up as he nudged Lucia with a broad smile. She grinned back at him before explaining.

“They’re enchantments. They make the shit in there stay cool. Pretty low-level stuff and barely noticeable,” she said.

“Well that’s just neat,” Ilea replied, getting a chuckle from Francis.

They continued talking and eating for an hour before most of them started going back to their work or research or back to their quarters to sleep. Indra showed Ilea to where she would stay.

“It’s not a luxury inn, but then again, you’re not exactly an esteemed guest. More a friendly prisoner who may still qualify for freedom. Tomorrow, you can show me some of your healing magic, and maybe I’ll be able to include you in some experiments I wanted to try.”

Ilea nodded and looked at the rather poor room. It was barely better appointed than her room in the temple had been. The bed at least had a

straw mattress, but that was really the only furniture in the stone-walled room.

Experiments? Wow, he's quite the creepy fuck, isn't he? I guess they all are a little... The room's alright though, considering we're in a cave. And compared to the mining stations, it's miles better.

"Sure, I can help," she said, putting her belongings next to the bed. "When will you give me my sword back? I'd like to keep my training routine up. Now that I can't really heal anything."

"I'll see to it tomorrow. Maybe I can get you something a bit less dangerous, although that thing didn't seem exceedingly so..."

Oh, it's pretty harmless. Especially if I'm using it. It's not like I have a skill for the thing.

Indra soon left, and Ilea started meditating with all her buffs applied, trying to grasp the extent of her new sphere ability and implementing her heat vision. She used her Flame spell to create sources of heat while using different ways to look at it. Her heat vision even leveled once, and she got much better at grasping the heightened senses from her sphere.

After that, she wanted to go check on what was happening in the common room but found that two level 80 undead had been placed at the entrance to her room. They were both fairly decomposed, so it was difficult to ascertain what they had looked like in life. One of them held up a notice for her to read.

Ilea. These two will see that you do not enter any forbidden rooms or try to leave. They will warn you with a grunt before attacking. I do hope you can agree to those terms. Do find me on the third room to the left one floor down if you wish to negotiate the conditions. - Indra.

She nodded to herself after reading the note and made her way toward the common room, her undead guards shambling along behind her. The guards outside the common room let her pass, and her undead followed her inside. She waved her hand in front of them and poked them in their rotten faces.

"No reaction, hmm?" She looked around. "Damn, Walter isn't here..."

Placing a couple of copper coins on the counter, she helped herself to a pint and walked back out of the bar with her mug in hand. Looking behind her, she read the letters above the entrance.

'Vultures Den'... original, aren't we?

Walking around the cave system, she was stopped from entering some of the rooms by her guardians and found little of interest in the ones she could. *I do like the common room, but this place is pretty boring overall...*

She walked on, occasionally trying to trip her followers up. After the third fall, that also got boring.

They're reeeeeeally dull pets. I'd rather have a baby dragon or something. Not a fae though, those are always so bloody fucking annoying in every piece of fiction I read...

Entering another big room, Ilea found someone she hadn't met before. She had red hair and looked to be in her thirties. She had a beautiful black dress on and was chanting something from the book she held in front of her.

A very revealing dress too...

This was by far the most interesting thing she had found so far, and the room seemed large enough that it wasn't this woman's personal chamber.

Guess she won't mind an audience then...

Ilea sat down on a nearby chair to watch. Mana gathered around the woman, and as she finished the chant, it flowed into the complicated carvings etched into the stone floor.

Puffs of smoke curled upward, but nothing else happened. Ilea saw with her Magic Perception that the mana slowly dissipated. The red-headed woman groaned loudly at that before turning around sharply and glaring at Ilea.

"You're seeing this too, right? *Why* does it not *work*?"

Without further comment, she sat down opposite Ilea and poured herself what looked like whiskey from an ornate stone flask.

"You're that guest girl, hmm? Sorry for the disappointing show. Guess there's nothing interesting going on in this bloody cave at the moment. Indra plays around with his mushrooms, Papa Bones digs for gold or whatever, and Walter cleans his mugs... at least the ale is good."

She sighed, downed her glass, and arched her back. Then she poured herself another glass and downed that too. When she gestured to Ilea and raised the flask, she declined, motioning to her mug.

"You took one of his mugs out of the common room? Brave girl... brave girl. You're a healer, eh? How'd ya get here? Actually, I don't care. Do you like reading?"

Ilea felt that answering in the affirmative would open a lengthy discussion. The woman was already leaning forward in her seat, readying a

speech no doubt. But, having nothing better to do, Ilea nodded anyway.

As she'd suspected, she opened a bit of a Pandora's box as the woman, who turned out to be called Celene, launched into a detailed monologue about her passion for writing romance and erotica novels. She was apparently obsessed with vampires and demons, thinking them to be the superior lovers.

Maybe Earth and Elos aren't that different after all... Ilea thought as Celene showed her numerous anatomical depictions of supposed demons and vampires. It did actually get very interesting as she described the species' transforming capabilities. Though she did mention tales of old folklore, forgotten witches, and burial tombs as sources for the information. But Ilea didn't feel like questioning the validity of Celene's claims – they were having fun, after all.

“As a healer, you really ought to try it at some point too. You being here just reaffirms my latest attempts are fated to succeed – you could patch me up easily should it become too much!”

Ilea just sipped her ale, not wanting to interrupt the passionate woman. *It's always a pleasure to hear someone talk about what they love... even if it is the prospect of mating with a vampire.*

She was having a fairly good time listening to her talk until Indra entered the room.

“What in Halthir's world... Celene, stop tainting this innocent girl! Ilea, I have something I need you for, if you would.”

Ilea nodded and said her goodbyes to Celene. The demon fetishist was already poring over her notes and barely noticed Ilea leave.

She followed Indra to another room where several undead were collected. Indra informed her that she was supposed to apply her magic to them so he could observe the results.

After Ilea cast Reconstruction, Indra's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He muttered in shock about not being able to identify which elements were being used in the healing process.

“Hmm... this is not a holy power... nor a natural one... interesting, interesting... it seems rather arcane at its core, which is nothing I've ever seen before...”

Ilea repeatedly used Reconstruction on the living corpse before her. It had the usual restorative impact – healing newer wounds present on the deceased bodies, sealing cuts, and re-setting bones.

“Normally, healing magic that heals the living would destroy the dead,” Indra commented. “Your power works on both, I suppose...”

Indra added that while this knowledge was interesting, it was ultimately useless as most necromancers had ways of healing their creations or simply raising them again.

Several hours later, Ilea excused herself to take a two-hour nap. Afterward, she went back to the common room to find an agitated Walter looking around the place. He seemed frantic, overturning boxes and rifling through shelves behind the bar. His eyes immediately fixated on the mug in her hand as she entered.

Then his eyes turned completely black.

Black lightning started to spark around him as he approached her with slow, deliberate steps. She activated her buffs, just in case, as he stopped right in front of her. He looked like death incarnate, and Ilea was sure she was about to enter the fight of her life. Her muscles tensed, ready to react in a fraction of a second.

Then Walter just grunted and took the mug from her hands.

“At least you paid. No mugs outside the common room.”

The mana vanished as he went back behind the bar, already starting to clean the mug she had brought back.

Ilea sat down and enjoyed a meal, famished after the sudden and rather intimidating ordeal. The initiates soon joined her. Naiir was the new one’s name, a short boy with mousy brown hair. He had a sling around his arm, apparently the punishment for working on a hammer of Harthome’s he hadn’t been supposed to.

“I could heal that for you, you know?”

Naiir just shook his head at the suggestion. “I appreciate the gesture, but a punishment is supposed to be borne... otherwise, what is the purpose?”

She shrugged and continued eating.

They were caught up in a conversation about the different quality tiers of corpses when Ilea felt a strange pulse ripple through her. It felt like a strange change in air pressure, but there had been no wind, nor had she heard or smelled anything, even with her enhanced perception skills, which were kept active most of the time as she had more mana to spare and their additional levels continued to reduce the cost.

Ilea and Walter immediately looked in the direction where the pulse had originated, and the three initiates noticed the sudden change in mood.

“Powerful mana...” Walter murmured, spells activating as he made for the door.

“Huh. That didn’t feel good. Strong though,” Ilea said, before turning to Naiir with a grin on her face. “Wanna get that heal now?”

TWENTY-TWO

Consequences

The three initiates looked at her, confused, as Ilea grabbed Naiir's arm. She started glowing blue as flames formed around her. He recoiled, letting out a gasp, but couldn't escape her grasp.

"Hold still," Ilea said, and Naiir relaxed a little after he realized the fire wouldn't burn him. "Something dangerous is here. Or was that normal, Walter?"

"No, not normal," the barman replied. "Initiates, you should stay here. This likely isn't something you can handle. Ilea, can I ask you to come with me? A healer might be invaluable. And I'm certain it'll be in your best interest as well."

She got up from the table after healing Naiir, who started moving his previously broken arm in wonder.

"I've got your back. My sword?" Ilea asked.

Walter nodded and moved out of the bar, Ilea following close behind. Handing her one of the zombie guard's swords, Walter started running toward where they thought the epicenter of the pulse had been. They navigated rocky tunnels and a myriad of twists and turns in seconds.

"What do you think that was?" she asked, easily matching his rapid pace.

"Came from the summoning hall, I think. Nothing good. Let's hope whoever summoned it has whatever it is under control."

Turning the corner to the summoning hall, which turned out to be a room Ilea had been in quite recently, they watched as a dark-clothed silhouette was thrown out of the room and crashed into the opposite wall.

“Indra!” Walter shouted.

As they closed in on the bleeding man, it looked like he’d suffered far more wounds than just a face-first trip to the cave wall would have caused.

“...demon...” the man gurgled before Walter motioned to Ilea and rushed into the room with impressive speed. His mana surged and black lightning crackled around him as Ilea started healing Indra.

Broken ribs, several organs damaged.

The second tier of her Reconstruction spell helped with saving the man’s life. She could heal specific parts but also had knowledge of what had taken the worst damage and therefore took priority.

After his ribs cracked back into the right places, he gasped for air. Looking at her, his skin was pale and the lines of his face appeared deeper. Exhaustion from the damage and rapid healing was taking its toll.

“...careful, mind...”

His eyes rolled back in his head as he slumped down in her hands. Feeling no more damage in the man, Ilea realized the noise from the summoning room had stopped and rushed in to help.

The scene she encountered inside was confusing yet, at the same time, mesmerizing.

Walter and Harthome were both standing still, a glowing hand and a hammer raised, respectively. Dark lightning periodically crackled around both of them. Behind them was a creature shrouded in powerful mana, its hand around Celene’s neck. She had a vacant look in her eyes. Before Ilea could even think to teleport, the being turned its head and locked eyes with her.

The creature was vaguely humanoid, with long limbs and a misshapen head. Its eyes were like endless pools of darkness. They seemed to pull at Ilea’s mind, attempting to draw her into their black depths. Its mouth was large and gaping as if its jaw were dislocated, perhaps with the intention of swallowing Celene whole. It wore no armor and seemed constructed of raw sinew and muscle.

A dizzying headache assaulted her. Memories flooded through her brain at an insane speed, and her life flashed before her eyes.

“*Be... still...*” the being whispered. Its black eyes and abyss-like mouth left no power in her to argue. Something was horribly wrong. Her *mind* was wrong.

Not... wrong... damag—

Her mana surged as her remaining consciousness flooded healing energy through her entire being, trying to fix what had been damaged. The headache lessened, and by the time the being turned its head back to Celene, Ilea could move again.

Seeing the being's lack of reaction to her newfound freedom, she spent another few seconds getting over the shock and continuing to heal herself, focusing completely on her head now.

What the hell...? Don't fuck with my head you fuck!

With that, she blinked next to the creature and smashed a fully powered punch into its unprotected side, as its raised arm gave her a free shot at its torso.

[Mage – lvl ??]

The being so helpfully identified as a 'Mage' crashed into the wall like a rag doll as Ilea caught Celene, who had been dropped from its grasp.

"You... dare... defy... me?"

A voice only describable as a thunderous, rasping whisper filled Ilea's ears as the being got up. Its legs and arms bent where they shouldn't, making it seem even more inhuman.

Laying Celene down on the stone floor, Ilea faced the monster while maintaining the flow of Reconstruction to her own head. Another powerful surge of mana was released by the beast, paralyzing Ilea for two full seconds as she attempted to resist the spell and simultaneously heal the damage it did to her mind.

With a fluid motion, the being flung its arms out, and two spikes dug halfway into Ilea's eyes, blinding her and filling her entire being with raw, pulsating pain. She screamed as she kept healing her mind, finally forced to completely shut off her perception of pain. It had been unbearable, maddening in its intensity.

"You... will... die... in... agony!!"

The whisper now felt like it was coming from inside her own head. Pressure forced its way into her mind, trying to overwhelm her. She now saw the being before her with her sphere alone. It was holding its side, obviously injured by her attack.

Not such... a strong guy... are you...? she thought sluggishly, healing the damage from what she presumed to be a mental attack.

Suddenly the pressure ceased. Trying to lift her arms, an impact rocketed her backward, and she landed with a loud crack against the wall behind her. The being had suddenly moved and sent her tumbling through the air with a magical shockwave.

Sensing no bones had been broken, she kept healing only her head. The pressure started again and surged, stronger and stronger.

“How... do... you... resist... still?”

Ilea felt a massive surge of mana travel from the spikes in her head and into her body, but there was no pain. Shivering at the memory of raw, concentrated pain coursing through her, she was glad she had removed her perception of it.

Another two seconds of this precarious balance between damage and recovery passed before the pressure suddenly lessened.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Mental Resistance – lvl 1: You are more adept at detecting and resisting attacks on your mind.

After a total of only twenty-five seconds, half of her mana had been channeled to her head, but in the meantime, her new skill had leveled four times.

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Mental Resistance reaches lvl 5

I can move again! Man, that headache would likely have literally killed me...

She stayed unmoving as the being came forward again, the pressure much less prevalent now. Perhaps taking her lack of movement as success, the monster continued its advance.

Again, the mental attack ceased as it reached toward her with one limb, clearly preparing to send out another wave of force and smear her innards

against the cave wall.

But Ilea was ready this time and blinked behind the beast. She slammed a fist into its back, sending it careening to the opposite end of the room. Spinning with the momentum of her punch, she blinked toward the creature just as it slammed face-first into the wall and delivered a devastating front kick into its already injured back.

The pressure started again, but Ilea had never stopped healing her mind. She fought the sensation of its magic and slowly raised her fist, then she slammed it down with all her strength into the horrible thing now sprawled below her.

She drove her hand into its shoulder, causing it to shriek into her mind. As she did so, its twisted arm shot out at a bone-breaking angle and managed to pierce her torso despite having its face buried in the wall. Jerking aside at the last moment, Ilea managed to deflect what would have been a fatal blow to her heart upward just a fraction and send it through her ribcage and shoulder.

Holding the creature's limb inside of her with one arm, she hammered another punch into the beast with maximum Destruction. This time she hit its left arm. It seemed the punch to its shoulder had already removed its ability to move that limb, but she wanted to make sure. The mental pressure lessened a little after that.

The next punch met the being's neck, then another slammed into its head. Each punch eased the pressure a little until she was moving at her normal speed and with her full power. She continued punching until no more noise or struggling came from her enemy.

Still she punched, fury guiding her fists. She punched until she felt her fist enter the wall behind the remnants of the bloodied and broken abomination up to her wrist. Ilea quickly ripped the thing's awful arm out of her body and blinked away.

Standing back in the center of the hall, she heard movement as the others were released from the spell that had held them. Circulating Reconstruction through herself, the wounds on her side quickly closed.

'ding' You have defeated [Mind Weaver lvl 180]. For killing an adversary 100 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 73. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 75. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 45. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 50. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Reconstruction reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Body of Flame reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Body of Flame reaches lvl 10

‘ding’ New skills available for Fire Enhancer

Sighing with relief, she dumped every single point into Wisdom and Intelligence.

Those were mental skills, right? No more fucking with my mind, assholes.

* * *

Walter recalled the short battle in a state of shock. His heart had sunk when the demon’s arm had pierced the girl, exiting her shoulder with a spatter of blood. His mind had conjured quite a few regrets in that moment, one in particular...

The girl, however, had simply shrugged off the deadly blow and grappled with the limb to use it as leverage to keep on punching. Each punch had sent a shockwave of air and sound through the room and another shockwave of raw mana through the demon. It had been unlike anything he’d ever seen.

Arcane magic, perhaps? But the color's wrong... and it can't be used for healing. What horrifying power... And her class is below level 72 – is this what a battle healer can do?

He had only been able to look on as the girl delivered blow after blow to the Mind Weaver, but as the girl kept on punching, the pressure on his body and mind had lessened. Then it had gone.

The fight was over now. Their guest had saved them from an untimely demise. He looked on as she completely obliterated the corpse below her. He was only a little disappointed that this likely rendered it unusable for resurrection.

She's gonna hear about that from Indra.

Able to move again, he breathed out and nearly buckled. Catching himself, he looked up to see Ilea a fair distance away from the beast, clutching the spikes in her eyes and ripping them out with a sickening crunch. She crushed the spikes with her hands while her eye sockets and eyes rebuilt at an insane speed.

What on Elos are that girl's classes? Walter thought as he noticed Harthome advancing on the corpse, completely ignoring Ilea. Raising his hammer, he finished what the healer had begun.

Poor Indra...

* * *

Ilea blinked her eyes as light entered them again. Double-checking for any lingering damage, she reactivated Pain Perception and fell to her knees at the sensation of invisible needles piercing through her entire body, seething and throbbing.

She tried to deactivate it completely and wait the pain out, but it only continued at the same intensity as soon as she activated its perception again, like it needed to be felt in order to pass – some kind of mental hangover from the creature's magic. Dry heaving on the ground, she waited until the pain receded.

'ding' Pain Tolerance reaches 2nd lvl 2

Nearly two minutes later, the pain faded completely. Lying on her back, Walter's black eyes finally came into view above her. Seeing her breathing normally, he nodded and turned around.

Well that sucked, how can anything hurt more than being burned alive?

Ilea sat up with that puzzling question in her head as she saw strange glowing red runes etched into the ground slowly dim and fade. She looked at Walter, who was crouching over Celene.

Heavy *thwacks* of a hammer hitting flesh and stone reverberated through the room as Walter turned to Ilea and motioned her toward him.

"Can you help her?" he asked, using his strange, reverberating voice again.

Stepping over to Celene and touching her, Ilea didn't detect anything wrong with the woman. Her breathing was a bit erratic and her eyes seemed lifeless, but nothing looked to be damaged. Still, she started to circle Reconstruction through Celene, focusing mostly on her brain, or rather her mind.

After a minute of this, she noticed that the woman's breathing had calmed a little. Another two minutes and some life returned to her eyes.

"What power..." An echoing whisper left Walter's mouth as he looked at Ilea with newfound respect. "Destroying is one thing, but healing not just the body but also the mind? That is a completely different feat."

Ilea kept healing Celene, and after five more minutes, Harthome stopped his hammering and joined them. Finally, Celene's eyes refocused. She slowly looked up at Ilea and mouthed a thank you before closing her eyes.

"She is asleep," Walter said, then looked toward Ilea, "and no longer in immediate danger. Please look after Indra first. And then Harthome. I will care for my own mind."

Looking toward him, she nodded and quickly moved out of the room to heal the knocked-out necromancer, stabilizing him but still saving some of her mana.

Just in case...

Going back into the summoning hall, she locked eyes with Walter.

Unnerving... that darkness in his eyes...

"Is he healed? And tell me what that was. That strange power you used on the demon," Walter barked.

“So it *was* a demon. Interesting,” she replied. *It seems Celene got something a bit different than she expected. Certainly not anything romantic...* She glanced at the pieces of flesh that remained of the demon. “Indra is stabilized, but I’m out of mana. I’ll continue later.”

“You lie. But no matter. It is only natural not to trust us. Him being stabilized is enough for now. Again, what was that power? What second class do you wield? Are you some sort of pyro enhancer? Or something rarer?”

His reverberating voice and black eyes bore down on her. Looking into his eyes, she had a feeling that nothing could be hidden from those dark orbs.

Maybe I should lie... but he has a way of telling if I do, I’m sure of it. This might be the time to gain their trust. All I’ve seen of them so far shows them as a weird bunch of perhaps misguided but not really evil scientists. And I’d certainly like to do some exploring outside again sometime in the future...

“My second class is Fire Enhancer. My main class is a sort of offensive healer class that can send destructive or healing waves of mana through someone by touch. What you saw of my fight was just that, combined with the Body of Flame skill.”

Walter’s posture visibly relaxed. He was certainly not poised for a fight anymore, but nevertheless, he remained a little tense.

“Ahh...” His eyes returned to normal, but somehow his piercing glare didn’t lessen in intensity. “An interesting class then. Something I’ve never seen before. Certainly something unexpected. Powerful and unique. I do believe I’ve heard about something similar before. Would you tell me its name?”

“For the price of letting me travel freely, in this cave and outside. As an equal to your Brotherhood.” She smiled at him, and he smiled back.

“With what you’ve done today, what you wish for is already granted. I’ll call you my equal and a friend to the Vultures. My name is Ethinu Skorn, often called Walter. Bard and Dark Sorcerer. Elder of the Vultures Brotherhood.”

“Ilea Spears, often called all kinds of names. Fire Enhancer and Azarinth Healer.”

Harthome laughed from the side of the room, where he sat next to Celene.

“And I’m the mighty Harthome! You two should get a room!”

Ilea chuckled at that, but Walter’s eyes never left hers.

“As much as I want to right now, I get the feeling he’s already hopelessly lost to another,” Ilea said teasingly, at which the barman finally averted his gaze.

“Let’s check on the others,” Walter said after he regained his composure. “And let’s move Celene and Indra to the common room. It’s the warmest.”

But before they could move, an unsettling rattling sound came from outside the now splintered door. A skeleton entered with its falchion drawn and sparkling yellow crystals in its eye sockets.

“Behold! Your savior, Neeto, hath arrived!” a voice echoed from the corridor. “Oh, um... am I too late?”

They all looked at the creature, then Ilea began to chuckle, Walter facepalmed, and Harthome burst into booming laughter.

TWENTY-THREE

Sun

Harthome and Ilea moved the unconscious Indra and the sleeping Celene into the common room while Walter checked on the dead demon with Grandpa Bones. Ilea continued coursing her healing mana through Celene and Indra as soon as they were settled.

Lucia joined them later, having apparently slept through the whole ordeal. She wasn't the least embarrassed and simply sat down next to Celene's sleeping form to stroke her hair.

"You poor idiotic lunatic..." she said in a scolding voice. "I told you demons are bad news..."

Soon after Walter joined them, he explained that Grandpa Bones and his skeletons had been tasked with extracting what they could from the dead demon and guarding what was left of its body. One apparently had to handle them very carefully, even after death.

Walter then recounted to the others how Ilea had saved them, but without going into specifics. They all looked at Ilea with new respect and thanked her profusely. She just smiled back.

"It's no matter, I got a bunch of levels out of it."

Even Walter was impressed with her power. He murmured softly to himself, likely not realizing Ilea could hear him.

"She's gonna be something if she continues like that... hopefully not an early grave... her corpse though, hmm..."

"Don't look at her like that," Lucia said, bopping Walter on the head with a spoon. "And get to the kitchen!"

He turned to her with a perplexed look. Some of the people in the room were chuckling.

“Yes, ma’am. Oh, and by the way.” He leaned in and kissed her. Ilea gave him a thumbs-up, and Ellie cheered.

Lucia just stood there, dumbfounded, as Walter went to the kitchen to prepare food for everyone.

“Wha...” she stammered, before Ellie embraced her in a big hug.

* * *

A cosy fire burned in the hearth as everyone enjoyed the relaxing tune of Walter’s lute. The two injured necromancers were taken to their respective rooms to recover further after everyone had eaten their fill and enjoyed each other’s company.

Soon, only Walter and Ilea remained. “I thank you again for your rescue,” he said as he started cleaning a mug.

“Did you really need it? With your level—”

He stopped her with a gesture.

“Demons are a very peculiar species. Dangerous in their specializations. I could resist the being’s mind attack for a while and might’ve been able to retaliate in time... but I don’t know how many would’ve died before then. Grandpa Bones would’ve been a better opponent for the demon, but he arrived too late.”

Ilea smiled at the memory of the strange skeleton man. It seemed nothing really shocked her anymore.

“And levels hardly matter, given what you did to him.” Walter paused and took a contemplative sip of ale. “That name... Azarinth Healer. I *have* heard it before. In the Foundation of Glass.”

She stopped at that, her mug of ale halfway to her lips. “What’s the Foundation of Glass?”

“A library, somewhere in the Isanna Desert. It’s a long journey, and not one I generally recommend. The Seekers don’t just let anyone inside. And even when you get there, the knowledge isn’t free. You’re expected to add to their collection.”

“Seems like a place I’d like to visit. When I’ve found more knowledge to contribute,” Ilea said. She didn’t even know what exactly she would be

looking for. But she made a mental note to go.

“So what do you know of the Azarinth Healers?” she asked.

“Very little, sadly. I was seeking power at the time. And an old librarian had shown me the name. They’re fierce warriors with the ability to heal even the worst of wounds before their enemies’ eyes. Battle healers, much like yourself.

“The class was apparently lost. I believe the theory is that the Healers might not have been particularly efficient fighters, and thus the Order died out. Having seen you fight, it seems a little strange to me now. And I suppose they’re not really gone, with you now standing across from me.”

She shook her head at his questioning look.

“I only stumbled across the class via dumb luck, I’m afraid. They were a healing order. The Azarinth Order.” Ilea chose not to mention the Bluemoon Grass. “To be frank, they seem like a bunch of pricks, going by the history books I found...”

Walter chuckled. “What powerful person or order isn’t?” He grinned at the two thumbs Ilea directed at herself in answer to his rhetorical question. “You’re certainly something, but don’t get overconfident. If that demon had been a warrior type, you would’ve been killed. Fast.”

“That’s why you were there, Mr. Skorn,” she said playfully.

He looked down and shook his head while smiling. “You know, if it weren’t for Lucia...”

“Oh I know, I know, the tragic binding of love.” She paused for a moment. “Well, Walter, I’ve honestly been in this cave system long enough. You’re a bunch of quirky fanatics, but I like you lot. But I do need my me time and, you know, the suns?”

She got up and put more coppers on the counter.

“So I’ll take my leave. Considering what you said before, I take it that isn’t a problem? Even though you really want my corpse?”

“It is not. I’ll have one of the guards guide you out. But how do you come to that conclusion about your corpse? I’m not even a necromancer.”

“Dark magic is dark magic Walter... But seriously, it’s your creepy as fuck eyes when you’re in magic mode.”

“Says the walking light show.”

They both smiled.

“Hey, at least one of us has style. I’ll leave now though, I really don’t feel like ruining this love story. Give the others my regards. And tell Celene

that maybe she should start with an elf and go from there.”

She held out her hand to him, which he shook.

“I’ll tell them, but I don’t expect them to be happy that you just up and left.”

“They’ll survive... and if not, Indra will resurrect them. Or maybe Mr. Bones. One of you creepy dudes will anyway.”

“Any ideas where the winds might take you?” Walter said to her back as she started toward the door.

“Oh, I’ll visit a dusty cellar, some old friends, and maybe a castle in the sky?” she said, winking at him over her shoulder.

This is a very nice place. I think I’ll be back at some point. The beds suck though. And the window coverage leaves a lot to be desired...

As she looked at the fire in the hearth, she realized she had made her first real friend in this strange new world.

“Goodbye, Walter,” she said.

* * *

Walter kept cleaning his mug while smiling to himself.

What an interesting girl. I bet she’ll send some big waves through the world. Unpredictable and strange waves, but waves nonetheless. Putting the mug down, he sighed. *Time to take what I can get from what she left me.*

“I know you’re there,” he called.

A chuckle could be heard from outside the kitchen.

“She’s a nice lass, isn’t she?” Lucia stepped out, a glint in her eyes. She was wearing a black dress that left little to the imagination.

“I’ll thank her later,” Walter replied. Closing in on her, he put his arms around her waist.

“You think it’s ok to let her go? She does know a lot, you know?” Lucia asked while staring into his eyes, a slight smile forming on her lips.

“You weren’t there, Lucia. Trust me on this one.”

She looked away thoughtfully, but she was brought back to him by the second kiss they’d ever shared.

“My cave or yours?”

* * *

Ilea reached the top of the cave system after what seemed like an age of following the incredibly slow undead warrior that was leading her.

I fucking hate these guys.

The undead stopped and turned toward her.

“What the hell are you looking at?” she asked, but it simply pointed toward a small opening in the wall.

“Alright, nice meeting you, Mr. Zombie.”

She waved at the undead as she clambered through the hole in the wall. Exiting into a rather spacious cave, she felt a breeze on her skin, and a smile spread across her face.

Is this... fresh air?

Running toward the source of the breeze, she squeezed through another two small openings in the cave wall.

The fall forest greeted her with a spectacular display of golden leaves that shone in the morning sun. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath of the cool air.

“I hope winter isn’t, like, four times longer than the other seasons... Should have asked about that.”

Shrugging and forgetting about it immediately, she made her way toward Riverwatch. Enjoying the view and being in the middle of nature once again, Ilea walked at a leisurely pace while looking over her stats.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 75

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 14

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 14

- Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 1

- Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 7

- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20

- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 11

- Passive: Azarinth Perception – lvl 18

- Passive: Free Slot

Class 2: Fire Enhancer – lvl 50

- Active: Flame – lvl 1***
- Active: Body of Flame – lvl 10***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Passive: Fire Manipulation – lvl 12***
- Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5***
- Identify – lvl 3***
- Meditation – 2nd lvl 12***
- Poison Resistance – lvl 16***
- Heat Resistance – lvl 7***
- Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2***
- Mental Resistance – lvl 5***

Status:

Vitality: 172

Endurance: 106

Strength: 67

Dexterity: 68

Intelligence: 173

Wisdom: 177

Health: 1720/1720

Stamina: 986/1060

Mana: 1493/1770

I think I started at, what, fifty health? Remembering that time, and her progress since then, made her smile.

It feels like years have passed... This lifestyle, I can't deny that I like it...

She ate some jerky she had bought from Walter as she walked, and after she'd looked through her stats, she went through the new skills for her Fire Enhancer class.

[Heat Surge]
[Wings of Arith]

Stopping in her tracks, Ilea immediately read the information on the Wings of Arith skill.

Active: Wings of Arith – lvl 1:
Wield the wings of Arith and throw them at your enemy. Wind explosion on impact.
Category: Fire Magic

“What. A. Fucking. Tease,” she stated and kept walking. Well, it was more of a stomp. The skill had put her in a bad mood.

I should've got a skill for Azarinth Healer at level 75... Oh well, at least my Healer skills are all amazing... compared to this load of bollocks.

She decided to check the other spell, which did seem a bit more interesting.

Active: Heat Surge – lvl 1:
Create a wave of fire with you at its center. Distance, heat, and speed depend on skill level and mana invested (max 40 Mana).
Category: Fire Magic

Heat Surge... that could be fun.

Thinking it over, she accepted Heat Surge into her skills and immediately tried it out. At full power.

A roiling wave of fire appeared around her and turned the lovely fall morning around Ilea into a blazing inferno. Grass, trees, flowers – everything was set aflame, and it was already beginning to spread.

“Oh no, what did I dooooo!”

Panicking at the forest fire she'd just sparked, she cranked her buffs up to the max and quenched the flames with Fire Manipulation, darting from left to right to get all the flames into range.

Soon the fire was out, and Ilea continued on her way again. She was sure there was nothing suspicious about a lone woman whistling a tune while wandering through a singed but mostly still alive section of forest.

It's a pretty nice spell. Might be able to use it to create distance... if I ever wanted that. Or as a trump card when someone gets behind my guard. Might not be worth the mana though...

"And now I also don't need the Flame spell to light a fire..."

Cackling at her own joke, she continued onward.

The city soon crested into view. She had come across a road after a while of walking and decided to follow it. The suns were higher above the horizon now, but she guessed it still to be mid-morning.

Looking at the clouds in the sky and the nature around her, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. *I really missed this.*

Buying some food, water, and two big sturdy bags at the nearest store to the south gate of Riverwatch, she soon left again. The bags and food securely in her backpack, she started running, first just with her raw speed and strength. Ilea found that she was moving at an incredible pace with her stats alone.

Activating first Body of Flame and then State of Azarinth, her speed nearly tripled. Leaving a trail of dust in her wake, she simply jumped over the river and kept running toward the temple. While her first journey to Riverwatch had taken close to four days, this time she made it back in under eight hours.

How has nobody found this temple yet? she thought as the nostalgic roar of a drake reached her ears. It came from much further away than she would've heard half a year ago.

Jumping on top of the temple with a powerful leap, she landed gracefully and looked at the compass rose she had put there all those months ago. Crouching down, she used her nails again to scratch a crude mountain into the stone near the marker pointing south.

Another two quick additions showed Riverwatch and the Calys mine. She scratched a skull next to the mine that would just indicate that there was danger to someone who didn't know better. To Ilea though, it simply meant the location of some bone lovers she had recently met.

Having finished updating her compass, she blinked downward twice, finding herself in the room where she had started in this once scary and dangerous world.

With the wisps of flame arching from her body and the glow of her Aura, that danger had turned into excitement. The excitement of exploring a whole new world. A world that did not have planes and satellites covering every corner. And, more importantly, a place where a satellite would find a dragon instead of just another forest or lake.

The room was dark, only illuminated by her buffs. A fully powered Flame spell helped in that regard. The walls didn't seem like they had grown any Bluemoon Grass in all this time.

Guess it does take a while... I'll be back sporadically anyway to check.

Going into what was once the library, she started filling one of her newly purchased bags with regular drake scales and bones. She had to break some of the larger bones, but the bags were large and could accommodate quite a bit.

Stopping about a third of the way through, she blinked upstairs. The bag was still in her hand, with the scales in it. Testing the limits, she managed to fill the large bag about halfway before she could no longer blink with it. After another four blinks, there were two full bags of drake scales and bones waiting to be delivered.

Grabbing some of the diaries and history books as well, she put them into her backpack and left again. There were still some scales and bones in the library, but Ilea thought she had enough. Even if she didn't, she could still come back to get more.

Considering how much stronger I've got, I can hunt tougher monsters as well. Might make a bit of a stir if I suddenly sell high-level things in Riverwatch. Maybe once I've become even stronger.

She started to run with one heavy bag held in each hand. Barely noticing the weight, she chuckled.

Maybe I'm being too careful here... Overconfidence kills, though. And having the element of surprise is never a bad thing. The poor defenseless healer... hmm, I could bait criminals with me as the bait...

Smiling at the thought, she figured she was probably a sight to behold, running at an absolutely inhuman speed with two bags containing nearly half a ton of cargo.

The way back wouldn't have taken much longer but she decided to camp out in one of the trees for a while before running on. With her increased Dexterity and Strength it wasn't an issue to balance the two bags while running and controlling the weight. *It's scary to know how strong beings can become in this world. I do believe this run is defying some natural laws... hmm, magic, I guess, so fuck it.*

Reaching the road to Riverwatch, Ilea placed the bags near a tree and sat down on the ground. She enjoyed the noise of the river and the suns shining down on her, though some of their warmth was taken away by the chill of the wind. Not that she had to worry about catching a cold with her Vitality.

After nearly two hours of lazing about, finally a wagon came up the road toward the city. Dusting herself off, Ilea got up and stretched.

"Wow, that was nice," she said as she stepped into the road and waved to the man sitting on the wagon.

"Hey, hey," he said as he stopped the old horse. Ilea noticed over the man's shoulder that the wagon had different kinds of wood in it. "Greetings traveler, what can old Greg do for ya?"

Ilea motioned to the two bags near the tree.

"I have quite the heavy burden. My team and I hunted down some drakes the past couple weeks, and I'm on my way to sell the harvest."

She beamed a smile at him, and he nodded.

"I do have some spare room, so why not hop on."

"That's incredibly nice of you, Greg. Name's Ilea."

She quickly put the bags on the wagon while acting like they were much heavier to her than they felt and jumped in right after.

"Ready when you are!" she said.

The drive took a while longer than if she had simply run. Greg talked about his farm and the different trees he'd been growing around it for the past three decades. His voice sounded nice to Ilea, so she didn't mind him talking. She especially liked hearing someone talk about trees after topics like necromancy and demons.

They entered the city through the east gate. Showing her silver adventurer badge with the healer insignia on it left the guards happy, and they let them through with a smile. She heard one of them talking curiously about her silver badge. The man was level 40, which meant he should have

been able to identify anyone with a silver badge, but he hadn't been able to identify her.

He hadn't stopped her though, so it was likely not an uncommon practice to use an adventurer badge below your level.

What happens if I get a higher one anyway? Do I have to give this one back? she thought as Greg steered the cart toward a side street.

The city was busy. It was still morning as Ilea had run through the night. The stone buildings cast shadows on the streets and people below, some still damaged from the elven attack.

Ilea closed her eyes as the sun warmed her body, and she dozed off to the sound of wheels hitting cobblestones.

TWENTY-FOUR

The Queen

The cart came to an abrupt halt, waking Ilea from her doze.

“We’ve arrived, lady adventurer,” Greg said as he started unhitching the horse, whose name was White Ash.

Ilea looked around. They were outside a large storefront whose sign displayed a crossed hammer and saw. *Must be some kind of workshop. Perfect for selling his cargo.*

Ilea grabbed her bags – only belatedly remembering to act like they were heavy. Getting down from the cart, she placed them on the cobblestones, puffing theatrically. Then she took two coins from her pouch and handed them to Greg, whose eyes grew to the size of dinner plates at the glint of silver.

“Lady, that is way too much for a simple transport. I didn’t expect anything, to be honest!”

Reassuring him that it was fine, Ilea bade him farewell. Before she’d gone more than two steps, she turned back.

“Greg. Another question. Do you work with the wood as well, or do you just sell it?”

He looked quizzically at her, then his weathered face split into a wide grin.

“I do, I do. Whenever I find the time. Tables, beds, whatever it is. Just come by at my farm east of the city. It’s only a couple hours down the road.”

Do you have a business card as well?

“I’ll do that. Thanks again, and have a good day!” She waved and turned to walk down the nearby alleyway, bags in hand. She activated her Sphere skill to perceive anything in a fifteen-meter globe around her, and, seeing nothing, she increased her pace.

Going from back alley to back alley, she sometimes slowed down as people approached or a beggar blocked her path. She threw a drake scale at one of them, who thanked her confusedly. She saw him trying to take a bite out of the scale just before her range of perception left him behind. Chuckling, she walked through the city until she emerged near Earl’s shop.

She noted a steady stream of people walking in and out of the blacksmith’s shop. *Busy as ever, I see...*

Stepping inside with her massive bags, a couple of people stole glances at her, but nobody said anything. There was a line of four people at the counter, where an attendant she hadn’t seen before was talking to them. Standing in line, Ilea looked at the plentiful gear in the shop.

Guess he did fulfill those contracts... and even had time to make more, eh?

Two minutes later, she was standing in front of the clerk.

“Hello, I’m Ilea. Can you get Earl for me? Tell him it’s the healer.”

The attendant looked confused.

“I’m sorry, miss, but the head smith is currently quite busy. I’ll have to check the schedule, but I can’t promise anything until the upcoming spring,” he explained regretfully.

Ah, fuck this...

Checking the shop with her sphere, she saw Earl working in the back. The attendant barely had time to draw breath as Ilea used Blink and disappeared.

“Spring? Are you fucking kidding me, you old fuck?” she barked, startling the smith. The sword he’d been working on fell to the ground, but Ilea caught it with her foot and flicked it up into her hand in a single fluid motion.

Earl just stared at her as she attempted to hand the glowing piece of metal back to him. Bare-handed. He backed away, gesturing to the anvil. She placed it there.

Thanks, Heat Resistance.

“I forgot how nuts you are,” the smith said, shaking his head in wonder. He extended his hand toward Ilea but then thought better of it, instead

patting her on the back.

“How’s our little berserk healer doing? Any new developments?” he asked, a smile now spreading across his face.

Ilea quickly filled him in on her past month. The smith apparently hadn’t been doing badly either. Having fulfilled some rather big contracts in an incredibly short time and with barely any sleep, his status had risen by quite a bit. And apparently, his smithing skills had grown as well. Hence the attendant out front, dealing with the ever-increasing number of customers.

“So, you’re a rich fuck now. Congratulations. Why not get some apprentices?”

He nodded at that. “Yeah, yeah, I know, but they’re all so... *adequate*. Haven’t found one to really strike me as the *one*, ya know?”

Is this a love story or what?

She nodded and motioned to the front. “I have something for you. And a request or two, maybe.”

The attendant was still shuffling about nervously after Ilea’s magic act, but he relaxed as both the healer and his boss came out from the back room.

“These are materials I gathered a while ago,” Ilea said, pointing to her bags. “You still have the charred scales, right? Should be enough for a set. Well, I thought before I get you the higher quality hide, I could get something with this in the meantime.”

She opened one of the bags, and Earl whistled.

“So, you want one set of bony armor with scales from this stuff?” Checking the scales, he added, “Doesn’t seem to be of a very different quality. Red or green?”

She thought and decided on red. *Fits the fire, I guess, and the camouflage of green would only really help in a forest.*

“Use the red ones. I’ll sell you the rest.”

“Hmm, yes, yes...” Motioning the attendant away from the counter, he removed some big books from below it. “The armor I can do for 4 gold in three days.”

The attendant’s eyes opened wide at that.

“But Earl, the contracts and time—”

He was interrupted by a hand on his shoulder, and Earl stepped back to the bags.

“Mason, my boy, do you know how boring it is working on iron swords all day and steel plate armor all night? This... this here...” Opening the

bags, he grinned. “This is why I became a blacksmith!”

“And the sweet, sweet gold, of course,” Ilea added.

“And the sweet gold, of course,” Earl confirmed.

Shifting the two bags into the back room, he emptied them onto a massive workbench. He counted the scales and bones and checked them for their quality and weight. Ilea, meanwhile, played around with the different pieces of equipment in the smithy, burning herself in ways that would make others scream for hours and need a healer to attend to their injuries.

“You’re like a newborn puppy. Do you not fear pain?” Earl asked, seemingly done assessing the materials.

“Oh, I fear the absence of it more, to be honest.” Thinking of the demon, a thoughtful look must have crossed her face. Earl noticed and softened his expression.

“None of that seriousness now. I like the puppy more. All of these materials you could sell to the Adventurer’s Guild or any trader for between 7 gold, 13 silver, and 12 bronze up to... well, up to anything you like, really. I could get that stuff for around 13 gold from the guild or a trader. Does 10 gold and 10 silver sound fair?”

She just nodded at him.

Is he really that trustworthy?

“Deducting the cost of the armor, which includes any materials used and my labor, you come out at 6 gold and 10 silver,” the smith said as he walked back into the shop for the money.

After receiving it, she thanked Earl again, got her bags, and stored them in her backpack. *What do I even need money for again?*

Then she remembered that food existed.

* * *

The marketplace was bustling. It wasn’t as busy as it had been during the festival, but it was definitely getting back to some of its pre-elf attack glory. Ilea found this to be a double-edged sword. She was glad the city was getting back on its feet, but now it was crowded with people again. She decided to get in and out of the market as quickly as possible.

Looking through the stalls, Ilea soon found what she was looking for. A small empty booklet, similar to a notebook on Earth. Compared to the

machine-manufactured and plain paper ones she remembered, this one held quite a lot more charm. She also got an actual *pen* in a shop nearby. Well, it worked like a pen anyway, but Ilea wasn't sure what technology it used. It looked kind of like a clockwork quill. Her coin purse a little lighter, she went back toward Earl's shop.

Considering a meal is a couple coppers, notebooks and pens are luxurious as fuck, she mused as she walked behind Earl's shop. Just within range of her perception, she could see the scales and bones still on the table. Taking out her notebook, she took an intricate inventory of everything she had given to Earl. She scanned the rest of the shop quickly too to make sure he hadn't moved anything yet.

She was glad to see the charred scales were still there, hidden away in what seemed to be a secret compartment.

He didn't lie about liking them, at least... she thought, and left with a smile on her face.

* * *

"Hello! Schroedinger's healer is back!" she shouted into Splicer's seemingly empty book shop.

No customers today. Hmm. How does he stay afloat?

The old man appeared from a back room.

"Schrodinger's what? Oh, it's the theoretical dealer of black market information. Greetings, young adventurer," he said with a completely straight face.

"You're as dry as your skin, old man," she answered, removing her backpack and getting out the three old history tomes and five diaries. The ones holding nearly no knowledge on the Bluemoon Grass and her techniques.

"First-hand accounts of the Azarinth Order."

Splicer's eyes became a little wider, and Ilea could even tell that his heartbeat quickened because of her buffs and newfound sense-enhancing sphere.

Or maybe it's my increased stats. At this point I'm like a superhuman, and I'm too afraid to ask...

“Wanna buy any of them? How much would you pay? I’d take some good stories as well.”

The old man calmed down again before he answered.

“I’ll have to check their authenticity, age, and contents. If they aren’t fake, the diaries would be between 4 and 8 gold each. The histories, around two gold each. Would you lend them to me for one or two days for review?”

“Sure, sure, I’ll come back again in two days then,” she said. “Thinking about it, maybe you can lend me some books as well, you know... as collateral?”

He nodded, and after discussing some of her preferences, he suggested five books to her, which she stored in her backpack.

“Another thing, Splicer. How much knowledge do you have on the worth of, say, drake bones and scales?” It was shot in the dark, but she had a feeling that just as Walter was a powerful sorcerer in disguise, the man in front of her was the same... just with a different kind of power.

Knowledge, that is. And he didn’t disappoint.

“Yes, I do dabble in the exchange of goods. Do you have an exact number, quality, weight? And where would you like to sell them?”

She gave him the notebook, opened at the page with her inventory. He took a look and, a few minutes later, wrote down some numbers.

“Selling that to the Adventurer’s Guild would net you 7 gold and between 5 and 30 silver depending on the day and demand. Buying it from a trader or the guild, you’d have to pay 13 gold and 20 to 50 silver.”

Fuck, that’s scarily accurate. He’s like the god of numbers. Looking into his eyes, she could see a spark.

Apologies for doubting you, Earl. At this point, you’re 100% Ilea approved. Putting the notebook back, she closed her backpack and put it back on again. *Or maybe this is some underground trader monopoly and, they all know exactly what prices to tell to whom...*

“Do I owe you something for that math?” she asked, but he waved her away.

“It’s on the house, Lady Ilea.”

She curtsied at that, the grace of the movement surprising her.

It’s the staaats... she reminded herself. *I should go dancing...*

Saying her goodbyes to Splicer, she exited the store and promptly bought more food. After walking aimlessly for twenty minutes, she decided

to go eat something in a nice restaurant. All that snacking had made her hungry, after all.

And it's nearly midday, judging by the suns.

After finding a nice place in a small, brightly painted courtyard, surrounded by restaurants with a fountain at the center, Ilea sat down and thought about her next actions. *I can do whatever I want...*

Smiling to herself, she apologized to the waiter, who it turned out had asked her twice if she wanted to order something while she was considering her next move. She proceeded to order a lot.

While waiting for her food, she got out the map of the Calys mine that she had improved upon with coal whenever she'd discovered a new tunnel or cave. Going to a new page of her notebook, she wrote down 'Calys Mine' and started to copy the crude map sharply onto the thick paper with her black-inked clockwork pen.

The food arrived fifteen minutes later, and Ilea let herself take a break from the work. *Who would've thought copying maps would be this difficult? Where's my ctrl + c and ctrl + v?*

Her lunch stealing her attention, she abandoned that line of thought. It was a potato soup with some fresh bread on the side, perfectly fitting the fall temperature. After finishing her meal, she ordered a tea and continued her work.

How peaceful it seems... and yet, at any moment, a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters or elves could come and attack. Is this how people felt during the Cold War?

She finished the new map and burned the old version in her hand. No guard was around to scold her. The people that saw her casual use of fire magic certainly weren't happy though.

She paid and made her way to the southern guard station. Getting stopped by a hairy, gruff-looking man outside the gate, she asked to see 'His Excellency, Lord Dale'. The guard didn't laugh, but his posture relaxed a bit.

"And what business do you have with his lordship?" he asked her, apparently bored enough to join at least a little in her repartee. Guard duty certainly wasn't the most interesting of jobs.

"We're old friends. Thought I'd visit him while I'm in town," she said.

"Dale!" the guard suddenly shouted. His voice was like an air raid siren, loud and irritating.

“What the fuck, John?” a voice came from the other side of the gate.

“There’s someone here looking for his lordship, Prince Dale. Would you allow an audience for... what’s your name, lass?” John asked, turning to her with the question.

Nice touch with the prince bit.

“Ilea the healer.”

After Ilea had been waiting at the gate for five minutes, it was finally opened from the other side.

“He says it’s fine. Come on in, my *lady*.” The guard motioned for her to follow.

The guard station was clean, and everyone seemed ready and on alert, albeit in a relaxed way. Very professional, to say the least. *Considering the action they get, it’s no surprise*, Ilea thought as they rounded a corner where the sound of metal meeting metal could be heard.

“Good. Another one,” Dale’s voice rang out.

Arriving in a walled-off square with a gravel floor, Ilea and John entered a scene of two guards squaring off against Dale in mock combat.

[Warrior – lvl 83]

‘ding’ Identify reaches lvl 4

Having identified him, she was happy to note that she could finally see his level. The other two were in a level range of fifty to sixty. The ten or so spectators were even lower-leveled than that.

The two warriors slowly circled Dale. One was wielding a broadsword and the other a scimitar. With a sudden explosion of speed and power, they struck at him at the same time from different angles.

Dale was unfazed. He crouched in a smooth movement and lifted his sword and shield to intercept both attacks simultaneously. Following up with an elbow to the swordsman’s ribs, he quickly turned to the other to block another scimitar strike with his shield.

Ilea felt a quick surge of mana exiting Dale’s shield as his opponent’s weapon was deflected off his shield right on impact. As soon as the opening appeared, he thrust his own sword at the man’s throat in a practiced and fast

motion and held it with blade pressing skin, ending the practice bout right there.

Some of the men clapped, while others exchanged tickets. Seemingly there was a betting system.

Her guide coughed and, in an exaggerated voice, announced, "Ilea, the Healer Queen! Here to see the Prince of Practice Square, Dale Langston!"

All eyes immediately turned first to Ilea's guide and then to her. Some of them chuckled.

She walked in front of her guide in the most noble way she could think of. Standing ten meters before Dale, she bowed deeply, getting whistles and applause for the act.

Standing up straight again, she smirked at Dale. "Been a while, Mr. 83."

"Indeed it has, Ms... 75? Well, that is indeed quite a change. Are you still running into battle to heal your enemies to death?" he joked.

"Oh, don't be so mean, you know how I like it..."

Some of the men laughed, while two of them got up from their lounging positions.

"We're next, Dale. You up for another, or do you have to attend to the princess?"

Shooting a glare at the man and activating her buffs, she declared, "It's queen."

The man stopped in his tracks as some tense stares were exchanged before Dale started laughing. They relaxed again, and the man who had called her princess flushed red.

"We can catch up later," Dale continued. "I'd love to hear what you've been up to. I do have my duties though, and today that duty is to whip this bunch into at least somewhat capable warriors."

Getting an idea, Ilea walked closer to him. Talking in a much lower voice than before, she said, "You know, about the 'running in' part... that wasn't because I was reckless or stupid. I'm not exactly just a healer." His eyebrows rose at that. "And even though I've fought monsters more than people since then, maybe some pointers against swords and other weapons might come in handy... You'll get it once I start fighting. I won't kill you, don't worry," she winked.

"What you're saying is a bit confusing, but you don't seem the type to lie. First, prove yourself against the royal offender there, and then I'll face you. What do you say?"

TWENTY-FIVE

Woman and Monster

Dale smiled, amused at the turn of events. Ilea definitely knew how to make an entrance. *This is already the most interesting day in a week*, Dale thought as he motioned to Gary.

“Gary, you’ll face Her Highness for your royal insult. See what the Queen can do. And don’t hold back, she can heal herself...”

He smiled at her as he joined the other spectators.

She’s leveled up absurdly fast. If she’s just a healer, she’ll still get messed up by Gary, but something tells me that isn’t quite what will happen...

Gary, a level 43 warrior, unsheathed his sword and stiffly bowed to her. He carried the standard guard-issued sword and shield and wore leather armor. He had a lean, muscular build and was one of the more experienced recruits. Because of this, his eyes turned from embarrassed to focused in an instant. Dale was proud that even in a situation like this, his men always became serious and professional when asked to do so. Ilea also got into a fighting stance.

She’s going to fight unarmed? Hmm... even more interesting. The blue aura she had briefly activated earlier wasn’t present now, yet her eyes were focused as well. A grin was spreading on her face.

She’s changed more than just her levels, hasn’t she?

Gary wasn’t bothered by the lack of a weapon and assumed she was a mage. Raising his shield a bit more, ready to dodge a ranged attack, he waited for Dale’s signal.

“Go!” Dale shouted, and both of them sprang into action.

She's graceful. At least one dedicated fighting skill there. And she's fast. Her reflexes are good too. Why would a healer invest in any of that? Dale thought as the two advanced on each other, Ilea with aggressive abandon and Gary in a careful defensive fashion.

They came together, and Gary slashed at her horizontally. Ilea dodged the blow and closed the distance in seconds. Her punch was blocked by his shield, and the guard skidded back from the impact.

So she's a hand-to-hand fighter. That was a powerful strike but nothing special for someone her level. Being able to heal oneself though...

Dale mused about the possibilities but came to the conclusion that using a sword and being able to heal would still be the superior style.

It's certainly a surprise, especially with her healer class. Most healers forced to do any kind of fighting use ranged weapons.

He analyzed the fight as three more blows were blocked by Gary, now fully on the defensive. The young guard slashed at her from above, and Ilea simply *caught his sword*.

"What the...?" a guard next to Dale exclaimed, his jaw hanging open.

Turning the blade aside, Ilea smiled at Gary and punched him square in the chest, sending the man tumbling to the ground some distance away.

She caught the sword? What are you doing, girl?

"So, whatcha think?" she asked Dale, having helped Gary back to his feet. She was smiling, clearly pleased with herself. Many of the guardsmen were clapping, but Dale himself was not as easily impressed.

In fact, Dale could tell Ilea had held back most of her skills. He had a skill that told him she hadn't expended a single point of mana during the fight.

"You're very graceful and strong. Your movements are... how should I put it... they seem exaggerated. The first blow you dodged from Gary, for example. It was executed well, but you moved too far, losing the opening it would've given you."

Ilea leaned in like she was soaking in his words. Had she never had an instructor before? It was lucky she'd come to him then – he'd been whipping amateur brawlers into proper fighters for years.

"You have a skill for moving, for fighting with your body. Or am I wrong?" he asked, and she just nodded. "Then you should use it. Either the skill isn't high-level enough, or you're disregarding parts of what it's telling you."

She looked confused. *It seems no one has taught her the basics of how martial skills operate.*

“I’m not sure what you mean, Dale. I don’t think the level of the skill is the problem though.”

He grunted affirmatively to her reply. “All fighting classes or skills will let you move instinctively in the right way. You have to trust them, even if your mind is telling you that that sword will hit you. If you trust the skill and its level is high enough, you’ll be fine.”

The way she looked at him made him continue. “I know it might sound stupid. Compare it to an ice mage instinctively knowing how to control or create the element with his mana. That comes from a passive skill the class grants him. A comparable passive skill for a warrior is Battle Sense or Swordsmanship.

“As soon as the skills reach a higher level, you know instinctively how to get better at it. Continuous training will let you level up the skill, and the skill will help you move in the right direction. In a fight, you have to be able to trust your instincts. Your mind will often be too slow to react.”

Ilea muttered to herself, likely thinking Dale couldn’t hear, but his Perception skills were rather high.

“Insightful... sounds like something that would be said in a samurai movie...”

Dale wasn’t sure what a ‘samurai movie’ was, but then Ilea had always been a strange one.

“The comparison with ice manipulation makes sense to me... my fire manipulation works similarly, and when I try to consciously control it with my mind, it’s much harder than just feeling it out.”

It sounded like her thoughts were going in the right direction, so Dale said nothing. New recruits needed to figure some things out for themselves.

She went back to where she had stood at the start of the fight.

“Thank you for the guidance.” She looked at her beaten opponent. “Gary, was it? Another round?”

Dale leaned in to give Gary a few pointers – this was a learning opportunity for the lad as well. Gary nodded to Ilea and got back into a fighting stance.

Let’s see if that helped, he thought, and he watched as Ilea closed her eyes. *Wait, she’s closed her eyes? Well that’s a first...*

“Go!” he shouted, and Gary immediately advanced. Knowing now that she was a hand-to-hand fighter, he was less wary of ranged attacks. He reached her in seconds, slashing at her from the side. He didn’t hesitate for a moment, despite his opponent’s closed eyes.

Good lad.

At the last moment, Ilea took a small step backward, the sword passing centimeters before her. Gary followed up with a twirl of his body and a shield bash with his left arm. Ilea, still with her eyes closed, crouched and turned with him, dodging the shield entirely. Her movement was more akin to dancing than fighting.

Turning around, Gary slashed from above. A small sidestep from her and his sword passed harmlessly through the air, the flat part of his weapon briefly touching her scale bracer.

Ilea opened her eyes as Gary thrust his sword directly at her, and a metallic ringing noise reverberated through the training area. She had deflected the blow with her left arm and bracer.

A grin grew on Ilea’s face, and she got into a fighting stance again.

“Let’s go another round.”

Gary didn’t let himself be taunted and unleashed a flurry of sword slashes and thrusts at her, interspersed by a couple of shield thrusts, kicks, and even punches. All of them were swiftly dodged or deflected at the last moment with incredible ease.

The other guardsmen were speechless, as they likely couldn’t believe the girl was the same person they had seen fighting just a moment before. Dale was less surprised. He’d known there was more to this girl than meets the eye.

His time is up, he thought as a lightning-quick punch crashed into Gary’s stomach after a fluid dodge had seen Ilea pass within a hair’s breadth of his sword.

Gary buckled as air exploded from his lungs, the sword falling to his side, but Ilea caught him as he fell and propped him back up.

“Thank you for the fight,” she said. Gary struggled even to bow to her in response.

“Thank you... for... the demonstration,” he wheezed, still catching his breath after being thoroughly winded. “I’ll work harder to improve. Next time we meet, I won’t be bested that easily.”

But Dale knew that what the girl had just demonstrated was a level of skill that Gary wouldn't reach in the near future, if ever. She was something else.

The onlookers clapped. They'd all seen good fighters before, so this wasn't something completely mind-blowing, but it was definitely impressive. Dale knew they were all a little jealous – some likely writing off her superior skills as a result of her being born talented or coming from a family of privilege. Dale himself though, and hopefully most of the others, was happy to have another healer around, especially one who could defend herself.

"That was quite a demonstration. I don't think I could beat you with skill alone, but I'll definitely give it my best shot," Dale said from the side as he prepared his gear. Donning his helmet and shield, he walked to where Gary had stood before.

Facing the girl he had seen in her first real fight, he was proud in a way to see she had reached this level. Dale cared a lot for the people he trained and fought with, and he counted strays like her to be part of the family just as much as he did his own men. Also, she had listened to his advice even though she had seemed cocky at first, which showed she had at least *some* brains as well as brawn.

On the other hand, he was also excited to fight her and – hopefully – teach her a lesson or two. He was her senior, after all, and his experience vastly outclassed hers.

"Are you ready?" he called out as the girl changed into her fighting stance.

"Yes, sir!" she shouted back, which put a smile on his face.

Maybe we can recruit her after all...

Activating his aura skill that strengthened his muscles and heightened his reactions, he crouched low and readied his shield. *I'll have to end this one quickly, don't want it to turn out like with Gary.*

Using his Dash skill, he closed the distance in a blur, following up with Shield Bash. The skill released a burst of kinetic force much greater than the shield itself could ever produce.

A shockwave ran through his left arm as he was stopped in his tracks. Locking eyes with Ilea, she grinned. The shield bash had only pushed her back half a meter, and she had blocked the full force of it with her arms crossed.

Stronger than I thought. Gary would have been hurled like a ragdoll into the opposite wall if I'd used that technique on him.

He followed up with a sword strike, but Ilea dodged it seemingly just as easily as the slashes from Gary. Dale confirmed her superior movement when a kick and two more sword strikes were dodged just as easily as the first.

Dale immediately stepped back to get some distance. He wanted to prevent her from using any openings she created by dodging his swings.

Let her come then, he thought and, he raised his shield. His sword was poised for a quick jab.

Ilea approached.

Dale's sword lashed out like a cobra striking its prey... and flew harmlessly past the girl's side as she dodged it with the smallest of movements.

He activated Cognitive Burst, a trump skill of his, and his perception and speed immediately accelerated. Predicting her next attack, the world slowed down to a crawl for him as he redirected his sword jab with unnatural force toward her again.

Got you now, he thought. Their eyes locked, and he saw the grin still plastered on her face.

A sudden blue glow flared to life from the rows of runic tattoos that covered Ilea's body. It was barely noticeable in the sunlight, but Dale knew the girl had activated her own trump card. His strike was unerring, but only air was there to greet it. Then a pain blossomed in his side, just behind his shield, and a shockwave rocked through him. The world spun and his back smashed into something solid, pushing the last remaining air out of his lungs.

His ears rang as he heard muffled shouting from around him. He started to fall, but then he was caught as blood filled his mouth.

Teach her a lesson, eh? Huh... was all he could think before unconsciousness took him.

* * *

"Oh fuck, fuck, sorry sorry sorry! I overdid it!" Ilea shouted. She was the first one to arrive at Dale's side. The man had been half embedded in one of

the sparring square's walls. She had caught him as he fell and immediately started to heal his injuries.

Six minutes later, two guards came rushing into the training yard, a small, lithe man in leather armor in tow. He breathed heavily as he knelt down next to Ilea and checked on Dale.

"He's fine. Why did you call me, you idiots?! You said he was heavily injured! Life-threatening!"

Noticing an unpleasant smell, Ilea looked at the man and realized where he had come from. .

"It's ok. I'm a healer too. They didn't trust me. It's fine if you go back and clean up." She smiled at the man as she identified him.

[Healer – lvl 53]

His face turned a bit red. "Apologies. I do have to take these claims seriously though." He turned away from Ilea.

"You guys owe me!" he shouted at the two guards, who winced at his rage as the healer walked back the way he'd come, a brown stain clearly visible on his undergarments.

* * *

Dale woke up in a daze, coughing a couple of times while getting his bearings. The coughing hurt.

"I passed out," he said quietly and rested his head back on the ground. "Healer my ass."

He closed his eyes and smiled.

"You might've won had it not been for your advice before..."

It was Ilea's voice, but he didn't answer. *I doubt it*, he thought to himself.

Once he was fully healed, which happened surprisingly quickly, Dale excused himself from the other guards and led Ilea to his office.

"You were holding back the whole time, weren't you?"

"I was, only my body enhancing spells though. My first fight with Gary wasn't me playing around," she said. "Thank you again for the advice. I'll take it to heart. Anything else you noticed?"

“I should be asking you instead... Your technique is more refined than mine, and your speed is faster than even my best skill.” *Well, second best*, he thought, but using a fatal skill in a training match would be beyond unreasonable. *And who says that was her full power either...*

“I don’t have anything for you either. That last skill was impressive. Had you known about my abilities, it might’ve even worked,” Ilea said, likely trying to boost his spirits. But Dale knew when he’d been beaten fair and square.

Switching topics, Ilea started talking about her exploits in the past couple of weeks. It took quite some time, and even then, Dale was fairly sure she was leaving certain things out.

“A fire enhancer? Quite impressive...” *She got a new class in mere weeks? I don’t want to know what she had to do for that...* His mind conjured up images of the quirky healer covered in blood. *She must have killed hundreds of creatures to get this strong.* In his imagination, the girl was grinning, transforming into some kind of battle-crazed maniac.

The story continued.

“Stalker hounds... above level 90 you say?”

The bloodthirsty fighter was growing more dangerous in his mind by the second.

“And you were there alone? That’s quite something.”

He felt the blood drain from his face as the conversation went on. *She could’ve killed me in that sparring match. Not sure how Abby would have explained that one to the kids.*

“Oh, what?” he said, turning his attention back to the fearsome girl. Had she just asked a question?

“I asked how you’ve been doing. After the elven attack a month ago. I’m sure there’s been a lot going on. The city seems mostly fine now though.”

Rallying his energy, Dale focused on the question at hand.

“A lot of people have left the city. We helped rebuild and patrolled the surrounding areas. The elves haven’t shown themselves since. It’s easier for people to ignore it, you know... the constant danger of being out here on the frontier.”

He sighed. Citizens forgot things quickly, but guards like him always remembered.

“Even though their house might have been burned down a month ago, it’s rebuilt now and they’re alive. Luckily, we still have some mages to help with that. Hating and blaming the elves is easy. This attack didn’t change how anybody feels about them.

“We’ve increased our training and patrols heavily though. Next week we’ll start going into nearby dungeons and dangerous areas to make ourselves stronger. I can’t say we’ve always been as vigilant and disciplined as we should have been, but starting now is the best we can do,” he said, feeling slight guilt that he had not pushed his comrades harder, leveled faster.

“I just don’t get it, you know...” Ilea started, but then she trailed off. She looked at the wall behind him as he waited for her to continue.

She’s definitely more thoughtful than before.

“You... we... have the opportunity to strengthen ourselves. To work hard and fight back. One person’s efforts alone can save a whole city.” She paused. “Like the shields Esteban raised above the arena to protect the people inside. He might not have saved the city, but he’d certainly saved hundreds of lives.”

Dale nodded. It was something the new recruits often mentioned. ‘If everyone trained like the guards, the city wouldn’t need them’.

Ah, the optimism of the young.

“I know what you mean. Most feel content to be protected by the strong though,” Dale replied. “Growing your own power is dangerous. Few actively embrace that danger. They live their daily lives, not dreaming of improvement and adventure, instead impressed by the next arena fights or the next live show at the tavern. Not realizing that they could be that same person fighting or performing.”

He got up and came back with a bottle and two glasses. “I hope juice is fine, I’m on duty,” he said, filling the glasses at her nod.

“And you’ve been out there. I remember how you looked next to the burning caravan and the dead adventurers.” He softened his tone. “Not everyone can face that, can overcome it and become stronger through it. I’m not ashamed to say that I wouldn’t go into a dungeon by myself either, although I know it would be the fastest and best way to improve my own strength. And the ability to protect those I love.”

She drank some of the juice as he leaned back. “It’s just so much more graspable than...” She trailed off again. “Than where I’m from.”

Her eyes grew distant, and Dale decided not to press her about her origins despite his curiosity.

“To be able to stand when someone threatens you or someone you hold dear. To be able to save those injured with fatal wounds. What other choice do you have but to fight when such things are possible?”

Dale smirked a little at that. He doubted Ilea’s intentions were quite so noble. She was a good kid, but he could recognize one who was addicted to the thrill of battle. Much had changed since that day with the bandits.

Seeing his expression, her lip curled upward. “I know I’m being unfair. I love fighting. The thrill, the power. It’s just a bit confusing to me that not more people choose a similar way of going about it.”

In his youth, Dale had often wondered why more people didn’t join the guard. He no longer wondered. There was a weighty responsibility that came with power, and danger too.

“I understand. Many still do choose your way. And many of those die, leaving behind grieving parents or lovers. The others, well...” Dale trailed off and grimaced.

“What?” she asked, a smile coming to her face.

“You... well...”

“I’m quite a maniac, I’m aware of that,” she said as he mirrored her smile.

“You sure are... fucking fire enhancer in less than a month,” he answered, mumbling the latter half of the sentence.

“What level were you when you first fought the stalker hounds?” he asked, then immediately regretted it.

She was opening her mouth to answer, but he stopped her. “No, thinking about it, I don’t want to know.”

Before Ilea could say anything else, Dale lifted his glass.

“To protecting our loved ones,” he declared.

“To killing monsters,” she said as their glasses clinked.

TWENTY-SIX

Not a Title

Leaving the guard station, Ilea was in a thoughtful but content mood. The talk with Dale had given her a new perspective on things.

I'm glad I'm as free as I am. To be constantly afraid of dying and leaving behind a family or an unprotected hometown would suuuck.

As she walked aimlessly around Riverwatch, the suns slowly began to sink. She heard mothers calling for their kids to come home and eat, saw men closing down their shops with tired expressions on their faces, ready to go home. A kid was playing happily with his dog.

Ilea found a bench on a hill with a nice view of a big part of the city. Smoke curled upward from many cook fires, and the sound of gossip and laughter carried on the breeze.

I guess if I can be there to fight monsters then these people don't have to. Kind of a win-win situation.

She sat there for nearly an hour thinking about her purpose in life. Back on Earth, her life had been a drag. Exercising, consuming entertainment, going to work, school. Eventually, that routine would have included college and then a full-time job. An endless hamster wheel. No wonder she had felt suffocated by it.

It seemed a bit pointless to her now. She had enjoyed parts of her life back on Earth, but other parts had been frustrating. There was just something she enjoyed about her current lifestyle. The simplicity of it.

Maybe I should've gone into pest control instead of medicine, she wondered. Or maybe farming?

What she knew for certain was that, in this world, she was free. She could forge her own path with her own strength. *The strength I luckily gained from an old ruin I accidentally stumbled upon...*

She chuckled at that and decided that what she knew for certain was that she knew very little. There was no definite answer but she was happy, right here and right now.

Getting up from the bench, she stretched.

“Time to lose the sentimentality and do something.”

So she did.

She ran through the city in the fading glow of the suns. Jumping up onto the roof of a small pastry shop, she continued across the rooftops, her Dexterity and speed leaving no mark of her passing behind.

Does the why of life really matter when you can run around on top of buildings, feeling the wind in your hair? Ilea didn't care about the answer as she kept running, a smile on her face.

Some of the owners of the homes she darted over were probably wondering where the laughter came from, but it was infectious, and many a face became a bit brighter as they caught sight of her. Others shouted at her to shut the fuck up – but to her, it was all the same.

* * *

The next day soon came. Ilea stayed in bed in her expensive inn, reading the books Splicer had left in her possession after eating a rich meal and taking a long bath the evening before. Only getting up for lunch, she got dressed and walked downstairs.

Giving the room key back, she said goodbye to the innkeeper. The whole night cost her only a few silver.

So, what to do today...? she thought as she stepped out into the road. It must've rained later in the night as she saw a cart being pulled through what was now a muddy mess of a street. The suns were out and shining now though.

Ilea walked through the city, occasionally stopping to check out a shop or a food stand. Finally, she arrived at the Adventurer's Guild and went inside. The occupants immediately glared at her again and started whispering. With her sphere active, she heard everything.

“A healer above level 50?” said a short, stout warrior with a great axe slung over his back standing by the administration counters. “Do you see her... no, not the red-haired one... what? Yes, I can see the redhead has a great ass but look at the *healer!*”

He was whispering to a companion who looked to be a mage of some sort, with heavy robes and an amused expression.

“Matt, what team is she with?” the axe-wielding man hissed at a clerk behind a nearby counter.

“Oh my God, you bunch of creepy assholes,” a female ranger huffed, sipping mead with a long-suffering expression.

“Let’s go ask her, I’m sure she won’t decline your pure heart, Legomo!”

The warrior elbowed the mage forward.

I don’t have a great ass? Ilea looked at the red-haired woman who had entered just before her and sadly had to agree that she did not compare.

Looking at the warrior, she raised her thumb. The mage next to him freaked out, but he just smiled and gave a thumbs-up back.

“She heard me? What the fuck?” the mage mumbled, much more quietly now.

“Don’t worry, she didn’t. It’s a language of the soul,” the warrior chuckled.

“Your dick you mean,” the ranger said, finishing her drink and belching at the other two.

Ilea stopped listening after that and went to a notice board on the wall to check on the available assignments. A number of them were for the protection of caravans or property. Some others were for monster subjugation – many of those were posted by the city itself, it seemed.

Her browsing was interrupted by a clerk calling out to her and beckoning her over.

“Excuse me miss, what’s your name?” he asked as she approached.

“Ilea,” she replied, leaning on the counter. “Why do you ask?”

“Yeah, thought as much, not a lot of healers around. Fewer with black hair and blue eyes. There was a letter delivered for you. Please wait a moment.” He disappeared into a back room. A minute later, he came back and handed her a sealed letter.

Dear Ilea,

I have heard of the elven attack on Riverwatch and dearly hope that you are doing well. Please visit me in Dawntree as soon as you can. I have a job that you might be interested in.

Alice

Didn't she say she wouldn't see me for quite a while? It's only been a month or so. Ilea shrugged. *Not like I have anything better to do, and traveling seems nice.*

Continuing through the list of posted assignments, Ilea found something appropriate and took it. It was about the protection of a caravan on their way westward. They would leave in two days, exactly when her armor would be done.

Seeing as she was a healer, the clerk didn't even double-check anything when she handed him the assignment and immediately approved her.

"Your contact is Arven. He's gonna be the captain of the caravan guard. They leave at midday from the southern gate. Take this with you to identify yourself." She was handed back the paper she had taken from the wall, which now bore an official stamp.

Thanking the clerk, she went back outside, folding the paper and putting it in her notebook.

Ilea decided then that she'd be spending the next two days relaxing. *Not in the city though... I need some time away from all this busyness.*

She walked toward the southern gate and, exiting the city, she ran for around an hour, reaching an area that overlooked the city.

Normally, one would assume that a place with as wonderful a view as the one before her would be filled with people, or at least someone trying to sell something. But this one wasn't, for the simple reason that this part of the mountain was outside the city walls.

At least something good comes from so many people choosing not to fight, she thought as she jumped up onto the bough of a comfortable-looking tree to prepare a nice place to rest and read.

* * *

“You finished all of them?” Splicer asked as Ilea put the books on the counter.

She had finished the two last books she had the day before and was now preparing to leave with the caravan.

“I did, I did. This one was really good. Got anything similar or by the same author?” She pointed to her favorite, a revenge story, at which he chuckled.

“Didn’t take you for that type. Remind me not to get on your bad side. The author has another couple books as far as I remember. I only have one of them though.”

She nodded and put her backpack on again. “Did you check the books and diaries I brought?”

Nodding, he reached for something below the counter and pushed over a coin pouch. “31 gold for the diaries and another 3 gold for the other books. Although I have to say most of their worth comes from their age and not their content.”

“Thank you. Although I have to say, this is a *lot* of money, considering I had some armor made for 4 gold just a couple days ago. What’s the catch?”

“There is no catch, my dear healer. Information and history is a pricey business, and although one has to look hard to sell, there are some people willing to buy. Some *very* wealthy people.”

Taking the money, she eyed him skeptically while jingling the pouch. “Like the Foundation of Glass, for example?”

The corner of his mouth lifted by a nearly unnoticeable amount at that.

“Yes. For example, the Foundation,” he affirmed. “Now, would you like to buy the book I mentioned?”

Ilea chose three books. Totaling one gold coin, it was one of the priciest investments she had made so far. Then she went back out onto the streets, heading to her next stop.

I kinda like Riverwatch at this point. It certainly has its charm. She smiled to herself while looking at the city’s small restaurants and cafés. Sometimes I forget that I’m in a medieval-like world. Magic really does change some things that would only have been possible via technological advancements on Earth.

She passed a tough-looking adventurer team with blood and injuries all over them.

“That girl there is a healer, come on Alex!” she overheard one of them saying. The man, apparently Alex, just grunted and continued walking.

“You’re injured! We could at least ask,” a woman said, but Alex just shook his head, not engaging with her either.

Dunno what that’s about...

Ilea kept walking as well though, thinking about the possibility of bringing some of the technology from Earth into this place.

I sadly know way too little about most things to really make a difference, and with magic already being here, a lot becomes easier or completely different as well.

Before she knew it, Ilea had arrived in front of Earl’s shop, the smith’s voice carrying through from inside.

“...it’s 50 silver, or there’s the door.”

Ilea’s timely entrance into the shop seemingly demonstrated where the exit was for the armored woman standing before the blacksmith.

“Well fuck this then,” the woman said and stormed past Ilea.

“What was that about?” Ilea asked, approaching Earl at the counter.

“Just another customer who isn’t used to paying for quality. Bunch of second-rate hawkers calling themselves smiths.” Earl stumbled upon the last words, but soon a smile formed on his face. “You’re here though, and you’re a paying customer at that!”

He gestured at her to follow him into the back room. Ilea did so.

“I finished it yesterday,” he continued, walking over to a cloth-covered armor stand. “Not my greatest work, I have to admit, but still better than most things you can buy out there. I’ll give you a discount, or you can choose any weapon out front. Nothing worth more than half a gold, mind you,” he said, removing the piece of cloth.

What greeted her was something beautiful. The feeling was akin to seeing a sleek top-of-the-line sports car for the first time in person. Not something that you could or likely even would buy, but nonetheless beautiful to look at.

A sports car’s power is rarely used in everyday life though... I feel like with this, it’s a bit different.

Approaching the armor, she saw it had a base of flexible leather, dark brownish-red in color. Drake bone lay on top of the shins, thighs, and parts of the chest. Additionally, the bone also covered parts of the upper arms.

The sides of the legs, the arms, the torso, and the stomach were partly covered by red drake scales. Some scales covered the shoulders too.

It all reminded her of something a samurai might wear, were it not for the difference in material... It seemed that the scales were there more to deflect blows than to absorb them. The bone, however, seemed very sturdy. At least to Ilea's untrained eye.

Walking around the armor stand, she noticed that the backs of the legs were only partly covered by scales, with no bones to be seen. That was surely to allow better movement. What seemed to be a miniskirt of leather and scales hung behind and to the side of the armor, though it didn't cover the front.

As Ilea looked at it a bit skeptically, Earl finally decided to wake from his smiling trance and hastily explained.

"It'll protect your backside while not inhibiting any movement," he said, and she just nodded.

She also noticed several places on the armor where pouches could be put or through which a belt could be slung.

The rest of the back was covered in nicely intertwined scales, with two rather big plates of bone covering the upper back. All in all, the materials had been very well used and left little room for the leather below to be seen.

Not a lot of weak points.

She also liked the hooks below where her neck would be. Most likely to fasten a hood, not unlike the one she wore at that very moment.

Earl didn't miss her smile at that, which only made his even bigger.

"How'd ya like it, lass?"

She smiled back at him and again marveled at the armor.

[Drake Chest Piece – High Quality]

[Drake Waist Piece – High Quality]

[Drake Leg Armor – High Quality]

[Drake Boots – High Quality]

"I love it Earl. It's beautiful."

"Armor's not supposed to be beautiful, it's supposed to protect you. How's your Strength looking?"

"Pretty high, and I can boost it. Why?" she said, touching the armor.

“It’s pretty heavy, all in all. With decent Strength, you’ll be more than fine though. The leg armor can be put on similar to pants. The boots and chest piece shouldn’t be a problem either. I’ll give you a couple minutes to change... or do you want to try it out later?”

She shook her head. “I’ll call you when I’m done.”

He unfastened the buckles on the waist piece miniskirt and then the ones connecting the leg piece to the chest piece for her, then disappeared to the front of the shop.

Ilea removed her backpack and leather armor and put it on the ground.

This is like Christmas!

She removed the leg piece from the stand and hugged it. Putting it on the ground next to her, she also removed her traveling clothes. Earl had supplied a new set with a different cloth that would cling better to the leather above. Ready to move on to the armor itself, Ilea got on the leg armor.

These really are like pants...

She easily slipped into them. The boots soon followed, and then the chest piece. It was a bit bulky compared to the previous pieces, but certainly no issue for her inhuman strength.

I mean, I am human, and this is normal here, isn’t it? Maybe unearthly strength?

With that thought, she turned around to look at herself in a piece of polished metal that was conveniently placed near the stand.

Well, ain’t that something...?

A smile spread across her lips.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Road Trip

The sight before her was certainly a lot more badass than she'd ever expected it to be.

I look like a cosplayer with this on though... and the miniskirt isn't even on yet.

After calling for Earl, the man entered the workshop and whistled.

"Aw, I love it when the customers wear my crafts. And it fits really well, it seems. Wait, I'll help you with the rest."

He quickly approached her and fastened all the hidden buckles and straps while showing each of them to her and explaining what they all did. She would easily be able to do the legs and boots on her own. Fastening the chest piece to the leg piece was rather simple as well, albeit time-consuming.

The skirt was also simpler than expected. It laid around her waist almost like a large belt, held by several straps and even some metal hooks. At Earl's suggestion, Ilea bought a used belt and some pouches from him.

He showed her how to fasten the belt around the skirt and how to add the pouches to it. Both laid half on top and half inside the scaly skirt.

"And we're done. Move around a bit. How's the weight? Comfort? Ease of movement?" he asked as he stepped a couple of meters away from her.

The full armor certainly weighed more than her previous clothes, but Ilea only noticed because she was focused on it. *I won't even feel like I'm wearing armor in ten minutes...*

She started moving around. First carefully and gingerly, then faster and faster with punches and kicks in between.

This is incredible.

“The armor is amazing, Earl. Worth every coin. You mentioned something about a weapon... what do you think would fit me the most?” she asked, a grin spreading over her face.

After checking some of the inventory, Ilea and Earl together decided on a rather small but heavy steel mace. Considering her lack of training in weaponry yet high stats, it wouldn't be too difficult to smash some things while not seeming completely incapable.

Ilea got her backpack and fastened the mace to her belt with the handle facing toward the ground. Looking down at herself, she felt very good. *I'm like a real adventurer now.* Although she felt the armor looked a bit too pristine at the moment. That would change with time, she was sure.

“Earl, this is really, really good work.” She put two gold coins on the counter. “Consider it a tip,” she said and bade him farewell.

“May it protect you on your journey!” he called after her as she left.

Ilea had told him to throw away or sell her old clothes and armor, but with her sphere, she noticed him pop them into a small box in his workshop for safekeeping.

It was almost time to meet the caravan at the southern gate so Ilea made her way there, not forgetting to buy food and drink for the journey. And for right that moment, as buying food and drink made her quite hungry.

She definitely received more curious looks because of her newly acquired armor, and some people even commented on how it looked unused. Most of them seemed to get out of her way though. No one wanted to anger an adventurer with an unidentifiable level – even if they could tell she was a healer.

Ilea arrived at the southern gate a bit early, and seeing as there was no caravan there yet, she decided at least to get a better view while waiting. She jumped up onto the roof of a nearby building, which seemed to be a postage company of some kind. The roof was two stories up, giving her a rather good view of the square and its many occupants.

Several stalls were set up nearby selling various goods. Adventurers would sporadically leave through the gate or come back from the wilderness. Some carried monsters and smiles on their faces, others had thousand-yard stares and gear that told a more grim story than any words could have.

The guards didn't seem to mind her being up there too much. One of them tried to ask her to get down but wandered away after being ignored, ranting about not being paid enough for this shit.

Nearly half an hour had passed when some wagons and carts finally arrived. More and more pulled into the square as Ilea watched on while she ate something akin to chips.

There were nearly twenty carts with horses, drivers, and passengers. They all had their own trade markings that indicated different professions or merchant companies, while there were also some private individuals.

Eventually, a man in spiky black armor made his way to the front.

"Alright, everyone!" he shouted. The square immediately quieted down. "I'm Arven, assigned guard captain for the caravan to Salia. Cart owners, please join me so we can start organizing. Adventurers and guards will be needed after, I'll call you later. I expect everyone to be ready to leave in two hours' time!"

Some of the people left the carts and joined him as he started taking notes in a big notebook he was carrying. Ilea lay down on the roof and enjoyed the light warmth brought by the midday suns. *A little nap won't hurt...*

* * *

Ilea was rudely awakened by Arven shouting again, calling the adventurers and guards over.

At least fifty people moved from their conversations – in other parts of the square, in shops or restaurants, or in their carts – to join the guard captain. Ilea noticed that at least one other person jumped down from a roof on the other side of the square.

Arven waited for all of them to join him in a semi-circle before addressing them. "Alright, as I said, I'm Arven. I'll be in charge of you all for the duration of the journey."

Ilea noticed that she couldn't identify his level. The people around her were between level 50 and as high as level 93, which was the maximum level she could currently identify.

So gold level and higher adventurers only... There were all kinds of people with all kinds of different armor and robes. *This feels like a cosplay*

convention... and I fit riight in.

She smiled to herself. There was one woman with gleaming armor and harsh features that she felt was familiar somehow, but she couldn't place her at the moment.

"Alright, now, everyone level 75 and above to me. The rest of you, please form groups of defenders, supporters, fighters, long-range, and healers."

People started forming groups as around seven higher-leveled people joined Arven and started talking with him in a small huddle.

Ilea stood there for twenty seconds before finally finding two other people that had the **[Healer]** tag when identified. She joined them and introduced herself.

"Hey guys, I'm Ilea. Nice to meet you."

The two others were a teenage girl whose highest class was level 23 and a robed man in his thirties who was level 47. The girl was dressed in simple work clothes, but they were immaculately clean, and she had a red ribbon tied into her hair. The man was wearing a dark green robe that had a strange texture to it, like moss. He carried a staff of gnarled wood that seemed to shift and move in his hand, as if it was still growing. He nodded to Ilea, and the girl said hello in a quiet voice.

Not a talkative bunch... I like it.

"You guys aren't Gold level yet, how'd you get in?" she asked after a while. The man looked at her with a confused expression below his hood.

"You're a healer as well, aren't you?" he asked, which didn't really answer her question.

Ilea recalled how she'd been treated in the Adventurer's Guild and how the clerk had talked about healers. *Seems there really aren't a lot of us.*

She grunted in understanding and started eating a piece of jerky she retrieved from one of her pouches. Naturally, she had filled all of them with different kinds of snacks.

"Mistress Healer, that's some pretty nice armor... what's it made of?" The girl next to her seemed to be in awe of her.

Oh boy, I already have a fangirl.

"It's made from drake materials," Ilea answered. *So other people can't identify my armor? Considering I don't see any info on their gear, I guess that makes sense,* she thought, looking at the leather armor the girl wore and the green robe the male healer had.

“Who are you guys?” she asked.

The girl was starting to answer when a clap from Arven shut her up.

Three of the seven people that had been in his leader’s huddle went to the biggest group of adventurers, the warriors. Nearly twenty caravan guards were in that group. The fifteen long-range specialists – who were made up of mages, archers, and the like – were joined by a woman who immediately caught Ilea’s attention. Her black hair and blue eyes that matched Ilea’s own were one thing, but what really caught her eye was the black robe she wore. It looked incredibly comfortable, maybe made of some kind of velvet?

I’ll have to ask where she got that robe from... My cloak is nice, but that looks almost as comfy as my poor departed bed.

They locked eyes for a second, and the woman nodded toward her. The five supporters were joined by a man dressed in furs, while Arven quickly joined the defenders, who numbered around fourteen.

After quickly talking to the defenders, he made his way toward Ilea and the other two healers.

“You three are the healers, hmm? The guild promised me experienced people. Guess I’ll have to take what I can get...”

He looked up and down Ilea’s armor while completely ignoring the other two.

“Is that new, or is this your first time out of the walls?” There was no hint of sarcasm or a mocking tone in his voice.

Professional, hmm, though still a bit of an asshole.

“I just got it today, been outside a couple times before.” She locked eyes with Arven, which seemed to convince him.

“Alright, you’ll be the healer in charge based on your level. You three will stay behind us defenders, divided along the caravan to cover its length. I’ll coordinate you, should the need arise. Your job is to stay back and deal with injured people. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Understood, sir!” Ilea saluted in an exaggerated manner, to which Arven just nodded.

“I’ll talk to the defender group then. You’re at the front,” he pointed to Ilea, “you’re in the middle,” he pointed to the girl, “and you’re at the back,” he pointed to the older male healer. “Just choose a cart and hop in. They’ll be happy to have a healer that close. Come to me if you have questions or concerns. And thank you for joining the guard.”

Arven nodded at them before leaving, seemingly showing more respect to them than to others she'd seen him interact with.

Guess being a healer has its good and bad sides – not that the bad ones apply to me – and that guy apparently lacks a humor organ. That or he's a good actor. Nice armor though.

"I'm Chloe!" the girl next to Ilea said, interrupting her thoughts.

"Nice to meet you, Chloe." Turning to the male healer, she asked, "Anything I should know? Or is it as simple as he said?"

The man just shrugged. "Name's Sebastian. It's pretty much that. We're here for our healing, mostly, and of course any skill or class levels we pick up by being with the group and using our magic. I've seen Arven work before. He's as capable as he looks."

There was a moment's silence. "I'll check for a cart then, before the others start to disperse. I suggest you two do the same," Sebastian suggested, and all of them started walking toward the carts.

"Ataniel will wait for you, trust me!" came a familiar zealous voice. Turning her head, Ilea saw the woman who had seemed familiar to her before, and hearing her talk made the gears in Ilea's mind finally click.

She's that crusader chick from the arena! Good on her for surviving the elves. I'll get as far away as I can from her though. She did straight-up murder a guy...

The guards and travelers soon piled onto the carts, some of them also mounting horses to ride alongside the caravan. Ilea had chosen a merchant's cart that was filled with boxes of goods. It also had a roof, which Ilea jumped onto to continue her nap from before.

* * *

The hours passed as she dozed. Occasionally she just lay there and listened to adventurers talk about monsters, women, and men. She was reading one of her new books when an armored guy joined her on the roof, having jumped from the cart behind hers. He had long, slightly messy hair and a hooked nose.

He said nothing but motioned to the other half of the roof – to which she just nodded. He nodded back and sat down, taking a notebook from his

pack and a pencil to write or draw. Ilea smiled, and they continued to sketch and read quietly.

Evening came and went as the caravan formed a circle in a clearing in the forest. Cooking fires were made and maintained by mages inside the laager. Two people in the support group were bards, and they entertained everyone with their tunes.

Rangers were scouting the woods around them as fighters and defenders rotated the guard. Ilea enjoyed the view of the stars and didn't sleep that night, savoring the quiet after a morning filled with talking. The armored guy had left her cart's roof a couple of hours ago to set up his tent. He had bid her a good night and offered his name.

Roland. Hmm... She looked at the stars and smiled.

The night passed uneventfully. Some wolves and a shining elk monster were scared away by some of the mages, but the commotion was so small that barely anybody even woke up.

The days passed as the caravan traveled westward. The only healing Ilea got to do was to soothe burns from cooking or tend to small injuries of overexcited warriors who had hurt each other in mock battles. Luckily, the girl from the arena didn't seem to be in the mood for killing.

Not that she'd leave more than a severed head behind...

As time went on, Ilea noticed that the road became progressively less well maintained, the land rougher, and the people less jolly. She had started to talk to Roland, who still joined her on her roof every day.

He told her that the farther they got from the city, the more dangerous the wilds became. Just a couple of days out and what kinds of monsters or other sources of danger might arise would become rather unpredictable.

The travelers still had their cooking fires and songs, but these became more and more subdued, which was only partly enforced by Arven.

All of that made perfect sense to Ilea. Especially when, six days into their travels, Ilea was abruptly woken up by the sound of a scream.

Her buffs flared to life as she got up from her sleeping position, hitting the naked Roland next to her lightly on the end of his cute nose.

She got her armor on in under a minute. She had become much better at fiddling with the different straps and buckles, especially after she had started to spend the nights with her newfound companion.

Exiting the tent, she finished up with her scaled skirt just as Roland followed her out, putting on his steel helmet.

“You’re not wearing a shirt,” she said to him. He just smiled and lifted his rather large steel axes as a dim red glow filled his eyes.

Ilea unstrapped her mace and motioned toward the noise of fighting.

“Not me this time, hush... go get them!”

Roland shook his head while walking past her, his fist hitting her in the shoulder with a strength that would down a normal city resident. She showed no reaction other than to just smile at his bare back as he began running toward the noise with powerful steps.

Shouts started to fill the caravan as the heavier sleepers roused. The roars of as yet unknown beasts joined the symphony of the night as Ilea twirled her heavy mace with the ease of a child playing with a rattle.

The moon illuminated her wide smile that was partially reflected in the polished steel.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Actual Healing

Stalking the stinking humans, Kariik avoided the big burly ones. The smell of his brethren's blood and the blood of the humans filled his nose, lifting him to the Plane of War. He ran by as one of his brothers was impaled by a spike of ice the size of his torso.

Blood splattered as his packmate was torn to shreds by magic. In the distance, a woman with a big stick of metal was cleaving through a small group of his pack as they in turn tore one of the humans apart.

The moonlight filled Kariik with power as he finally found his own prey.

Blue eyes stared into his own but the fear he so anticipated was absent. Instead, the human's expression was strange as the corners of its mouth lifted up.

Kariik raised his clawed arm to deliver death.

* * *

A dull sound filled her ears as her mace impacted the creature's face, killing it instantly.

These would be creepy, but they have nothing on a certain bartender.

Turning around, another two of the bipedal creatures ran toward her. She identified one of them as she dodged a clawed hand that sailed inches past her head.

[Nazark – lvl 42]

The beasts were nearly two meters tall and very thin, patches of fur covering parts of their wiry, hunched, humanoid bodies. Their claws were almost a full foot long and a bird-like mouth lined with sharp teeth extended forward from their heads, two dark pupils in each eye reflecting the moonlight in an eery manner.

The beast stopped in its tracks, held back by the knee she had thrust into its path. The force of the beast and her leg's speed combined to create a rather impressive amount of kinetic energy that was released into the creature's bones and organs upon impact.

Releasing Destruction with her hit seemed unnecessary as the nazark died immediately, blood and flesh spraying from its back.

Her second foe managed to stop and turn around. While fleeing, its speed increased dramatically, now fueled by terror instead of bloodlust. She threw her mace at its back, but it impacted a tree a full two meters to the left of the retreating creature.

“My throwing sucks...”

Walking over to the tree, she ripped the mace back out. The noise of fighting and magical explosions was only sporadically heard now, so Ilea focused on the several shouts of “Healer!” that came from all around.

She moved through the forest at a high speed, stopping only to stabilize the wounded warriors and mages. Some with worse wounds than others she took more time on, some she ignored completely.

“He won't die. You two, stop his bleeding,” she told the two people watching her look over a wailing mage with what she considered was barely a paper cut but, to him, was obviously a horrible gash before she stormed off again.

Stabilizing eight more badly wounded individuals from that devastating initial clash, she made sure to backtrack and heal them more thoroughly. During the next two hours of steadily dwindling battle, Ilea sent those who were too injured to fight to the caravan where the other healers could take care of them.

* * *

Ilea listened to the near silence after the din of battle finally ceased. She started to meditate as she soaked in the now peaceful night. When she was half full on mana, she started to move through the remaining injured.

The beasts had left nasty cuts with their massive claws, and many of the half-dressed warriors and mages had had difficulty combating the monsters in the dark of night.

Another three hours passed as people came and went, some thanking her for the healing, others begging her to check up on teammates or friends.

"I need more fresh water," Ilea said to two watching adventurers, who sprang into action, running off at full speed.

"You should get buckets, you idiots," she called after them, turning around while cleaning her bare arms of blood with an already stained cloth.

She had removed her armor after the battle so as not to drench it in even more blood, thinking *I'll have to clean all that...*

Chloe had passed out half an hour into healing the people brought to the center of the circle of the wagons, her mana running dry. She had been too focused to notice herself waning but had worked hard for that time, taking some stress off the two more experienced healers.

Sebastian was apparently some kind of druid and could work on several people at the same time. His healing was much less focused than Ilea's second stage Reconstruction but nearly as strong. He had two healing classes working in tandem, after all. If his skills had been in the second stage as well, he would have been much more efficient than her.

She found that they actually worked great together. Ilea stabilized the most gravely injured right after the fighting had stopped in the forest. They were then brought to the center, where Sebastian and Chloe continued her work.

Ilea was nearing an empty mana pool again when Sebastian looked up with a tired smile.

"You can leave the rest to me." She saw with her Magic Perception that he was somehow drawing energy from the ground or, more accurately, from the many plants that grew nearby.

"Don't worry about me," she said, and she started meditating again as she worked, albeit a little slower than before. Ilea had gained another level in Reconstruction right before patching up the last patient. The newly-healed mage thanked her and joined her friends who were waiting a short distance away, now filled with relief.

Just then, the two over-eager adventurers from before returned with four buckets of fresh water. “Thanks,” she said, promptly splashing some of it on her face.

Chloe had been carried to her tent a while ago, and most of the bystanders had now gone to sleep as well. The caravan was still on high alert though, and Ilea heard that Arven had led a party of high leveled guards on a hunt to frighten the nazarks a bit more and discourage them from another full attack.

Arven had returned from that mission a while ago and was now talking to different leaders of the caravan groups while taking notes. He approached Ilea as she and Sebastian were cleaning themselves up. The ground next to them was heavily soiled by blood, its smell and dark color unmistakable even in the dull light of the moon.

“Heavily injured... fourteen. Medium injuries... nine. Dead... three. Of which two lost their heads and one was literally torn apart by the beasts. Great work tonight. I misjudged both of you.”

“Chloe worked well too, albeit with her level she was quickly out of mana,” Ilea supplied, which Arven made a quick note about.

“Rest now. We’ll leave at the planned time tomorrow,” he said and turned around, approaching four guards talking nearby to continue to gather reports.

“And here I thought you were green... your level should’ve convinced me,”

The voice of Sebastian made her turn away from the seemingly even darker armor of Arven.

“How did you not pass out? I won’t believe that you never run out of mana, even with Meditation,” he said as he finished cleaning himself.

“We all have our secrets, druid,” she smiled, at which he chuckled tiredly.

“I’ll go rest then. Maybe it’s the moonlight, but you don’t seem like you need any rest. See you around – and good work,” Sebastian said, and he turned to leave for his tent.

Ilea stood there, continuing to clean herself while staring at the blood on the ground. *Guess there’s a reason people don’t leave their cities...*

She took two of the unused buckets of water and walked to Roland’s tent. He wasn’t there, though she found this unsurprising. Leaving one of

the buckets there, she took the other through the edge of the caravan circle and moved into the woods, taking care not to alert any of the guards.

Out of sight, she undressed and started cleaning all of herself. *The cold air and water don't even slightly bother me anymore. This would already be very dangerous back on Earth. Here, though...*

Ilea looked down at her hands and clenched them into fists. When she was done a short time later, she went back. She sat down on the grass next to Roland's tent and started eating something. There had been no time to stop while healing, and the continuous use of her mana had made her ravenous. A number of full meals later, Roland came back.

Several cuts could be seen on his still naked torso, and some new scratches adorned his helmet. His axes told another story though, being nearly completely dark red with blood.

"You alright?" she asked, chewing on some hard cheese.

Roland just sat down next to her and fell on his back while grunting affirmatively. She still checked him with a quick touch, but none of his injuries were severe. He had an ability to heal some of the damage himself after all. And she'd learned he liked to feel the injuries of his battles.

He fell asleep soon after this, which was when she healed the rest of his cuts. Ilea stayed by his side until early morning, humming otherworldly tunes.

Everyone was woken up before the suns rose, voluntarily or not.

"Come on, move, move! I want everyone to be ready for departure in thirty minutes!" Arven was shouting through the camp. His armor still had smudges of blood on it, not unlike Ilea's.

She had put it on again after healing Roland but not before cleaning it as well as she could with half of the water she had left.

A groan caught her attention, and she saw a zombie-like Roland rising to his feet from exactly where he had collapsed the night before.

"What happened? I have a bloody headache," he said before falling into a coughing fit.

She approached him and patted his back. "You went out on one of your famous hunts," she said, at which some color returned to his face.

"Great... and I was just starting to like you..." He shook his head and went over to the nearby bucket, peering in to check if there was water inside.

“What do you mean?” Ilea asked, handing him a cleanish piece of cloth. He took it and dipped it into the water.

“Most women freak out when it happens. Hard to be attached to someone who does... that.”

Ilea shrugged and started eating something she'd pulled out from one of her pouches.

“You forgot to clean your mace, by the way,” Roland said, gesturing with one hand to the gore-spattered weapon that lay next to his tent. With his other hand, he removed his helmet and washed his face.

You hot piece of shit, she thought, chewing on a sausage and watching the water run down his impressive chest.

“Don't give me that look,” he smiled, but it wavered as she aggressively bit through the sausage.

They had told each other vaguely about their classes, and he'd shared that he sometimes got a bit overwhelmed by one of his when fighting. Nothing could stop him until the last of his enemies were dead or he was completely out of juice. Last night was the first time she had seen it in action, or at least that intensely.

She frowned at that thought and would tell him tonight that he shouldn't hold back his berserker tendencies around her anymore. She was a grown woman, after all. *And I have claws too.*

Most everyone was ready after the stipulated thirty minutes had passed, and the rest were helped along so that they were ready to go too. The caravan was moving again only a bit later than planned, and Ilea and Roland enjoyed the sunrise on top of their temporary moving home.

The day was certainly a quiet one. Barely anybody felt like speaking after being attacked the previous night. The guards were on high alert, and Arven had upped the patrols. They now went out even further, which was a risk he apparently thought was reasonable now.

“You think they'll be back?” Ilea asked Roland a couple of hours after they started moving. He stopped drawing and turned the notebook around. It was her, quite naked.

“I'm flattered,” she said, and she actually meant it. He definitely would've studied art back on Earth. She was happy that he could at least find some fulfillment in his hobby here.

“Will the nazarks come back?” Roland replied. “I don't know. I've actually never fought them before. Heard stories though. They like revenge

apparently, which I believe is why we left so quickly.”

They both stopped talking after that. He continued to draw her, and she enjoyed the sunlight that filtered through the trees above. Their pace was quite relaxed, at least compared to Ilea running at full speed.

The day passed peacefully, and this time the night went by without incident. They did receive a scout report from a ranger who had apparently seen a lone nazark, but they weren't uncommon in these parts.

Nothing was done about it as they could certainly defend themselves, and what choice did they have but to move on? They were halfway to their destination already.

The terrain got more and more rocky as the road ran closer to the mountain than before. It also made the ride a lot bumpier and more uncomfortable. Ilea was getting a bit sick of it.

Next time I'll travel by foot again – and alone. Although Roland definitely isn't unpleasant. He must have a full notebook of me by now.

The caravan came to a halt a couple of hours later. They had exited the forest and were now at the southern base of Karth. The trees now gave way to grass and then barren earth and rock. Eventually, the open ground rose and climbed upward to form the mountain. The suns were slowly setting as they neared a massive rift in the mountain's side.

The rift was diagonal, nearly a kilometer long and a couple of hundred meters wide. Ilea was completely blown away by the sight. She had seen the Naraza mountain range in the far away north, and the Navali Forest was impressive as well. But, well, it was still just a forest.

It reminded her of pictures she'd seen of some natural formations in Iceland or Scandinavia. Seeing it in person was certainly something else though.

The caravan halted when they arrived at the mouth of the canyon.

“First time you've seen rock?” Roland asked, not looking up from his notebook.

Ilea ignored him and simply jumped down from the wagon. The caravan was forming a circle, but she was still enjoying the view.

It's so huge! Puts my power into perspective.

Arven walked into the middle of the caravan, doing his famous ‘look at me’ clap. When he had everyone's attention, he explained the setup. He would sometimes do that if they came upon a not-so-ideal spot for the night.

“We’re gonna be staying inside this part of the Karth cave system. Nobody wanders off.”

Some grumbles could be heard, and there was some questioning about the cave system. Roland, having now descended from the wagon, started to explain when he saw Ilea’s face. For some reason, he seemed to think she knew very little of the world.

Some of his theories as to her ignorance involved her being an escaped slave or a sheltered noble. Apparently he would’ve bet on the latter if he had to. Ilea didn’t think she acted like a noble though.

“They’re largely unexplored, which is why nobody should wander off. Not that anyone has so far. We’ll be in a much more defensible position though, and there will be much less open space to keep an eye on – so I get his reasoning.”

Ilea nodded at that and continued staring above her as she twirled around. Forming a hashtag with her fingers, she looked toward Roland and said, “Hashtag traveling!”

“You’re fucking weird, Ilea.”

He started to build his tent, ignoring the chuckling idiot next to him. Sebastian and Chloe joined them for dinner as they sometimes had in the past week.

Chloe was still a bit shaken up by what had happened two days ago, but she was taking it well. *Much better than I did*, Ilea thought as she remembered her first encounter with a drake.

“What are your plans once we’re in Salia?” Chloe asked her. She had tried to make conversation with Ilea every time she’d had the chance. Ilea found it endearing, as the girl was obviously looking up to the *experienced* healer, but a bit annoying too. She didn’t hate socializing even though she enjoyed her time alone the most, but this felt more like being a manager or a team leader. Not something she had ever wanted to be.

“I don’t know yet. Explore the city a little?” Chloe seemed confused at her answer. It seemed her sentiment wasn’t one very common in these parts.

And here I thought adventurers were adventurers and not just gold diggers... Then again, I shouldn’t base my knowledge of the people in Elos on one teenage girl’s reaction.

They continued talking for a while and then enjoyed the bards playing some tunes. Admiring the stars while a bonfire crackled next to you and a bard played a jaunty tune was certainly a very nice position to be in.

Although Walter was better.

Arven's decision to camp inside the canyon was proven to be the right one as they saw the nazarks coming from a couple of hundred meters away. There wasn't enough cover to hide the nearly two hundred of them as they moved in, and their battle cries certainly didn't help their attempts at stealth either.

The monsters proved to be rather simple creatures as they hadn't waited for the caravan to sleep before attacking. A night attack wouldn't have shocked the guards this time, but with everyone still up, the defenses were a lot tougher and faster to respond.

Arven immediately jumped on top of a wagon facing the beast horde while shouting, "Warriors, defenders – to me! Form a line in front. Long-range and support on top of the wagons behind!"

All the people around Ilea sprang into action as they scrambled to follow the guard captain's orders. It would be quite a different battle tonight than the last time they had faced the nazarks. The monsters didn't realize they were charging to their doom.

Ilea jumped on top of one of the wagons, where she saw Mia. That, she had learned, was the name of the woman whose robe she had admired the day the caravan left. The blue in her eyes seemed brighter as she gestured with her hands, a massive amount of mana condensing around her.

"...let them know Winter! For you are here, Incarnation of Ice!"

With that, a massive wave of frost materialized before the mage and rushed toward their enemies. The first two rows of monsters were frozen in their tracks, instantly dead.

Fireballs, arrows, and rock spikes were shot and flung into the advancing horde after the frost wave. Ilea watched the gruesome display of explosions, crushed bones, and blood. It reminded her of a documentary she had watched about World War One and the early use of machine guns.

They should've built trenches. She wondered if even a single nazark would make it to the line of warriors that had started to buff themselves and were in turn being buffed by the supporting bards and enchanters behind them. Spells sparkled, flared, and glowed throughout their ranks.

The smell of blood and burned hair entered Ilea's nose just as the loudest noise she had ever heard rang through her head. A hiss rent the air, nearly shattering her eardrums.

Then the whole battle stopped as if frozen in a picture.

‘ding’ You have heard the basilisk’s cry. You are paralyzed for thirty seconds.

Thirty seconds? Are you fucking kidding me?

TWENTY-NINE

Force of Nature

By the looks on their faces, Ilea could tell the message had appeared for all the warriors, merchants, and even nazarks present. The time of paralysis was probably different for each individual though. Ilea's mental resistance and high Vitality and Endurance resulted in her being unable to move for only thirty seconds. Some of them would probably be immobilized for much longer.

The rift was quiet now. Not a single one of the monsters or people could move a muscle. An eerie silence was what Ilea observed just before she felt an incredible buildup of mana around a hundred meters behind her.

She had *never* felt mana from that far away.

The mana vanished, and the sound of approaching wind howled in the distance.

A massive wave of air disrupted the frozen scene as wagons, stones, and people alike were flung away like airborne statues, still in their frozen states. The outer line of their circle of wagons was rapidly pushed backward to first form an oval and then a single line. People who had once stood in the center were crushed by a cacophony of wood, stone, and metal, their screams silent, stolen by the paralysis.

The lucky long-ranged guards atop the wagons were flung toward the nazarks, while the unlucky ones were impaled by flying debris. A few of them got completely crushed, others were merely dismembered or torn apart.

Ilea felt an inescapable force collide with her back and she was thrown forward. The bone plates and scales in her armor reduced the damage to

only a cracked spine and around twenty shattered ribs.

If she hadn't had her buffs active, she would've been torn apart like some of the other unfortunate souls on top of the wagons.

The fighters fared a bit better as the second line of wagons somewhat stopped the first. Some of them were still crushed but most only got injured, the impact shocking them from their paralyzed state.

Only a couple of the nazarks were hit by the debris, so most of them remained immobile.

Ilea was thrown toward the monsters, tumbling several times before striking a large boulder with a sickening crunch. This injured her further, but not as much as whatever had hit her before.

The broken ribs punctured her lungs and other organs, and blood oozed from her mouth as well as from the newly made holes in her body.

Her second stage of Reconstruction shone as she focused on the most dangerous of her injuries. Her consciousness was a testament to the toughness of her stats, body, and mind. She was lying with her face toward the caravan and to the side of the frozen nazarks.

Bones were reset and regrown as new tissue formed in and around her organs. The cracking was unsettling to hear, but Ilea was most shocked by the first injury she had already healed. Her heart had been punctured by a rib.

How do you even survive that? That's impossible... Right?

Groans and screams started to fill the space as the brutally flung bodies came to a halt, some only skidding for a few meters, others smashing into the waiting nazarks, breaking both their own bodies and those of the monsters.

Ilea's own body started to twitch as feeling returned to her. Behind the caravan some two hundred meters away, she saw two battered, scaly wings rising. The wings were immense in size and dark in color, although they appeared to shift and shimmer in the light. She gasped and started coughing up blood when a head lifted itself between the wings, a long, green, scaled neck supporting its ascent.

Her blue eyes were reflected in gigantic white ones just as another hiss entered her ears. She felt a pressure similar to the demon's, though more raw – and even stronger.

The humans and nazarks who had managed to get back to their feet now fell to their knees, holding their heads, while Ilea gasped for air, having

coughed out more blood than she wanted to think about.

She tumbled to all fours when the hiss finally receded, checking herself up and down even though her healing skill told her she was mostly fine again. Her HP had taken a hit, but she kept healing the damage as she slowly got to her feet.

Facing the monster, which was still some distance away, she finally managed to use Identify.

[Basilisk – lvl ????]

Wait – four question marks? Aren't there usually only two?

In that moment, Ilea didn't want to know what the four question marks meant and simply stared at the mighty beast. People started shouting again as everyone who could move began running or crawling toward the chasm's exit.

"Flee! Run for your lives!" Arven's voice cut across the shouts and screams for a second as the seemingly uninjured guard captain rushed past the fleeing warriors and toward the basilisk, unsheathing his sword.

What is he doing? Ilea thought, jerked from her awe of the creature by this display of stupid heroism. She noticed that some of the warriors and mages had stopped running at his shout. Others apparently hadn't even run to begin with.

"Do what you can then, Ilea," she said to herself as her eyes focused. She slapped herself on her cheeks, turning them red, then blinked toward the nearest fallen warrior.

Head injury but still alive, her touch told her as she pumped mana into the half-dead man.

"The fast ones with me, we can't tank this one! Rock mages, form deflective plates! The rest of you, try to save as many as possible!"

Arven's instructions were overheard by Ilea as she told the groggy, newly healed man on the ground to run. He looked at her, confused, then toward the basilisk and the carnage around them before nodding.

"Don't run too fast – you're not out of the woods yet," she said, then she blinked to the next nearest fallen humans.

Three of them she found to be dead, but a fourth one was woken up from his unconscious state by a pulse of reconstructive mana.

Ilea continued her work as pieces of rock fell nearby and gusts of wind sliced into the stone around her.

She ignored the danger. There was healing to do.

* * *

How in the hells is there a basilisk so close to the entrance to the pass? New roads will have to be built further away... Arven thought as the beast before him, a mix of snake and dragon, bit down on a mage who was too slow to react in time.

The victim managed to detonate a massive explosion inside the beast's mouth as his last act of defiance, which actually staggered the monster for a split second.

Seven warriors had stayed with him, while four mages were still standing and two rangers were firing ineffective arrows at the monster before them. Five of the defenders with classes that didn't have speed enhancements were rummaging through the wagon wreckage, trying to find survivors. Their high Strength stats helped with this task tremendously.

A fiery blue glow suddenly caught his eye, and a smile spread on his lips.

Perhaps not all hope is lost...

Turning away from the teleporting healer, he faced the basilisk again.

"Deflect!" he shouted as the monster opened its wings. Ice formed before him, as well as the two mages who stood on his left, right before powerful wind magic buffeted them. Most of it was redirected by the quickly cracking ice and cut deep furrows into the ground or the rock behind them. The wind was so powerful and condensed that it cut through rock and metal like a blade through flesh.

One of the mages, Mia, was flung backward but remained standing. She focused on the creature again after having saved Arven's and the two mages' lives.

"Ice Blade," she said with her hands outstretched, wincing at the wound in her left side that was already staining her robes crimson.

The massive blades of ice shattered against the basilisk's head without doing noticeable damage. It did change its focus toward the woman though

and slithered toward her in the span of a single heartbeat, its maw gaping open to feed.

One of the warriors, Arven recalled his name was Jacet, struck the beast from the side with a powerful shield bash, redirecting its strike enough so that its jaws tore away scraps of Mia's bloodied robe instead of the already damaged body beneath. The snake smashed into the stone wall of the canyon as the survivors regrouped.

"We need to get further away from the carts! We still have a healer!" Arven shouted and gestured at them to follow him.

"Keep attacking!" he shouted to the mages and rangers, who continued firing volleys of fire magic, rocks, and arrows toward the beast as it slowly turned away from the cracked stone wall.

Its mouth opened, and moments before the horrifying sound emanated from within, Arven shouted "Fortify!", activating one of his top-tier abilities. The hiss made them all clench their teeth, but they weren't overwhelmed by the pressure this time with the support of his ability.

"Now come at me, you bastard! We'll show you humanity's power!" Arven shouted in defiance as the basilisk lifted its head, towering nearly three stories high with wings each as long and wide as a barn door.

* * *

"Run!" Ilea shouted at the woman she had just healed. All the adventurers and guards who were still alive were now heading out of the canyon. Some of them had started helping to clear debris and help the civilians out of the wreckage. The ones still alive, at least.

Ilea turned back to the wreckage, working even faster at clearing it than the warriors and defenders close to her. She flung hundreds of kilograms' worth of wood away as if it was tinder.

Another one... She grabbed a half-mushed corpse from the wreckage. She held back a gag of disgust as she unceremoniously tossed the ruined corpse behind her. *I don't have time for respect or revulsion...*

She knew that she'd have to work through what she was seeing right now sometime, should she survive. That time wasn't now though – there still were lives to be saved.

Another piece of wood was thrown away, revealing part of another body. Then it gave a soft whimper. It sounded familiar.

“Chloe! Oh no...” Ilea whispered at the sight of the wounded girl. She was bleeding from numerous places and appeared partially crushed. But she was alive. Ilea carefully started healing her.

“Circulate the mana through yourself. I know you can do it!” she said while working on the worst damage. The girl had miraculously survived standing inside the cart circle with the merchants and civilians.

“S... Seb... Sebastian...” the girl stuttered as Ilea stabilized her and helped her away from the wreckage.

“Can you heal the rest? Look at me – focus!” Ilea grabbed her face, and the girl nodded, tears running down from her eyes and mixing with the dried blood, turning her skin into a patchwork of red splotches.

“Good. When you’re done, run outside,” Ilea told her while moving back to the wreckage. Behind where she had found Chloe were Sebastian and three other people. Fortunately, they were all much less injured than anyone else she had found so far.

A half-formed shield of battered roots was formed behind Sebastian, although he lay there unconscious. After checking on the people around him, she healed him first. Then she slapped his face, and his eyes gained focus.

“The basilisk... Ilea...” They locked eyes, then he looked around, immediately starting to heal the people that lay crumpled on the floor nearby.

“Can you finish up here? I can help the others distract it,” Ilea said to him, readying for a fight.

“I can feel the life energies of another five people here. I’ll get to it immediately,” he said as he stumbled to his feet. The people around him began to stir.

“You’ll have to exit the rift immediately after. We’ll hold it off as long as we can.”

He nodded just as a hiss reverberated through their bodies. Ilea staggered but caught herself, but Sebastian didn’t seem to have been affected, though his frown deepened.

“It’s angry. We have invaded its domain,” he said. “It... it has young...”

“Great news for it then! I’ll go congratulate it!” Ilea helped up the people around her who had fallen down from the debilitating hiss.

“You don’t understand! It will not pursue us if we leave – it’s only defending them. Leave as fast as you can! I’ll be done in... three minutes,” Sebastian finished as roots started to push wreckage aside to reveal the battered body of a girl below.

Ilea nodded and blinked above the wreckage.

“Defenders! Sebastian the healer is below me – he can sense the living. Help him get to them!” she shouted, but only half of the searchers heard her.

Sprinting forward, Ilea looked at the massive basilisk up close for the first time. It was nearly fifty meters long, nose to tail tip, while its head was ten meters above the ground with its wings extended.

Blinking and running closer, she saw a small group of warriors and mages led by the black-armored Arven shouting his defiance.

Let’s play then.

* * *

Arven’s defiant shout was interrupted by a flap of the basilisk’s wings. Ice and rock formed before them in an instant, and the wind was redirected to either side.

Cracks spiderwebbed across the barrier. A moment later, the defenses were breached. As the wall splintered, all Arven could see were the monster’s ivory teeth and gleaming eyes. Raising his shield, the sound of an impact crashed against his ears – but his shield arm told a different story.

The dust settled and Ilea now stood before him, cracks in her expertly crafted – though not so pristine anymore – drake armor. A blue light shone through the gaps, emanating from runes exposed on her naked skin where the armor had been ripped open. Red wisps of fire danced around her, and dark blood covered her entire form, giving her already red armor an even more sinister aspect.

Her head turned toward him, and her piercing blue eyes locked with his. A smile was plastered on her face as the tissue of her ravaged arm reformed before him, the bones and flesh having been completely ripped apart by the punch she had just delivered to divert the attack.

What... are you? he thought, but a hiss from their left stole his attention. Ilea, however, was seemingly not bothered at all by the immense mental

pressure that now hammered against Arven's Fortitude-enhanced defenses.

"It's defending its newborn. We've come at a bad time," Ilea said, forming a fist with her already reformed arm. "We just need three minutes until Sebastian has got the others out."

Arven nodded to her, knowing that Sebastian had some sort of druid class. They were renowned for feeling whatever a beast was thinking.

* * *

Ilea blinked back to Mia and touched her side. The injured girl winced, but while relief spread on her face, she remained focused on the enemy that was now slowly getting up again.

A discolored dent could be seen on the beast's head where Ilea had hammered it with all her enhanced Strength and Destruction. The injury seemed to flicker and shift as if distorting the light. Despite this, the wound didn't seem to bother the basilisk a lot as it immediately lifted its wings again to deliver another air attack.

The deflective ice cracked once more as all of the remaining survivors protected themselves with shields and lifted arms.

"My mana won't last much longer. Buy me some time so I can meditate!" Mia shouted over the noise of battle as she slowed her movements down.

She has the second stage as well... neat. Ilea thought as Arven used Fortify to bolster everyone's defenses.

"You two to the right, you two to the left!" Arven shouted as he gestured to the warriors and Ilea. Everyone fanned out at incredible speed while the rangers and mages continued to assault the beast with fire and arrows.

Closing in on the creature, Ilea blinked to its head again. The basilisk's eye quickly focused on her and its head jerked forward viciously, sending her flying.

With her arms before her, she managed to catch the blow, and while cracks formed in her wrists, they were healed even as she was flying through the air. The warrior who was running with her, a dark-skinned veteran covered in scars, managed to dig his sword into the snake-like tail while it was distracted before he too was flung away.

Arven was more successful as his massive axe bit into the base of the basilisk's right wing. The cut seemed insignificant, but the beast hissed and started to thrash around. The wing almost seemed to shift and distort as the blow struck home.

The guard captain was saved from an immediate counter-attack as his companion, a short, stocky man in green boiled leathers, tackled him to the side just before the beast's jaw closed on the leader's previous location.

The injury to the beast's wing seemed to have more of an effect than what Ilea had managed with her punch before. The behemoth was now a bit more apprehensive of the humans before it. Precious seconds were won as the beast took in its adversaries again and hissed.

* * *

It's now or never, Ilea thought as she finally crashed to the ground, skidding ten meters upon impact.

"Leave now! I'll get its attention!" she shouted and blinked several times toward the enemy while running at full speed.

* * *

The others looked on as the healer disappeared and reappeared next to the basilisk's wing before a nova of fire extended outward from her in all directions, eliciting another hiss from the monster. The Heat Surge spell wasn't even close to powerful enough to damage the beast, but it was certainly flashy enough to get its attention.

"She's right. Anyone without any energy left should leave. Injured also," Arven ordered. The other mages and the rangers nodded and started to run toward the canyon's entrance. Four of the warriors left as well, nodding to Arven with battered shields and broken weapons.

"Tom, can you get Ryan?" Arven asked the green-armored man next to him, nodding toward where Ilea's own scarred companion had been flung. Tom headed off in the direction of the dark-skinned veteran.

"Mia, you think we can give them some more time?" Arven asked the ice mage, who somehow still managed to look dignified with her dress in

tatters and blood pooling at her feet from her barely healed wound. She smiled at him as her mana condensed.

* * *

Ilea blinked under the fast-moving head of the basilisk and delivered punch after punch into the hard scales of its body. The impacts felt off, like she was punching cold stone rather than scaled flesh. Nothing even slowed the beast, and it was careful now not to let her get close to its head.

Both Ilea and the monster noticed the mana build-up coming from below. The basilisk darted toward the mage, and Ilea took the moment of redirected attention to blink above the monster and deliver a devastating kick with her heel to the base of its skull.

The beast crashed into the stone below, and Ilea was propelled forward by both the impact of her kick and the speed of the basilisk. She felt the wave of ice pass below her before she landed behind the remaining warrior and mage.

Turning around, she saw the monster was thrashing about, its healthy wing and snout frozen in place, both stuck to the ground. Mia collapsed and was caught by Arven, who then dashed toward Ilea.

“Time to leave!” he shouted, and she quickly followed.

Tom, the green-leathered rogue, had managed to get the remaining warrior, Ryan, back to his feet, and soon they were running parallel to Ilea and Arven. There was no sight of Sebastian or anybody else in the chasm.

Another hiss echoed through the air, and Ilea looked back to see the basilisk lifting itself up, cracking the ice on its wing. Its eyes focused on Ilea and Arven as it slithered closer to them. Its speed didn’t match theirs, apparently unsure if it should let them go.

It hissed once more, and Ilea could have sworn its form began to fade. It flickered once more, and the creature looked their way as its wings moved, lifting it off the ground once more.

I’ll be back for you, my friend, Ilea thought, looking over her shoulder at the beast and the pile of bodies before it.

Just you wait.

THIRTY

Claymore

Roland waded through the nazarks before him, slicing through their grasping limbs with his axes. After being freed from the paralysis, some of them had turned on the vulnerable humans fleeing behind and between them.

As the terror of hearing and seeing the basilisk left the nazarks, they were again filled with bloodlust and revenge.

Roland didn't care much. He welcomed the fight, and these were certainly enemies he could face.

Unlike that big fucker. I hope some of the people in that canyon survived... like Ilea.

He liked the woman. She was talkative and fun, quick to joke, yet also completely fine with an afternoon of no words at all. And, of course, the sex. He could finally go all out, compared to how careful he had to be with his husband and wives.

Although George can take quite a bit as well...

Dodging a claw that would otherwise have taken his face off, he kicked the offending nazark and smashed one of his heavy axes into its skull. Blood splattered over him, and he smiled. As red puddles formed underfoot, he could see the familiar faint red glow in his eyes reflected in them, alone, unaccompanied by the light of the moon.

"A cloudy night," he said, ripping the axe and half of the monster's head from the corpse.

Next to him, the templar Iris laughed loudly as her claymore cleaved through another of the unholy monsters.

“Feel my wrath, cursed beings!” A claw dug at her head, but she just shrugged it off and impaled the offending nazark before her.

Magic lit up the night as warriors glowed in different auras, blades of fire and ice were brought to bear upon the monster’s bodies, while magically conjured spikes impaled even more of them.

The lower-level monsters didn’t stand a chance against the remaining warriors and mages of the caravan guard, even with their once vastly superior numbers. Many had already been killed in their initial assault, and what was left was quickly being whittled away.

“Regroup! To me!” the surviving leader of the support group shouted, an elderly man with hair pulled back into a white braid. Most of the survivors followed his call, quickly building a core of fighters, pushing back against the remaining nazarks while protecting the heavily injured.

They moved through the monsters, and their formation strengthened in time as the surviving rangers and mages joined them. Behind them, some of the civilians even started to throw rocks at the enemies while others just lay on the ground crying.

In the end, they wiped out the beasts completely. Some of them even attempted to flee. The two warriors didn’t let up though and hunted down the running monsters. Roland did his work in silence while his counterpart did hers with manic laughter.

“She’s mad, that one,” a voice commented from the crowd, producing a couple of grunts of assent. Roland ignored them, but they were likely right.

“That was a basilisk... I hear they can take on whole groups of Ruby-level adventurers...” one of the fighters said, nervously moving his sword from hand to hand.

“Stop that hooey. Let’s help by clearing up here. We’re no help in there,” the support leader said.

“Look, they’re coming out!” one of the surviving civilians exclaimed.

Satisfied, Roland returned to his hunt.

* * *

The basilisk was still sending waves of air through the canyon, but its magic dissipated after a couple of hundred meters. After making sure the

basilisk wasn't following them, Arven set Mia down after they'd exited the canyon, and Ilea immediately checked her.

"She's fine," she declared after a moment. "No mana though. Just let her sleep for a while."

Arven nodded at that, and Ilea started to treat Ryan, the man who had been running next to her during their assault on the beast.

"You can lie down, back to the rock."

He followed her orders as she started treating his broken arm and shoulder.

Hope this is the last of them. I really am running low on mana□

"Unholy!"

A sudden scream broke through Ilea's thoughts.

Iris was pushing through the people crowded around Ilea. Her armor stained by blood, she unsheathed her sword and suddenly rushed at Ilea with an incredible burst of speed.

Her claymore held high, Iris descended on the healer like a blood-crazed avenging angel. It must have appeared to the assembled crowd that they could only watch Ilea be cleaved in half.

But that didn't happen. Instead, Ilea sidestepped and punched the woman. A crack resounded when Iris' head snapped back, her neck broken. She slumped down, her claymore clattering to the ground.

Shit. Way too hard.

She shook her head lightly, confused as to why the woman had attacked her in the first place. But after the fight and all the death she had seen, Ilea wasn't in the mood to even consider the implications right now.

"I'm sorry," she said, her back to the group again as she continued to treat Ryan, focusing on what she could do instead of the murder.

It was so easy.

She shuddered.

"She attacked you for no reason... Let us... forget about this," Arven said, his voice shaking just a fraction.

No trial, just acceptance. I just killed someone.

None of the survivors reacted much, most too preoccupied with their own losses and injuries to even notice what had happened. Some collapsed in relief while others hugged each other.

Ilea finished patching up Ryan and helped Sebastian with the rest. He smiled weakly at her, not stopping his work until they were both done an

hour later.

When the healers were finished, Arven got up from his sitting position next to Mia and addressed everyone.

“Alright people. There are only forty-five of us remaining out of the hundred fifty that left Riverwatch. We have some decisions to make.”

Thirty-seven out of those forty-five were from the guard. It was a miracle that even eight civilians had actually survived. They had all been between the carts when the basilisk first attacked, and most of them had died instantly.

Having finished her work, Ilea now joined the others who were listening to Arven. They were voting on going back to Riverwatch or continuing their way to Salia. Most of them wanted to continue.

“Alright, that’s settled then. I suggest we camp out here for a while until everyone’s recovered a bit. Then some of us can go in again to salvage whatever we can from the caravan. Did anyone see any horses escape?”

Some people nodded and mentioned that they saw a bunch of them running away toward the closest trees. Arven gestured to the remaining rangers, who nodded and fanned out. It was the middle of the night, but they would likely still find the animals.

“Tom, do you feel up for a scout inside the rift in an hour or so?” Arven asked the green-clad rogue.

“Sure, if you and Ilea wait at the entrance to bail me out should anything happen,” he replied.

Both Arven and Ilea were alright with that, and so everyone spent the next hour recovering. Seeing as all their physical injuries were already healed, it was mostly a mental thing. Ilea remembered after half an hour of checking the damage done to her armor that she could heal mental damage.

Maybe it works on shock and warding off PTSD as well. No wonder I’m strangely unaffected by everything that happened... Especially with Iris. She just attacked me. Why?

She shook her head and started healing the civilians, touching their foreheads and banishing the mental pain as she would a sword wound or broken bone. They all seemed a bit more relaxed afterward.

Most of the adventurers and guards seemed to be fine. Life in those professions brought similar events to what had happened that night on a regular basis, albeit maybe not as intense.

Ilea had just finished checking up on the last one of them when Arven patted her on the shoulder.

“It’s time. You ready?”

She nodded, and together they escorted Tom into the canyon. After a while, the rogue stopped them with a gesture.

“This is far enough, you guys are too loud,” he said. He continued on alone, crouching slightly.

“I couldn’t do that...” Ilea said after a minute.

“What do you mean?” Arven asked, scanning the open space before them. There was no sight of the basilisk or anything else moving.

“I mean the roguey kind of work, you know.” She kicked the dust on the ground, wondering if he would confront her about Iris.

“Yeah. Not my thing either. Didn’t expect you to be a madwoman though,” the man said with a completely straight face.

“Madwoman? What’s that supposed to mean? And yeah, you’re more the leader type than a behind-the-scenes guy.” Ilea then pulled out her mace and started playing with it, throwing it into the air and catching it.

“Madwoman. It’s what I call people like you. The ones that get enjoyment out of, well, this...” He gestured to the scene before them.

“It’s not that I enjoy the killing and deaths, trust me I don’t. It’s just... the fighting itself. There’s something about it,” Ilea responded. The mace fell to the ground a couple of meters away from her. She went to it and picked it up.

“I know, I know. Many of you do enjoy the carnage though, so you’re a special case, I think. Sometimes I just think it would make it easier, you know. To enjoy it.” He started tweaking the straps on his armor.

“I get you.” She threw her mace again. “What’s that armor made of by the way? Heard someone whisper about a dragon.” This time she caught the mace in the air.

“It’s a secret,” was his plain response.

At that moment, Ilea felt a presence with her sphere of perception and turned to her side to see Tom crouching close to her. His eyes widened, and he straightened himself up immediately.

“At least you’re not *completely* unaware of your surroundings. But holy fuck, you idiots, could you be any louder?” He cocked his head as he looked at the now slightly embarrassed pair. “There’s no sign of the basilisk or anything else living. The tracks look to be at least an hour old, so the

thing probably left soon after the fight. Must have flown off, because the tracks vanished after a few meters.”

“You think we’re fine with checking ourselves then?” Arven asked, none of the embarrassment showing anymore.

Tom made a wavy motion with his hand. “I’d give it another hour or two. Maybe let them sleep first,” he suggested. Arven grunted affirmatively.

They went back out of the canyon and informed the group of the results. A watch plan was put into place while the rest prepared to get some sleep. Some of the others seemed to have as little need for sleep as Ilea. She believed the Body of Azarinth skill or the class itself was responsible for that but had never actually seen it in her skill descriptions. Asking around, apparently such unwritten perks weren’t uncommon for certain classes.

She could certainly sleep for over ten hours if she was in a safe environment and wasn’t woken up, but two hours was all she really needed at this point. If she meditated regularly, she could even push sleep aside for days upon days. But it didn’t feel right, and it would always end with a headache. And Ilea didn’t like headaches. In the end, sleep took her though, as the night had been rather intense, even for her.

A shout woke her up a few hours later. One of the guards on watch had his sword drawn at the sight before him. Ilea followed the guard’s gaze and breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s alright, I know the guy,” she said from her half-sitting position.

Roland gestured to her in a friendly manner and sheathed his axes. He approached her as the guard sheathed his sword, turning his back on the two of them.

“I saw you survived,” Roland said. “I won’t say I’m surprised. Looks like you managed to run away in the end? I saw you leave but had... business to finish.”

“I was in there for most of it. Quite a thing, that basilisk.” She lay back down, resting her head on her hands.

Roland lay down next to her. “Glad you made it,” he said after a minute of silence.

“Same,” Ilea said.

The sky had cleared by now, stars shining bright. The sounds of people sleeping could be heard all around, while the howl of a wolf occasionally split the otherwise still night.

Ilea quietly chuckled to herself. *How did I get here?* She smiled at the absurd situation she had found herself in. *Guess I'm twenty now too. And I didn't even celebrate my birthday like I usually do by shutting myself in and avoiding all human contact...*

She didn't feel like it was her mission to find out why she had come to this world, but it was certainly of interest. No obvious party had declared her the hero of the land, and there seemed plenty of people stronger or wiser than her. Nor was there a demon lord to be defeated.

It just seems like some sort of joke. I do appreciate jokes, but where's the punchline?

She thought about it for another hour or two before getting up and stretching.

The suns were already rising at that point, and more of the guards were waking up. The atmosphere was certainly not a happy one, but to Ilea, it didn't seem gloomy enough for what had happened the previous night.

Life here is tough, huh?

After finishing her stretching, she saw Roland had cooked some fresh eggs and meat, and he offered some to her.

"Where's the wind taking you after this? You staying in Salia?"

"No, no, I'm heading for Dawntree actually. I'll likely stay in Salia for a couple days or so though. What about you?" she asked, biting down on one of the eggs.

"Salia for me. Back to the family again." He finished eating and started sharpening one of his axes with a whetstone.

Ilea finished her first egg. "Kids? Don't tell me you're married."

"Oh yes, yes. Seven of them. Two wives and a husband." He smiled at her, completely straight-faced.

Ilea laughed but stopped after a moment. "Wait, you're serious?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?" He stopped his sharpening and looked at her, confused.

Ilea bit into the second egg, not realizing she was eating the shell as well.

"Well, that's neat..." She gave him a thumbs-up.

And here I thought he might have just been cheating, but he's actually triple cheating. She continued to chew on the egg. *Or is it even cheating for him?*

"Can I meet them? Your family, I mean," she tested.

“Sure! They’ll love you. Although the kids might be too much for you... Main reason I do this job is the space, next to, you know, my... well, let’s call them needs.”

He chuckled lightheartedly at that and continued to sharpen his axe.

Well, that settles it then, I guess. I won’t out myself as a prude who prefers monogamy...

“Sounds good, I’ll need a guide to the city anyway. Maybe one of your kids can show me around.”

THIRTY-ONE

Arrival

“Who goes there?” came a shout from atop the city walls. They were a little less high than the ones in Riverwatch but still seemed quite impressive to Ilea.

Arven emerged from the group and removed his helmet.

“My name is Arven. We’re the caravan planned to arrive three days ago from Riverwatch.”

The man on the wall signaled someone below, which was presumably to open the gates as a loud mechanical noise resounded a moment later while the massive metal structure came to life.

“Come on in then. Welcome to Salia!” the man called. Either he had completely misread the mood or perhaps thought the gloomy atmosphere was caused by the dark sky and the pouring rain.

It was now late afternoon, and the city was alive with merchants and people going about their business. Some merchants came up to the caravan immediately, already starting to haggle for prices. A couple of them quickly realized that too few merchants were with the carts.

Off to one side, Arven talked to a city guard, who quickly sent another to get someone.

“Alright, let’s move the wagons somewhere dry and wait for a guard officer,” Arven said. “Tom, can you go get someone from the guild? Then we won’t have to go through the whole story twice.”

They moved the carts, horses, and themselves to a secluded stable area nearby where the horses could eat and drink. The space was like a large

stone barn built into the wall near the gate, so it provided shelter from the rain. Even if it did smell a little of manure.

Ilea noticed that the buildings reminded her a bit of pictures she'd seen of Italy and old Roman structures. It was all arches and stone columns. Marble and polished stone instead of wood and thatch. Quite a different style compared to the practical approach that had been used to build most of Riverwatch. There were intricate designs here adorning nearly every building. They depicted geometric shapes, people, and even monsters. A lot of them looked rather old.

Do they have an amphitheater? Ilea thought while drying herself off with her magic. Heat Surge certainly wasn't a possibility here with all these people nearby, not to mention the hay, but her Flame spell did the job just fine.

The city guard officer joined them rather quickly. He was a bulky man with black hair and full plate armor. Ilea couldn't see his level, which meant he was at least level 94 in his main class.

The officer listened to a quick explanation from Arven, his eyes widening slightly at the mention of the basilisk, and he agreed to wait for the guild representative before they went into more detail.

Ten minutes later, a woman with blonde hair and an incredibly bored expression joined them. Some gasps came from the group as they saw her. Apparently, she was famous. Or perhaps infamous.

"Valery, glad you're the one to join us. Then this will be done with even faster." Arven seemed pleased with the woman's presence and immediately went into a detailed retelling of their travels. He left out anything that wasn't vital while still painting an understandable picture.

His good reputation and relationship with Valery was a stroke of luck. Ilea later discovered that this was the reason why their group hadn't been questioned more thoroughly about the loss of over two-thirds of their caravan's personnel.

Arven informed them all that they were free to enter the city and do as they wished. Payment for their guard services could be received at the local branch of the Adventurer's Guild.

Some of the people immediately left in groups or alone. A couple of them nodded to Ilea before going back out into the rain, while five people personally thanked her and Sebastian again. Two even offered her money, which she refused to accept.

Arven was the last one to approach her.

“Thanks again for your work. Many more would’ve died if it weren’t for you.” The man shook her hand.

“Same to you, Captain Arven.” She returned the handshake, and he was off. *Not one for overcomplicated farewells, it seems.*

“Look at you...” Roland stopped leaning on the stable’s back wall and grabbed his pack. “The famous healer Ilea waving farewell to her admirers. Or is it ‘The Murderous Slayer of Paladins’ now? Maybe even ‘The Mad Healer’?” He laughed at his joke and approached her. “The invitation stands to stay with me and mine. It’s already late, and the inns around here have little space even if you book a week prior. You’ll also have your own room.”

He winked at her as he passed, stopping a couple of meters away and looking back at her.

“I’m not one to turn down a free room,” she said, and she followed him through the city, the rain continuing to fall on the cobbled ground around them. Arven’s debriefing session with Valery and the guard officer had taken nearly an hour, and the sky had since darkened even further.

Their walk took them through a part of the city containing many imposing buildings constructed of bleached white stone. A number of courtyards were surrounded by column-lined walkways, and most buildings’ entrances sported carved archways decorated with various scenes from what Ilea assumed was the city’s history. The architecture still impressed Ilea, and she assumed the suns would only improve the already picturesque setting.

Eventually, they reached one particular house among the many. Roland knocked on the door, noticeably holding back his strength. Still, the noise must have woken at least some people inside, because the sounds of a commotion immediately began behind the heavy door.

The door swung open, and a horde of kids smashed into Roland with shouts of “Dad” and other affectionate variations, joining the noise of the rain outside. Behind the children stood a woman who stared first at Roland and then at Ilea. Her red eyes pierced into Ilea’s soul.

Ilea smiled and waved at the brown-haired woman. *Scary...* was her only thought at the sight of this red-eyed demon. The children started to notice her at that point too, their reactions as different as their looks.

This looks more like a kindergarten than a family...

One of the kids immediately hid behind the glaring woman who was standing in the doorway. Another one came up to Ilea, dark eyes staring into hers.

“Hey,” Ilea said, lifting her hand in greeting

“‘Ello,” the kid replied, imitating her gesture nonchalantly.

“Now, now, children, why don’t you go in with Roland and welcome him back in the kitchen?”

They immediately followed the woman’s suggestion like a well-trained group of huskies. Passing by her, Roland got a kiss on his cheek.

“Welcome back. Glad you’re alive,” she told him while he was dragged away. He looked back with an apologetic glance to Ilea before disappearing out of sight inside.

“Hello, I’m Samantha. Roland’s first wife,” she said, folding her arms. Seeing no reaction from Ilea, she continued, “He told you?”

“Two wives and one husband,” Ilea said while stepping toward the woman. “I’m Ilea. Nice to meet you, Samantha.”

She held out her hand. Sighing, the woman returned the greeting.

“Nearly every time he comes back this happens... can you believe that the men usually react much worse?”

Ilea was relieved to hear that Samantha didn’t seem too bothered. Roland’s marital... situation was apparently nothing new to her.

Ilea looked Samantha over. She had dark brown hair, piercing red eyes, and was of a medium build. She was wearing a finely crafted apron and a rather plain skirt and shirt below. Ilea had no idea regarding her capabilities though. Her status told her the woman was a level 48 mage, which wasn’t much.

“I can imagine. I didn’t expect him to be like that at the start. Considering his tendencies though...” Ilea trailed off while looking Samantha up and down.

Samantha laughed at that, a lilting, musical laugh that reminded Ilea of her mother. *Hope she’s doing alright with me gone... oh, who am I kidding, she’ll be fine. Probably didn’t even notice.*

A part of her knew that even a mother as uncaring as hers wouldn’t be unscathed by the disappearance of her only daughter. But that daughter was happier now. Plus, they hadn’t spoken in years.

Ilea cleared her mind of those thoughts. *Nothing I can do about it. Maybe there’s a clone of me there now, or time is frozen. Or maybe that*

world never even existed...

"You alright?" Samantha asked, but she didn't wait for an answer. "There's still some dinner left. The people he brings usually stay for a night or two considering the housing situation around here. You're the same, I presume?"

Ilea nodded and was promptly led inside while Samantha kept talking.

"His 'tendencies', as you call them, have certainly landed us a few quite... special guests. I like you more than some already."

"Not all of them?" Ilea said, smirking.

"You're not a man. So no, not even close," Samantha said with a wink. Ilea did have her fair share of experience with relationships, but certainly nothing as open as the people in this house seemed to have had.

Ilea knew from her time in Elos, and especially Riverwatch, that polygamy wasn't considered too weird, but it wasn't something you saw every day either.

They entered what Ilea thought was the kitchen slash dining room. A big man was cleaning a wooden counter with a dirty towel. He was a level 52 warrior, not that she needed the prompt to determine that – he had scars all down his arms. He looked at Ilea and then Samantha before shaking his head, smiling.

"A healer, how did he manage to land that?" he asked, throwing the towel over his shoulder. "Nice to meet you, lass," he said as he approached her, but he was stopped short by one of the small boys running into him.

"You must be the husband, then, or maybe the lover and cook?" She smiled at the scene as the man picked the boy up and whirled him around himself.

He stopped and put the now disoriented boy back down. "All three hit the mark, Ms. Healer. George is the name. Warrior cook."

Warrior fucking cook... ok...

Two of the kids ran through another door while shouting loudly about the return of their dad. *One of their dads, at least.* Then she smiled as the scent of food entered her nostrils. It smelt rich, hearty, and altogether mouthwatering.

Ilea joined all the others at the slightly-too-small table and shared a meal with them. She had long given up on remembering or even caring much about the different names and excited stories about hunting dragons

and discovering ancient treasure – most of it, but not all, coming from the kids.

She made an effort to remember the name of Roland's second wife, who joined them an hour later. *At least the adults... Sophie... Sophie. It's Sophie. Sophie Sophie Sophie...*

Sadly, her high Intelligence stat didn't seem to help a lot with remembering names. *150 Intelligence my ass... I wonder how differently my college studies would go now though. Or I could go into pro kickboxing.*

She finished the mead in front of her and sighed with contentment. The room had gotten a little quieter since Samantha chased the kids away to bed. Roland had joined them again, the others talking about the basilisk and Roland's travels while Ilea simply drank her mead.

Some time alone would be nice... maybe I'll only stay the night.

"How does your healing help with your periods?" Sophie asked, which shook Ilea out of her daydream.

How'd they get to that? she wondered, looking at the three interested pairs of eyes.

Then she shrugged and explained a bit about how her pain tolerance skills would remove that problem while Reconstruction dealt with most of the rest. The blood was certainly a mess sometimes but wasn't even comparable to what she dealt with after fighting... well, anything really.

Sophie seemed satisfied, albeit a little annoyed at the benefits. She did, however, completely ignore Roland's idea of becoming a battle healer or having some of the kids work toward it.

"I'll not have that, they have to be able to defend themselves and that's *all*. No offense, Ilea, but you're apparently a maniac, and we're working hard not to let them take after their father."

"None taken. Hey, if you're alright with it, it's been quite a long day and I'd like to finally get some sleep in a real bed again."

Ilea slowly got up from her chair and was joined by Roland.

"Sure you won't join us for the evening's entertainment? Trust me, it's fun – and there's plenty to like," George said while Sophie blushed a little.

"Thank you, but again, I'd prefer to just stay the night. I do appreciate the hospitality though and, of course, the invitation." She winked at a disappointed George and followed Roland, who had gestured for her to do so.

“It’s certainly not the most luxurious home but it beats sleeping on the road every day of the week. George is right, you know. Our bed is better,” he finished while opening the wooden door to what was apparently the guest room.

“Thank you. Really. Also for accepting my way of life,” she told him, and she gave him a kiss on his cheek as she went into her room.

Roland nodded and closed the door behind her. “Have a good night, Ilea.”

“You too,” she said to the now quiet room, then she smiled at the comfortable-looking bed before her.

Ilea meticulously removed her damaged armor and clothes before entering her own personal heaven. It wasn’t as if this was the best bed she’d ever encountered, but it had felt like an eternity since her last indulgence.

Ilea lost herself inside her blankets, resting inside the spartan yet pleasant room.

She woke up to the faint smell of sizzling bacon that was pushing through the door to reach her enhanced senses. She knew that the noise she produced while waking was more akin to one a beast would make, but it was nothing weird to anyone, like Roland, who knew how much she enjoyed being wrapped up inside three blankets.

New day, less talk... hopefully.

She kept laying there until the tempting smell overwhelmed the comfort of bed and blankets.

THIRTY-TWO

Slice of Life

This girl is legit creeping me out... Ilea thought as she stared into the little girl's eyes. She seemed to be about ten, maybe eleven, and she was most definitely Samantha's daughter.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked Roland, who was finishing up his breakfast next to the three already empty plates belonging to Ilea.

He swallowed the last bit of bread and nodded while George came to collect some dishes.

"Glad you're only staying today. You eat more than five children combined," the self-proclaimed warrior-cook teased in passing.

Roland got her back on track as he wiped his mouth with a piece of cloth. "Lily enjoys being quiet. Like you do, usually. And she knows the city quite well."

And I'll be babysitting one of your annoying children so you don't have to... was what she wanted to say, but considering the hospitality they'd shown her, there was no reason for her to protest.

Plus, it had been her own idea anyway. Even if she had been joking. She nodded to the kid. To her surprise, Lily simply nodded back in a far too mature manner.

"It's not raining today so you'll be able to enjoy the city a bit more. Still planning to visit Dawntree? You know it's nearly two weeks with a caravan," Roland said as he got up from his chair.

"I am, yes, although I won't be joining a caravan this time around." Ilea turned to the kid, who was still looking at her. "I'm Ilea and I hear you'll be

my guide to the city today. Are you ready to go?"

Lily nodded and started to walk toward the door.

"It really was a pleasure to meet you, Ilea," Roland said as he cleared away the dishes. "And thanks for saving all those people. Some of them I've known for quite some time. Your name will be quite well-known as soon as word gets out."

"I hope not. Just the way everyone gawked at me at the guild in Riverwatch was a bit much already," she said as she shouldered her backpack that, surprisingly, was still in a rather good state.

"You'll be fine. If the crowds of admirers get to be too much, you can always just punch your way out," he smirked. "Now follow Lily before she gets impatient with you."

Ilea went for a light hug and kissed him goodbye.

"It was very nice to meet you, Roland. And your family. They're lovely. Just... a bit much for me."

"Why didn't I meet you before all the others?" he whispered, at which George threw a towel at his head.

"I heard that. You want to sleep in the guest room tonight?" he teased.

"Goodbye, Ilea. Do visit whenever you're in Salia. Even if I might not be here." Roland released their hug and bent down to grab the towel George had thrown his way.

"Goodbye, guys. Do say goodbye to the others for me." She curtsied and turned around to find an empty hallway.

"She's done it again..." Roland said, but Ilea only smiled.

The hunt is on, she thought as she extended her sphere of perception.

Before blinking away, Ilea placed five silver coins on the table. She did feel a *little* bit guilty about the amount of food she had eaten, after all.

* * *

Lily was leaning up against the side of the house and was certainly not prepared for Ilea to suddenly appear right behind her.

"Ready?" Ilea asked, surprised that the girl didn't even flinch. Her reddish eyes did widen a little though. Lily shrugged and walked away, Ilea following close behind.

“I need a smithy first to have my gear repaired,” she said. Lily stopped in her tracks and started walking in a different direction.

There was no rain falling on the city of Salia today, but the weather was certainly nothing to be excited about. It reminded Ilea of Great Britain. *I wonder how their one day of summer went this year...*

A couple of adventurers emerged from a side street and ran past them, talking excitedly about a newly discovered dungeon not far away.

Ilea and Lily continued on. They saw food, drinks, and various snacks being sold in the streets, quite similarly to Riverwatch. Ilea could resist everything, of course, except temptation. She filled her arms, and pockets, with new snacks. Lily didn't say anything to Ilea's questioning gestures but nonetheless took any food given to her.

The two girls walked the streets quietly, enjoying the hustle and bustle of city life around them. Ilea observed that Salia was a bit more cramped than Riverwatch. She thought it might be to do with city planning and the necessity for high walls.

Can't blame them with monsters out there. I wonder how that farmer with the trees does it... Greg was his name, I think?

Lily tugged on Ilea's arm, causing her to stop walking and focus on her surroundings.

“Oh, a smithy. Thanks, Lily.” Ilea patted the girl on her head, at which she recoiled with a disgruntled face. “Alright, alright.” She gestured placidly and then extended her hand. Lily shook it and seemed happy with the arrangement.

Do I have to pay her as well?

“You wanna come inside too? I might even buy you something if it's not too unreasonable,” Ilea said. She was quite sure that Lily's lips curled in a smile at her question, but she didn't bother trying to pry any further.

She emerged from the shop a short while later, missing Earl quite a bit. The smithy, while very shiny and made of marble and other polished stones, had been significantly less pleasant than the Riverwatch smith's. First the staff had tried to charge her far more than the repairs were worth, likely because her healer class suggested she didn't know much about armor. Then they had moaned about her needing the repairs today, despite her already agreeing to an exorbitant rate. On top of all that, it had been clear the smiths cared little about their work. They seemed almost annoyed her armor was

so unique and of such high quality as it made their job harder. There was no small-town passion. Just city greed.

Lily had been fascinated by a dagger inside but Ilea hadn't wanted to give the horrible people the satisfaction of further patronage.

"Next stop, the Adventurer's Guild. I think there was mention of getting paid," Ilea said, and she followed Lily, who again took the lead. The girl seemed to have an innate sense of direction and also had a habit of using routes that avoided crowds wherever possible. Ilea couldn't help but find herself growing fond of the quietly intense little girl.

They walked for another half hour through the streets without a word. Ilea didn't feel like browsing the shops today and stopped only to procure more food along the way until they reached the Adventurer's Guild.

The two entered the guild and got to the front of one of the lines rather quickly. A few people she recognized from the caravan actually stepped out of her way, allowing her to jump the queue. Ilea asked for her pay for the caravan job, upon which the attendant went to a back room. She came back with an adventurer who Ilea vaguely remembered as one of the guards who had worked with Arven.

"Oh, it's Ilea the healer," he said with a smile. "She was most definitely with us. Top healer and bonus pay." Having quickly confirmed Ilea's participation with the attendant, he waved at her and returned back to the room he had come from.

All in all, she received 1 gold and 20 silver. She thanked the attendant and left the guild again. As the two girls entered the square in front of the building, a sun finally managed to pierce through the gray veil above.

Only one sun though. The suns had become so normal to her at this point that she barely even noticed there were two anymore. *I wonder what winter will be like with two suns?*

With her sphere skill still active, Ilea noticed that Lily had started walking away from her. Their deal was complete now, after all. She also noted that Lily wasn't heading back toward her house, so, having finished her most urgent tasks, she thought it might be interesting to follow the girl. They had had a shared love of silence, and Ilea was keen to see what parts of the city the kid found interesting.

Before long, Lily noticed Ilea was stalking her after she entered a side street, and she glared back at her. Ilea just shrugged and bit into a piece of kebab she had acquired earlier.

The staring contest went on for three seconds until Ilea waved the food in Lily's direction. Lily rolled her eyes at that and shrugged too.

"So, it's ok if I follow you? I'm leaving the city later today, so show me some cool shit while I'm here. I'll even pay you," Ilea said.

"You really are a child," Lily replied.

Ilea was quite proud to have broken the mute's silence with her sheer annoying presence. She didn't refute Lily's statement and simply followed her down the alley.

They walked for several minutes in silence before Lily stopped in front of some steps down into what smelled like the sewers. The girl turned around, her slightly red eyes glowing in the shadow of the houses that rose around them.

"Promise not to tell?"

Now this... this is interesting.

Ilea nodded and put her right hand against her heart. "I promise that whatever your secret is, I won't tell anybody. Except if it puts your life in grave danger," she finished, to which Lily's expression turned thoughtful.

After a minute of thinking, Lily nodded and turned around again. Rummaging through some rubble in the alley, she pulled out a rough-looking bag and checked its contents. Nodding to herself, she walked down the steps quietly with Ilea close behind.

Another two minutes passed before the sound of rushing water could be heard. They were well below the street level now. There was little light here and the surroundings were damp and coated in moss and algae, but it wasn't quite as unpleasant as Ilea had expected. Perhaps because of all the recent rain. After walking into the sewers a bit further, Lily turned around and motioned for Ilea to wait.

She then advanced five more meters and opened the bag. Lily removed a couple of pieces of dry-looking meat and placed them on the ground before her, then she pursed her lips and made a sharp whistling noise.

They stood there for about a minute before movement caught Ilea's eye.

[Wild Dog – lvl 3]

As the notification appeared in her mind's eye, she stopped an instinctual aggressive reaction from her body. *Too many bad dogs lately*, she thought as the canine advanced toward Lily and the food.

The hound reached the girl and snuggled into her leg before starting to eat. A second dog emerged from the nearby tunnels, and then a third. There were a total of seven dogs in the end, all of which were fed by Lily, who methodically checked on each of the dogs. She touched their sides, checked their teeth and paws, then offered more of the meat from her bag.

Ilea slowly approached to stand at Lily's side. One of the dogs looked up at her but then just continued eating. She crouched down to the dog and touched its side with her palm.

This one's fine, she perceived, but she still pushed some healing mana into the creature.

The dog looked up, startled, but quickly relaxed and continued its meal. Ilea hadn't noticed Lily staring at her during the interaction. The red-eyed girl shook her head after a couple of seconds and continued to look after the dogs.

Ilea did the same, checking each and every one of them for injuries. She knew some things about the human body from Earth – she had wanted to become a doctor, after all – but her healing skill also gave her some insight on the well-being of any creature she touched.

Two of the dogs had light injuries that she quickly healed. The dogs stayed with the two girls for an hour or two, who cuddled or played with them. Lily didn't seem bothered by the stench and grime the animals got on her.

"Is there a bathhouse in the city?" Ilea asked. Lily nodded. Only one of the dogs was still with them, and Lily shooed it away to join its brethren. "Then lead us there, queen of dogs."

Ilea followed the girl as she quickly gathered up her things and walked back out. Thanks to her Azarinth Sphere, she didn't miss the big grin on Lily's face, but she chose not to mention it.

The two made their way to one of the city's bathhouses in complete silence.

* * *

"Aaaaaah. This... this is it," Ilea exclaimed, naked and relaxed inside the warm bath. Only three other women and Lily were in the large communal bath. Lily looked a bit uncomfortable.

“What’s the matter?” Ilea asked, focusing on the girl.

“You’ve been very nice to me. Thank you. Sorry for calling you a kid,” Lily said, looking down to hide her embarrassment.

Ilea lifted her hand to pat the girl’s head but stopped midway through the movement. She lowered her hand back into the water and smiled.

“Apology accepted. Although I hope I won’t ever stop being a bit of a kid.”

* * *

After Ilea had said her goodbyes to the queen of dogs, she had wandered the city some more and was now crouched on top of a church-like building with a towering domed roof. The moons were shrouded by clouds, and their pale light only illuminated certain parts of the city, which was now quiet and dead at this time of night.

Ilea double-checked the freshly repaired armor she had got back just a couple of hours prior. It didn’t look as good anymore, but the smith had done a good job. She looked down at that very same smithy now.

Still ridiculously overpriced for such basic repairs. Couldn’t complain then, as I was in a hurry, but I can do something that will balance things out.

She checked the street for any guard patrols once more, then she blinked down right into the shop, grabbing what she had come to get, and blinked back out.

Just three seconds had passed and she was once more crouching back at the spot on the domed roof.

Checking around her again, she started stealthily running over the rooftops before blinking down into an alley. She simply walked the rest of the way, so as not to raise suspicion, while maintaining full awareness of her surroundings. Some people were still out, but she avoided as many of them as she could.

Arriving at her destination, Ilea listened with her buffs active. All the house’s occupants were fast asleep. Two blinks later Ilea left again, having disturbed nobody in their slumber.

Lily would wake up with a sheathed black steel dagger next to her arm under her blanket and a pouch with 50 silver coins inside one of her boots.

No dogs would go hungry for a while in Salia.

Ilea walked toward the northern wall, pulling her cloak up against the rapidly cooling wind, smiling at the prospect of a night alone in the wilderness of Elos.

THIRTY-THREE

#Traveling

That night, Ilea continued through the city toward the north wall and soon found herself in front of the store she'd seen earlier in the day. The cartographers. She found it open despite the hour, strolling inside before she started to browse.

Five minutes later, she'd found what she was looking for and brought it up to the counter.

"Night owl?" she asked the clerk. He was hunched over a book, a small lantern next to him.

The man raised his head slightly to look at her, obviously annoyed about the interruption. "What is it?"

She soon realized the map itself was far too expensive, but luckily the shop had an alternative, and so she paid the clerk to copy the map into her notebook. It wasn't perfect, but it got the job done.

Even so, it was by far her most expensive purchase so far, but she felt it was worth it. A nomadic adventurer needed at least some idea of where they were going as they roamed about. Various cities and countries were listed, including estimated travel times and small mentions of landmarks to look out for.

Her errand complete, Ilea went back outside into the night air and arrived at the north wall. Checking the other side with her sphere, she simply blinked through and continued on into the night. She first broke into a jog and then a sprint. After five minutes of running, her runes came to life and fire started to dance around her.

Certainly faster than a caravan...

What followed was a sequence of running, hunting, and sleeping. The cool weather didn't bother her. She didn't even consider selecting a Fire Enhancer skill to make herself warmer, as she was already warm enough. Likely just a consequence of her high Vitality.

The first three days of traveling passed without any interruption. Ilea enjoyed being alone and lost herself in the speed, the views, and simply being free in the dangerous wilds. In those three days, she figured she had already traveled as far as a caravan would've got in a week and a half.

With her very small need for sleep and enhanced body, she was much, much faster than most normal travelers. But it was being alone that made the biggest difference. Even though some adventurers could match her for speed and endurance, they mostly still had slower members in their parties or at least some people who couldn't easily forgo sleep for a couple of days.

Finally, Ilea reached the base of Karth, though now on its opposite side to where Riverwatch was located. It hadn't been hard to find as the massive mountain towered in the distance even from miles away.

The wind was blowing through her hair as Ilea scratched the top of her head.

"Where the fuck do I go now?" she asked the wind. Sadly, she received no answer. The mountain was huge, and according to her sketched map, the city of Dawntree was somewhere halfway up this side of the mountain.

"I need a road to follow."

Seeing how easy it was to get to the mountain itself, she had never really followed any of the roads she had come across so far. They often diverged from the straightest path to the destination for various reasons. Reasons that Ilea didn't really care about. Until now, anyway.

It took her nearly five hours of constant running before she finally found a road that led up the mountain. She wasn't sure if this one led to Dawntree, but it was the best she had at the moment. As she started following the hard-packed earth, she soon came across other travelers.

At first, there were only lone teams of adventurers, but, as time went on, there were some carts as well. Seeing other people running or galloping through on horses, Ilea didn't see anything wrong with continuing as she had been.

However, she did stop to ask someone about where the road led and was pleased to hear that it was indeed the road to Dawntree. The confused look

she got likely meant that either one should know such a thing after traveling so far or that there simply wasn't anything else up this mountain.

Another four hours of running later, Ilea finally came up on what looked like a dam. A massive dam. It was, in fact, the stone wall of Dawntree, half-built and half-carved into the mountain side. Ilea stopped in her tracks and continued at a walking pace, a bit stunned by the sight.

This magic thing really puts medieval architecture on another level... she thought as she looked upon the nearly two-hundred-meter-high structure that blended nearly seamlessly into the mountain on each side. *Like a half-finished carving.*

Nothing could be seen behind the wall itself, and while the rock simply continued into the mountain on her right side, on the left side, there was a straight drop that went further down than Ilea could see from her current angle.

It took her another fifteen minutes to reach the gate at the bottom of the wall, where an assortment of guards with rather high levels checked everyone who went inside. Some were even a higher level than Ilea.

"Reason for coming?" one of the guards asked with a rude sneer down his long nose. Her cracked and repaired armor perhaps wasn't quite as imposing or impressive as it once had been.

"Visiting a friend," she answered, shrugging. The guard wasn't amused though, and he motioned to two other guards standing nearby.

"Trying to be funny, eh? Those visiting a resident must present name and title. Actually, I don't care. We'll see why you're *really* here soon enough. Grab her!"

The guards advanced toward her while the other travelers either looked on with interest or tried to get out of the way.

"Alice Forkspear. I'm a friend and on my way to see her," she said, lifting her hands placidly. "I have a letter from her with me."

The guards hesitated immediately upon hearing the name. It looked like it held a certain amount of weight in Dawntree.

What am I getting myself into? Ilea wondered, but she got the letter out of her pack nonetheless. *I hope some good fights, at least.*

She handed the letter to the guard who had first addressed her, who examined it carefully.

"That's the original seal. Please excuse us for offending you, young lady," the once obnoxious guard apologized mechanically. "She's with the

Forkspears, guys,” he informed his colleagues, waving them back.

Either he’s not used to being nice or he just really wanted to mess up my day.

Ilea grabbed the letter from the abrasive man’s hands and strode through the gate before anyone could change their mind.

The wall was massive, and it took her a full minute to pass through a gate that was more akin to a tunnel. Reaching the other side, bright sunlight blinded her for a split second before she could take in the city before her.

It stretched downward and into the mountainside’s natural valley for hundreds of meters. Houses of stone filled the whole place, and colorful flags and banners flew above numerous rooftops. There were temples and what looked like forts and castles. High above the city, the rock of the mountain formed a natural wall, and atop even that was another man-made wall with defensive structures and patrolling guards.

Hoping to avoid any further questions, Ilea quickly made her way into the city, descending the first fifty steps and entering the city proper. The now-familiar noise of a medieval city greeted her as adventurers, merchants, and carts made their way here and there.

The city stretched much further than Ilea had first thought. The mountain seemed to have the form of a basin in which the city was placed, and the lower parts of the city were overcast by stone. And right where the opening would be, they had built their wall. It would only be feasible to attack the city from the air, and the citizens of Dawntree certainly knew that. Nearly every bigger building and certainly every castle and fort had several rune-covered cannon-like devices that Ilea assumed must be some sort of anti-airship machine, and likely even more mages or rangers who were specialized in ranged combat were employed as guards.

The cities I’ve been to so far are nothing compared to this...

Ilea stood there, remembering the attack on Riverwatch. Size-wise, the cities were rather similar, but everything else was like night and day.

I enjoyed being out in the world though, so I’ll go check on Alice and then leave again as soon as possible. Maybe find that dungeon the adventurers in Salia spoke about. Or go to that bathhouse again.

Her thoughts were interrupted when she noticed an incredibly light tug on her armor. Seeing behind her with her sphere skill, she quickly found the culprit and grabbed his arm.

“That’s not yours, little man,” she said and put pressure on his arm. The boy immediately released the decoy pouch he had taken from her. He was skinny, dirty, and covered in scabs, but his eyes were bright as they darted about, looking for an escape route.

Prepared to let the kid go, Ilea suddenly had a different idea and removed two silver coins from her actual coin pouch that was a bit more hidden inside her armored skirt.

“Lead me to the Forkspear residence and these coins are yours. How does that sound?”

The kid’s eyes widened, and he quickly nodded his acceptance. He struck up a quick pace, obviously excited to get two whole silver coins for this little amount of work, and they reached one of the big castles a short while later.

Ilea handed the coins over and took in the structure before her. Within her sphere, she saw the kid already quickly sneaking away, probably hoping she wouldn’t change her mind and come after him.

She didn’t though, and she soon approached one of the guards at the massive gate.

“I’m here to see Alice Forkspear. My name is Ilea.” She handed over the letter to the guard, who took his time to study the seal and the letter itself. He looked her up and down before shrugging.

“I’ll have someone tell her you’re here. Please wait a moment,” he said before gesturing to a young woman behind the gate. The ‘moment’ turned out in fact to be many moments, enough that Ilea even witnessed a change of the guard.

“Ilea Spears?”

Ilea, who was now leaning on the wall and dozing slightly, saw a woman approaching.

“Yeah, that’s me,” she waved, slightly annoyed at the waiting time. *Does she want to see me or does she not?* she asked herself, but she followed the serving woman nonetheless as she gestured to her toward the interior of the complex.

Ilea was led to a house next to the castle. It was still impressive, but she was certainly a little disappointed that she wouldn’t be entering the real residence.

“Please wait here. Lady Forkspear will be with you shortly.” The woman bowed slightly and left Ilea standing inside one of the house’s

rooms.

You've got to be kidding...

She closed her eyes, trying to focus on the past three days of quiet, calming nature before sitting down on one of the fancy-looking chairs that adorned the very beautifully furnished room.

Paintings on the walls showed different presumably important members of the Forkspear house, but Ilea was more interested in the mounted bear head with antlers.

Where can I find something like that? Can I ride it?

Just then, a knock on the door got her attention. A woman in a traditional maid outfit entered the room with a pot in her hands. An unfamiliar yet somehow nostalgic scent filled Ilea's nose as she unconsciously got up from her chair.

Coffee! she thought, advancing on the pot.

The woman swiftly put it down on the table and poured two cups before bowing and leaving the room again. Ilea sat down and grabbed one of the cups. Smelling it, there was a distinct difference to the beverage she knew and loved. She took a sip and was intrigued.

Not quite... but it's the closest anything here has come so far...

The door opened again three minutes later and Alice entered with a big smile on her face. She was followed by a man in what Ilea could only describe as a suit.

"Ilea! I'm so glad you could make it, how have you been?" Alice greeted her merrily.

That's rather chipper despite everything that's happened to her. Maybe she's trying to forget? Well, it's her decision, so I'll play along.

Ilea got up from her chair to greet the girl and took her in a powerful bear hug.

"Hey Alice, did you miss your ride so much that you had to send a letter my way?" she asked, and she noticed a nervous shiver run through the girl while they hugged. She quickly let go and set some distance between them.

"My ride? Oh, yes... no, not quite. Although the job I mentioned has turned into something of an emergency, I'm afraid. We'll talk about it later though. Do tell me about the attack first. Were you there when it happened?"

They talked for nearly an hour, sharing stories about their lives – Ilea's travels and progress and Alice's studies and advances in healing magic. Ilea

found out that the coffee-like beverage was called *saaih* and was a specially brewed tea that was rather famous in Dawntree.

“So, what’s this job or emergency you mentioned? The reason you got me here,” Ilea asked while pouring herself another cup of *saaih*.

“It’s a rather complicated situation. Have you ever heard of the sleeping plague?” Alice asked, her tone changing from jolly to serious. Ilea shook her head and started to sip her tea.

“No wonder, considering it’s a rare disease that only ever pops up in cities right around Karth. The problem is that conventional healing methods don’t work with this disease. Normally this wouldn’t be an issue, there aren’t many deaths attributed to disease every year after all, but... my sister has contracted the sickness.” She looked away thoughtfully and continued after a short pause.

“We currently have no cure. I think the Forkspears might even be the only ones with knowledge of the disease’s existence.” She paused again, looking nervous, “We... ah... researched it after my sister fell ill. It’s so rare that few books mention it. What we do know though is that the Taleen quite certainly did have a cure.

“This is where you come into play. We discovered a new Taleen ruin around two months ago. It’s bigger than anything we’ve uncovered before and right in Forkspear territory.” Alice smiled a bitter smile. “I’m afraid I’ve sent everyone I could trust or afford into the ruin already to look for a possible cure, to bring back any artifacts, machines, herbs, or mushrooms that can be found.

“None have returned, and now my family won’t do more. So, if you go, you’d be going alone. If you find any teams inside you could join them, but I remember you were alone in the forest too, so I thought...”

The girl was running over her own words now, getting quite worked up about the issue.

“It’s fine, Alice. I do prefer to explore alone anyway. Who are the Taleen though? I apologize if it should be common knowledge,” Ilea said, holding one of Alice’s hands in her own. She was happy to explore a dungeon either way. All the better if she could help a friend in the process.

The young noble’s eyes widened a little at the question, but she quickly focused again.

“I forgot about your strange remote healing order. The Taleen were an ancient dwarven civilization. We’ve found ruins all over Elos. They were

highly advanced in technology and magic. Different from what most people use today,” she explained.

“Sure, I can check it out,” Ilea said. “I’m pretty good at running away should something dangerous show up. And some new ruins to explore was pretty much exactly the thing I’ve been looking for. I can leave to start the search immediately. How do I identify a possible cure? And you don’t want me to see her first? Maybe I can do something. My healing *is* a bit different from the norm...”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Alice said, shaking her head. “We’ve consulted every healer in the city and some outside. The disease has been researched for decades in secret and nothing was found. My family is unaware of you being here, and they wouldn’t allow a wayward healer to walk in and look at her, even if you did save me before.” She gave a pained grimace before continuing.

“We’re not sure how to identify the cure, sadly. That’s why you should simply map out the ruins and clear out whatever machines and traps you can. Mark possible places of interest or machines too big to carry on the map. Take any machine, device, or artifact with you that seems out of the ordinary. And of course any mushrooms or herbs. And, most importantly, don’t die. Taleen ruins are incredibly dangerous. Their defensive mechanisms and machines rival the strongest beasts you might stumble upon in the cave systems.”

Alice looked troubled. *Perhaps she’s feeling guilty about asking for such a dangerous favor?*

Thinking of the basilisk, Ilea shook her head to get the thought out again. *I can just run away should something like that happen this time. Another benefit of being alone.*

“It’s ok. If it’s not possible to see her, that’s fine. Still, do consider it if I don’t find the cure. I have everything I need with me already. Is it alright if I leave some unimportant things here so I have more space in my pack?” Ilea asked. Upon Alice’s nod, she started to remove the books she’d bought from Splicer from her pack. She also set aside some of the food she’d brought from Salia.

“Jaime, please get the map of the cave system,” Alice told the suited man she had come in with and then turned back to Ilea. “You should find the ruins without issue. The entrance to the cave systems is at the very

bottom of the city. You can simply go down and you'll find it. Or ask around." She finished just as Jaime returned with a big map.

"This is the most accurate map we have at the moment, Miss Spears," he said as he placed the map on the table. He handed her a smaller version as well. "This replica is for you, but you're free to copy your own version as well."

Ilea chose to quickly sketch the map into her notebook but also keep the replica map she got from Jaime. Backups were never a bad thing, after all.

"I'll be on my way then," she said when she was done. "I'll bring back whatever I can. Don't worry too much," she finished and hugged the girl again. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Ilea got up and quickly left the room, ready to take on some ancient dwarven machines. And it was even for a good cause.

THIRTY-FOUR

Dungeon Diving

Alice's weak smile vanished after Ilea left the property. She sighed. That had been more difficult than she had expected. Still, it was necessary.

Jaime shook his head. "The sleeping plague, really? Why not tell her the truth? She seemed eager enough to walk to her death without the additional... motivation," he said, his tone agitated.

"I'm well aware of that, Jaime. Do remember who you're talking to," Alice replied. Jaime was an excellent manservant. But their many years together meant he sometimes forgot his place, acting more like a family member than a member of staff.

"I don't have the funds to pay her, and this gives her a good motivation to not lose track of her objectives. You heard her stories. She seems to just wander aimlessly from one place to another. I can't have her reappear in a year saying she found the capital of the elves. We need results fast." She took a sip of the now cold tea.

"She saved you. I simply cannot accept that you would act this way... my lady. You sent her to her death, like all the others—"

Jaime was interrupted by Alice's cup loudly clattering onto the plate below. He would *not* take that tone with her.

"I'm aware that she saved me, Jaime. Where were you when they kidnapped me?" She trailed off, steadying her shaking hand. "It is necessary, for the family and for Dawntree. It's necessary... for me."

Alice gave Jaime a sad smile. It was the first real one that she had shown that entire afternoon. A part of her *had* enjoyed the casual friendliness she had shared with Ilea back in Riverwatch. It had been

refreshing, freeing even, but now she was back home. And here, she had to be careful about what to show and what to hide. Every weakness could be exploited.

“Additionally, I think you underestimate her,” she said, getting up from her chair and walking to the door. “She can teleport a short range and can take out five seasoned adventurers with little difficulty.”

Still, Alice wouldn’t lie to herself about the difficulties that Ilea would face in a Taleen ruin. Death was likely, even for the most powerful of adventuring parties, let alone a single person. Jaime was tactful enough not to point out the obvious.

“Come now, it’s nearly time for my training. Maybe I’ll finally get rid of this useless healer class,” she said, smiling bitterly at the memory of the refusal she had given Ilea at the offer of learning her ‘battle healer’ class.

It was too late to ask her now.

* * *

Ilea reached the lowest level of the city after a leisurely jog. The mountain loomed above, casting nearly a third of the city in shadow. Ilea could see an expansive tunnel into the void waiting at the very bottom. She looked up at the hundreds of tons of solid rock.

Am a little scared of all that stuff falling down on me at some point...

The living space became less cramped as she got closer to the tunnel. Fewer people in normal clothing and more adventurers occupied the space. Small cooking fires burned with haunches of meat and pots of stew placed over them.

After around two hundred meters of open space between the last house and the tunnel, there was another wall that separated the city from whatever lay beyond. The defenses were much less impressive than what Ilea had seen above, though the wall was still nearly seven meters high, but it was probably far less likely that a threat would come from below.

Reaching the wall, a guard stopped her. “Level fifty and above. You with the guild?” he asked.

She nodded. The level statement seemed more like information for her – everyone could identify her level, after all.

“Sure you want to go in alone?”

Ilea got a little annoyed at that question.

I obviously meet the requirements to go through. The guards in this town... seriously.

She decided to simply ignore the man and walk through the gate. He didn't stop her, just shrugged with an annoyed frown.

On the other side of the wall, Ilea started running into the darkness. The first couple of dozen meters were illuminated by some torches, but after that, adventurers seemed to be on their own. She saw a group of five adventurers walking before her while what seemed to be their leader gave them a small pep talk.

"We're the Piercing Eagles, don't forget that. We're gonna defy the evil that lies beyond this point!" the man said, lifting his shining great sword into the air.

They're gonna die... Ilea thought as she ran past them.

On the map, it seemed like the tunnel went on for at least two kilometers before it even started to branch out in any direction.

If they posted scouts there with some sort of light magic or whatever, then they'd have a pretty good early warning system.

Activating her buffs, her speed multiplied, and she crossed the two kilometers in no time. Before she could go into any offshoot tunnels, there was another wall. This one looked rougher than the one before but didn't seem any less sturdy.

There were magical lamps all over the battlements and some stone houses before the wall. The diameter of the tunnel at that point was still around fifty meters. Certainly not the best choke point to fight off anything that came from the deep, but nonetheless it was the tightest spot in the tunnel.

There were more guards here as well, and a lot of them were at a higher level than Ilea. One of them spoke to her as she walked up to the gate.

"Going out is free, but entering again is a fee of one silver, and we'll have to examine you and your items. For any kilogram of goods above what you can carry on your body and in your backpack, there's a tax of ten coppers," the guard said, going through the information in a slow monotonous tone.

Ilea just nodded and exited through the gate. What greeted her on the other side was certainly not what she'd expected.

A huge open cavern spread before her, with houses both big and small. Someone was playing music nearby while two bystanders danced. A fist fight between a woman and a man was taking place off to one side while people cheered them on and placed bets.

“Welcome to the Root. By the looks of yer face, you’re new ’ere. If ya want booze, go to Rick’s.” A small and obviously drunk man with barely a hair left on his head greeted her, pointing in an indiscernible direction.

Ilea kept walking and opened her arms wide. “I’m home,” she exclaimed with a big smile on her face, just as the woman knocked out the man in the fist fight and started kicking his groin. Repeatedly. The advertiser behind her puked on the ground, and a bellowing monster roar accompanied by laughter came from behind the building in front of her.

Wish I could stay and explore a bit. Later, maybe.

Instead, Ilea left the small settlement and followed the way the map in her notebook indicated. She found the next tunnel easily enough and started running again.

A kilometer later, the right side of the wall opened up to a cliff leading into a cavern. Beyond was a beautiful shining blue sea, illuminated by what seemed to be crystals below the water and on the far-away walls. Ilea had to slow her pace for a minute to appreciate the sight.

There were creatures in the water as well. Seeing the massive unclear silhouettes made Ilea hasten her pace again. *Nope. Well, not yet anyway.*

She soon reached another spacious cave with several branching paths. The sea was still sparkling to her right, and some embers of old firepits were strewn around the cave.

The only vegetation down here was a bunch of mushrooms, and the only light came from the sea and Ilea’s own flames and runes, although the runes were only visible on her exposed neck.

Looking around, Ilea chose her next path and followed it. After twenty minutes of running, she reached another opening. Blackness extended before her. Activating Heat Perception, the whole space took on a sort of blue tone.

It was so dark that Ilea must’ve seemed like a beacon in the night. She could barely see ten meters ahead, but with her sphere skill and heat vision, it was easy to continue. The sphere only had a radius of fifteen meters, but with her incredible reflexes, that was enough to not suddenly run into a wall or a monster that somehow escaped her Heat Perception.

The cave was massive and pretty boring to Ilea as all she could see were the rocks in a sphere around her. No life seemed to be present. She ran at full speed for over an hour to reach the other side of the cave. Jaime's map included some detailed information that explained where she had to go from there.

This kind of traveling continued for another six massive caves, several drops topping out at fifty meters, and even a quick swim through a dark lake. It took Ilea several minutes to build up the courage to swim, but in the end, she even got a notification for her troubles.

***'ding' You have learned the general skill Fear Resistance – lvl 1:
You have overcome something truly terrifying to you. Your ability to deal
with non-magical fear is increased.***

Ilea was shivering when she clambered out of the lake, and she immediately continued running to warm herself up again.

Luckily, there were several hidden markers scratched into specific stones or walls that she easily made out with her sphere skill. They matched the markers she had on her map, and after another two hours of traveling, she finally found her destination.

A small crevice in the wall led her into a perfectly rectangular room with weird rune markings on the walls. *They look kinda mechanical... like the designs on the parts I saw when my friend replaced bits of my PC.*

More eye-catching though were the runes on the door at the far end. They were of the same design, but unlike the ones on the walls, these were glowing faintly green, illuminating a meter or two in front of it. Above the door, some sort of green moss grew, but this didn't have a glowing quality to it like the Bluemoon Grass had.

It looked a bit like ivy to Ilea. Using her Magic Perception, she saw that the door glowed with a bright light while the ivy glowed too, albeit more subdued. Walking up to it, she touched the ivy and identified it.

[Ivy]

Well fuck me.

The next step was basically instinct to Ilea as she ripped some of the ivy from the wall and lifted it to her face. Stopping right before she put the plant in her mouth, she chuckled.

“What the fuck has this world turned me into? A toddler?” She threw the ivy on the ground and approached the door. *I'll eat some of it after I've informed myself about it.*

Remembering Alice's words, she picked the ivy up again and put it safely into her backpack.

Upon touching the door, nothing happened. The next thing Ilea tried was inserting a bit of mana. This was mentioned on the map. She nodded to herself as the runes sprang to life and the lines moved to the four corners of the door before the remaining rock just sort of crumbled.

“That doesn't seem like an efficient door system,” she said out loud, but she couldn't deny the cool special effect. *Though it's not really a special effect, is it?*

She entered the room and found herself in one quite similar to the one before. This one was also empty, but there were three additional doorways in it. Behind her she could see the entrance reforming.

Ivy could be seen growing on all four walls. It didn't cover the place, but it was certainly prevalent among the otherwise gray rock. *Or concrete, or whatever these people built with...*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a notification.

‘ding’ You have entered the Iztacalum dungeon.

“Guess we're invading the new world,” Ilea said as she checked the adjacent rooms. They were both empty and looked exactly like the first room.

It seems to be a pattern. Where are the robots trying to murder me though?

She advanced through the last remaining door. A cavernous hallway spread before her, looking very similar in style to the rooms before. The rock had crumbled here and there, giving the space a ramshackle quality.

Taleen, hmm? Certainly not a people for interior decoration...

Walking through the hallway, she removed her notebook from the backpack and started to map out the whole thing while listening to the mechanical sounds of gears turning. The sound was a constant presence in

the background, so all-present that it had taken her a while to notice it. Something in this dungeon still worked, it seemed. The sound was only interrupted by the occasional hissing of steam from whatever pipes lay in the walls.

Luckily, her recent swim had been brief enough for the water not to have penetrated her pack too much. The notebook had an additional oilskin pouch as well that would save it in case she needed to make a longer dive.

She started sketching the rooms on a rather small scale, marking any points of interest with a number that allowed her to describe or sketch them in more detail on another page. It wasn't a perfect system, but she'd need the space as she explored.

The next five hours were spent doing exactly that. The dungeon seemed bigger than Ilea had expected. She did find some materials, rusted metal, and some stony furniture after a while, and she soon came to the conclusion that she was in a storage part of the dungeon. She entered another big area through a massive door that someone could easily have driven a bus through. Or even two buses.

Her arms relaxed at her sides and her eyes widened as she gazed upon the spectacle before her. She knew for a fact that she was underground in a cave, but looking out into the street before her, with houses on each side and glowing greenish magical lamps above, made her feel more like she was in an ancient city on a fall evening. Albeit a greenish evening. It was an entire city, its layout not too dissimilar from that of Riverwatch or Salia. Yet this city was dead silent.

Some of the lamps lay broken on the ground while others still flickered slightly, giving the whole scene an eerie atmosphere. The seemingly empty and dead houses on each side, perfectly carved into the stone, might as well have been coffins.

Deciding to sketch later, Ilea walked in the only direction possible without checking all the houses for anything inside. Two minutes of following the street later, she came out onto what looked like a square.

In the middle of it was what had to have once been a fountain. There were some poles on a large building on one side but no fabric hung there, and rust covered most of the metal pipes that were embedded in the stone.

At the other end of the square lay pieces of metal that Ilea was sure hadn't come from the broken lamps above. Coming closer, she noticed

long, deep gashes in the stone floor and some of the nearby houses. Then she came across a pile of half-melted and torn-apart greenish metal.

Going through the pile, she found something that resembled a helmet, though it wasn't hollow.

Looks a bit like an insect but the angles are too even. A robotic mantis? Not exactly, the eyes aren't bulging out. Less like multifaceted bug eyes, more like shattered green glass. And there's no mouth either. Guess these are the machines trying to kill me... but who destroyed this one?

She stopped.

Backtracking, she removed her notebook again from her pack and started to map out the street and square. Anything notable got added as well. The houses held different items of furniture, but either the dwarves preferred stone or anything else had rotted away a long time ago.

She moved through the houses and quickly started to notice the patterns in design. The lack of individualism made her sketching a lot easier, and she was done with the street in no time.

The square was a bit of a different story, as was the bigger building that had the poles fastened to it. Inside there were more than just stone beds and shelving. There was dust on the ground in some places, while the stone was scuffed clean and discolored in others.

I assume something was moved away rather recently... Ilea thought, noticing some drag marks and wooden splinters with her sphere of perception. Probably by the others Alice mentioned. Were they even taking the furniture?

She marked where she found the splinters in her notebook and continued on.

The square itself had two roads leading away from it. Ilea chose the one where no metal remains littered the ground. Looking down the dark road, she was quite sure that her Fear Resistance was doing its job quite well already.

This is like an alien movie... shit. Why did I have to think of that now?

With a groan, she made herself continue down the path, the green light illuminating the perfectly cut rock while Ilea's blue runes and red armor shone like a beacon.

A very small beacon, lost in a sea of green.

THIRTY-FIVE

Outclassed

Not too far along the road, Ilea's jog slammed to a halt.

The smell of blood was in the air.

It was coming from one of the houses to her right. Sneaking up to the wall, she tried to determine what was inside with her sphere, but whatever caused the smell was simply too far away.

Walking inside, the mechanical noises seemed to heighten as her eyes spotted what had lain just outside her sphere's range. Five bodies – and more blood than seemed possible for them to possess. The ivy and walls were painted red by it. The fact the smell of the scene had reached Ilea so late was a testament to the dwarves' advanced ventilation systems.

Ilea listened to the room but couldn't make out anything extraordinary. Approaching the bodies, she kept her senses on high alert.

A moment later, there was a click that sounded slightly higher pitched than the monotone noises before. She dodged to the side a split second before a dull *clang* rang out from her left. Something impacted the wall behind where Ilea had just stood, cracking the rock.

She could see something moving where the noise had come from. A fast-moving metallic creature skittered across the far wall on six metal legs. On top of the legs was a metal cube with a round opening protruding outward, not unlike a gun barrel. Even higher up extended what looked like a spine made of metal with a mask quite similar to the one Ilea had found a few moments prior.

The legs clicked on the wall before the creature's torso angled toward Ilea, the barrel aimed at her head. A dull noise echoed through the room as

a quick flash of light illuminated the small space. Ilea sensed the bullet and leaned slightly to the side, and the metal slug glanced off her armored shoulder to harmlessly enter the wall behind her.

Ilea spun with the force and blinked next to the creature, and her movement continued into a kick that connected with its head. The creature's head wobbled slightly before its torso turned back to face Ilea.

Another blink brought her behind it before she delivered a punch directly on the metal cube. There was a loud noise upon impact, but nothing else seemed to happen as the creature turned around again in a fluid motion. At the same time, its legs moved away from Ilea, and while she knew the thing was made of metal, the movements were too smooth, too animal-like.

Ilea blinked back outside, taking shelter behind the house's wall. Her sphere saw a slug dig into the wall just behind where she had been seconds before. Looking around the corner, she identified the creature as another slug buried itself in the wall she was hiding behind.

[Taleen Guardian – lvl ??]

As always, Identify is just rather underwhelming.

She blinked back into the house, and after failing to get any reaction from the creature with the next five attacks to its head and torso, she changed to the next obvious target. Blinking next to the creature, she stomped down on one of the spider-like metal legs.

Again, there was no obvious reaction, but she felt like this was the only way she could win. Escaping wasn't an option she wanted to consider just yet as she was still nearly fully stocked on all her resources.

She continued to alternate her attacks between the six legs until, finally, there was a change as the machine started to favor one side a little more and became a little slower in its movement to the other.

There's no change in its behavior though—

Her thoughts were interrupted by a slug that she barely dodged with another blink.

If it had an actual AI, I'd probably be dead already.

Her next stomp finally broke through as the leg she had targeted now dangled uselessly from the creature's side, but the guardian wasn't inhibited by the smashed leg much and continued its merry shooting.

To Ilea, though, her victory was certain, just postponed. It took some time, but eventually she finally disabled the creature's last leg. The machine was now resting on the ground, its torso frantically turning to find its enemy.

"It even looks a little sad," she said as she blinked behind the machine and grabbed onto its moving torso. Punch upon punch rattled the guardian as it spun around itself, trying to attack the foe on its back.

The execution dragged on for nearly as long as the leg smashing. Ilea even paused for a while to steady herself, her head growing more and more dizzy at the constant spinning. She figured that, with some funfair music, this scene would have looked quite a bit different. The corpses nearby didn't paint a very fun atmosphere though.

Finally, the last punch landed, a wave of destructive mana fried whatever lay within, and the guardian's spinning slowly glided to a halt. The noise in the room reverted to the monotone sound of gears and steam, and only Ilea's breathing contrasted with the mechanical sounds.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 150]. For killing an adversary 75 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 76. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 77. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Fire Enhancer has reached level 51. 5 stat points awarded.

...

'ding' Fire Enhancer has reached level 54. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' New skills available for Fire Enhancer

'ding' Blink reaches 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches lvl 19

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Body of Flame reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Body of Flame reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Body of Flame reaches lvl 14

Now that’s what I call power leveling!

Ilea looked at the battered machine below her. She sat down next to it and relaxed while activating Meditation. Her sphere and auras were still up – considering how quiet the machine had been before, she didn’t want another one to sneak up on her.

She decided to put the new points into Intelligence and Wisdom. These guardians were tough, so she needed to hit harder. And even though that fight had gone on for a while, she had barely touched her stamina reserves.

After two minutes of Meditation, however, the smell of blood became a little too irritating to ignore. Ilea got up and walked over to the corpses.

There were two men, two women, and a lizardman. *Or maybe a lizardwoman. I’m not gonna check...*

She knelt down and started to go through their gear. All of the armor was heavily damaged. There were holes that she attributed to the guardian she’d just fought, but there were also dozens of cuts all over the bodies.

That thing couldn’t cut...

Ilea became a little more wary at this discovery. The corpses had once been adventurers, as she found badges belonging to the golden and crystal tiers. Three of them were warriors, one was a mage, and one a ranger.

No healer.

She shook her head and continued her search, finding three gold coins and ten silvers that she added to her pouch. The rest of the gear was either heavily damaged or simply useless to her. She closed the people’s eyes and arranged them in a slightly more dignified manner. There was no earth here

where she could bury them, and digging into the stone with her hands seemed even less appropriate than leaving them as they were.

Moving down the rest of the road, Ilea checked every house and every corner for guardians or other beasts, but nothing showed itself. Six houses later, she came upon the next square. This one wasn't as big as the one with the fountain from before.

As Ilea approached, she could see movement out of the corner of her right eye. From a bigger house on the square, perhaps once a bank or some sort of guardhouse, another guardian appeared.

It didn't have a box as its torso like the last one but instead something more akin to a thin chest made of metal, which extended from the bottom with six legs. An even metal spine extended upward on its back and ended in the same simplified mantis-head on top.

The torso was noticeably larger, with six additional arm-like appendages that moved in an eerily smooth manner, producing no sounds.

It's just a machine...

Ilea steadied herself, activating her buffs and letting her backpack fall to the ground next to her as she moved into a defensive stance.

[Taleen Guardian – lvl ??]

It was the same message she had seen before, which was both good and bad. The creature stopped around ten meters in front of her and straightened itself. Its six metal arms extended outward in nearly meter-long blades.

A moment later, the creature was upon her.

The fluid movements of its many legs let the guardian close the distance in under two seconds, and a flurry of attacks rained down upon Ilea from six different angles. With six arms and six legs, the machine was a flurry of limbs. She could only blink away, unable to process all the attacks at the same time even with her enhanced senses and all her skills.

Using the same tactic she'd applied for the other guardian, she blinked close to the creature and kicked at one of its legs, only to jerk back in pain as a metallic blade dug deeply into her right arm. She winced and blinked away again, the wound slowly staining her clothes red with blood. The damage was significant despite her high Vitality.

This creature was strong.

The bleeding stopped with a pulse of healing just as the creature rushed at her again. Ilea blinked away. She looked at the creature from a distance as, upon her disappearance, it immediately started to slash in every direction with seemingly random strikes.

Then the creature spotted her. It stopped and focused again, rushing in her direction.

Well, that isn't going to work...

But she wasn't quite ready to give up yet. Blinking again, she tried to see if she could read the creature's attacks, but after four more tries, she couldn't find a blind spot. The guardian changed its attack pattern on all four occasions.

Seeing how easily the machine had cut through her armor and deep into her arm, it seemed too risky for Ilea to try and approach it again. She had already gained a number of new wounds for her troubles.

A dull boom that came from the alley behind the machine sealed the deal. Ilea narrowly dodged a metal slug, quickly followed by blinking away from six blades on their way to reap her life.

She grabbed her pack with her uninjured arm and blinked another two times into the closest building behind her, retreating back into the alley where she had first come from. Not stopping, she blinked again and again until she sat behind a wall on the first floor of the large building with the flagpoles overlooking the fountain square.

Breathing heavily, Ilea waited while using Reconstruction on her arm. Looking down on it, the creature's bladed arms had cut through it like a sushi knife through cheesecake.

Pain Tolerance is good and bad then, eh?

She winced as she looked at the bone-deep cut that was slowly closing.

A minute passed, then two. Ten minutes of waiting, counting her heartbeat, and listening later, Ilea looked out onto the square, but there was no sign of the creature.

She sat back down behind the wall and breathed out. The wound had closed after a minute of healing, but the smell of the blood on the ground would give her away. Provided the creatures *had* a sense of smell. She blinked again, going even further back into one of the houses in the very first alley.

That thing is too much... no wonder those adventurers were sliced apart.

Even the long-ranged guardian would have been too much for her if she couldn't teleport several times in quick succession to close the distance. Since the sword guardian had a way to counter that tactic, it meant there was no way for her to win, not with how little damage she did.

Fucking ridiculous... I can punch a hole into a wall but can't damage some creepy insect robot? At least I can avoid fighting them easily enough.

Thinking of the sliced-up corpses, she shuddered, suddenly thankful again for her evasion skills, speed, and ability to heal.

What should I tell Alice? Ilea sat there for another ten minutes before slapping herself lightly on each of her cheeks. There's still another street... and there was a destroyed guardian there. Maybe some of the people she sent made it through. If I can find and help them with healing or distracting machines, then perhaps that will be enough.

Having found another target to work toward, Ilea checked the square again, but it was as empty as before. She blinked down onto the ground and approached the remains of the guardian at the start of the other side street.

That one has sword arms. Being able to discern the parts better now that she'd seen the guardians in action, she was sure. A slight smile formed on her lips as she walked down the street, checking every house for guardians.

Her map grew in size as more and more streets joined her sketch, as well as more and more trashed guardians, which she marked as points of interest. The metal they were made of was impressive enough to consider taking some of it with her outside.

Nearly five hours of walking and three pages of her notebook later, she decided to call it a day and hid away in one of the houses. After eating some bread, dried fruits, and meat, she decided to sleep for an hour or two.

She chose the top floor of one of the taller buildings for her rest. Perhaps it had once been a shop of some kind. It had numerous shelves lining the walls, but any wares it sold had long since been looted or had rotted away. She closed up the stairway with some very old furniture that had started to appear more and more as time went on.

Apparently, whoever or whatever had been killing those guardians didn't care much about lugging furniture around.

* * *

Ilea woke up undisturbed two hours later and continued on, refreshed and topped off on all resources. It hadn't been the most restful sleep, given the constant thought that six sharp blades might come charging out of the darkness. But with her sphere, she had at least felt somewhat safe.

Three hours of walking later, she finally came upon something new. It was a bunch of adventurers, walking in the distance in front of her at a bit of a slower pace than her. Two women and one guy, and what she could see of their equipment was rather impressive.

She hadn't gotten close enough to the three to identify them when one of the women suddenly turned her head without breaking stride and waved her right arm slightly.

At that moment, Ilea's thoughts froze. A surge of mana erupted next to her neck, followed by an incredibly thin line of condensed air. She immediately blinked away, clutching her neck as Reconstruction started working on the wound.

Blood flowed down into her shirt and armor as she tried to move as little as possible, her mind in a haze. The wind blade had cut nearly five centimeters into her neck before her Blink skill had activated. Slowly, the wound closed as she stared at the three people in front of her.

They had stopped now, and the man was talking to the woman who had attacked Ilea. She seemed embarrassed about it and simply nodded to whatever the man was saying. For some reason, Ilea didn't hear a word of what they were saying despite her sphere being active.

The second woman looked Ilea's way and smiled, pointing toward her while saying something. The other two stopped immediately and looked her way. The man's eyes turned apprehensive, but his stare was overshadowed by the first woman running Ilea's way while talking loudly, tears falling from her eyes.

Suddenly Ilea could hear them. At least, she heard the one who had cut her wailing like a cat that had had its tail stepped on. Eventually, she managed to form some words.

"I'm soooo sooo sorry! Are you alive?" the woman yelled, coming to a stop a meter away from Ilea. Wide yellow eyes took her in, and long flowing black hair draped down her back. She wore light metal armor that seemed of very high quality. "Can you heal it? Please tell me you can," she said in a rushed tone, sounding like a teenage girl who had accidentally got a scratch on her father's car.

Ilea didn't make a move to run away, figuring it was best to hope for a friendly resolution. A single spell had nearly taken her head off. Given her neck had been cut nearly halfway through, she wouldn't have wanted to move anyway.

The other two reached her at that point, the man again looking at her and checking the surroundings with his deep black eyes. Two slightly curved swords were sheathed on his belt. His armor was heavier, dark in color, and, if her time with Earl had taught her anything, of even higher quality than the others.

"Oh wow, she got you good! You're the first one in a while to not lose their head to that!" the woman who hadn't attacked her said in a happy tone and with a big smile. Her brown hair and leather armor looked almost mundane. Of the three, it seemed she cared least about her appearance and gear.

Why don't I feel like celebrating? That guy looks like he's still deciding on whether or not he should murder me...

Their eyes met then, and his gaze relaxed a little.

"Your speed and healing are rather impressive. Instant spatial movement? Not long range though, as you wouldn't be here in that case. Disappointing," the man said. "Fel, apologize to her. You've beheaded far too many people because you were startled."

The woman who had attacked her, apparently called Fel, nodded and bowed to Ilea.

"I, Felicia Redleaf, apologize for cutting you... a little." She went in for a hug that Ilea didn't stop, instead patting her on the shoulder.

If she did that twenty seconds ago, I'd have lost my head.

"S—"

Nope, talking is a bad idea...

Ilea grimaced as part of the internal wound opened up again. She gestured with her hand, indicating she had to wait for a while.

"Not as good a healer as I thought then. Although for around level 80, that isn't bad. You're a peculiar one." The man kept analyzing her. "Aliana, we've been fighting for a while now, why don't we rest here? I feel obligated to at least offer this healer a meal," he continued, gesturing to the woman not currently hugging Ilea.

So the women are Aliana and Fel.

The wound closed then, and Ilea finished healing the internal damage. This time she did manage to talk.

“S... So this... this happens often? You just behead random travelers?” she asked the man in front of her, looking at him more intently now. He had cold black eyes and matching hair. Now that she saw it up close, his armor was a combination of metal and leather with complicated symbols carved on it. A tattered cloak covered it, entirely black.

Only the helmet is missing to make him a true black knight. Is he from that Shadow's Hand order too?

“Accidental beheadings? Of innocents? Not that often, no. Rarely does it happen to someone without the intent to kill us,” the man said. “I’m Edwin. Would you care to join us for a meal?”

THIRTY-SIX

Sparring and Advice

“I was just on my way back,” she began, but she stopped when she remembered food had recently been offered. Near-death experiences *did* make her hungry after all. “But I couldn’t turn down a free meal now, could I?”

Felicia released her surprisingly strong hug and smiled brightly at Ilea. “Ed, I didn’t kill her!” she said, and Edwin gave her a weak smile.

“You didn’t. Good job Fel. Now go help Aliana.” The woman saluted to that and went over to Aliana.

“Now you know our names already, would you care to reciprocate?” Edwin said. “And also add in your origins and reason for being here. Current occupation and, if you’re willing, your classes.”

He posed these as questions, but to Ilea they sounded more like demands. Edwin seemed like an intense guy. He kept checking behind her as well.

Expecting there to be more than just me?

In the meantime, Ilea had identified the three, but all she had gotten were question marks, in addition to him being a warrior while the women were both mages. Something told her not to take them lightly, her instinct perhaps. The phantom pain in her neck certainly helped in that regard as well.

“Ilea Spears is the name. Grew up in Riverwatch and became an adventurer. I’m currently just that. I’m a close combat healer and body enhancer. Second class is Fire Enhancer currently.” She told him only as

much as she was willing to, not wanting to make it more complicated with her true origins.

“You’re here alone?” he asked.

Ilea considered for a moment, then nodded.

He raised his brows. “Impressive. Or impressively stupid. So, you’re not here for us?”

“I don’t know who you are,” Ilea said. “I’m here on a mission for a friend of mine.”

“You’re not telling the whole truth, but I guess this is good enough. Don’t think you were sent to kill us. Close combat healer... very interesting. Healing yourself while fighting... being alone in a Taleen dungeon doesn’t sound *quite* as ridiculous with that, I suppose.”

He was apparently lost in thought at the possibilities of her class but soon focused on her again.

“Did you recognize any of our names?” he asked, his eyes turning cold again.

“I’ve never heard any of them before,” she said, locking eyes with him. He stared at her for a few seconds before turning away.

“Well then, I promised you a meal. You’re free to go now though, if you like. I apologize for being abrupt, but you wouldn’t be the first one sent to murder us. Even in a place like this,” he finished, a slight smile on his face that didn’t reach his dark eyes.

“You’re a scary fucker, you know that?” Ilea said. She couldn’t resist it. His eyes widened a little at that, and while the smile on his mouth stayed the same, his eyes actually joined in this time.

“Strange how one sentence can change one’s whole perception of a stranger. I’m glad I didn’t kill you on the spot, Ilea. Edwin Redleaf.” He extended his hand, which she shook in greeting, smiling back at the man.

“I’d like to join you for the meal, but I have to warn you... I eat a lot,” she said as they walked toward the other two. Aliana had already set up a fire and two pots, and she was cutting meat that she certainly hadn’t spotted on their persons before.

“We have a lot of food,” Edwin said. “And I’d be very impressed if you managed to match even Aliana or Fel, let alone me.”

They sat down on some destroyed guardians next to the fire and watched Aliana slice through what seemed at least ten kilograms of meat.

The fire was burning ancient dwarven furniture, but Ilea didn't feel like mentioning it.

"Where did she get all that from? You guys don't have packs..." Ilea wondered out loud, to which Felicia giggled and showed her hand. She then started outright laughing at Ilea's confused look.

"It's a spatial enchantment bound to her ring," Edwin supplied. "You're really not that worldly, are you? I'm aware that an item like that is rare, but there are plenty of stories about them around. Many powerful people like to flaunt them as well."

"For food?" Ilea said, and her eyes glazed over. "Where do I get one?"

Even Edwin chuckled at that. "You don't. Nobody in their right mind would sell one. Only dwarves and maybe elves know how to make them, and good luck trying to buy one from them."

Edwin was smiling now, though more toward Felicia than Ilea.

So I guess these people are very powerful. Their names were important, which means their family is probably famous as well, or infamous.

Looking at the meat, Ilea was sure that the things inside the spatial ring stayed fresh as well. It looked like it had been butchered just a moment ago. And she hadn't seen a single living thing in this dungeon so far.

"So, about that close combat healer thing. How is it working out for you? How are you fighting and leveling?"

Edwin's question surprised her a little. It felt more akin to someone asking about the engine of their friend's car than a fighting style.

"Well, it's going quite well. Since I've left Riverwatch, I've mostly fought things alone, and it's been quite... rewarding. And fun, to be honest."

"Interesting, interesting. If only I could've stumbled upon your class earlier. How is your offensive power? You've already demonstrated your movement skill. What other skills do you have? Can you only heal yourself or others as well?" He asked all those questions in quick succession while Felicia nodded along to all of them quite attentively.

Aliana, meanwhile, was humming a tune and hacking into the flesh in front of her with a rather savage-looking cleaver.

"Wait, don't answer those. Let's have a quick bout before we eat, ok? I can give you some pointers as well if I see something. How does that sound?" Edwin said, getting up.

They seem scarily friendly... I'm obviously not a threat to them, so why the hell not? That guy though, he treats me like a computer character in a video game with a rare skill to share. What a nerd. But seeing as the girl nearly beheaded me and since he seems to think himself the strongest of the group, I can definitely learn something from this guy.

She nodded and stood up too.

"Tell me when you're ready," she told him after they'd moved a bit further away from Aliana.

"I'm always ready. Do you have a skill that lets you sense things around you in any way?" he asked, standing opposite her nearly ten meters away.

"I do, yes," she answered, and she activated both State of Azarinth and Body of Flame, getting into a stance.

"Hmm, yes. Body of Flame. And the blue runes, I assume, are from your healer class? Two body enhancing classes working together while being able to heal. That is quite the combination. The reason I asked about the perception skill is because you should always – and when I say always, I mean at all times – keep that skill up. I assume it saved your life earlier when Fel attacked you. So, are you ready?"

Ilea nodded.

A red mist suddenly rose out of Edwin, hovering irregularly above his armor. Then he vanished, appearing to Ilea's right. His right sword was unsheathed with a speed barely comprehensible to Ilea as he slashed at her arm. She turned her body slightly, trusting fully in her Azarinth fighting and perception skills. Blink would've been the safer option, but she didn't feel like running away just yet.

The sword scraped against her bracers before she started to deliver a punch at the man. A touch to her side let her know she had already lost though as his second sword had somehow already reached her.

Blinking away, Ilea held her side, which started to bleed a second later. She healed it while Edwin slowly sheathed his swords.

"Very impressive. I can barely think of anyone in your level range who would be able to touch you. Although body enhancers do have a massive advantage early on. Don't forget that. You have a good reliance on your skills and instincts as well, you've clearly fought for your life more than once already. Your perception skill can certainly use some training though. You didn't seem to notice my second sword until it reached you."

“Let’s just say you’re good,” Ilea admitted. “You were simply too fast. I could barely see your first strike.”

She got back into a fighting stance, her wound already healed.

“Healing seems second nature to you too. But do try to ignore superficial wounds like that in a fight of attrition. Every ounce of mana is important, even though your regeneration might be high. I didn’t hold back much on speed seeing how you dodged Fel’s wind blade before.”

Didn’t hold back much? This guy really is fucking scary.

The smile on her face belied her thoughts as she prepared for another strike.

“Let’s see your destructive power then. You do have offensive spells, I assume, and you can heal others?” Edwin asked, receiving a nod in reply.

“Good, then give me all you’ve got. I wouldn’t normally do this, but you’ve got me curious, little healer,” he said, holding his hands in a cross in front of him.

“Fucker,” she said and blinked right in front of him. Her fist reached him a split second after and slammed into his arms. A full wave of Destruction followed. Both of them smiled as they locked eyes.

But Edwin didn’t even take a step back. There was no visible wound, not even a scratch, though this wasn’t surprising given the nature of her spell.

“Not bad, not bad at all. That did more damage than I ever expected,” he said as she extended her hand toward his.

She assessed the damage and healed him, rather disappointed by what little her attack seemed to have done to him. It was mostly internal but still essentially a flesh wound.

“Don’t be discouraged. I assume you can feel my injury? Many healers have that ability. It’s a wonder someone of your level even managed to hurt me. I have plenty of Vitality, after all. Your strike was good, very fast. Combined with the teleport, you’re the bane of any mage – just like I am,” he said and smiled again.

“The actual impact of the strike wasn’t too bad either. Considering you’re using Body of Flame, the other skill you have must be quite impressive. Now, the reason you managed to hurt me at all was the force of the mana that entered my body upon impact. A very rare form of attack, and only hand-to-hand combatants can usually use something similar. Mana intrusion. Just be aware that there are ways to guard against it for many

magicians out there, mostly through enchantments on their armor and robes. It's still a strong attack, but don't rely on its impact in all cases," he lectured.

That's a bit more than some 'pointers', but it's free, and he seems capable enough.

She nodded, internalizing his comments.

"Your skills make your form nearly perfect. How many times have you fought against magicians, swordsmen, people using axes, monsters with claws —"

She stopped him there. "I've mostly just fought drakes and stalker hounds so far. Not many actual people," she said, becoming thoughtful, but then her eye was caught by a waving Aliana. "...Aaand I do believe the food is ready."

Something about the woman made her shiver right then. She was covered in flecks of viscera from her minutes spent butchering the meat.

What a bunch of nutters... I feel right at home. A manic grin formed on Ilea's face. Fucking fitting that I'd find them hundreds of meters underground inside an ancient dwarven ruin. Let's just hope they don't murder me. The fight would be fun though...

The four people sat around the fire while eating the generous amounts of meat Aliana had prepared.

"Wow, this is delicious," Ilea said, to which Aliana smiled brightly.

"Yeah! Right?" she answered, getting a thumbs-up from Ilea.

"It seems, despite my initial suspicions, that you're not here for us. May I ask you what you're doing here?" Edwin asked after eating an entire stalker hound leg-sized piece of meat, throwing the bone behind him.

Ilea recounted her talk with Alice and what she had experienced on her way so far. Seeing how easily Edwin could dispatch her if he wanted to, she figured he had no reason not to be honest with her, so she told them about the dead adventurers and her fight with the guardians as well.

"That is some creative usage of your skills. If only all of them were ranged variants," he said.

"Don't be mean to her, Ed. Explain the rest," Felicia told him with a mischievous look before she continued eating.

"Hmm, well alright. That girl, your so-called friend, is using you. I'll tell you more if you give me the name of your class," he said, looking at Ilea.

“I’ll tell you in exchange for that information *and* if you let me come along with you. I won’t get in the way, I promise,” she answered, knowing that his curiosity would likely win him over. She had already learned quite a lot. More bouts would help her improve, and the group was here for something. She wanted to know what.

Edwin tsked in a way that made Felicia laugh loudly, dropping her food in the process. He glanced at her, and his annoyed look softened slightly. Looking back to Ilea after a couple of seconds though, his expression had hardened once more.

“Alright, why not? We can handle it, and your healing might come in handy once or twice,” he agreed. “Some conditions though.”

“What kind of conditions?”

“You want to learn from us, fight alongside us? Then you have to pull your weight. Healing is obvious, but you’re also surprisingly resilient for your level. There are copious amounts of traps in Taleen dungeons, many of them dangerous even to us.”

Ilea grinned. “I can spring them. Good way to train my perception. And my healing.”

He looked at her for a long moment, then sighed. “That’s not... technically wrong. Your class?”

“It’s called Azarinth Healer. A very old order of healers. I stumbled upon their remains and got the class after meeting various requirements.”

“Can you teach it to others?” His eyes lit up a little.

“Not for many years, I’m afraid. A moss-like substance is required to get it and none remains, sadly,” she answered. “I ate it all.” She looked into the distance, remembering the bland taste before she ate another piece of juicy meat.

“Bloody idiot. Could’ve made a fortune from selling that class. I don’t know the circumstances though, so no offense. And it likely isn’t worth a switch at this point...” Edwin said, looking at her thoughtfully.

I could’ve done that, yeah. But then it’s likely other people would’ve died to try and get it.

She smiled back at him. “None taken. It was necessary at the time to use it all, plus there’s a one-in-three mortality rate.”

It really wasn’t though. Guess I just like fighting more than money. Plus, I’m impatient.

“You’re not the best liar, you know? I guess keeping the class to yourself is an advantage in itself as well though. And there’s plenty of other powerful classes out there anyway.” He finished another leg and threw the bone away.

Is he reading my mind? Ilea thought as she grabbed more food. “You mentioned something about Alice. Do tell. How exactly is she using me?”

Edwin nodded. “Hmm, yes. You’re aware that the six big houses of Dawntree declared different parts of the cave systems their own, right?” He looked at her. “You don’t. No matter. They just chose different tunnels and declared them theirs. Whatever lies within, they claim, not that the houses play by the rules. This dungeon was found a couple months ago by the Forkspears. Usually, Taleen dungeons are left alone because they’re too dangerous and not rewarding enough to touch. Whatever those dwarves did before leaving, they had a way to make their valuables disappear as well.” He paused to chew some more meat. “Or to guard them in ways that even Shadows wouldn’t engage with.”

“Are you a Shadow?” Ilea asked. The thought had occurred to her before, seeing as his armor was black, much like those worn by the high-level mercenaries she had met outside Riverwatch.

He looked at her sideways but didn’t answer, instead continuing his previous explanation.

“I did hear about some Forkspears sending adventurers in here to map out the dungeon. Outrageous prices are usually paid for that, not that many actually make it back. Only the desperate, the stupid, or the very powerful take on dungeon explorations in Taleen ruins. Compared to most other dungeons, these hold ridiculous traps and usually have machines above level 150.

“More importantly though, I’ve never heard of a sleeping plague, and it seems like a bit of a stretch to find a cure in a newly discovered Taleen dungeon. This is more a political move, it seems. And why not send a free scout in there who thinks they’re doing their friend a favor? Pretty cold and calculating, but that’s nobility for you,” he finished, the last bit a little more quietly.

“No, she didn’t seem like that...” Ilea couldn’t mesh the memory of the young girl she’d given a piggyback ride with such cold-blooded manipulation. “I mean, maybe something changed after she got back,” she mumbled to herself.

“How long have you known her?”

“A few months,” Ilea murmured absentmindedly.

“The girl is part of a major house. She probably values the opportunity to gain favor in her family more than a friend she’s only known for a couple months. You are powerful, so many will see you as a tool to be used, if you don’t watch out.”

“Like you do right now?” she asked with a slight smile.

“Exactly. But you *want* to jump in front of bladed machines. Win-win, right?”

She shook her head, thinking about Alice.

“It’s strange. But... I guess? How cold though...” She stopped herself.

It makes perfect sense in this world, but I still didn’t expect it. Even on Earth, people do similar things in positions of power. I was simply never exposed to that. I suppose I was lucky.

“You said she wants to gain favor,” she continued out loud. “How would she do that by sending adventurers into this dungeon? Didn’t you say it’s too dangerous and not rewarding enough?”

He nodded. “I also said only the desperate would take the job. She doesn’t seem to be in a very stable position if this is what she uses her resources for. It is certainly highly dangerous, but some Taleen dungeons also hold treasures many would kill for, while others hold only death and despair.”

Ilea nodded and stayed quiet for a while, thinking it over. She was more hurt by the lie than anything else.

Coming to this dungeon is a good opportunity, and I would’ve done it anyway if she’d just asked me. I’m gonna ask her about it once I’m back. As much as it makes sense, I won’t simply take this man’s word for it.

“What’s your objective here then? Were you hired as well?” Ilea asked, but she didn’t receive an answer beyond a considering look. By now, the fire had burned out and everyone was done eating. Nothing was left after all. Edwin hadn’t exaggerated their appetites.

“We’ll go further into the dungeon and destroy more guardians. We can spar with you during breaks. It will be good for them as well,” he said, gesturing toward Felicia and Aliana.

Well now, that sounds like my kind of party.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Azarinth Leecher

Ilea didn't have a problem with the arrangement. She could learn a lot from these people and didn't feel like confronting Alice just yet anyway.

He seemed a bit too forward about this though... there has to be a catch somewhere, but these are the first powerful adventurers I've met who are willing to fight and train with me. I can't pass that up. Also, I have to admit I'm dying to see more of their abilities. Plus the longer they keep me around, the stronger I'll get. I assume with their levels it might not be as effective for them.

Felicia seemed especially happy about the deal and immediately hugged Ilea again.

"Yay, finally some new company," she said while Edwin extinguished the last remaining embers of their little makeshift firepit.

"With her here, we won't stop as often to let our wounds heal." Edwin nodded and completely ignored Felicia's groan. She turned smiley again quickly though and started to ask Ilea all sorts of questions, ranging from her thoughts on cute clothes to removing arrows from the body in ways that wouldn't worsen the wounds massively. Her line of questioning was rather scattergun.

Felicia never stopped talking or mumbling next to Ilea, while Aliana and Edwin walked in silence before them, the group continuing down the ancient road for a while until Edwin called them to a halt.

"Get ready," he said. "Two sword guardians and one ranged guardian. Ilea, I assume the sword ones are still too much for you, so go for the

ranged one down the middle. I'll take right, and you two take the one on the left. Shout for help if you need any."

His instructions issued, he immediately disappeared. A loud boom echoed through the dwarven street, moving the dust on the ground as Edwin reappeared inside the partially collapsed ruin of a nearby building.

A clash of metal on metal signaled the start of the fight as magical power condensed next to Ilea's companions. She ran toward the indicated location and was greeted by the now familiar sound of a ranged Taleen guardian shooting a slug her way.

It took her a while to close in on the machine, but with it being alone and exactly the same as her previous encounter, she soon found herself riding on a metallic spinning back once again.

When her final punch landed, she looked up to see Edwin smiling and Aliana clapping. Felicia, predictably, ran up to her and caught her in a strong hug.

"Aliana and I have some minor cuts, if you would...?" Edwin said.

Ilea healed them and finished up just as Felicia let go of her.

"I suggest you start to split up your stat points into two parts Vitality, two parts Intelligence, and one part each for Strength and Dexterity. Seeing you fight, you don't seem to have any big mana spenders like Felicia and Aliana do, so Wisdom-wise you're probably good for now. With all your body enhancements, you probably get more of a punch out of Intelligence than Strength. Dexterity will help with reactions though, so that's important as well," he lectured.

"More or less what I've been doing. More physical stats then?" Ilea asked.

"That depends on your bonuses. Just from seeing you fight, yes, more Dexterity would help. If you're too reliant on your mana intrusion, it might come back to bite you in the ass when you face someone or something that can defend against it. Strength could help with that. There are always drawbacks when specializing. Plus, going too low on anything has consequences unless you can compensate. What are your current stats at, by the way?"

The question seemed incredibly insensitive, even to Ilea, who hadn't lived on Elos for even a year yet.

"I won't share the details. Focus is on Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom."

“Suit yourself. It’s a good base. I stand by the suggestion from before though. Whenever possible, we’ll leave a single ranged guardian to you. With the level difference, it’ll be no time until you hit the hundreds. We’ll also try to move further away once you’re alone with one of them so it’s a bit more dangerous and rewarding.”

“Isn’t that, I don’t know, kind of cheap? I can easily destroy these machines now. It doesn’t seem reasonable for me to level up as much from them as I do,” Ilea stated, looking down at the destroyed guardian.

“If two of them engaged you, you’d be dead. You need several minutes to destroy one, and one slip up could easily cost you your life. So no, it’s definitely not unreasonable. You enjoy a challenge though, so I understand your reasoning. Maybe you enjoy it a bit too much. This is the only way for you to reasonably fight one of the sword guardians eventually, so deal with it,” he said and gestured to Aliana.

“You fight Ilea this time. Show her some of your spells. Oh, and Aliana... try not to kill her,” he finished as the woman prepared herself, her easygoing smile replaced by a manic grin.

* * *

Ilea hadn’t seen the two women fight earlier as she had been preoccupied by the guardian. She’d ignored the messages after destroying the machine and simply invested the points as she deemed fit, mostly keeping her focus the same but deciding to put a few points into Dexterity as Edwin had suggested. Again, she’d gained six levels across her two classes.

If this continues for a while, I’ll get that damn basilisk in no time. Although...

She looked toward Edwin to ask him about the four question marks she’d seen above the basilisk – just as something hot splashed against her face.

Ilea’s eyes widened as she immediately started to heal the burn. Her pain resistance was the only thing keeping her from screaming. Aliana hadn’t waited for her to ask the question and had seemed bored by all the talking. So, she’d begun.

Another wave of boiling liquid fired toward Ilea but this time she blinked through it, getting closer to her opponent. Her face was still healing

when her back started itching. The wave of boiling water had been redirected after the blink and was now hissing against her back.

“Use your perception,” Edwin said from the side, twirling one of his swords around with an amused smile.

Calming down, Ilea activated her sphere and started moving away from the water that had formed out of nowhere around Aliana and came at her from every direction. A wave of deadly hot liquid flowed through the air as if it were the rocky bed of a river, released from the limitations of gravity.

With her sphere active and the help of Azarinth Perception and Blink, Ilea managed to evade any further injuries for a what felt like half an hour or so. At that point, Edwin sheathed his swords and stepped back.

“Alright, Aliana. Enough playing around. Ilea, good luck,” he said as the grin on Aliana’s face grew more than Ilea thought possible.

Good luck?

The boiling water suddenly dropped to the floor. The whole street they stood in suddenly heated up and some lamps above burst. Drops of hot liquid suddenly filled the air and fell in such numbers that Ilea found it impossible to dodge them all.

She got away with some light burns and stood inside a nearby house looking at Aliana. Drops of boiling water were still falling like rain as the woman started gesturing with her arms. Her eyes closed and the movements stopped as a whisper too soft for Ilea to hear left her mouth.

Ilea’s eyes widened as a massive semi-transparent gate formed above the woman.

A floodgate...

The thought came to her too late as she blinked toward where Edwin stood, getting only a third of the way to him even with the full distance of her Blink ability.

The gates had opened at that point and released an unfathomably large torrent of water in Ilea’s direction. And the water was boiling impossibly hot. Her next blink brought her closer to Edwin, who was standing safely to the side. The water rushed below her, and a glance at Aliana brought a shiver to her back as more and more water poured out of the gate.

I could blink right through it with the next one...

Ilea was more annoyed at losing to the mage without having got a single punch in than at the prospect of being boiled alive. *This is the power of their cook, huh?*

Then she smiled, blinking as close to Edwin as she could.

* * *

Felicia watched as her new friend was about to be consumed by Aliana's deadly wave and frowned. Moving her hand, a strong gust of wind formed and flew toward Ilea's position. The girl had teleported into the mass of water as a last-ditch effort to get through, but Aliana had countered her.

The wind pushed away the water in front of the already severely burned Ilea. Both wind and water continued to fight each other before the gates finally closed again and Aliana collapsed on the ground.

Her brother shook his head and went to look after Aliana.

"Really? You had to step in? She's tougher than that."

Felicia was already kneeling above Ilea but couldn't make out much from the disfigured face.

"You're mean," she said as she felt magic flow through the girl.

"You really like her, don't you?" Edwin asked, but she didn't feel like answering rhetorical questions. Not if they were coming from anybody other than herself. It took Ilea an impressively short period to get back on her feet.

* * *

Ilea jerked up and coughed, after using an insane amount of mana to heal herself.

"That was close. I'm alive, right?" she asked a smiling Felicia.

"You are. Quite impressive, that healing power. Aliana's still recovering as well," Felicia said, gesturing over to the water mage, now lying on the ground while chewing on a piece of meat.

"I just healed burns. It's nothing new," Ilea said, but Felicia shook her head.

"Then why isn't your melted armor sticking to your molten skin now? Aliana's water is far deadlier than spilling a pot of boiling oil on yourself. It's like acid to whatever she chooses."

Ilea touched her armor, and it did indeed seem that only her skin had suffered any burns. Compared to when she'd burned herself to get the Fire

Mage class, this had taken a substantial amount more mana and time to heal. Seeing how her skills had gotten stronger since then, it seemed strange to say the least.

Scary.

“You made it. I really thought you were done there. I hope you learned something from that fight. Next up is Felicia, but we’ll wait until we get a bit deeper in,” Edwin said as he helped Aliana stand up.

“Yeah, I learned many things. Once someone starts channeling for more than a second, get the fuck away. Also, Aliana is scary,” Ilea said as she walked over to them.

Aliana started smiling when she heard the comment and nodded. “I am, I am. I didn’t plan on flooding you, but after seeing your melting flesh, I just couldn’t resist!”

Her voice sounded like the cute woman in front of her should have, but as Ilea processed the meaning of the words, she could only smile back awkwardly.

“Don’t worry, she keeps her... indulgences to herself,” Edwin soothed, and he motioned for all of them to start moving again.

Well, that comforts me exactly 0%. Maybe this is what people mean when they say curiosity killed the cat. I did want to see their abilities...

“You don’t mind, do you?” Edwin asked. “If this is bothering you then I suggest you turn back. If not, let’s get going.”

“Five minutes after I nearly died from acid burns...” Ilea murmured, but she said it with a smile as they walked further into the dwarven ruin.

My brain will need a while to get used to this lifestyle, but at least it was a challenge...

* * *

It turned out that the dungeon or ruin had once been a rather big Taleen city. The four intruders cleared road after road, square after square for nearly three days straight.

Edwin didn’t seem to have the goal of clearing everything out, and Ilea was sure they were walking to a specific destination. While they did destroy all guardians they came across, it would’ve likely taken them weeks if not months to clear out all of the city they had come across so far.

He's after something or somewhere specific, Ilea thought as again Edwin chose a road that would lead them further down instead of one of the three side streets. He didn't share any of his plans with Ilea, and she stopped asking after the third time. Aliana and Felicia seemed either painfully oblivious or simply apathetic to any further goal Edwin had.

Ilea had grown to like the two women. Through all the sparring and meals they shared, she found them to be actually quite good company. Although Aliana was properly insane and obsessed with melting things, Ilea figured it was not too different from her own fighting obsession. Well, there were some differences, but the fights were great. Still, they did somewhat bond over their shared liking of food.

It was no surprise to her that her first spar with Felicia ended much faster than the one against Aliana. What she did learn, though, was that reattaching limbs was possible for her if she acted fast enough, even with a crying wind mage trying to apologize for her far-too-enthusiastic use of magic. Regrowing limbs with her healing wasn't something she was willing to test quite yet, even though Aliana had suggested she try as much. She'd even offered to help. For entirely unknown reasons. Entirely.

Despite the brutal sparring sessions that would likely have had anyone else parting ways with the group of psychos after their first near-death experience, Ilea found herself feeling rather at home.

On the third day, they reached the entrance to a natural cave. Before them, a massive chasm without any visible ground below stretched from left to right for a couple of hundred meters. On the other side of the chasm was a massive door. Greenish runes covered nearly all of it.

Ilea had grown tremendously in those three days. The group had destroyed dozens of machines while she had managed to defeat eight ranged guardians on her own. That experience, combined with what she got from the group effort, had been enough for her to level fifty times. She'd nearly died just as many times though, only her healing power letting her continue. She continued more or less in the same way as she had before, taking Edwin's comments with regard to stats into consideration. Her main focuses remained on Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Both Aliana and Felicia got badly injured several times, and when they would've otherwise had to wait for days to heal, their recovery time was reduced to mere minutes with Ilea being there. Edwin, however, only got small injuries from time to time, which he healed himself.

“The Great Hall,” Edwin said, awe in his voice as he stared at the massive door in front of them. “Finally.”

He then effortlessly jumped over the nearly twenty-meter-wide chasm, followed by the others, who were carried by their magic. Ilea simply blinked over.

“So, what’s this Great Hall?” she asked, completely unprepared for an actual answer.

“Some of the Taleen cities had what are called Great Halls. They are basically the only reason anybody would even venture to a place like this, except those like you who want fighting experience, of course. Those people are rather rare though,” he explained.

“A lot of Taleen dungeons simply hold similar things to what you’ve seen over the past three days. But Great Halls usually have similar machines with additional traps inside. And usable technology and artifacts. Of the sparse reports I’ve heard of and read, half of the Great Halls hold something valuable inside.” He looked at Ilea. “Sorry, I must be boring you. Let’s gather our strength before we go in.”

He stopped at that and walked up to the door, examining the large entrance.

Bored? Please, this is the first relevant thing you’ve shared in the past three days...

Aliana started cooking some broth and Felicia sat near the edge of the chasm, dangling her feet into the void. When the food was ready, Edwin returned from the door with a bit of a frown on his face.

He was very subtle about showing them, but Ilea had started to notice more and more of his emotions in these past three days. Frowns were mostly present when Felicia got hurt, and there were smiles when she was happy. He cared a lot for his sister – that was the only thing Ilea was sure of with Edwin.

“I can’t figure it out. We’ll have to push through with brute force,” he said, sitting down next to Ilea. “Aliana, can you start melting through after we’ve had dinner?”

“Sure thing, boss,” Aliana said, tasting the broth.

“You should check your status and any possible new skills. Given how thick the door seems to be, it’ll take a couple hours at least,” Edwin said with a glance toward Ilea.

“Right,” she mumbled back while looking through her recent messages and notifications.

A lot of her skills had improved as well upon Ilea using them to fight and destroy guardians, others by simply using them. The most interesting of them was Body of Flame, which had reached the second stage.

Active: Body of Flame – 2nd lvl 3:

Clad yourself in flames, raising your resilience, speed, and strength by 31% [75.95% after bonuses].

2nd stage: The longer you fight within the Body of Flame, the stronger its heat burns. Each minute of fighting adds 10% to the bonuses (maximum 100%).

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement – Fire magic

The last two guardians had got a taste of that powerful second stage, and her average time for one guardian fight was reduced by nearly two full minutes.

It had been a scarily fruitful three days for Ilea. She felt like her levels and stats were slowly catching up with her incredibly high skill levels. Most of the benefits came from the kills deemed as a solo kill instead of a group one, which had made her try and fight the machines as isolated as possible.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 99

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 15

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 16

- Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 8

- Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 9

- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20

- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 12

- Passive: Azarinth Perception – lvl 20

- Passive: Free Slot

Class 2: Fire Enhancer – lvl 88

- Active: Flame – lvl 2***
- Active: Body of Flame – 2nd lvl 3***
- Active: Heat Surge – lvl 2***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Active: Free Slot***
- Passive: Fire Manipulation – lvl 14***
- Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***
- Passive: Free Slot***

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5***
- Identify – lvl 4***
- Meditation – 2nd lvl 14***
- Poison Resistance – lvl 16***
- Heat Resistance – lvl 9***
- Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2***
- Mental Resistance – lvl 5***
- Fear Resistance – lvl 1***

Status:

Vitality: 287

Endurance: 106

Strength: 97

Dexterity: 98

Intelligence: 268

Wisdom: 217

Health: 2870/2870

Stamina: 1011/1060

Mana: 1889/2170

THIRTY-EIGHT

Centurion

With each passing fight, Ilea could hold her own a little longer against both Aliana and Felicia. Edwin still judged her unable to face one of the sword guardians on her own and he only rarely sparred with her, demonstrating again and again how vastly inadequate her power still was, even after gaining over fifty levels.

According to Edwin, Ilea would be a formidable opponent even for a normal adventurer at level 150. Though the three people fighting alongside her against the machines of the Taleen were anything but normal. They all had specialized classes and very effective skills for killing, as well as the ruthlessness and experience to use them to a scarily efficient degree.

Edwin had explained after one of their spars that Ilea had an incredible advantage with her healing against unknown enemies. A surprise attack executed by both her and her enemy would leave her healing her wounds and most opponents injured. If the opponent's attack didn't kill her on the spot, she would already have an advantage.

Ilea looked through the new bunch of useless skills she could choose from in her Fire Enhancer class. Edwin had told her not to bother too much with them as it was still a rather basic class. Most of the skills reflected that. Ilea did, however, spot one skill that intrigued her.

Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 1

Regulate the heat in your body to protect yourself against harsh climates or even blend in with your environment.

Category: Body Enhancement – Fire magic

Would you like to learn this skill?

Hmm, given that I now know heat vision is a skill people can get, controlling my body temperature could be very useful.

Willing her mind to add the skill to her arsenal, her body cooled and heated itself quickly before she managed to control the newfound feeling inside of her.

Wow, this is cool...

She chose a rather warm temperature. She had thought that simply resisting the cold was enough, but actually feeling toasty warm was much better than simply ignoring the cold.

Why didn't I get this one earlier?

With some testing, she managed to match her surroundings rather easily, mostly thanks to her Heat Perception skill, which complemented Body Heat Manipulation quite well.

Half an hour later, Aliana called them all over.

"You guys! I'm through, I think!" she exclaimed. Edwin got up quickly, followed by Ilea. Felicia was playing above the chasm, flying this way and that, but she soon joined the others.

"Ilea, if you would be so kind? My swords are unfit for this task," Edwin said, gesturing to the door. Her buffs immediately surged up, and she stepped closer and hit the door with everything she had.

A dull reverberation rang through the cavern as a large piece of the door fell away. Edwin stopped her from punching again and, with a quick motion, cut away the jagged edges of the door. Two cuts later, he put his hands on it and pulled.

After a painful minute of listening to the grating of metal on metal, Edwin managed to open up the remaining part of the door. The four of them went through the opening into an enormous hall, which could have fit the Riverwatch arena two times over. Massive pillars lined the walls.

But Ilea didn't have time to properly take it all in. Immediately, four sword guardians advanced on the intruders while four ranged variants hanging from the side of a wall over a hundred meters away started shooting. Two quick movements of Edwin's swords deflected the slugs before the others had made it into the Great Hall.

Water started flowing around them immediately, forming a shield and taking care of some more of the slugs, while others were cut in half by gusts

of magical wind. The two mages walked to the left and right slowly while casting. The pillars posted on each side gave them cover while they wielded their magic.

Edwin's form blurred, and he appeared behind one of the sword guardians, cutting off two of its arms with clean swings before retreating from a second guardian's approach. Ilea followed quickly behind him with a Blink but didn't stop until she reached the wall on the other side.

Dodging slugs here and there, she positioned herself in a way that obscured her from some of the ranged machines. Only two of them remained focused on her as the others continued attacking Edwin, but their slugs found only water or air instead of the desired flesh and bone.

Ilea's punches came rapidly, and several dodges and blinks later, her opponents were already suffering from several destroyed or damaged legs. Her high Intelligence stat was helping a great deal, and with the second stage of Body of Flame, the fight would only continue to become easier.

Three of the sword guardians were missing limbs at that point, while Felicia had managed to destroy one of the other ranged enemies. Boiling water burned like acid, slowly working on the guardian's shells, melting away the sharp edges of the machines.

As Edwin had to retreat from the combined assault of three machines, the third remaining ranged guardian turned to Ilea and attacked her too. A third slug to dodge sporadically made her fight much more dangerous.

Her leveled sphere and perception skills helped her tremendously at avoiding any fatal shots. Then she knew a minute had passed when her second stage Body of Flame bonus kicked in.

Felicia and Aliana focused on the sword guardians that threatened to overwhelm Edwin with their sheer number of attacks and blades. But a barrage of wind and water kept them at bay.

With more than one ranged attacker to handle, Ilea could only buy time for the others to destroy their enemies. Her mana was still high when suddenly a spear-like object entered her sphere of perception, making her blink away behind a pillar immediately.

The spear continued and entered the metal wall, embedding itself deeply with a booming clang and forming a huge crack in the process. It was a spear made from the same greenish metal the guardians were made of. It suddenly vanished from the wall and appeared back in the hand of the creature that had thrown it.

Ilea looked to the side where a new machine stood. It had six legs as well, and while it had the same headpiece, it only had two arms and was taller than the other variants they had encountered. Compared to the sword arms the other guardians had, the machine sported quite normal, almost muscular arms, once again holding the spear in its metal hands.

[Taleen Centurion – lvl ??]

Ilea moved her head to the side as the spear shot past her at a breakneck pace. The throw itself was as fast as one of Edwin's swings, if not faster.

"Centurion!" she shouted, hoping the others had faced such a creature in the past, before blinking toward the three remaining ranged enemies.

The others had managed to finish off two of the three sword guardians just before she warned them. Edwin immediately disengaged the last sword machine and switched his attention to the centurion.

With two punches, Ilea destroyed the last leg of one of the ranged guardians before continuing on to the next one. The guardian fell down from the wall, leaving it sprawled on the ground, turning and shooting at whatever it could.

Leaving two enemies to face, Ilea relaxed when a blade of wind cut into the guardian before her.

They must've finished the last sword guardian, she thought as another blade of wind unbalanced the ranged guardian.

Five punches and two kicks to its torso later, the machine gave in. Most of the damage came from the blades of wind that kept slicing into Ilea's adversary. Only one of the ranged guardians remained functional now, but no more magic was coming to her assistance.

I'll finish this one normally then. She blinked closer and started working on the machine's legs. It took her only two minutes to finish the last enemy.

Looking over, Ilea realized that the others were still engaged in the fight with the Centurion. And a fight it was. Both Aliana and Felicia were behind Edwin, throwing missiles of wind and water at the Centurion, which was fiercely engaged with the warrior. The most amazing thing to Ilea was that the machine could actually match the man.

It was hard to tell how damaged the Centurion was, but Edwin was sporting several gouges and dents on his armor and both fresh and healed cuts from the machine's spear. Ilea stopped watching and blinked down to

the remaining ranged guardian that was nearly out of the fight but still dangerous.

Several dozen punches later, the machine's struggles ended, but not before releasing a final slug that nearly struck her forehead. Expecting the attack, she moved her head slightly right before the shot embedded itself in her skull.

'ding' Azarinth Perception has reached 2nd lvl 1

Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 1:

Increases your perception and reflexes while fighting. To keep up with their faster-moving body, a healer of Azarinth has to control it.

2nd stage: Your perception spikes for two seconds, should you be about to receive a blow that would take 75% or more of your health. This can happen only once per hour.

Category: Body Enhancement

Nice, no more sudden death by basilisk sneak attack... maybe.

She looked toward the group again. Not much seemed to have changed, but she could tell that both of the mages were running low. Even Edwin seemed more exhausted than she'd ever seen him before.

She had reached the final stage of her Body of Flame bonus, meaning it had been at least ten minutes since the fighting started.

Felicia and Aliana were burst hitters who used up their mana much quicker than Ilea or Edwin, and although Aliana had demonstrated over twenty minutes of spells in her sparring against Ilea, what she was throwing around against guardians was quite a bit more intense than the 'playful splashes', as she called them, that she had used in their first bout.

Playful splashes my ass. Ilea blinked closer to the three of them. *This thing is overwhelming to me, and none of them seem actually hurt.*

She didn't want to distract Edwin from the intense battle and simply decided to move in between the man and the two mages as a second line of defense. The others immediately reacted, giving her enough space to move.

"Aliana, how much do you have left?" Edwin shouted, deflecting another five consecutive blows from the Centurion's spear. A blade of wind cut into the machine, leaving a deep cut in the stone below and behind the enemy but only a scratch on the green metal itself.

"I'm nearly there, tell me when to use it!" Aliana shouted back.

“Then use it now!” Edwin’s answer made Aliana jump back a couple of meters before she started her gestures. The now familiar movements made Ilea move in front of Aliana – and not a moment too soon as the Centurion immediately focused on her, sensing the buildup of mana from the mage.

It moved back a step, disengaging from Edwin with a punch delivered from its left arm. Forced to block, Edwin was blown half a meter to the left, right in front of Felicia. Now with ample room, the Centurion threw its spear, sending it thundering toward Aliana.

Ilea blinked to adjust her position, time slowing to a crawl as the spear closed in on her. It was already only a meter away when her Blink finished, moving too fast for her to completely deflect it or move both her and Aliana away.

Trusting all her skills completely, she moved her hand to intercept the spear. It impacted and devastated her hand before veering slightly to pierce her right breast.

But the deflection had moved the spear slightly from its trajectory toward Aliana, which would have seen it punch right through Ilea’s spine and into the mage.

Time accelerated as Ilea was sent flying into one of the pillars as the spear traveled nearly unhindered through her, but it flew past Aliana’s moving form and into the far wall behind them.

Catching himself, Edwin vanished, bursting into the spot Ilea had just vacated right as the spear vanished from the wall. Thrown once more, the spear was intercepted by one of Edwin’s swords, after which the flood finally reached their enemy.

The Taleen Centurion tried to move against the tide, but the endless deluge caused by Aliana’s spell continued. The flood of boiling water didn’t stop for some time, at which point Felicia caught a collapsing Aliana as she fainted from complete exhaustion.

The remaining water flowed toward the other side of the hall, leaving only a molten husk of green metal behind.

Ilea collapsed onto one knee, trying to stop the bleeding from her chest and back, breathing heavily when the wounds finally closed up. *That was something.*

* * *

After Ilea's body had finished healing the deadly wound after a couple of minutes, she simply watched the unending tide.

Now that's what I call a spell commercial... how did I survive that again?

Before she could answer her own question, a familiar noise interrupted her thinking.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 302]. For killing an adversary 200 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200] x 8. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 100. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Fire Enhancer has reached level 89. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Fire Enhancer has reached level 90. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Fire Enhancer has reached level 91. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' New skill available for Azarinth Healer

'ding' New skills available for Fire Enhancer

Two hundred levels higher?! Oh man... wait... new skills... twice?!

Checking her messages again, she rejoiced as she read through the information.

'ding' You have met the following conditions: Reached lvl 100 in Azarinth Healer. Reached at least 2nd lvl 15 in both Destruction and Reconstruction in the Azarinth Healer class.

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, rendering 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.

Blink no longer requires you to touch the ground between activations.

Category: Body Enhancement

Would you like to learn this skill?

“Hell yeah I would!” she said out loud. The skill was added to her abilities.

No more touching the ground? Does that mean I can basically fly?

Ilea really wanted to test it out immediately.

“A hundred, huh? Something good. I hope,” Edwin said after having checked the remains of the Centurion. “Can you check on Aliana first?”

“Oh sure, sure!” Ilea exclaimed, turning a bit red with embarrassment. All the blood from her injury hid that fact rather well though.

Fortunately, Aliana was fine – she was simply out of magic juice. Healing all the minor injuries of the group, Ilea read through her new skill again and assigned the new stat points in the same way she had before.

Level 100 bitches! Looking down at herself, she frowned in spite of her joy. *Another armor repair session in my future, eh?* This time, though, it was only a massive hole in her right chest and on her back that needed repairing. She held a hand to her exposed breast as she approached the others.

“Fought a Centurion before?” she asked Edwin, who was making a makeshift pillow for Aliana out of a bunch of debris. Nothing particularly comfortable.

“No. I know someone who did though. I’m surprised we survived actually... we’ve grown Balt–” He stopped himself before finishing the sentence. “So, what did you get for your one hundred?” he asked, shifting the topic back to Ilea.

“Yeah! Whatcha got?” Felicia added as she glomped onto Ilea.

“It’s very interesting. Edwin, up for a trial?” She didn’t need to ask twice as they moved a bit further away from the resting Aliana. “First, though...”

Ilea took a deep breath and blinked up. As she fell, she blinked again before she hit the ground.

It works.

She tried a few more times as the others looked on and finally landed, her head spinning a little from the continuous fall.

That’s not exactly how I imagined it, she reflected, slightly disappointed. I’ll have to test it more, but it’s not exactly flying. More an enhanced fall. I still want wings...

“Not the most elegant way to fly,” Edwin said. “But I suppose it’s one way to do it.”

Ilea rolled her eyes.

“That’s not all I got. So, this is supposed to, well, steal mana from you, I think?” she explained, a bit unsure of herself.

“Mana draining? That’s worthy of a level one hundred skill. I have something similar with life. I believe I got it at one-fifty of my second class,” Edwin said. He had a way of slipping into a scholar’s mindset when it came to skills and classes, sharing knowledge that, from what Ilea knew of the world so far, many would rather die withholding.

“Well, with my healing abilities, it’s basically the same really. Shall we try it then?” Ilea asked. Edwin nodded, and she activated Azarinth Reversal. A light punch later, all three of them smiled. On impact, a small portion of Edwin’s mana was indeed removed from him and integrated into Ilea. The attack didn’t cost her any mana, just the stamina of her executing the punch.

“Impressive. That was more than I expected,” he said.

“It’s related to another skill I already had, so I assume it’s affected by that one’s skill level. I got a second thing too though, let’s try that one!” Ilea exclaimed, somewhat inspired by Felicia’s enthusiastic smile.

She touched Edwin and released a reversed Reconstruction spell. She held it, now able to do continuous damage rather than a single burst on impact. He winced away after only five seconds.

“You can keep that up?” he asked, to which she nodded. “That’s the most damage you’ve dealt me so far. So, it’s like a reversal of your healing and attack skills?” he asked, one hand on his chin.

“You’re way too smart, Edwin,” Ilea sighed. Before he could reply, they were all taken away from their talk by a noise coming from Aliana. Felicia rushed to her and held her head. Aliana’s eyes opened slowly.

“Hungry,” she said in a quiet, weak voice. Out of nowhere, several big cuts of meat appeared, and Aliana fell unconscious again.

“Wow... Fel, I told you we shouldn’t let her keep the ring on once she’s unconscious,” Edwin said. It was only then that Ilea understood what had happened.

“She loves the ring though, and you know what happened last time I asked her to take it off,” Felicia answered.

“You guys make great parents,” Ilea said from behind the two. “So, anyone hungry? Maybe the smell will wake her up?”

A flame formed above her hand as she spoke.

THIRTY-NINE

Traps

The smell of food didn't wake Aliana immediately. It did, however, help to have food around once she did.

"How are you feeling? You've been out for nearly an hour this time," Edwin told Aliana after she'd had her fill of food.

"I'm ok. So, did I finish the Centurion?"

Edwin gestured to the piece of metal in the middle of the hall. "You did, yes. Without an explosion too, for some reason. With a Centurion present, there should be a lot of interesting things to find here," he said, getting up from his crouching position.

"Looking for anything specific?" Ilea asked, but this time she didn't receive an answer. "Figures," she mumbled. She looked around the hall. A lot of it was battered and destroyed, a testament to the battle they'd fought.

As long as I can fight alongside them. Not like I would've reached this place anytime soon while alone.

"So, this is the Great Hall? Doesn't look very special to me. The stone seems to be a bit nicer though, and there's more runes on the walls," Ilea commented as she walked around a broken pillar.

She saw six doors in total, one of them being the one they had entered from. All of the other doors were of a similar size, and the only difference between them was in the assortments of runes above, on, and next to them.

"Any idea what they mean? I know I'm not the brightest torch in the dungeon, but I know you're here for a reason. And with your power, it's not for some random riches," Ilea continued, her head slightly inclined toward Edwin.

“We’re here for something specific, I’ll tell you that much. I know that the runes next to the doorways explain what’s behind. And I know two of the ones in this room,” Edwin explained, walking up to Ilea and stopping.

Felicia and Aliana came up to them too, listening to what they were talking about, although Felicia seemed busier, using her wind blades to cut small holes into the magical lamps above to create patterns in the green light.

“Don’t hold me in suspense, Edwin. What do they mean?” Ilea asked, walking close to one of the doors and nearly touching one of the runes before stopping herself.

Maybe not the best idea...

“The one you’re standing in front of means prison, dungeon, or something to that effect. I’ve seen it in a report on another Taleen Great Hall. The symbol over there means armory. That’s where we’ll be going.”

He gestured toward a door on the other side of the hall and started walking toward it.

“Do you like it?” Felicia suddenly asked, appearing at Ilea’s side while gesturing above them. Ilea looked up and was impressed with the light show the wind mage had managed to produce with some incredibly precise cuts and without destroying the magical lamps in the process.

Looking back down at the smiling Felicia, she couldn’t help but chuckle and hug her. *Sometimes she seems like a kid.*

“I like you Felicia, you’re goddamn cute,” Ilea said and released the wind mage, who kept smiling.

“You may call me Fel, if you like.” With that, Felicia walked after her brother.

Aliana and Ilea followed behind. With the lack of voices, the ever-present sound of the machines took over again.

They really built all of this underground... Quite an impressive people, the Taleen.

Having opened the door that apparently led to the armory, the group was walking down a long stairway.

“An ancient weapon maybe? A legendary shield?” Ilea tried to pry something out of Edwin as they descended, trying to distract herself from Felicia’s incessant questions that had started raining on her once again. Receiving nothing in return, Ilea had no choice but to listen to Edwin’s sister’s chatter.

“...so if a wyvern and a lizard mate, do you think something more or less powerful will come out? A dragon, maybe, or just a winged lizard?” Felicia finished, a thoughtful look on her face.

She looks like she's doing math...

“Realistically speaking, I don't think they can mate, but my heart says baby dragons. They won't ever grow bigger, but they're very cute.”

“What? Ridiculous. Haven't you read *The Breeding of Scaled Creatures* by Rhywis Walt? Of course they can breed. It just depends on which power of the moon is relevant that day, though that addition is my own theory,” Felicia said, although her tone made it impossible for Ilea to tell if she was being sarcastic or not.

Emerging from the stairway into a long hallway, Ilea saw the walls were completely lit with greenish runes. The hallway was perfectly straight, stretching out before them for over a hundred meters.

As they made their way down it, Ilea kept listening to Felicia's theories on different species' mating capabilities before they finally reached an opening on the other side. The entire group, even Felicia, were stunned into silence by the beautiful room before them.

Machinery, pipes, and gears were exposed all over the place. Everything was moving in harmony, accompanied by the noise of surprisingly well-oiled mechanical parts clicking into each other. It was like being inside a clock, or perhaps an engine.

Unlike what Ilea had seen of the Taleen dungeon before, the metal used here wasn't the familiar greenish one but something that looked more silvery. It still had a bit of a green shine, but it was much more subdued.

This find would certainly please Alice if what Edwin said about her is true. I'll continue and see how much I can learn from being with these guys before I head back out through the residential part of town.

Ilea glanced at the others. She'd become a lot more familiar with both the people and their powers but still felt there was a lot more she could learn from them. She didn't often meet people who could probably easily put her down, should they have reason to.

She wasn't sure exactly what Edwin's deal was. The women seemed a lot more straightforward. Both of them certainly had the capability of killing her if she crossed them, but Edwin was a bit more complicated. There was a reason he had allowed her to tag along, or maybe several reasons.

I don't care though. I've gained over fifty levels already and I feel like if this continues, I might actually be able to get away if he turns out to be psycho...

They walked down a broad stairway toward an expansive circular space in the center of the machinery. The stone used in construction here was different to the rest of the ruin. A brilliantly polished white stone was used for everything here, compared to the normal gray stone of the earlier houses and tunnels.

The bright ground and walls combined with the silvery machinery gave the place a very different feel. There was still a greenish light coming from above, but all of it seemed brighter.

"Ilea, if you would?" Edwin said with a cold voice and gestured to the round space at the bottom of the stairs. "I'm pretty sure this place will have traps."

"I was wondering when they'd come up. Here we go," Ilea said, cracking her neck.

"Think you can handle it?" he said.

Ilea looked at the circular ground. "Any idea what I can expect?"

"Not particularly, no. Spears, spikes, whatever. We'll support you as best we can from a safe distance. The Taleen are infamous for integrating traps into traps so we won't jump in there right away."

Ready to see me die. I suppose it's what I signed up for. Let's see how dangerous these traps really are.

"You have the highest possibility of survival here with your healing and high Vitality," he finished, and he stepped aside for her to continue.

"Thanks, Mr. Pragmatic," Ilea said, walking past him down onto the platform.

"We really appreciate your help!" Felicia gave her a huge grin and a double thumbs-up. Aliana didn't seem to care what happened. She was probably just waiting to melt stuff.

At least Felicia is cheering me on. She treats it like a game. Ilea's considered smile turned into a grin while she waved to Felicia. Maybe I should do that too. Bonus points if I survive.

As soon as Ilea reached the middle of the round platform, a mechanism below her feet activated. Ilea immediately blinked upward, about halfway toward the roof. From both the ground and the roof, spikes nearly ten meters long were released at a very high speed.

Ilea found herself suspended in the air between green metal spikes above and below. Then her fall began, seemingly in slow motion. The spikes were positioned with around half a meter between them. A bit of maneuvering let her land between three spikes without ending up being skewered by one of them.

Landing on the ground, she felt something shift below her before she blinked up again. A second later, a spear shot out of the ground right where she had been standing.

What are those?

She slowly descended and saw different green-lit patterns around the spears on the ground.

“Any idea what they mean?” she shouted as she shifted herself to land once more between some spikes. The same thing happened as before – a spear shot out from where she landed, but she was already in the air again. She could’ve simply blinked back to the others, but that would mean no safe passage would be possible for them.

“No, I don’t know the runes!” Edwin’s shout reached her ears as she landed again.

Well, too bad... but if it's a game, why not cheat? Throw at me what you got, dwarves. I have fists of iron.

Her arm shot out and punched into one of the spikes. A very slight dent formed before she had to blink away again.

Ilea blinked around, kicking and punching at the spikes where she could. Dents formed, and soon she found herself balancing on top of a bent spike that couldn’t hurt her anymore from that angle. Other spikes around her shot up, but they couldn’t reach her.

Edwin whistled softly and seemed to be impressed by her outside-the-box thinking. His sister cheered like a lunatic next to him.

Ilea made a bit of a show of it as she bowed a couple of times before continuing her assault on the metal spikes. After damaging nearly ten of them, a loud mechanical noise could be heard and all of them vanished into the ground. Some got stuck partway because of their bent state.

Ilea was suspended in the air – the spike she’d been standing on having retracted – when all the spikes were suddenly completely ejected out from the floor and roof like arrows. One spike smashed through her leg and two went through her torso.

Felicia's cheer turned into a scream as all the spears and a skewered Ilea landed on the ground. A lot of the spikes now dug deep into the ground or roof. Aliana winced at the sight, and Edwin stopped Felicia from running in.

"She should be alive Felicia, don't run in yet, the Taleen have a way of —"

Edwin was interrupted by a roar of fire that burst out from the openings that the spears had just been ejected from.

The last thing Ilea saw before she was bathed in fire was Edwin hugging his crying sister to his chest.

Laughter rang through the chamber.

"Fire? Is that all you've got?" Ilea cackled. She parted the flames, kneeling on the scorched stone, and the spears that pierced her held her up as blood soaked her armor. She smiled a bloody smile as she locked eyes with Edwin.

"Ferocious..." Edwin started to say, but his voice was overshadowed by the laughing and the firestorm.

Ilea smiled as the fire died down and she stopped manipulating the flames away from her body. *Lucky it wasn't poison gas or something like that...*

She steeled herself, closed her eyes, and removed her perception of pain while channeling Reconstruction on herself. Fully buffed, she grabbed one of the spears that pierced her and pushed it out. As the spear came out, a lot of gore came with it splattering onto the ground behind her in a puddle of blood. Reconstruction did its job as the wound slowly closed.

She gave it a minute before removing the next spear and then the next one. After removing all of them, she healed herself completely and activated her perception of pain again. She could feel a light soreness, but nothing concerning.

Her Reconstruction spell already told her that her body was fine. She was down to one-third of her mana after the whole ordeal though. Most of it had been used to heal her body and to push the flames away from herself.

She got up and waved to Felicia, but the three still didn't join her on the platform.

"Open the door on the other side," Edwin instructed. "And... good job," he nodded at her, and for once, his expression seemed genuine.

“I bet you could have survived that too...” she said to herself and walked to the silvery door. *Maybe not the spears at the end. Who knows.*

Nothing happened when she touched the door. So the obvious course of action was to punch it. The sound of bending metal reverberated through the hall as the door that led further into the complex slowly gave way.

One last punch landed before what remained of the door clanged backward into the hallway beyond. She bowed again to the other three and motioned for them to follow.

“I’ll walk a couple meters in front of you,” she said and went inside, not caring if they followed or not. She *did* still want to see what was inside after all.

There were no traps in the hallway behind the door, which quickly changed into downward-leading stairs. *Down, down, down we go.* When she reached the bottom, she heard the others enter the hallway behind her.

A couple of minutes of walking later, they came out onto a platform. A massive chasm gaped below them, and only a thin bridge would lead them further across the abyss. The chasm itself was perfectly even, an impressive feat of architecture and magic.

A dull sound made Ilea duck, and a split second later a metal slug sank into the stone behind her. More noises came from far away before she blinked back into the hallway. Over ten impacts could be heard from outside, the slugs digging into the white rock that still made up all of the walls around them.

“I’ll cross the bridge. I suggest you wait here.” She didn’t wait for a response from the trio of adventurers, who were still some distance away, before walking out again into the hail of bullets.

After blinking and dodging for nearly twenty minutes, she was rather exhausted when she reached the other side of the bridge. There was another closed door there that seemed a lot sturdier than the one before. The shots were coming from mounted turrets along the walls of the chasm nearly fifty meters away on each side of the bridge.

I never tested how many consecutive blinks are possible, but hey...

She blinked off the bridge toward one of the walls. Below her, the black abyss was ready to consume her.

“This is all I got!” she shouted and blinked to the side, dodging a hail of bullets. This continued until she reached the wall four blinks later. It

seemed to her less like flying and more like throwing herself at the wall. Falling with style, maybe.

Ilea crashed onto one of the turrets and stomped on it several times in quick succession before blinking to another one, dozens of slugs suddenly peppering the turret she'd been standing on a split second before.

Just as she was making a mental note to test the limits of blink traveling as soon as possible, the first turret finally gave way to her abuse. The metal holding it in place snapped loose on her last kick, and the whole thing fell down into the void.

Ilea smiled and continued her work. Nearly a minute later she got a notification.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Turret – lvl 160]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

“Wow, the way down is far, eh?” she said to the turret she was currently kicking. Soon after, another notification popped up in her vision, but she ignored it and continued her work. It took her twenty minutes to clear out around a third of one of the walls before her mana started to run low.

Blinking back to the bridge, she landed and ran back toward the entrance while dodging bullets. Getting close to the door, she blinked inside and crashed into a smiling Felicia. They both fell down in a tumble before getting up again.

“You alright?” Ilea asked, but she knew already from her touch and Reconstruction that the other woman was fine. Felicia nodded.

“Where are the other two?” Ilea asked, noting the absence of Edwin and Aliana.

“Preparing dinner. Are you coming too?” Felicia asked. “That was quite the confusing teleporting. Isn’t your head spinning?”

“Food would be nice, yes. I’ll continue after. And it’s alright actually, you get used to it,” Ilea answered, smiling roguishly at her notifications – which were still appearing.

FORTY

Fire and Ash

For once, Ilea's attention was not on her food but on all the messages she had received earlier.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Turret – lvl 160]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Turret – lvl 160]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Turret – lvl 160]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

And so the list went on.

She had already destroyed nearly thirty of the turrets, and more were waiting to be reaped. *What a lucky trap this is.* She checked out the messages that had made her smile the most.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 101. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 102. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 103. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 92. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 93. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Fire Enhancer has reached level 100. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ New skills available for Fire Enhancer

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Fire Enhancer becomes Pyro Enhancer – Become one with the flame. Have the Fire Enhancer class at lvl 100 or more. Level the skill Body of Flame to the 2nd stage. The Pyro Enhancer is a master of the flame. She is both a master of the fire within herself and the one she wields in ranged battles.

Would you like to evolve your Fire Enhancer class to Pyro Enhancer? No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

It was hard for Ilea not to smile, but the food she was currently stuffing into her face somewhat obscured it. Her eyes widened a little though as another message appeared in her mind.

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Fire Enhancer becomes Ash Wielder – You are the wielder of ash. Have a fire-related body enhancement class at lvl 100 or more. Have a total of at least three Body Enhancement skills in the 2nd stage. Primarily hand-to-hand combat has been used in fights. Have brushed death more than ten times in the past week.

The Ash Wielder is the smoldering heat left by fire. Ember glows within her as an ashen mist shrouds her form.

Would you like to evolve your Fire Enhancer class to Ash Wielder? No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Oh boy...

Ilea continued eating as she thought over what she had read. Pyro Enhancer had been the plan from the start, and she would never forget Jyrai's display in the arena, but Ash Wielder seemed more geared toward hand-to-hand combat.

Damn, I wanted those fire wings.

She glanced over at Edwin, who currently had his attention on the map before him that he updated every time they stopped to eat. She was tempted to ask him for his opinion, but she still felt he wasn't being entirely honest with her. Plus, if she did decide to part ways with them, it might be handy to have an ace up her sleeve.

The requirements for Ash Wielder seem super-specific. Assuming that the more specific something is, the rarer it is, I should definitely go with that. It also said I wouldn't be losing any skills, so I should be fine.

She made the decision rather hastily, not wanting to be seen deep in thought. Edwin had shown himself to be rather perceptive. And he didn't shy away from sending her into life-threatening traps. Even though she was there to help them with traps and healing, she deemed their advice questionable at best.

She finished her meal and told the others she'd continue to clear out turrets and left. On the way down the stairs, she accepted the Ash Wielder class. Having thought about it a bit more, the hand-to-hand requirement was what finally sold her on the class.

It's my main thing, and so far, any fire-related abilities I could've learned seemed a bit useless. Except Body of Flame, which isn't really a fire-specific thing, I guess.

More notifications filled her vision as she continued downward.

Class Change: Fire Enhancer becomes Ash Wielder

Vitality +10

Strength + 5

Dexterity + 5

Intelligence +15

Wisdom +10

Body enhancement magic is improved by 100%

All fighting styles using hand-to-hand combat are more refined

Ilea's steps slowed as she read the description while her eyes widened. The body enhancement bonus had increased from 20% to 100%. Although the 25% bonus for fire magic was gone, this was still unbelievably huge.

My Azarinth skills will also be affected by this...

Skills changed by Ash Wielder:

[Body of Flame] becomes [Form of Ember]

Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 3:

Ember glows within you, raising your resilience, speed, and dexterity by 46% [138% after bonuses].

2nd stage: The longer you fight while in the Form of Ember, the stronger its heat burns. Each minute of fighting adds 15% to the bonuses (maximum 150%).

Category: Aura – Body Enhancement

Ilea took another step as she processed the change. *The bonuses have doubled.*

[Heat Surge] becomes [Ash Surge]

Active: Ash Surge – lvl 2

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).

Category: Ashen Magic

[Fire Manipulation] becomes [Ash and Ember Manipulation]

Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 14:

Your control over ash and ember increases dramatically. Bend it to your wishes and shroud the path before you.

Category: Ashen magic

Ilea quickly read through them, but it wasn't over yet. Her heart rate sped up, nearly thumping as fast as when she was fighting.

Skills gained as Ash Wielder:

Active: Shroud of Ash – lvl 1

Shroud yourself in a mist of ash, increasing your resilience by 50% [150% after bonuses].

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic

Active: Wave of Ember – lvl 1

Burn the inside of whatever your body hits with a surge of heat and embers.

Category: Ashen magic

You have no more free slots for active skills in your second class. Please choose a skill to be replaced by Wave of Ember or choose not to gain the skill.

Ilea quickly selected her low-leveled active skill Flame to be replaced. As convenient as it was, it didn't really help her fight. She was standing still in the white corridor now, her breathing almost frantic.

Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 1:

Increases your perception by 30% when fighting without a weapon [90% after bonuses].

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic

Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 1:

Increases your reflexes and speed by 30% when fighting without a weapon [90% after bonuses].

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic

She had to steady herself on the wall next to her to stop the trembling and calm her breathing. Checking her status, she simply stood there reading over all the messages again and again.

Two minutes later, her breath had steadied, and she took a last in-depth glance at her status.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 60

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 103

- ***Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 15***
- ***Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 16***
- ***Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 8***
- ***Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 9***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20***
- ***Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 12***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 1***
- ***Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 1***

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 100

- ***Active: Shroud of Ash – lvl 1***
- ***Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 3***
- ***Active: Ash Surge – lvl 2***
- ***Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 1***
- ***Active: Wave of Ember – lvl 1***
- ***Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 14***
- ***Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1***
- ***Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 1***
- ***Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 1***
- ***Passive: Free Slot***

General Skills:

- ***Elos Standard language – lvl 5***
- ***Identify – lvl 4***
- ***Meditation – 2nd lvl 14***
- ***Poison Resistance – lvl 16***
- ***Heat Resistance – lvl 9***
- ***Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2***
- ***Mental Resistance – lvl 5***
- ***Fear Resistance – lvl 1***

Status:
Vitality: 312
Endurance: 106
Strength: 97
Dexterity: 98
Intelligence: 273
Wisdom: 247
Health: 2950/3120
Stamina: 983/1060
Mana: 1566/2470

Ilea opened her mouth, letting out the breath she'd been holding in, and opened her eyes. *I can't let them see all this new stuff yet. Best save it, just in case. I'll deal with the turrets without any of the new skills.*

She did, however, apply her new stat points.

With her crazy new class, she felt like Strength and Dexterity would rarely hold her back. If she kept them at a minimum of about a quarter or a fifth of her main stats, her auras would boost them to levels that nearly matched the others. Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom should still be her key focus, especially now that she could channel Reversed Reconstruction for continuous damage. Also, with the brutal traps and things like the Centurion lurking about, healing herself was more important than ever. She couldn't neglect Wisdom or she'd risk running low on mana at the worst possible moment.

While it was tempting to buff her physical stats, given her aura bonuses, the 'mana intrusion' Edwin had mentioned seemed like her main trump card. Powerful creatures would be more likely to resist raw physical strength, but Destruction had the potential to bypass such defenses. Plus, with her Blink boosted even further, speed and agility were rarely an issue. Her current build was working for her, so she decided to stay the course. She split her new points evenly across Vitality, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Smiling, she continued into the trap room. The new bonus to Body Enhancement magic that came with the Ash Wielder class alone had a higher impact on her fighting capabilities than the whole Fire Enhancer class had.

They did tell me that the classes before Pyro Enhancer wouldn't be all that, but this...

She balled her hands into fists as she came out onto the bridge, immediately being bombarded by the still massive number of remaining turrets.

“Let’s get going then, boys...” she said with a wide smile on her face as she started to blink through the air.

* * *

Edwin was finishing the map with what they’d explored so far. *Finally...*

He wiped away some sweat. Fighting was one thing, a thing he was very good at, but cartography was quite a different beast. He was certainly good at remembering all the different streets and corners, but putting them down on paper proved a difficult task.

“You should really do the maps, Fel,” he said once again in frustration. The girl waved dismissively, still trying to produce sound with wind magic and some exposed tubes she’d cut from the walls.

“We’d have to stop in every other room for that, Ed,” she said absentmindedly.

He just nodded and walked back to Aliana, who was trying to figure out how the machines that had produced the firestorm that had nearly burned Ilea to a crisp had worked.

Bringing her continues to prove to be a good decision. We’ll reach the gate in no time with that indestructible trap finder.

He winced at the thought of being caught between those spikes. Part of him had wanted to try to escape them, but the more rational side of him had won out in the end.

“Aliana, can you store it again?” he asked, passing her the map. She took it in her hand, where it quickly vanished.

“Why are you letting her get all those towers?” Aliana asked when he started to walk away.

Edwin stopped and looked at her, a bit confused. “Why would you care? They’re far below our level, a drop in the bucket.”

Aliana looked at him then for the first time in the conversation. Her brown eyes had an intensity to them that they only rarely held. Usually, it was to do with meat.

“They wouldn’t help us. But they do help her. A lot. She’s already level 100, Edwin, and she will only grow from here.”

He blinked at her. “I know. I’d like to see how far she can go. What an interesting combination of skills... and soon she’ll get an upgrade to Fire Enhancer. Pyro should be in her range of possi—”

Aliana grunted, which prompted him to stop his monologue.

“You always do that. For how smart you are, you can be so blind and stupid. You’re aware that behind that interesting and deadly combination of skills is a woman? A woman who could potentially find out who is looking for us, perhaps decide she’s willing to talk to them? Or maybe she decides that we have some interesting possessions?” She raised her hand to show him her storage ring while still looking into his eyes.

“You think she’d become a danger to any of us?” Edwin scoffed. “Maybe if she reached our levels, but that won’t happen while we’re here. And I believe her to be more rational than you think. I apologize if this has brought up some bad memories, but this is different. Accept at least that.”

He left her after he finished. No response came from Aliana, whose eyes had lost some of the life they had held before.

She does have a point though... Edwin acknowledged as he heard his sister finally produce the sound of music. He smiled, taking in a deep breath. *As long as Fel’s doing alright. This has to be the one. We’ll find you soon enough, Maria.*

* * *

Ilea didn’t return to the others while she was clearing the rest of the turrets. It took another five rounds of depleting her mana and using Meditation to restore it in between. The whole ordeal took her only about a couple of hours. It wasn’t fruitless, though, as she’d destroyed over a hundred turrets.

For a short while after the last turret was demolished, Ilea sat on the middle of the bridge. The last notification popped up to tell her she had defeated an enemy, and she checked her gains.

Seven levels in Azarinth Healer and five in Ash Wielder. She glanced at her status to save a lot of reading because the level-ups were displayed in between the dozens of other messages. *Fewer than I expected. I guess the level difference getting smaller had a big effect.*

She then distributed all her remaining stats. *I think I'll invest some in Endurance and Wisdom this time. Stopping after half an hour of blinking around and fighting is annoying, especially considering how much mana all my new skills will be using if I want to keep them up for long periods of time.*

Before she went to get the others, she tried blinking from one end of the bridge to the other in quick succession. *It's certainly fast. But if I blink into a trap, it might be dangerous... Having something on the edge of my Azarinth Sphere is easier to react to than it suddenly being a meter away from me.*

Walking up to the closed silvery door at the far end of the bridge, Ilea began her assault on it. At the same moment that she finally broke down the door, a rumbling sound came from below.

Suddenly the stone below her feet fractured, and the crack of breaking stone could be heard running through the bridge as dust and pieces of rock fell into the air. Ilea quickly stepped into the newly opened corridor and watched as the bridge collapsed behind her.

Oh well...

She blinked back to the other entrance. Walking back up the stairs again, she bumped into Edwin halfway up.

"Bridge collapsed?" he asked. He shrugged at the nod he received as a response. "They tend to do that. Before I get the others, I have to ask you something."

He locked eyes with her, and his face became the cold facade he had shown her when they first met.

"Interrogation face, eh?" Ilea smiled, but she was a bit worried he might have already found out about her class change. She really wanted to keep that to herself a while longer. As insurance.

"Yes, interrogation face. You've grown quite a bit. The turrets helped a lot in that as well. So, we're both benefiting. I hope you're rational enough to see how much you've gained so far."

She nodded warily.

"Good. My question, then, is this. If you had the ability, or maybe a tool, choice, or another way to kill us, would you?"

Ilea was a bit taken aback by the directness of the question.

"You're frank, aren't you?" she said, her smile vanishing.

She thought about it seriously, as she knew anything less than the truth wouldn't satisfy him. She had gained over fifty levels, amazing pointers from all three of them, and experience of fighting with seasoned mages and a swordsman, let alone her new amazing class. Why he even considered her a possible danger said more about his worldview than it did about her. *Or his situation. He did think I was there for them at the very start. Maybe he thinks I'm trying some long con?*

She might not even have got her new class, given the brush with death requirement, without Edwin's insistence that she be the one checking for traps. She could've gone to a different dungeon or simply somewhere in the wild to level up, but the speed at which she had done so here would have been impossible without help. At least not without amazing luck. Without being able to isolate them from the ranged machines, the sword guardians would've cut her apart a long while ago.

If anything Alice had said was the truth, then they would be helping there as well. Although Ilea was leaning more and more toward Edwin's interpretation of her 'friend' than the remaining hope she still held onto that he was wrong.

Most important of all though, she liked the three of them. Crazy though they were. After realizing that she was a battle maniac, most people she'd met so far had looked at her differently. They likely wouldn't want to associate with her for fear of the risk. She didn't blame them. She had lived an incredibly risky life since coming to this world.

It felt disconnecting. Few people really understood her. Roland was certainly one of them, but even he had his family to worry about. Hell, she'd had a hard time coming to terms with her enjoyment of fighting herself.

She didn't know their history or their goals, but she felt comfortable around them. They didn't look at her as if she were crazy. They understood. Sure, Edwin was a rather cold, calculating bastard. But then Ilea was kind of a psycho, and they had made a deal. She could have left any time she liked.

She shook her head.

"No... no, I don't see why I would attack you in the first place. You've helped me out so much. What about you? Why even ask this question?" she asked seriously.

“I had to be sure,” Edwin said after a while. “There are people...” he started, then reconsidered. “Forget it. We have our arrangement.”

“We do,” Ilea said.

They stood there quietly for a couple of seconds before Edwin started chuckling. She smiled in return.

“See, I didn’t think it was anything to worry about,” he said. “I like you, Ilea. You’re the first person in a long time that I can say that about honestly. But you need to know that getting through this dungeon without losing too much time and without one of us dying is more important to me than your life. My choices will reflect this. I hope you can understand that.”

As he started to walk back up the stairs, he asked, almost as an afterthought, “Is the path clear?”

“The bridge is gone, but yes, the path is clear,” she replied.

If this is how he treats people he likes, I don’t want to be his enemy.

FORTY-ONE

Trash Compactor

The group of four teleported or flew over the chasm, landing in the entrance to the next hallway. Once they were all there, Ilea asked Edwin how many more trap rooms she should expect.

“I don’t know. Sorry,” he said. And that was that. They continued with Ilea leading the way.

A short walk later, they came upon an entrance. Looking inside, they saw four more walls made of the same white stone as before. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary.

The room was about the size of a school gymnasium. The only thing other than some runes and magic lights in the room was a door on the other side and a pedestal in the middle of it.

“Peculiar,” Edwin mumbled. “Can you go and try to activate the pedestal by channeling some mana into it? We’ll support you from the doorway if necessary.”

Ilea nodded and walked inside the room.

“Go Ilea!” Felicia shouted, a big smile on her face. “Don’t get stabbed again though!”

That’s encouraging, thanks Fel... Ilea smiled nonetheless as she put her hand on the pedestal and let some mana seep inside. *Whatcha got for me this time, dwarves?*

As the mana channeled into the pedestal, some runes lit up and a rumble could be heard near the doorway. Edwin seemed to have activated some buffs and dragged the other two behind him while jumping back himself. A

fraction of a second later, the doorway was sealed by stone. From this distance, Ilea couldn't tell that the doorway had ever existed.

"A room for myself then, hmm?" She looked over to the source of the noise coming from her right and wasn't surprised to see a sword guardian exiting from a new opening in the wall that closed and vanished as fast as it had appeared.

Oh, hello there my friend...

[Taleen Guardian – lvl ??]

"You're quite perfect for some testing," she said, smiling at the sword guardian in front of her before looking back toward where she had entered the room. She hoped Edwin wouldn't break through immediately. With his somewhat cautious approach toward the traps so far, she assumed that she'd be on her own for a little while at least.

Risking being found out was worth it to her to see how much she'd changed. Ilea walked toward the sword guardian, which was currently unfolding its torso.

Her Azarinth Sphere was activated, having become a constant companion after Edwin's suggestion, and State of Azarinth was activated too, increasing her speed, strength, and resilience just like her senses of smell, hearing, and sight.

These alone were still covered by her mana regeneration, and her blue runes shone out through the holes in her increasingly battered armor. *At least my boots are still fine.* Ilea took a deep breath and let it out again.

She looked down at herself as lines of a fiery dark red color formed on her body. She let her backpack fall to the ground and threw her mace a couple of meters away.

Form of Ember, she commanded as the mace clanged on the stone floor.

A dark yellow and red glow intertwined with the blue runes on her body as Ilea adopted a fighting stance, her blue eyes focusing on her adversary.

Her resilience, speed, and dexterity had now more than doubled again from their level before activating State of Azarinth. She also felt her passive Ashen skills sharpen her senses even further.

"Shroud of Ash..." she whispered. A mist of ash formed about her and a warm feeling spread through her, comfortable in the ash's embrace.

“Ash Surge,” she said out loud, just as the guardian sped up to attack her. It seemed weird to her how slowly the machine was moving compared to when she had faced one of them for the first time.

I really have grown...

She smiled as an explosion of ash and ember surged outward from her, shrouding the space in heated cinders.

Her vision was perfectly fine – combined with her sphere, the enemy stood before her as if illuminated in the hot summer sun. A blade cut through the ashen mist, missing Ilea by a couple of centimeters. Another blade and then another joined the assault as her senses went into overdrive. Dodging each of them by the smallest margin, Ilea made her way slightly backward before she stopped.

The human and the machine engaged in a dance of blades as one sought to kill and the other sought only to avoid the reaper. At least at first. Mere seconds later, an opening presented itself and a punch enhanced with both Destruction and Wave of Ember rocked through the dwarven creation.

It recoiled for a fraction of a second before moving in again. With each passing second, Ilea could comprehend the patterns better and better. The time between her attacks shrank with each one she delivered.

Twenty-five fully powered attacks were needed until, with a final punch, the guardian faltered, its blades and legs uselessly clattering to the ground before Ilea. She breathed out, balling her hands into fists again before moving back into her initial stance.

Two doors opened now, her enemies doubling. Ilea stood there, looking at the sword guardians approaching her while unfolding their torsos. She opened one of her fists and gestured for them to come.

And so they did.

* * *

Ilea danced skillfully between the twelve blades, a mist of ash following the blue and fiery glow that emanated from her form. The sound of errant slashes passing through the air and the satisfying crack of fists on metal filled the room with a rough melody. It was music to her ears.

With two enemies, it took longer for her to find openings, and she started using Blink sparingly in between strikes. Yet the enemies still fell to

her assault, their lifeless, cold metal carapaces falling to the ground. This time, four more guardians took their place from unseen chambers in the walls.

Ilea continued on, dodging and fighting, sweat dripping from her brow as she simply grinned and continued the battle. She had yet to receive a proper hit, but in the end, four guardians at once proved too much for even her enhanced senses. When they were clustered together, more than twenty blades flew at her at once. It was like being caught up in a tornado of flashing steel. Finally, one of them hit their mark. Ilea winced and blinked away, blood dripping from the cut on her shoulder.

You'll have to do better than that...

She looked at the shallow wound and grinned as it closed before her eyes in seconds. *Guess I don't have to be that careful anymore*, she thought, silently thanking her new defensive skills. Her abilities had changed what would have previously been a crippling attack into a mere kitchen accident.

The fight dragged on for another five minutes, her enemies slowly losing numbers as her power only grew. The last one fell when her knee hit the creature from below with a devastating momentum-based uppercut. She breathed out and went back into a stance, still smiling.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 80 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 80 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

...

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 111. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 112. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 116. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 106. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 107. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 111. 5 stat points awarded.

Allocating her new stat points, she continued to bring her Wisdom up and then put the rest into Intelligence.

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 2

No new skills to choose from, Ilea thought as she relaxed her stance as no more enemies appeared. She had mixed feelings about that. Azarinth Healer only gave her skills at incredibly rare intervals while Fire Enhancer had literally showered her with skills. *I’d rather have rarer but better skills though I guess...*

She shelved that dilemma for now and looked at the wreckage before her.

He won’t believe that I killed them with the classes and skills he thinks I have—

Her thought was interrupted by a familiar noise as spears shot up from the ground. Two things surprised Ilea in that moment. One, time didn’t slow down, which meant the spear that was currently moving upward to pierce

her wouldn't take more than 75% of her health. Two, her perception was magnified enough that she now saw the spears moving upward before they reached her – and was able to move her body slightly out of their way.

She wasn't quite fast enough though, as the spear below still scratched her leg. Even so, she noted with some satisfaction that the spears that had previously punched right through to her muscle and bone now didn't even manage to properly pierce her skin.

"You're repeating yourself, dwarves," she said, moving to dodge the spear that would inevitably try to stab at her from between the other spikes. Using the same tactic as before, she simply started punching the spears, bending them out of shape much faster than previously.

After damaging ten of the spears... nothing happened.

Where's the fire?

The walls started to rumble, but contrary to the expected firestorm, the walls on each side of the room started to slowly close in on her.

Oh, we're going the garbage disposal route now?

The spears closest to the wall retracted back into the roof and floor, and as the stone walls closed in on her, they flattened some of the damaged spears that failed to retract.

Ilea hurried through the dense forest of metal spikes until she got to her backpack near the very center of the room.

I don't know if I can take the pressure. She thought about how easily the walls were bending the spears, which withstood several punches, at least from her. It was not a pleasant thought.

Only one thing to do...

Now in the center of the room, Ilea raised her foot and slammed it down on the ground. Cracks appeared as Destruction and Wave of Ember dug into the white stone, but the impact was more subdued than it had been in the other rooms.

They used something more resilient here... or maybe they added enchantments? Crap.

She tried again and again. Chunks of stone came away with each strike, Ilea poured everything she had into the frantic attempt to escape. Her heels began to bleed with the effort.

By the time the walls were about to turn her into paste, she had just managed to carve out a hole barely large enough for her to squeeze into. But then she stopped, eying the walls.

“At least give it a shot Ilea...”

She smiled, taking some of the stone dust created from her digging and rubbing it onto her hands. Then she stretched and held out her hands to both sides.

The stone walls touched her, and she pushed back against them. A loud metal groaning echoed through the chamber as the walls ground to a halt. Flesh pushed against stone and metal as her human body struggled against the dwarven trap.

A scream ripped from her lips, cracks forming around her hands. The red glow of ember mixed with the blue of her runes illuminated the thin corridor that remained of the once spacious room. All the lamps had been shattered when the spears had filled the room in search of the intruder.

A loud sound of something like a spring coming loose reverberated in Ilea’s ears. The pressure lessened. There was a slight pause, and Ilea nearly breathed a sigh of relief before the force exerted by the walls increased a hundred-fold. Ilea’s shoulder joints shattered, and she immediately dropped to the ground and into her shelter, even blinking at the last moment to avoid the walls a fraction quicker.

The boom of air pressure produced by the two walls smashing into each other ruptured Ilea’s eardrums even with all her defensive capabilities. Trapped in the small space below the walls, she simply waited and quickly healed.

“You got me this time, walls, but I swear, after I kill that basilisk, I’ll be back for the final boss!” she shouted and laughed.

Five minutes later, the machinery behind the walls came to life again and the stone parted.

Will they do it again though?

She stuck her head out from her cramped cavity and looked around the room. Several disks of green metal lay on the ground in a line toward one of the exit doors. *Poor guardians*, she thought, moving out from her safe spot.

She deactivated all her Ash Wielder skills and walked back to the place where the entrance should’ve been. The pedestal had been obliterated as well, so there was nothing else to do in the room but get out using either of the exits.

Ilea started punching the wall until cracks formed. Without her Ashen skills, it took a little longer to dig into the resilient stone. She also shouted

in the hope that the others would hear her. It wasn't too far-fetched, given their senses were likely just as enhanced as hers, if not more so.

When she had managed to dig nearly a meter into the wall, a splash of boiling water hit her right in the face.

"Fuck!" she exclaimed and started healing it immediately. "Should've seen that one coming..."

She could already hear the cheering from Felicia on the other side.

It took Aliana another five minutes to melt a hole big enough to get through the wall. Ilea stopped them from coming through though and instead entered the hallway the group had come from.

"Care to explain?" Edwin simply said. And so she did. She mentioned a bunch of ranged guardians attacking her when she was inside and then the spikes and finally the walls moving in. *No way anybody would be able to identify the disks of metal as sword guardians at this point.* She figured her lie was safe.

With the story being mostly the truth, Edwin didn't spot the deception. Or at least, he didn't say anything. *So he's not a walking lie detector at least,* Ilea thought, a little relieved. It didn't seem too unlikely that there was an actual lie detection skill out there.

"Good job on surviving then. This one might've killed even me... It's not easy to cut a hole into rock with two thin swords," he said, then he gestured to Aliana. "Please just flood and melt the whole place, a trench would be the best. Try to focus on a straight pathway to the other side that we can crawl through. Just in case the trap activates again."

Ilea nodded to his comment and moved to one side so Aliana could get to work. "I wish I could've seen it!" Felicia said, hugging Ilea. This time, her strength didn't seem quite as impressive to Ilea as it once had. She smiled at that and hugged the woman back.

"Glad to be alive," Ilea said, and she didn't miss the quick unreadable glance Edwin gave her at that.

* * *

It took Aliana the best part of two hours with some pauses in between to cook and eat to finish the path through the room.

“Couldn’t any hallway do that here?” Felicia suddenly asked while looking around in a concerned manner, but Edwin calmed her down.

“That’s a very slight possibility. There has to be a way to determine that an intruder is inside. For this room, it was the pedestal and the destroyed guardians. So just make sure not to damage anything in the hallways and we should be fine,” he answered. Felicia still looked a bit worriedly at the walls, albeit somewhat less so.

“There were also metal constructions behind the walls. I can’t see anything similar with my perception around here,” Ilea supplied, to which Edwin nodded. She had perceived the metal beforehand, but the trap room walls were always full of machinery anyway, so she’d thought nothing of it. Now, knowing what to look for, Ilea was sure she could identify a moving wall trap if they came across another one.

“Let’s move on then,” Edwin said, and the group crawled their way through the trench to the other side, where Aliana started to melt through the door. The walls didn’t move again, but Ilea approved of Edwin’s cautious approach, although all four of them were a little restless at the waiting time.

Finally breaking through, another hallway greeted the group. It had the same rune-inscribed metal walls and white stone floors, illuminated by the ever-present green glow. Ilea took the lead and walked inside. The walls slowly grew wider the further they walked. There was a slight downward slope until they came to what Ilea could only describe as a park.

The walls still looked artificial but less so than the rooms in the Great Hall before. They looked more like cave walls, although they were still entirely covered by the familiar white stone. At the top of the cave was a massive crystal growing from the roof, spearing downward nearly twenty meters like a huge stalactite. It gave off a bright white light that illuminated the colossal cave they were in.

Ilea saw a pond near the center, various plants, and even a few trees growing in the vicinity. The ground was even actual earth for once instead of stone, at least at the center of the expansive chamber. To the right of the lake was a wonderfully crafted archway with stone stairs leading up to it.

“Finally, it’s not green anymore...” Aliana mumbled, and Ilea could only agree. Being in caves all the time had an effect on her, but the continuously monotonous artificial green light was the worst of it.

“Well, there is *some* green remaining,” Ilea commented.

“Ilea, please explore the place. We’ll watch from here,” Edwin said, but even he seemed a little relaxed at the sight. “There shouldn’t be any traps, but I want to be sure.”

She was already walking around, welcoming the different sights, new smells, colors, and, most importantly, peaceful atmosphere.

At first, she simply walked around aimlessly, but then she started to methodically check the plants, the lake, and the walls. The whole thing took nearly an hour, and Edwin had to hold Felicia back from running toward the lake a full five times. The water was shallow, and though Ilea cautiously walked into it, she found nothing artificial about it.

“I think we’re fine here. Just don’t eat or drink anything,” she said eventually as she waved to the others.

“Who feels like sparring?” Edwin said while cracking his neck and smiling.

“Fuck sparring. Swimming!” Felicia shouted as she half-ran, half-hobbled toward the pond while simultaneously undressing.

Edwin looked toward Aliana, who was already in the process of building a firepit with some rocks and melt-chopping down one of the trees to get some wood to burn.

“Don’t look at me, Edwin. I don’t know this wood and I *have* to taste meat grilled on top of it.”

Ilea heard him sigh as she plucked a big fruit from a tree nearby and took a bite. She glanced over at him and saw him looking at her. Clearly, she was his last hope. Ilea just shrugged at him and chewed happily.

“Poisoned?” he asked, before putting his hand to his face as Felicia fell down into the dirt as she tried to remove her pants.

Blue glowing runes appeared on Ilea’s body as she took another bite and smiled a toothy smile at him.

“Yep! But in my defense, they looked like mangos.”

“What the hell are mangos?” he muttered, sitting down on the ground and looking up at the light crystal.

Then, looking toward the archway with a determined look on his face, he whispered, perhaps unaware Ilea was still close enough to hear, “There’s one here, I’m sure of it. We’ll get you soon...”

Ilea shrugged and continued eating.

FORTY-TWO

Sushi

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by the coco fruit. -25 HP/s for 30 seconds. Sense of smell has been suppressed.

Quite potent, eh? Nonetheless, Ilea continued eating. The damage was nothing compared to Reconstruction. *Maybe some light poison resistance leveling while I’m here?*

Thinking more about it, she glanced over at Edwin. “What do you think of resistances? Worth going through the pain to get them and level them up?”

He looked at her. He seemed a bit distracted, but then he focused again.

“Oh, most people wouldn’t want to go through the pain. You gain some through class changes. Pain resistance would help a lot in getting them, but as I said, generally people don’t do it.”

“I have pain tolerance in the second stage,” Ilea said simply, continuing to eat her fruit.

It took a while for him to comprehend her words.

“What...?” He shook his head. “I know like ten people who even have the skill and only two who might have the second stage. They never confirmed it though. What does it do?”

“You can turn off pain at the second stage,” she said and smiled.

He stared at her, and she could almost see the cogs turning in his head. Then he started laughing. Deep, bellowing laughter. Edwin was caught in a fit and only stopped after a solid minute. Wiping away a tear that had formed in his eye, he slowly calmed down to faint chuckles.

“Oh that... that is... thank you for that, Ilea. That is useful information indeed. So, you’re basically perfectly equipped for getting resistances then? What should we start with?” he asked, still smiling.

“What do we have?” Ilea answered, matching his smile.

However, there was nothing that could be gained from Edwin’s swords. Nor did he have any other skills that would contribute to any possible resistances. The obvious ones that could be gained were Aliana’s water magic and Felicia’s wind magic.

Sadly, neither of them could be convinced to spar or use their time to shoot spells her way just yet, so Ilea decided to join Felicia in having a nice bath. It wasn’t a warm bathhouse, but as soon as Aliana was done cooking, that would be changed in a heartbeat.

It took around half an hour for her water magic to heat the lake, and the group followed up the swimming with a proper portion of meat. Ilea was actually craving some potatoes and vegetables, but she felt her life was in sufficient danger as it was and thus refrained from mentioning this desire to Aliana.

That woman has something about her... Ilea thought as she looked at Aliana, who was intensely chopping up the next portion of meat. She looked quickly away when their eyes met.

“So, Ilea wants to train some resistances,” Edwin said to the others once everyone had had their fill. “She can apparently turn off her perception of pain – which, by the way, is the second stage of pain resistance.”

“Well, let’s get started then,” Aliana stated in a matter-of-fact way, and boiling water quickly formed around Ilea. As soon as the water touched her, she received a notification.

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches lvl 10

Guess that one was close to leveling... not surprising considering my near-death floodgate bath from before.

She had gotten better and better at keeping up her sphere skill and her Magic Perception in the past couple of days. Magic Perception sometimes got in the way a little, but with a conscious effort, she could dim the light somewhat, which helped a lot with noticing magical attacks before they actually happened. This had allowed her to disable her pain before the water had hit her.

Over the next couple of hours, boiling water was constantly poured on her, only interrupted by razorblade-like slices of wind that tore at her body. Felicia actually turned away so as not to look at the constantly melting and reforming flesh. Aliana, on the other hand, had an incredibly unsettling expression on her face that Ilea only saw glimpses of between losing her eyes and healing them again.

Not feeling pain is very weird.

In fact, she was getting a bit bored of the whole process. There was a difference between grinding something like this and actually fighting against things that were trying to kill you. Edwin apparently thought something similar and eventually motioned for them to stop the training so that they could continue on their way.

Ilea checked her messages and was rather happy with the results.

Although fighting guardians is certainly more effective...

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches lvl 12

***‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Water Resistance – lvl 1
In your time, you have learned many things. One of them is that water pressure is not a joke. This resistance helps a little with reducing the damage.***

***‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Wind Resistance – lvl 1
The ever-elusive magic of wind can cut from any side. You have learned that it might have been a good idea to become a Void Mage. This skill helps you resist the power of wind a little more.***

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches lvl 2

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Wind Resistance reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Water Resistance reaches lvl 5

“Yeah, I’m with Edwin,” Ilea commented after she’d finished scanning through her notifications. “Let’s move on. As much as this is beneficial to me, it’s boring as fuck.”

At this, Felicia let out a big breath and opened her eyes after Ilea had finished completely healing. They packed their things, most of which went into Aliana’s ring, and walked toward the exit.

The next room had runes on each wall and was quite similar to most interiors they had seen so far in the dwarven ruin. It was also carved in the white stone that seemed to be the norm inside what Edwin had called the Great Hall. It was rather spacious, and in the middle of it was a rectangular stone platform with a pressure plate in the center.

“An elevator of some kind?” Ilea asked. Edwin glanced at her.

“Maybe. Can you activate it?” he replied, motioning for her to go on ahead.

Ilea nodded solemnly and stepped onto the platform. Mechanisms sprang to life, and the stone platform dropped downward with a screech that indicated it had not been used in quite some time.

Suddenly the tight elevator shaft was replaced by a view extending for several dozen meters in all directions. A vast space lay below, filled with water and illuminated by white light from crystals growing on the walls. The elevator descended further toward the water below in what seemed like a magically induced free fall.

That’s filled with water... shit!

Ilea started to blink upward to the opening where the elevator had come from. She reached it in four blinks and dug her hand into the white stone with a jab to keep herself there.

The platform kept falling for another five seconds before finally impacting upon the still lake. Waves broke the glassy surface, and Ilea

watched as a set of massive tentacles shot out of the water and dragged the platform further downward. She was too far away to identify the creature though, and she couldn't see through the dark water to make out its shape.

"I know just the girl for this job," she said and blinked upward once more to emerge out of the top of the shaft again. The others were already busy with their own things. Edwin was sketching the trap rooms when he turned his head to look at Ilea.

"Already back? No trap down there then?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Not exactly..."

She explained what she had seen down below and suggested her idea. The other two in the room overheard the conversation, and Aliana accepted Ilea's proposal immediately.

"If I can control the water, I'll be able to cook it just perfectly," she said, licking her lips. "It's been long enough since we ate some fish. Ilea, a hand?"

Aliana extended her hand, which Ilea grabbed, and they started to climb downward. Edwin and Felicia followed close behind, also climbing down with their various abilities, weapons and magic digging into the stone to keep them from falling.

"Do you need to touch the water to use it?" Ilea asked.

"No, I just have to be close enough to send some of my own magic into it. The heat will spread through it all. Depending on how much water there is, it could take a while. It's also gonna be difficult to get a perfectly cooked monster in the end. Do you have any idea of how big it is exactly?" She looked disappointed when Ilea shook her head.

By now, they had reached the point where Ilea had hung while clinging to the wall. Felicia was hovering a little to the side with her wind magic. Ilea saw with her perception how Aliana's power flowed downward before touching the water. Bubbles instantly started to form at the points where her magic touched it, and they started to spread quickly, just like she had described.

Ever so slowly, the massive hall filled with water that boiled in the unnatural way typical of Aliana's powers. It reminded Ilea more of an infection than simply boiling water. Three minutes later, in one of the corners of the room, a tentacle lifted itself out of the water, soon followed by two more.

First the monster seemed to be confused and testing the changing environment, but quite quickly it started panicking and thrashing around. More and more of the behemoth became visible as horrifying screams filled the room with noise.

The heat in the room rose as well, and steam soon filled Ilea's vision. Her heat perception turned into a blinding light, and only her magic perception let her determine where the beast was.

Ilea looked at Aliana's concentrating face, sweat dripping from the nearly spent woman's forehead. She didn't want to interrupt the cook or distract her from her hobby, so she simply waited it out. Eventually, Aliana changed into a meditative state, only moving slowly while recharging mana.

"Is it dead?" Felicia asked finally, quite bored of the process.

"Oh, it's been dead for a while, but it's so big it'll need another three hours for the meat to be cooked to perfection," Aliana answered.

Felicia groaned and started to fly back upward, but Edwin stayed back.

'ding' Your group has defeated [Caller of the Deep – lvl 318]. For killing an adversary 200 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

Two hundred? I'm glad I didn't go down there then. No level-ups though? Guess it was mostly Aliana, although I did hold her up!

"So, I just wait? You can't hold yourself?" Ilea asked Aliana, but she didn't receive an answer. *Oh well, guess I'll meditate too then.*

Watching on from the side, where he was standing on one of his swords he had inserted into the wall, Edwin shook his head.

* * *

"It's done."

Ilea immediately opened her eyes and looked on as Aliana let herself fall downward. A wave of water formed to embrace her and carry the powerful mage safely to her destination. Ilea followed behind, while Edwin clambered upward to get Felicia.

Quite a lot of the water had evaporated in the cooking process, and what remained was only about four meters deep. Much of the monster that had

owned the hall towered above the waterline. Although it might've been more impressive had it not essentially been a giant plate of calamari. One that, to Ilea, smelled surprisingly nice. The rising steam hadn't bothered any of them much, plenty of resistances of that sort had built up with Aliana in the group.

"Want some squid?" Aliana asked with a smile on her face. Ilea had blinked to the wall nearest the dead monster and was clinging to it after smashing her hand into the rock.

"I mean, it's been hours since our last meal, so why not?" she answered and smiled back. When she looked at the creature from close up, she gulped. It looked like something straight out of an Eldritch story with spikes, tentacles, and likely more teeth than the whole student body of a college had in its entirety.

Although Ilea didn't really think the beast compared to something like sushi, in the end, she didn't dislike the notion of adding some rice to her plate. *Soy sauce would be glorious... and wasabi...*

Felicia and Edwin had joined them in the meantime. The three were now sitting on top of stone rubble previously under water while Aliana chose to swim.

Upon Edwin's request, Aliana kept boiling the water until nearly all of it was gone. More and more of the room became visible as time went on. Ilea, of course, decided to stick her feet into the boiling water to level her resistances, and she got a nice message in between the resistances leveling up.

'ding' Reconstruction reaches 2nd lvl 16.

I just keep on growing, she smiled to herself. Half an hour later, almost none of the water remained, and Ilea had leveled up Heat Resistance one more time. Felicia used her wind magic to disperse most of the vapor.

"Ilea, please check the whole room for any mechanisms that look a little like traps to you. At least compared to the rooms before," Edwin said, sitting up. "Although I believe that with all this water and that monster here for so long, they may not work anymore anyway."

"How did that thing even get here?" Ilea asked, but Edwin just shrugged.

“We’re in a Taleen ruin and former city, but it’s also marked as a dungeon now, so the rules are a little bent,” Edwin answered, starting to sketch the room they were standing in.

Ilea shrugged and walked through the still boiling hot water with her sphere active. There was indeed machinery below the ground, but it seemed that the monster or something else had already worked hard to destroy most of it. There were cracks and gashes in the ground, rendering the exit points of whatever unholy hell the dwarves would’ve unleashed here unusable.

“I’m done,” Ilea said after checking the hall carefully for around twenty minutes. “Most of it seems destroyed, and if we steer clear from the edges of the room, we’ll be fine.”

Edwin answered by getting up and giving his notebook to Aliana for storage.

“So, we have three exits from here. I do believe we’re getting closer to the armory,” Edwin said as he walked closer to the biggest door. “This should be it,” Ilea heard him mumble with her enhanced senses.

Should be what? she wondered, but she didn’t bother asking him. The trio had been completely silent about why they were here up until now and had never once answered questions about it.

Edwin looked intensely at the rune above the door before motioning for Ilea to continue on.

She nodded and set off down the corridor that led further down from the hall that had been filled with water.

Let’s see what they’re looking for.

As she walked, she thought about her situation for a while, hoping there wouldn’t be a trap that actually managed to end her.

That’s no way to think. They’re just more opportunities to grow and collect near-death experiences. And if not traps, then I’ll come across more dangerous monsters. There are plenty here that could’ve killed me in different circumstances. If I simply continue to wander and explore, I’ll come across more creatures, some maybe that could kill me in an instant. Why does that excite me?

Or maybe I can find a way to at least escape creatures or people hundreds or even thousands of levels above my own. I already have a teleportation skill. I just have to become faster and even harder to kill. Following a strange group of adventurers with dubious motives down into a

dungeon is certainly not the best way to stay alive. It is fun though, and I guess that's the point.

She grinned. *And I suppose once this is done, I can really figure out the new skills I got from that class evolution. Mark would freak out if he saw me now.*

She paused, realizing that she hadn't thought about Earth in quite some time. Ilea looked at her hand and made a fist.

Feels like I'm finally alive. I'm sure you'd understand, old friend. If we meet again someday, I'll be sure to bring you here so you can experience it yourself.

She soon reached another opening that led into a spacious room with stone chairs and even some tables. Checking through the whole thing, there was no indication of a trap. On one side of the room were several gates that were blocked by a grid of silvery green metal rods.

"I think we're in the clear here!" she shouted back to the others. A smile formed on Edwin's face as he entered the room, but it vanished as quickly as it came. He walked toward the grids and surprised Ilea when he simply cut them apart. Ilea was sure that he wasn't using his full speed as she could follow his swings completely for the first time.

But what surprised her more than that was that Edwin walked through the grid and continued on alone. Ilea and the other two women followed him down the tight corridor after a couple of seconds.

No more traps then? Either he knows or he just doesn't care anymore.

After a brief walk, they came out in an artificial cave that was bigger than even the one with the lake in it. A similar white crystal protruded down from above and lit the area with a bright light. Ilea saw no further doors in the cavern.

In the middle of the cave was a slightly raised circular platform made of white stone, and a small slab of stone stood to its side. Strange runes shimmered on its surface. Compared to anything else she had seen of the dwarven architecture and machinery, the thing before her seemed the most unnecessarily decorated.

That slab could be part of the tech, but this all seems weird to me.

There were dozens of guardians kneeling near the walls of the cave and even one Centurion. None were active.

Yet.

FORTY-THREE

Reasons

Edwin had a determined expression on his face as he approached the platform. A genuine smile crept across his face upon touching it.

“It still works... We’ve finally found one, Felicia. This could be it.”

“I’m happy for you, Edwin,” Felicia answered, her tone earnest yet tinged with a little bit of sadness.

“If there is no other dungeon below Dawntree, this one has to be it,” Edwin continued, removing his fingers from the platform he had been touching.

“Don’t get too enthusiastic, Edwin. there are a lot of gates. Besides, she might be dead already,” Aliana said, walking toward the platform.

“Hah, his head would’ve been cleaved from his shoulders already were that the case. Both he and I know this,” Edwin answered, his eyes flashing with something Ilea hadn’t really seen in him before.

Anger.

Ilea debated what to do and if it would even be a good idea to interrupt them. She had some ideas as to what the platform might be but couldn’t be sure yet. Perhaps she should wait and see?

Edwin took in a deep breath and then hugged Felicia. The woman simply stood there with her arms at her sides for a moment before lightly hugging her brother back. When they parted, Ilea could see a tear running down Felicia’s cheek.

Oh shit. He’s going to kill me, isn’t he? She immediately activated all the skills she had that wouldn’t show a visual effect.

“I’m not going to murder you, Ilea,” he said. Walking over, he locked eyes with her, and she saw a complicated expression in his gaze. “Thanks to you, we’ve saved at least a couple days, if not more. And I got to see some interesting skills. This is where we part ways though, I’m afraid.”

His tone was final, and Ilea knew in that moment that there was no arguing with him.

“So it’s some sort of gate?” she asked, motioning to the platform.

“Yes, it’s a gate that links different Taleen ruins together. Or so I hope. Our goal lies in one of them, one I knew would lead to a dangerous dungeon near Karth, such as this one. I decided not to kill you the moment you saved Aliana from the Centurion’s spear. Mostly though, it’s because my sister likes you. It’s been a long time since she’s smiled the way she does with you. But this is something we have to do on our own.”

“Is there no way for her to come with us?” Aliana asked, glancing at Felicia’s tear-streaked face.

“She would die. Much as we likely will,” Edwin said. Nobody disputed this, and even Felicia didn’t look like she disagreed. “Come find us though, as soon as you’re stronger. Stronger than I am now.”

Ilea only shook her head in a daze. Felicia ran up to her and hugged her with all her strength. Ilea responded in the same way.

“You’re a weird bunch. Why does it make me sad to see you go when I should be filled with joy to finally be rid of you monsters?” she asked quietly while still hugging Felicia.

“Please, Ilea, don’t do anything stupid. He really is protecting you,” Felicia said, weakly smiling while looking up at her. “Live a happy life and fight all the things you can fight, ok?”

“How could I refuse such a tempting offer?”

So, blinking onto the platform at the last moment would be a bad idea then...

She had talked to Felicia quite often since joining her brother’s party, and a bond formed through fighting is something quite special compared to the bond formed by working together in a fast-food joint, as Ilea’s own experience told her.

Felicia didn’t necessarily feel like a good friend, more like someone to be protected. She could certainly take care of herself, but there was an innocence about her that was hard to explain. Even harder considering she’d nearly cut off Ilea’s head on their first meeting.

Ilea cared little for Edwin. He was a capable fighter to say the least, but to Ilea, he was just a pragmatic asshole.

“I’ll respect your wishes, Felicia. Don’t you dare go dying on me.” She looked at Edwin while releasing Felicia from their hug. “That goes for you two as well. One day I’ll be the one to teach you something in a bout. Just you wait. Cheers for the levels and advice though.”

“Take care, Ilea,” Edwin smirked at her and turned around to walk onto the platform.

“Don’t forget to eat your meat, little one,” Aliana said. Ilea replied with a nod, still too cautious around the woman to even think of vegetables.

“Ilea, you’re great! Don’t die down here. One last tip, the guardians will probably wake when we leave. And do explore more, there’s probably some treasures hiding away. I also really like your new class, you’re gonna crush them all!” Felicia said to her in a quiet but excited voice. Ilea’s eyes widened a little as Felicia smiled at her.

How the fuck did you find out about my class?

“When should I find you? And where?” Ilea whispered, but Felicia shook her head.

“Brother is nearly level two hundred now, if that helps. I can’t help you with the where... but you’re smart, you’ll figure it out,” she said and winked at her.

Ilea couldn’t help but smile widely at the pure joy and mischievousness radiating from the woman before her.

“Thank you. I’ll see you soon then,” Ilea said, continuing to smile. Finally, Felicia turned around and joined the others on the platform.

Ilea locked eyes with Edwin one last time and both had the same determined look on their faces. Both of their expressions conveyed the same meaning: ‘Don’t die.’

Felicia waved to Ilea. The other two simply stood there while Ilea responded to the wave with her own. Mana surged, and Ilea could see a spiral of it forming around the circular platform. A massive nimbus of light began to surround them, and just before she lost sight of them, she saw Edwin smirk and call out, “Oh, about teaching me something? I’d love to see you try...”

Then, with a flash, the three were gone.

“What the hell? I’d like to see you try?” Ilea shouted, stomping the ground in the now empty cavern. “Who does that punk think he is? I’ll

fucking stomp his ass into the ground! Condescending motherfucker! I'll wipe that smug look off his face with my fucking fist..."

All the guardians, except the Centurion, were slowly coming to life as she shouted, but Ilea didn't stop. As she ranted, she turned toward an approaching sword guardian that was slowly opening its torso.

"What the fuck are you looking at, asshole?"

The guardian didn't seem to comprehend anything and simply attacked. All of Ilea's buffs came to life at once. She blinked to the guardian with reckless abandon, leaving a trail of blue and fiery light behind.

Ash shrouded her in the next moment as her fist hammered into the machine. One of its swords cut her arm, breaking through the shroud of ash, but Ilea didn't care. It only made her angrier. With all her new skills and stats, the anger turned more into a need to efficiently destroy all of her enemies in the room.

Her blood painted the ground as her fist smashed into the guardian and rocked the metal structure. More and more of them joined the fight while slugs of metal dug into the ground around her, hitting more guardians than their intended target.

She blinked through the mass of blades, caring little about her own wellbeing. Slugs peppered her but, when they would have been deadly before, they only slowed her down a little now.

And so she fought. More and more cuts and bruises appeared on her body as she traded hits with the guardians around her while only healing the significant injuries. The pain was dull and only spurred her onward.

Three slugs impacted her chest and threw her back several meters. She skidded on the ground before blinking inside the group of nearly forty guardians.

Although she'd had trouble fighting four of them at once before, that was when she was trying not to take any blows from them. With so many of them around her, their large size was more a detriment than an advantage against a single, teleporting, close-quarters fighter.

The ranged guardians injured their comrades, more focused on destroying any intruders than not attacking their machines in arms.

"Why am I even annoyed?" Ilea grunted as she punched another guardian. "I agreed to stay behind. Maybe I shouldn't have. But she *asked* me. To keep me 'safe'. Why do other people get to decide what's good for me? What I can and can't handle?"

Kicking a guardian on its head, it cracked down the middle, signaling the first downed enemy after ten minutes of continued fighting. Three swords darted in from behind, but they were deflected by Shroud of Ash, changing the blows from grievous wounds to innocuous cuts on her back.

She blinked away and into a group of ranged machines. The sword guardians followed her, and the already chaotic battle turned even more so as ranged machines tried to get away while close-ranged ones pushed them back from behind. She cursed, finishing off another sword guardian with a punch to its side.

“Fuck. I should’ve gone with them.” She dodged skillfully through seven blades directed at her before kneeing a guardian in the base of its torso. “I’ll find you... when I’m strong enough to not hold you back...”

Three blades sliced her, and more of Ilea’s blood spilled onto the floor and colored the guardians’ sword arms. “And to do that,” Ilea grunted, “I first have to murder all of you fucks.”

She downed another guardian. Five minutes of fighting later, she had destroyed six more of the machines, which still left her with over thirty of them. Her health was heading down to forty percent, and her mana didn’t look much better.

Having vented a little, her mind was clearer to make the right decision, and she blinked toward the entrance of the cavern. She didn’t stop and blinked further out, quickly reaching the room with chairs and tables. Another five blinks brought her back to the room that still held the remains of the squid monster. Not taking any chances, Ilea blinked upward and headed all the way back to the first trap room, even crossing the chasm that had held the turrets.

Finally standing in the room where the spears had skewered her, she sank down, leaning against the wall, and finally allowed herself to relax. Her body started to heal and her wounds closed up, but her mana was dangerously low. No other skills but her Sphere and Reconstruction were active, giving her time to react to danger while at the same time using the least amount of mana.

Why did them leaving hit me so hard?

A few deep breaths later, she calmed down a little more and started to meditate. The skill had a way of letting her mind clear, although she wasn’t sure how much of it was because of the skill itself and how much was the benefit of actual meditation.

I'm conflicted, she concluded after a couple of minutes of meditating and regenerating mana at a rapid pace. Even though they had been using each other, Ilea had grown to like the trio. She had felt a connection with them that she hadn't felt with anyone else since coming to Elos. It had hurt to see them leave her behind so easily.

She had believed herself more important to them than she obviously was. At least Felicia seemed to have reciprocated the feeling. Aliana had definitely enjoyed trying to melt her and see how much meat she could eat. She'd thought even Edwin had grown to respect her, if only for her classes.

They're right though. I'm not quite where they are. Whatever they're doing, wherever they're going, I would likely get in the way. Until I'm stronger than Edwin, at the very least. Maybe I was naive again. Just because they're the first people I've met who share my particular brand of crazy, doesn't mean I should give a shit. Working together was a means to an end. For everyone. Still sucks though...

With her head clearer, she wanted to get her notebook to write down some plans, but then she realized with a sigh that it was still in the room with the teleportation gate.

"Ok, let's be pragmatic here. First things first, I have to get tougher, no more bullshit. Maybe I'll start associating with some adventurers, or an organization, that can back me up. Train with me. Being alone and only having my own power won't be enough forever. It hasn't been enough so far. Not here at least. I probably would've died down here without them. I'll start with Alice though. Talk to her and find out what the fuck she thought she was doing," she said to the demolished room. She was no longer in a forgiving mood regarding the deception of her so-called friend.

"Personal power is important though, and there's still a ton to be gained here in this dungeon. Seeing how the adventurers in Salia were talking about a new dungeon, this is an opportunity I won't squander. So first, fighting. As soon as I've cleared most of it, I'll go back and talk to Alice. If I've gained enough power by then, I'll go look for them. I'll need information and backing... and my bloody notebook."

She got up again purposefully, as if writing down her thoughts would somehow solve her problems. She walked back toward the chasm while continuing to meditate. Her mana was maxed again now and so was her health.

"Ready for the next round. This is gonna be a looong day."

She checked her messages while making her way back to the teleportation room and was happy with the results.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 203]. For killing an adversary 80 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 80 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 201]. For killing an adversary 80 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 117. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 118. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 121. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 112. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 113. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 116. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 4

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 3

‘ding’ Magic Perception reaches lvl 13

Given the number of opponents in the teleportation chamber, it was going to be a long fight. Likely with many breaks for meditation. She needed to hit harder, and last longer, so she spilt her stat points across Vitality, Endurance, Intelligence, and Wisdom.

Here we go again...

Before she did anything else, she blinked inside the teleportation room, grabbed her backpack, and went back outside before most of the guardians had even reacted to her presence. Leaving the pack above the ‘squid room’, as she had started to call it, she went back and walked inside the gate room.

“I’m back motherfuckers, ready for another pounding?”

She was happy to see that some of the guardians still had scratches and damaged parts. They needed maintenance to repair the damage she had done earlier, and apparently there was no automated workshop nearby.

Cracks, filled with a deep fiery red, had formed on Ilea’s body, and a mist of ash formed around her while her blue runes shone. A smile touched her lips, the anger gone. Only her joy for fighting remained. Not that it made a difference for the guardians – they would fall either way.

She blinked into their midst, and the dance of slugs and blades began anew. This time she destroyed five of them before leaving. Her health dropped to a similar point to the earlier fight, as the numbers were still overwhelming.

Next time let’s see how much Azarinth Reversal can change my staying power.

She sat down again to meditate, and while she capped out her mana, she checked her messages.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 70 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus

experience.

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 70 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 122. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 125. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 117. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 120. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Blink reaches 2nd lvl 17

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 9

‘ding’ Body of Azarinth reaches 2nd lvl 10

‘ding’ Form of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 4

Glad they left me the machines in that room. I have a feeling even Edwin knew I could take sword guardians now...

She decided to distribute her new stat points into Vitality and Dexterity as she felt her speed was falling behind a little and might help her deal with multiple foes at once. She took a quick look at her new stat sheet.

Status:
Vitality: 365
Endurance: 148
Strength: 97
Dexterity: 118
Intelligence: 336
Wisdom: 309

Quite the tank now... but it's not even close to Edwin, I'm sure. My high skill levels have let me survive this far. They let me fight against the fuckers that kidnapped Alice. They let me kill stalker hounds and undead. Even just surviving that elf chase was certainly not due to my stats alone.

Taking out her notebook, Ilea added the coco fruit to her list of interesting foods that she had started a long while ago.

Now to plan some... goals.

- Clear Taleen dungeon
- Smack Alice
- Smack Edwin (much harder, ~~twice~~ ten times (in an educative manner))

She was drawing a blank after that, but it had helped her to write down those three things at least. She thought of other necessities, questions, and tasks that she had neglected and wrote them down as well.

Suddenly her eyes opened wide as a chilling realization hit her.

“Where will I get food without Aliana?”

FORTY-FOUR

Newcomers

A lack of food wasn't really something that would kill Ilea in the short term, but it was a matter of principle. Even though there was no diversity to the coco fruits, they were alright, and she could live off grass or unseasoned meat for a long time as well.

Given there's a town just a couple of hours away with food to buy though, I'll finish up in the teleport room and then take a jaunt back to Dawntree.

She already dreaded the thought of confronting Alice, but, having made up her mind, she would stick to her decision. Looking down at her bedraggled self made her a bit weary as well. Her once beautiful armor was in tatters.

No smith will be able to repair this... Even the bracers are fucked.

"Oh well, nothing I can do about that now. If only there was an actual armory here," she grumbled. "Edwin is a fucking liar. The description probably said something like 'teleportation hall'... wait..."

Ilea thought back to the three dead adventurers she'd found at the start of the dungeon. *Free clothes... with holes, yes, but they'll still be better than whatever my current attire would be classified as.*

Her plans made, Ilea went back down to fight more guardians. The next day was spent fighting them, and she gained an absurd number of levels and stats. Reaching level 125 in Ash Wielder filled her last passive slot in the class as well.

Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 1:

You are familiar with the fighting style of Ash. Base damage inflicted with your own body and while shrouded in ash is 50% higher [150% after bonuses].

Category: Body Enhancement

That skill alone made fighting the guardians much faster, though the fight did become quite a bit harder as soon as only around fifteen of them remained. Ilea also noted that the increase to her magical damage output seemed to be additive, rather than multiplicative, which meant that the increase, while formidable, wasn't quite as incredible as the numbers had initially suggested.

The chaos she had previously wrought wasn't as spectacular anymore by the time she had whittled down their numbers, and Ilea had to leave the cavern more often to recover. Using Azarinth Reversal, she could at least fight longer, siphoning additional mana until her stamina reached critical levels.

In total, she destroyed all forty-three guardians in the teleportation room. Checking her status, Ilea found she had made quite a leap, although the more guardians she killed, the fewer levels she advanced for each of them. It seemed her familiarity with them, and of course her constant reduction of the level gap between them, reduced the rewards exponentially.

She split her stat points across the same attributes again, the ones she considered to be the most important stats: Vitality for survivability, Intelligence for damage output, and Wisdom for sustain. She did also spend a few points on her other stats though to make sure they didn't fall a long way behind.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 144

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 18

- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20

- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 19

- Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 12

- *Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 11*
- *Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 14*
- *Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 3*
- *Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 9*

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 138

- *Active: Shroud of Ash – lvl 8*
- *Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 6*
- *Active: Ash Surge – lvl 5*
- *Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 1*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – lvl 9*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 15*
- *Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 6*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 6*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 3*

General Skills:

- *Elos Standard language – lvl 5*
- *Identify – lvl 4*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mental Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 3*

Status:

Vitality: 415

Endurance: 178

Strength: 117

Dexterity: 128

Intelligence: 381

Wisdom: 339

Health: 4150/4150

Stamina: 1759/1780

Mana: 2828/3390

Ilea finished distributing her latest gains as she stood next to what remained of the last guardian in the room.

“Well, you weren’t quite the last one, were you?” she asked, turning toward the last kneeling form behind the teleportation platform.

Slowly, the dust on the machine started to move as it came to life. It even cracked its neck. The six legs that had previously been joined together to form a kneeling position separated as the Centurion got up. Its initially jerky movements soon became more fluid, and a massive spear appeared in its right hand.

[Taleen Centurion – lvl ??]

Ilea watched on, all her buffs active, as the monster of a machine started to advance on her.

“Let’s see if this is a challenge I can best then...” she said out loud, a grin on her face.

The spear was thrown before Ilea even registered the movement. With all her skills active, she could still dodge it without having to use Blink, albeit barely. Her head moved to the side as the weapon passed it by a fraction, crashing into the wall several meters behind her. It vanished, and as she looked back toward the Centurion, the machine was already upon her.

Three thrusts of the spear came with such speed that they landed nearly simultaneously, and Ilea blinked to the machine’s right. It let go of the spear and punched at her without even looking.

Fuc—

She didn’t even finish the word in her head before the Centurion’s fist hammered into her chest. The small cooldown time between blinks had been enough of a window for the warrior to land a hit on her.

And what a hit it was. Ilea was sure that its sheer force would've killed her on the spot the last time she'd faced a Centurion. Her health was down a whopping thirty percent. She started healing her broken bones while still flying backward from the impact.

A blink saved her from the thrown spear that had nearly reached her before she'd even hit the ground. Sliding to a stop, she coughed up blood. Her chest regrew, and the Shroud of Ash, which had been dispersed by the punch, reformed.

The Centurion advanced again and thrust the spear at her heart. Ilea trusted in her skills and deflected the weapon with her arm. The ash was enough to change the direction of the spear but not enough to let her completely avoid the attack. The spear cut a part of her arm and her side, and Ilea was thankful that the ash around her reduced the damage greatly.

At the same time as the Centurion attacked, Ilea swung her right arm fist-first at her opponent. The machine moved to block with its left hand, catching her fist. The two limbs crashed together with a thunderous boom and a gust of wind that exploded from the center of the impact. The full force of Destruction and Wave of Ember crashed into the Centurion's hand, enhanced by her aura skills and both her Azarinth Healer and Ashen Warrior classes.

She noticed that she had pushed the Centurion's hand back a couple of centimeters. The damage had been done by now, and it was simply a question of how much it had actually hurt her enemy. In the meantime, the Centurion had reclaimed its spear, and another thrust came her way. This time, Ilea blinked behind the machine.

Her punch was met by the creature's left elbow, which intercepted her attack while the Centurion's torso turned to the left with the force of its spear thrust. Another wave of destructive mana was forced into the Centurion, but it didn't slow.

Ilea was still in the air, completing her attack, as the creature's torso executed a fluid one-eighty degree turn. It swiped its spear around with sickening speed, but the weapon was still too far extended to thrust properly.

Ilea appeared ten meters away from the Centurion, and a ragged breath escaped her lungs. *I can hit it!* she smirked. The spear whistled past her ear as she ducked left, advancing once more.

The Centurion, however, had learned from her moves, and it was getting better at predicting where she would appear and how she would attack. It started to move more defensively as time went on, trying to cover its blind spots before attacking.

“You’re way smarter than the others, eh?” she said as another lightning-fast thrust, barely dodged, left a weeping cut on her arm. She was covered in such wounds now, and the fight had only been going on for two minutes. In those two minutes, she had managed to land only five attacks on the Centurion. Four of which had been in the first minute.

Although her Form of Ember skill enhanced her speed as time went on, she found it harder and harder to spot any openings. The Centurion had changed from holding its spear in the bottom third to the middle, effectively countering her ability to blink behind it and catch the machine overextended after a thrust. There was no bladed end on the back of the spear, but Ilea had learned it could still break all the bones in her fist and wrist should they collide.

Four minutes later, blood coated her armor, and every exposed section of skin was covered in superficial wounds Ilea couldn’t afford to heal. She hadn’t managed to land even one additional attack in that time. Her mana was running low as well since she hadn’t meditated after finishing off the last of the guardians. The Centurion had also made her use Reconstruction quite a bit more frequently than any previous foes due to the severity of the wounds it caused.

“Time to go now, but we’ll play again later, Centurion,” Ilea said, and she blinked away toward the door. Blinking again, she watched as time began to slow. Motes of dust hung in the air, barely moving, and she found her perception had heightened to the extreme.

Oh no...

The Centurion’s spear was two meters behind her and closing in. With her sphere and the 2nd stage ability of Azarinth Perception active, she launched herself from the ground and twisted her body in midair. The spear rocketed beneath her and slammed into the wall, burying itself a full meter in the stone and creating a violent spout of rock and dust.

Behind her, the Centurion watched her impassively with its steely, glowing green eyes as Ilea finally blinked out of the room and then farther and farther away.

That was a close one... it knows the maximum distance of my blink, and I couldn't get in even a single hit in those last four minutes...

She had reached the squid room by now, and she blinked upward. When she reached the first trap room, she finally breathed out.

Well, that was something. She sat down and started meditating, allowing herself to relax a little. *Even the Centurion won't follow me this far.*

'ding' Azarinth Perception has reached 2nd lvl 4

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 145. 5 stat points awarded.

Hmm, been a while since I got a class level through skill advancement.

A while later, she got up again and cracked her neck. "Alright, once more with full power."

Sadly, the Centurion hadn't forgotten about her or the way she fought. It immediately changed the grip on its spear and rushed her as she entered the teleportation room. Twenty-five minutes of fighting later, Ilea was forced to flee again, this time blinking using different distances and directions to make the spear throws miss her completely.

'ding' Azarinth Perception has reached 2nd lvl 5

'ding' Azarinth Sphere has reached 2nd lvl 13

'ding' Shroud of Ash has reached lvl 9

'ding' Shroud of Ash has reached lvl 10

'ding' Eyes of Ash has reached lvl 7

'ding' Ash Wielder has reached level 139. 5 stat points awarded.

"Not a single hit this time," she hissed, frowning after allocating her latest stat points. The fight was fun for her to be sure, but after a couple of

minutes, she felt that she was almost being mocked by the expressionless machine.

As if it said it would like to see me try...

She hit the ground next to her. "I'll show you in time," she said, getting up a while later.

First though, food...

The way back was largely uneventful, her blink and sphere allowing for unimpeded and fast travel through the ancient city. Ilea soon reached the first street she had entered, finding the same scene she had upon her arrival.

The corpses were as she had left them, though perhaps a little... riper. *Maybe a rock mage can bury them?*

"Well, guess this is goodbye then," she sighed, looking down at herself. Removing the pieces of armor she still wore, which were barely still connected now, she threw them on the ground and undressed one of the dead women.

The clothes stank of death and rot, but it wasn't too bad compared to Ilea's, which smelled of blood and ash. *Guess the water I had to swim through on the way here might actually help on the way back.*

She finished putting on some of the leather armor and strapped her barely-used mace onto the belt before hoisting her pack, which was still in one piece, onto her shoulder. *Let's move on then.*

She walked back toward the first house she had come across at the very start of this dungeon crawl. Before going inside, she looked back and smiled at the greenish light and gray houses and streets. What others might see as a deathtrap, she already looked at fondly as one of the biggest treasure troves she'd ever found.

Maybe I'll find some actual treasure sometime...

She entered the hallway connecting the storage rooms, hearing new noises over the constant sound of machinery.

Before she'd gone very far down the hallway, she saw two people jumping up from their lounging positions slightly ahead of her while grabbing their weapons.

"Who goes there?" a man who looked to be in his thirties shouted.

[Warrior – lvl 142]

Heh, I'm a higher level than him. A slight smile tugged on her lips. It hadn't quite yet sunk in just how many levels and stats she'd gained in the past week.

"Cheers lads. Just a healer passing through. No need to be so jumpy," she said in a neutral voice, glancing past them and into the hallway beyond.

There were actually quite a few people down there. Adventurers, as far as she could tell. Many were armed. Greatswords, rapiers, daggers, bows, quite a few mages too, some of whom were even using their magic to light fires or inspect the ivy growing on the walls. She saw a man helping another up toward one of the green lights, climbing the wall with earth magic.

What's all this? She glanced back at the two people she assumed to be stationed at the entrance.

One of them held up his spear and nodded toward her. "A healer, eh? Where's your party then?"

Ilea took another glance behind them, now seeing people who had set up tables and chairs. A few of them were playing cards.

Did they bring all that down here? Or does someone have a storage ring like Aliana?

"They died nearly a week ago," she said. "I only managed to get away because I could heal myself. One of those... machines ambushed us."

The blood on her body and her stench helped a lot with selling the story. The man lowered his spear a little and sighed. Fear creased both guards' features.

"Why stay in there for so long then? We've been here almost two days now," the other man said. His dark eyes looked at her suspiciously, but Ilea stayed calm.

"I wanted to get them out. They nearly managed to destroy the machine, and I could actually finish it off after a couple days. Doesn't do a lot of damage, but it gets the job done," she said, tapping the mace on her belt.

Glad I kept that bad boy.

His eyes softened, and he nodded at her.

"I couldn't move them yet and even had to get some gear from my friend because mine was in tatters," she said, noticing one of the men's expressions changing to something she hadn't quite factored in.

Maybe I acted too vulnerable... Now I might have to fight this entire group on my way to food.

She was preparing herself to fight until the one who hadn't looked at her like a savage slapped his friend in his face.

"Get your head out of the gutter, you miserable fuck," he said and walked up to Ilea. "Excuse the idiot. Been down here a while. And you know how adventuring can get lonely. The name's Roger. And the idiot's Tim." He extended his hand, which she shook.

"Don't worry about it Roger, I've seen worse. Those guys with you?" she said, not offering her own name as she motioned to everyone behind them. Some were wearing shiny armor that would blind someone in broad daylight while others sported gear with even more horns than Arven's. Quite a crew.

"They are, yeh. Expedition force. First in the dungeon, or so I assumed. Appreciate the lack of offense taken, by the way. You were part of the scouts then?"

"Not exactly. A Forkspear sent you, I assume?"

"Bjorn Forkspear, yes," Roger nodded. "Oooh, let me guess. You were sent by a different member of the family. Well, no matter, not like we care much who pays. Just don't mention it in the city. But down here, we're all adventurers. Planning on going back in?"

"Not right now, no," she answered, looking at the busy scene down the tunnel. There even was an alchemist whistling a tune while looking through his potions.

"Hey, who's she?" asked one of the men standing next to a makeshift table with a map spread out on it.

The words got the attention of more of the mercenaries and adventurers lounging around. Their armor clattered as they shifted to look at Ilea. Some of them resumed their tasks of sharpening blades or checking potions and bombs after a couple of seconds, but other gazes lingered for longer.

Ilea approached the man who had spoken and patted Roger on his shoulder as she passed him.

Might not want to use my real name. Hmm. Let's have some fun.

"Lilith, nice to meet you." After choosing the most ridiculous name that came to mind, she walked up to the man, extending her hand. Nobody here would be familiar with the name, or so she assumed.

After shaking hands with the man, she continued talking, but at a lower volume. "My party was killed a couple streets in, four days ago." She didn't

let the man ask questions as she quickly approached the map, which was blank after the room they were standing in.

“May I?” she asked a level 120 mage with a scholarly-looking robe. He nodded, and she started sketching with the pencil that lay on the table. “There was a square here, where we managed to defeat one of the guardians...”

She sketched, and the people around her listened attentively. Nobody seemed to have a problem with her sketching on their map. Considering her look and smell, she certainly sold the new persona well. Her status as a healer was certainly of help as well.

“There’s a fork here. We went to the right and were ambushed on the ground floor of this building.” She pointed it out to them on the map. “I managed to finish off the severely damaged guardian after two days of going in and going back out to heal.” She motioned to the holes in her clothes that were punched through by the guardian’s metal slugs.

“There are ranged and sword guardians in there, around level one-fifty and up,” she finished, leaning back while putting the pencil down.

“Well that’s nothing majorly new,” one of the men said. “Nonetheless, thank you for the information. We’ll go in tomorrow with the entire expedition. You probably won’t be able to convince Bjorn Forkspear to let you join, assuming you were sent by someone else in that family. But we’d appreciate the help of another healer, and we could pay you a fee similar to that of a fully-fledged Corinth Healer.”

He looked at her with anticipation, but his hopes were dashed as Ilea shook her head.

“I’ll come back with some helpers to get the bodies. I won’t let them rot down here. But I won’t be going further in.” Her tone was final, and most of the people who had listened in nodded or showed some sort of understanding. “I’ll go to Dawntree first to speak with my contact.”

She tried to sound resigned, and from what she could read on the man’s face, it worked.

“I understand. Shame you won’t join us. Such high-leveled healers as you are rare as it is. Do you need somebody to guide you back? It would cost you though,” the man asked, but she shook her head.

“I’ll be fine on my own. I assume you cleared the way here?” She paused, and he nodded. “Then I’ll go. I hope you’ll fare better down there than we did.”

“Good luck on the way back,” one of the other men said.

She nodded and turned to leave, glancing at a passing group of well-equipped adventurers – a huge man with a horned helmet and heavy armor, a bald man wearing a spotless white robe, and one with gray hair and half-plate armor. After failing to identify the first of them, she decided to leave quickly before attracting the attention of anyone higher up in this expedition.

As she headed back toward the surface, Ilea decided to keep her visit to Dawntree to two days at most. *Can't let them get to the Great Hall before me.* She deemed it unlikely to happen even in the next week, considering they'd stayed in the first couple of rooms for two days already, but the higher-leveled ones at the end had made her think twice. She hadn't missed the older half-plate-wearing warrior glancing her way just before she left.

Of course, just as I get my own dungeon to fight machines in, there's an expedition arriving to get in the way.

Fighting alongside them wasn't really something she'd considered. Now that she could fight sword guardians alone, she most certainly didn't want to lessen the danger by teaming up. At least not for the moment. There was too much left to explore, too many machines to fight.

And now there's a timer on all that. Well, that's if they survive long enough to get to the Great Hall in the first place.

FORTY-FIVE

Cake

Ilea started sprinting after ten minutes of walking and soon activated her buffs as well. In just over an hour, she reached the Root. The last couple of hundred meters she ran without any buffs.

A smell of booze, blood, and food greeted her. A smile spread over her face. “Aaaah, civilization.”

“Oh, a healer! Hey! You wanna—”

The skinny, leather-clad man who had addressed Ilea couldn’t finish his sentence before a burly blonde woman tackled him to the ground and started punching his head with great enthusiasm.

“You fucking fuck!” she shouted, and Ilea simply moved on in silence.

Civilization indeed.

She bought some spiced meat at a nearby store before heading up toward the gate that led back to Dawntree, accompanied by two people trying to recruit her and one musician singing about her fair skin.

I smell of death, bard guy. This healer tag can be quite annoying...

The guard at the gate didn’t ask many questions and let her pass after he accepted the fee. He briefly checked her backpack, which was still somewhat whole. The thing was just as much a survivor as Ilea. Luckily, he didn’t think it important enough to check inside her notebook.

Ilea breathed a breath of fresh air and enjoyed the light of the fall sun on her skin as she reached the city of Dawntree. The noise of the busy lives of many people reached her enhanced ears.

Good way to get used to the sphere, I guess, Ilea thought, not having disabled her perception skill since Felicia and the others had left. Now, what

to do first?

Just then, a small hand tried to grab her coin pouch, but Ilea reacted instantly to seize the thief's hand.

"Again, you little shits?" she sighed, letting the small girl go. The girl started running away immediately before Ilea threw a silver coin her way, missing by over a meter. The thief beelined backward and grabbed the coin from the ground.

"Cheers, asshole!" she shouted back.

"Kids these days," Ilea murmured, shaking her head and continuing on her way.

She jumped onto the roof of a nearby cottage and saw the Forkspear palace from a distance, but she decided not to go there right away. She was keen to postpone her uncomfortable talk with Alice.

Doesn't that rock bard Aaron live here? He mentioned something about visiting... maybe I can clear up some questions too. She jumped down from the house.

"Excuse me, where's the Adventurer's Guild in town?" she asked a very startled man in laborers' leathers, but she only received another muttered "asshole" in response as he swerved around her.

Three 'fuck off's later, she finally at least got a direction. On her way there, she took in the city. It was a lot more rudimentarily built than Salia. *A lot more rock, although the castles stand out for sure.*

* * *

Ilea walked out of the guild a couple of silvers lighter but with a ruby healer badge. Two adventurers whose level was higher than one hundred had vouched to the clerk that she was between one hundred and one-fifty, so it had been easy. She had also paid a clerk for the information needed to continue her daily business and obtained information on the Forkspears as well. It turned out to be a good decision.

Ilea had learned that Alice wasn't quite as important as she'd thought. She was just one of many daughters and not close to the eldest or youngest. The Forkspears were famous for promoting only men inside their hierarchy while women were mostly married off.

Contrary to Ilea's thinking, this was not as normal as she'd expected. Many families were actually led by women. The existence of levels helped quite a bit with bridging the muscle mass gap between the sexes, and thus warriors weren't primarily men, at least among humans.

Maybe that's why nobody was looking for her in that forest... Ilea reflected as she walked toward the school where Aaron apparently taught part-time.

She walked for another half an hour and was already a little annoyed at the densely packed streets when she finally came upon a massive mansion with a big yard in front.

The Magic Academy, eh?

Some students were lying down or training on the grass as she passed. One student even thought she was the new teacher in healing magic.

"Damn, she stinks even from that distance... how badass!" one of the students exclaimed.

Ilea chuckled. *Quite a different outlook on the stench of blood and rot here.*

Other people had given her a wide berth on her walk through the city, and the pupil's comment made Ilea finally understand why. No wonder getting directions had been so hard.

Weirdly it's not really bothering me... although a bath would be nice.

She walked up to a group of students lying on the grass and put on her biggest smile. "Hey, I'm late to my first day of teaching. Do you guys have a bath? And where's the administration and library?"

Her question was met with some flustered expressions. The teenagers arrayed before her were low-level and mostly suddenly very interested in their own feet. They sputtered out the answers as fast as they could, obviously intimidated by her getup.

I feel like I'm thirty! I was a bloody student just a year ago... or I was supposed to be, I guess.

She went up to the mansion and walked around it to the rear. As soon as no students were in direct sight, she blinked inside a small room that her sphere had confirmed was empty.

Wait, why didn't I just use the door? They think I'm a teacher, right? Oh well.

The mansion was huge, several hundred meters long. Exiting the room, there were only a couple of students walking around, and Ilea quickly found

the bathhouse area. The baths were separated into male and female. Only two other people occupied the women's bath.

One seemed older, her gray hair tied up in a bun so that not a single strand touched the water. She looked like a teacher. Or maybe a librarian? The other was younger, perhaps the same age as Ilea herself, but she had deep purple eyes.

Ilea ditched her clothes and walked over to the bath. Steam was rising from it, and she saw with Magic Perception that there were runes on the ground inside the bath itself. *Neat.*

"Aaaaah, that's it... that's the reason to live," she exclaimed upon entering the warm embrace of heated water. The filth of her activities slowly colored her immediate surroundings brown and red.

A possible exercise for some water and earth mages?

At least the filth didn't seem to spread much, though she saw the older women give her a look. Ilea noticed the purple-eyed woman was similar in size to her, and so she inched closer to her after twenty minutes of cleaning herself and relaxing.

"Hey, do you have a spare set of clothes? Doesn't really matter what... a robe, school uniform, pajamas, whatever. I'll pay you ten silvers."

"T... ten? Ten silvers? Yes! Yes, I have something, just wait!"

The woman immediately got out of the bath and ran toward the changing rooms.

Students are dirt poor everywhere it seems...

"You've left your filth behind," the teacher-librarian said, and she pointed at a stone with runes etched into it on the edge of the bath.

"Thanks?" Ilea said and moved over, touching the thing a few times before she figured out how to push her mana inside. Something glowed, then the floating blood and dirt were pulled toward it. *Neat.*

Just then, she noticed something in her sphere of perception.

* * *

As always, Sammy was enjoying the view. The Eye of Inna skill he had gotten a couple of months prior after a level-up in his main class had made his days at school a lot more interesting.

The steam and stone separation of the men's and women's baths consequently didn't bother him one bit as he took in the sight of a gorgeous black-haired beauty who had entered the bath around twenty minutes ago.

Never seen her before, maybe a new girl?

Then the woman suddenly cocked her head and stared straight at him.

Shit.

Sammy looked away, quickly getting out of the bath before he glanced back, just to make sure. She was still there, looking at him from the other side of the bath, her eyebrows raised.

Then she waved.

* * *

“Heh...”

Ilea leaned back and relaxed. She didn't care much about some random perv, but it was fun to mess with him, and nobody had gotten hurt.

Good lesson to learn that you're not the only one who can see through walls... should remember that myself as well.

She continued soaking until the younger girl came back with a set of fresh clothes.

“I... I... I got them!” she wheezed, and her heavy breathing could be heard from across the whole bath.

“Good, good, I'll be right there,” Ilea answered, and she left the water.

After drying herself, she put on the surprisingly comfortable clothes that consisted of brown cloth pants and a cloth shirt of the same fashionable color. She even got some fresh underwear as well. They were a little wide at the waist, but there was string to make them fit. Ilea kept her boots and put her backpack on again as she prepared to leave.

Handing over ten silver coins from her pouch, she motioned to the old leather armor and clothing.

“Can you burn this?” she asked the purple-eyed girl, who nodded enthusiastically.

“Thank you so much!” the girl shouted after Ilea as she exited the changing room.

Now where?

She flagged down a passing brown-robed girl with wide eyes and wider glasses. “I’m looking for Aaron, teacher, rock mage and bard? Any ideas?”

“Classroom 501. I need to get to class, but a quick search and you’ll find it – head that way.” The girl hurried off, pointing to the other end of the hall.

The ‘quick search’ turned out to be not so quick, but eventually Ilea found herself descending back below the ground again. This time it wasn’t into a cave but down a very long, yet normal, flight of stairs. She opened the door to classroom 501 and was surprised to find a rather spacious hall with around a dozen students inside.

Aaron was standing at the front and was explaining something while gesturing with a rock in his hand. Ilea started to sneak up behind the man, which got some giggles from some of the students, who were immediately hit by some of the small pebbles that hovered around Aaron.

“Ow!” one of them exclaimed, a red-headed boy with large ears. He rubbed his forehead and glared at Ilea.

By now, Ilea was standing behind Aaron with crossed arms after successfully managing to sneak up on him. At least, that was what she thought until he suddenly whipped his arm toward her with quite a bit of force.

Ilea easily stopped his arm with one hand. “Nice to see your senses aren’t as shit as I thought,” she said with a grin.

Aaron looked at her. “Well look who we have here. I didn’t actually expect for you to visit, you know?” he said, offering his hand in greeting after Ilea had released his arm from her grasp.

“And you’ve grown again... quite a lot, given those question marks I see. Didn’t think you’d make it longer than a month with that recklessness. I’ll be done in ten minutes. Grab a drink later?”

“It’s not even two in the afternoon, Aaron. You have a drinking problem.”

“Nothing alcoholic of course,.

“Aww...”

Ilea sat down with the other students. Aaron was nice enough to make her a rock chair as well. Ten minutes later, Ilea knew two things for sure. First, rock magic wasn’t for her. Second, Aaron wasn’t as inspiring a teacher as he was a tank.

* * *

“Now, tell me how you got higher than level 80 in such a short amount of time,” Aaron said while they were sitting in a balcony café at the top of the mansion. Ilea had half a cake in front of her and had started eating.

“Oh wow, this is good,” she said through a mouthful. “Well, this and that happened. You know how it goes, Aaron. I fought stalker hounds for a while though. Alone.”

She held back the fact that she had already been quite a way above level 80 when she’d done that.

“Yeah, I saw you do that. Guess you’d have reached 80 at some point if you just continued doing that for a while. Lucky for you that we found a new dungeon. Glad you didn’t come across whatever the boss would’ve been down there.”

Ilea ate her cake in silence. *He’s not as imaginative as I thought...*

“So, you like teaching here? What about the adventuring? You seemed pretty adept at the whole thing back in the Calys mines,” she said, finishing her first piece of cake and grabbing another.

“It’s rewarding. Seeing the young ones progress so fast is incredible. All that enthusiasm yet to be replaced by dread and death,” he said, looking out over the courtyard.

He really has quite a different outlook. It’s nice though, caring for the next generation and imparting his knowledge. She smiled as she looked at the man. *He’s happy.*

“What’s that?” he said suddenly. Ilea followed his gaze and had to stifle a laugh as two young fire mages helped a young woman burn some clothes.

“Hey, go to the training rooms for that!” Aaron shouted, and the students ran away in different directions. The deed was done though, and only ash remained of the leather armor.

“Aaron,” Ilea began. “Can I ask for some advice?”

FORTY-SIX

Alice

Ilea had been waiting in an ornately decorated hallway for around five minutes before Alice appeared from around a corner. The girl was running at quite a pace, with little regard for the fine rugs she was likely scuffing in the process. There were pictures of various supposedly important people on the walls staring down at her. Alice was on none of them.

“Ilea!” the girl cried as she came to a stop in front of the healer. Dour-faced Jaime appeared down the corridor soon after, lagging behind due to his much more formal walking speed.

“You did it, you came back! Did you find anything interesting?” Alice asked, with what looked like a genuine smile on her face.

“I did find some things, yes. Can we talk somewhere more private?” Ilea asked as Jaime came within earshot.

There are no guards around to protect her from me.

Jaime indicated for them to follow him, and they arrived in a candlelit room, furnished in a now familiar decadent style with plenty of gold gilding and dark, polished wood.

Alice sat down on a chair while Jaime prepared some *saaih* tea.

“None for me, thanks,” Ilea said as she leaned on the high table in the middle of the room, still standing.

“So, Alice...” She stopped and looked upward to gather her thoughts. This wasn’t going to be easy. Alice noticed the glance, and her previously excited smile faded slightly.

Right, here we go...

“That plague you mentioned. That doesn’t really exist, right? There’s nobody in danger,” Ilea said, finishing with a statement rather than a question. Alice’s expression had already made it clear what the truth was.

Alice’s smile failed completely now and she looked downward, face paling.

A long moment of silence passed.

“There is a plag—” she started, but Ilea interrupted her.

“Then let me see her.”

“I can’t... you know my family.”

“No, and I don’t give a fuck about them, Alice. Tell me where she is and I’ll go there and see for myself. I think I can handle or get away from whoever guards the place.”

Her words came out with more heat than Ilea had intended, and Alice flinched. Then her shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Alright... ok... alright. There is no plague. Nobody is in danger. I just needed more people to go down there for me. I didn’t have money to pay you, and to be honest, given how strong you are, you’re pretty gullible, Ilea,” Alice said, rushing the words out and continuing to avoid eye contact with Ilea. Her hands were fidgeting, picking at her dress. Jaime stood next to her with a thoroughly unreadable expression on his face.

“Alice, I considered you a friend. Was all of our time together just an act? You seemed to enjoy traveling with me near Riverwatch. Well, as much as you could back then.” Ilea paused. “You could’ve just asked me to go. I’ve gained more in that dungeon than anywhere else before. Why would I need to get paid for that?”

Alice perked up at that, perhaps sensing a way out of her predicament. “Well that’s wonderful! So we’re alright then? What did you find?”

She was smiling again. *For fuck’s sake. How did I not notice how messed up this girl is?*

Ilea’s hand tightened involuntarily, and the wood of the table splintered. She calmed herself with a deep breath.

“You don’t seem to understand, Alice. You lied to me, you used me, and now you’re not even showing anything close to remorse, let alone an apology.”

Alice opened and closed her mouth but didn’t say anything.

“You know what, I’m out of here. Sure, I found plenty, but you’ll just have to imagine it. Hope you’ll learn something from this, girlie. Thanks for

providing the dungeon's location."

Ilea pushed herself away from the table. She straightened, gave the room a final glare, then turned to leave. As she walked out, she touched Alice's shoulder and then stopped briefly next to Jaime.

"Sorry about the table."

* * *

Back outside, Ilea walked toward the gates but stopped quickly to look backward. It felt as if a shadow had passed across her Sphere. Had it been a person? Or something else? *I swear there was somebody there...* she shook off the feeling and continued on. *Fucking creepy this place.* She took one last look at the palace and left the estate.

She wouldn't even apologize, even after admitting to the lie. Maybe I really should've slapped her...

Ilea walked aimlessly through the city, not really focusing on anything. Thoughts tumbled through her mind, but she couldn't focus on any of them. She felt in a kind of daze.

It was probably the right choice in the end. A slap from me might've killed her. I'm a lot stronger than I was when we first met. Ilea smiled at that, but she still felt her hands curl into tight fists.

She needed a drink. The encounter with Alice had left a sour taste in her mouth.

* * *

"Another one," Ilea said, tossing some copper coins onto the battered wooden countertop. Her poison resistance prevented her from getting drunk, but she liked the taste and light buzz that came with it.

"Hey lassy, you in for a ride?" a man in silver plate armor sitting at a nearby table hollered at Ilea as she finished downing her fifth mug of ale. "I like an enthusiastic drinker!"

"You know we have stronger stuff if you're just looking to knock yourself out," the barman said as he brought her a fresh mug.

"No, I'm fine, don't like the taste of stronger stuff," she answered as she started to down the new drink.

“Hey, you listening lassy?” the man in plate insisted, leaning forward in his chair. His helmet sat in front of him on the table, and his two companions looked on with massive grins as well as supportive grunts and cat calls. One was a mage in leathers, the other a short, fat boulder of a man.

Ilea held up one finger and finished what she assumed to be about a liter of ale. That done, she put it down and retrieved the mace that sat on the ground next to her backpack.

“Mate, if you call me lassy one more time, I’ll fucking throw this thing here right in your bloody teeth, alright?”

Some people chuckled while the man’s companions outright laughed at their friend.

“Oh she’s a feisty one. You bit off a bit too much there, eh Willy?” one of them said, the shorter, pot-bellied man, who then downed his mug and added a belch for emphasis.

“I’d like to see you try, lassy,” Mr. Silver smirked and opened his arms wide as he stood up. It seemed all in good cheer though. That was why Ilea had liked the Root from the start. People here were more easygoing and ready to receive a mace to the face.

The mace, thrown without any buffs applied, flew and hit the man’s shoulder, denting the armor a little as it bounced off, before it flew on and shattered the table behind him. The four people sitting there shouted and scattered out of the way.

“Hah! She actually did it, the absolute madwoman!” a burly woman with a few missing teeth shouted, giving an emphatic thumbs-up.

Mr. Silver, who had been drunk enough to stumble and fall from the impact, just laughed as he pulled himself up and winked rakishly.

“You think a mere *love tap* will stop the great Willy?”

“The great Willy, eh? Are you compensating for something, I wonder?” Ilea only got a confused stare from the man. Still, two people leaning at the bar chuckled into their drinks, so she considered it a win.

“How much for the table and their refills?” Ilea asked the barman, motioning to the destroyed furniture and the handful of people who had spilled some of their drinks when getting out of the way of the flying weapon.

“Don’t sweat it – their own fault for being too slow. You’re all dead, you idiots!” he shouted at the men in what Ilea could only describe as a

military voice. Green magic gathered around the barkeeper, and Ilea watched as the splintered table rebuilt in front of her eyes.

“Aye, cheers mate,” one of the previous table occupants said, sitting back down.

“Cards?” another asked, and the rest of the displaced patrons shrugged and sat down before throwing some coins into the middle.

“Leave her alone, Willy. She’s obviously not interested. Remember the last time you tried to... woo a higher-leveled woman?” the mage in leather armor said to his companion.

“Can I get three more? I’ll be in the corner there,” Ilea said and got up from the bar to sit down at a table a little farther away from the loudest people. She didn’t dislike the place and atmosphere, but her social energy had already been depleted from talking to Aaron and Alice earlier in the day.

It was getting close to evening now, and she thought about going back to the dungeon a bit earlier than planned. *They might not even have left yet though.* She decided to wait at least another couple of hours.

Just as the barman came over with her drinks, she noticed with her sphere skill that someone new had entered the bar. The newcomer was a hooded man, who quickly scanned the room before walking straight toward her.

[Mage lvl 98]

Walks like he’s got the world’s biggest stick up his ass. Very formal. Seems familiar, Ilea mused as she nursed her next drink.

The robed man stopped in front of her and bowed lightly. When she looked up and saw his face, she recognized his dour features instantly.

“Miss Ilea, may I sit down?” Jaime asked, locking eyes with her from below his dark hood.

“Call me Ilea, and sure, if you must,” she said, faintly gesturing with one hand while lifting the first of the three mugs to her mouth with the other.

“Didn’t think you were a drinker,” he said as he sat down.

A cute waitress with plaited braids quickly came up to them but was waylaid by a man reaching out to try and pull her onto his lap. A spark of electricity arced off of the waitress and left the man spasming for a solid ten

seconds. Ilea burst out laughing and the waitress locked eyes with her for a moment, a smirk on her lips. She continued over to their table.

“What may I bring you?” she asked, looking at them with her dark brown eyes while still wearing a hint of her previous smile. Ilea sipped at one of her three ales, looked at it appreciatively, then waved at Jaime to order.

“Do you have Darkseed?” Jaime asked. The girl just nodded and sped away to the next table.

“I apologize, Ilea. For Alice’s behavior,” Jaime continued, his eyes on Ilea again. “It seems my subtle influence wasn’t quite enough to break through her parents’ indoctrination and instill an appreciation in her for how things are done in polite society. The noble world is quite different to ours, I’m afraid. I hope you do not take her disregard personally. She simply does not understand.” He sighed and looked at her appraisingly. Not getting a reaction, he continued.

“Your actions today might get her thinking again. And perhaps I’ll get a little bolder as well. For now, please accept my apology on her behalf. I hope I’ll manage to make her understand enough that she will offer her own in the future.” He finished just as a small glass of dark liquid arrived and was set before him.

Ilea turned down her increased sense of smell from her sphere as a foul whiff of the spirit entered her nose. She tore her gaze away from the rather pleasant sight of the departing waitress and looked at Jaime.

“I’m glad at least one decent person is around her. Why did she send me to that deathtrap anyway? Most others would’ve died at my level, and I have a hunch that some corpses I found weren’t exactly unrelated.”

He closed his eyes as he looked away, lifting his glass before he took a sip.

Didn’t even cough...

“She sent two parties before you. I hear one of them returned, but they refused to talk to her or me. I assume the corpses you speak of are the others. Yes, a Taleen dungeon is certainly a risk, but there is a possibility of great rewards. They were the only ones willing to go for the price we could pay.”

“You basically murdered them,” Ilea said, and she continued drinking as well.

He shook his head lightly at that. “Not everyone is as ignorant as you when it comes to the Taleen. They knew very well what they were getting into. Debt or fear would’ve driven them into a dangerous place one way or the other. I do not see us having to carry any blame for their deaths.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

“You have an interesting outlook, Ilea. To care for the lives of adventurers you didn’t even know. I’m afraid Alice doesn’t have that luxury. She is falling behind, not distinguishing herself against her peers, nor is she proving herself extraordinary as a healer. This is not viewed... favorably by her family.”

“What will happen to her then?”

“Hmm... that is indeed the question,” he said, taking another sip of his spirit. “She will likely lose what little remains of her status in time. Blood alone means little to them, I’m afraid. It’s a ticket inside, but certainly not one to stay. I’ll try to get her out before that happens. The family tend to... dispose of those members who prove themselves no longer useful,” he said as he finished his drink.

“Can’t she just leave once her status is gone? Might do her some good.”

“An idealistic view. No. She has seen behind the curtain. She knows too much,” Jaime said with a slight frown. “It is quite a shame. The girl has drive and some good ideas. Even though she can be cold and careless at times. The higher-ups certainly aren’t any better.”

“How would me finding some treasure in the Taleen dungeon have changed that outcome?” Ilea asked.

“Taleen treasures are worth a lot. That’s all there really is to it. Alice needs resources and status to advance. Or power, but her healing class doesn’t seem to want to change into a warrior’s or a mage’s.”

Ilea thought for a while and took out her notebook. “You care for her deeply, don’t you?”

Jaime didn’t answer.

It’s possible that he’s just using me as well, or that Alice is still involved with this somehow. I’m not going to give him any Taleen treasures.

But I’ve got something else.

“I’ll give you something then. In the hope that you can change her for the better.” She started to write and draw on some blank pages in her notebook. “She’s just a kid, and I didn’t help her escape back in the forests of Riverwatch to see her be dispatched by her own family.”

She took her time to draw as well as she could, finding her ability improved compared to the last time she had done so. Finally, she handed five pages to Jaime and continued drinking.

“She’s already fulfilled the main requirement for the class. Do me a favor though and burn that as soon as she’s got it.” He took the pages skeptically and nodded to her.

“It’s a healer class, isn’t it?” he asked, looking through the notes and sketches. “A battle healer class. Yours?”

She didn’t say anything to that and simply finished her ale, pushing the first empty mug away and pulling the next toward her. The buzz had gotten a little stronger, and Ilea was growing tired of talking.

“This is probably more than I should give to you two. Please leave before I change my mind.”

Not that it was any great risk. There was no Bluemoon Grass left, let alone anybody except for her who knew where it grew.

Also, I don’t really care if there are a bunch of hundred-year-old Azarinth Healers out there in a century or so.

“Well, I thank you for listening to me then. And for this. If you ever need anything that I can provide, seek me out,” Jaime said, standing. “I’ll have to return to my duties again now. Take care, Ilea, and good hunting.” He bowed sharply and left.

Ilea continued drinking for a couple of hours. She listened to different conversations in the room, though without joining in. Her sphere made it easy to follow every sound and movement in the inn.

Now...

Ilea quickly made her way to the bathroom and entered. She brushed against the waitress who was coming out at that exact same moment, and she stopped the woman with a hand on her side. Her runes and ember lines shone lightly through her brown clothes as lightning coursed through her.

Seeing Ilea seemingly unaffected by her usual deterrent, the waitress smirked and increased her power output. Sparks flew around them and scorched the wood as they stood there staring into each other’s eyes. Each daring the other to break. The waitress was above level 100 and certainly had a punch to her attack, but Ilea didn’t flinch.

“How about you and me? Room 23 seems to be free?” Ilea asked as lightning danced around them.

“You’re certainly interesting, and your resistance creates... opportunities,” the woman answered as a hand entered Ilea’s shirt from below, sparks arcing between the hand and her bare skin. The hand went further and further upward until Ilea bit her lower lip.

“I’ll think about it,” the waitress said after a moment, then she removed her hand. She winked at Ilea and sauntered back to her rounds. Ilea stood there with a goofy smile.

Ilea found in the next twenty minutes that she wasn’t quite as talented as Roland at drawing a naked human form and gave up to simply stare at the waitress. Her body still ached from her touch. *What a fucking tease.* Nor did she miss any of the quick glances and smirks the woman sent her way throughout her shift.

“Well now, I think you’re quite ready,” the waitress said an hour or so later, waving a small iron key in her hand. Her lips curved upward before a small spark went through the key, causing it to flash.

Ilea let out a long breath and got up after an appropriate length of time and followed the waitress up the stairs and into room 23. Ilea noticed she got some glances, but most people either missed their escape to the same destination – or didn’t care.

She entered the room and slowly closed the door behind her. The alluring lightning mage was already sprawled enticingly on the bed, none of her clothing remaining on her body.

Ilea locked the door and slowly removed her own shirt as she approached. She crawled onto the bed and continued until she was eye to eye with the other girl. They both smiled as Ilea’s runes started to shine blue and electricity began to spark between them.

Slowly, Ilea bent down and kissed the woman’s neck. With each kiss that went further and further down, the intensity of the lightning grew stronger. Upon reaching a certain point, which was accompanied by a moan, Ilea got a message in her head.

***‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Lightning Resistance – lvl 1
Either in a storm or fighting a ferocious beast blessed by lightning, you
have resisted the elements. This skill will help further with your
endeavors.***

She smirked and continued moving her tongue.

This is a fun way to train...

FORTY-SEVEN

Darkness

Ilea woke up completely refreshed after two hours of sleep. The waitress lay next to her and would likely continue her slumber for quite some time. *I'll definitely visit this place again.*

She got up and dressed herself, then she snatched up her backpack and blinked out of the room to make as little noise as possible. Walking down the stairs, she stopped at the bottom and walked over to her mace, which was still stuck in the ground where she had thrown it yesterday. Yanking it out, she left the inn.

The Root looked the same as it had last night. Being underground had that effect on a town. Still, it seemed like most people were still asleep as Ilea looked at some of the slumbering and unconscious bodies that were lying right in the street.

She walked to a nearby store and bought provisions for her next go at the Taleen Great Hall. Another half an hour was spent looking for comfortable leather armor, which she found in the only armor store that apparently opened this early. It only cost her ten silver coins. After that, Ilea was decked out and ready to go.

Shit. I forgot the books I left at Alice's... Oh well, she can keep them.

Ilea made her way back to the dungeon, and found that the expedition had gone. The bodies in the street were no longer present. She assumed someone had buried them.

Checking for both guardians and adventurers, she sped through the city with Blink, and she was soon back in the Great Hall now that she knew the

way. Inside, nothing seemed to have been disturbed, but she couldn't be sure if anybody else had managed to get there yet.

She looked at the symbol near the door that Edwin had led them through before. *I assume that one means teleportation or something similar.*

There were two doors on each side of the great hall and one large gate facing the slightly bent-in entrance that Ilea had come in from.

"Obviously I should choose the side doors first. I don't wanna face whatever is behind that big gate yet, not before I destroy a centurion," she said to herself.

Then she thought about which door to choose. Edwin had mentioned one of the other markings meant 'prison', and she had an inkling that he hadn't lied about that one as well. She knew the teleportation one already. That ruled out the two doors on the left, so she chose the door immediately to the right of the entrance.

It opened after she had channeled mana into it, and Ilea was met with the familiar sight of stairs leading down. Activating all her buffs, she ran down for quite a distance until she finally reached a small room with eight sword guardians in it. There was nothing very special about the room, which looked the same as many others with its glowing walls and dwarfish aesthetic.

The guardians were upon her right after she had managed to drop her backpack and activate Shroud of Ash. The fight itself was short, and it wasn't long before Ilea stood victorious above the dented and broken machines.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 201]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

...

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 146. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 147. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 140. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 141. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Surge reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 10

Not quite as much anymore, eh? Although I assume gaining four levels from eight enemies is quite spectacular for most people...

Ilea felt her Wisdom was lagging a little behind her other core skills, so she put all her new stat points there, bringing it closer to her Vitality and Intelligence.

The only exit to the small chamber was further stairs that led downward. This time though, Ilea only needed to take a few steps before arriving in a similarly sized room to the one above, once again lit by green magic and made from the ever-present white stone.

By now, she had more than enough first-hand experience to make out the traps in the ground and walls and simply walked in to receive the spears. Without Edwin and co, Ilea didn’t care for destroying the traps entirely and instead blinked through the place. While she got hit a few times, she quickly cleared it before finding herself behind yet another door that, once she had got past it, led still further down.

Circumventing some of the traps turned out to be the right decision as she found four more trap rooms after that, each with an increasing number of spears and fire.

This is boring. Not even anything to fight?

The next room, however, contained something slightly different. Ilea found herself wandering into a spacious hall with all manner of plants and trees growing in carefully curated locations. Guardians were stationed on the walls and kneeling near the foliage.

The plants couldn’t grow further in all this time?

Ilea looked upward but couldn’t find the ivy that had been so prevalent on the stone in the residential area. Instead, the various bushes, flowers, and

trees were confined to their designated spots. Like decorations.

“Some of those guardians—” she started, but she was interrupted when one of them swiveled its metallic body and looked at her.

It was a bigger model than usual, but not an unfamiliar one. Its whole torso area was a massive cannon, and the ear-splitting boom that came next woke all the other guardians from their centuries-long rest.

Well shit...

The projectile that sped toward her was almost identical to the ones fired from the smaller ranged machines but was far bigger and presumably deadlier. Ilea smiled and dodged to the side.

“This is gonna be so much”—she jumped again before the slug impacted the ground behind her—“easier with heavy artillery on my side.”

Around a dozen sword guardians moved in on her position while ten heavies and five ranged machines started firing her way. *Not gonna waste this precious experience...*

Ilea blinked a couple of times until she reached one of the heavy ones. She attacked and found that they were much slower than their smaller brethren. She cackled with glee while dodging several blades coming her way, then blinked away as three massive slugs smashed into the group of guardians that had been targeting her.

“Your programming sucks, guys!” she shouted before blinking back into the fray.

Ten minutes later, three of the sword guardians had been reduced to scrap. Then, just when things seemed to be going so well, a poorly executed strike from above created an opening that allowed a sword guardian’s blade to pierce clean through Ilea’s leg, skewering her. It took her a moment to pull free, but it was enough to ensure that a massive slug slammed into her side, crushing a fair number of ribs. Ilea was sent flying into the nearby wall, and only another blink saved her from a follow-up wave of projectiles.

It broke through the ash so easily... Man, what would’ve happened if I didn’t have the skill?

Ilea danced around the slugs flying around the room while healing her injury.

Don’t get too cocky, Ilea. She reminded herself of Dale’s words and breathed in deeply. *Don’t forget you’re not immortal, Ilea.*

But her smile never left her face. In fact, she felt it grow even wider as the intoxicating danger of her situation seeped in again.

She wasn't hit again after that initial mistake, though she did have to flee the room twenty minutes later to regenerate her mana. Moving out and meditating was much faster than using Azarinth Reversal, but she still used the skill sometimes to make sure it would keep leveling up.

The next fight finished up the remaining guardians, and Ilea meditated in the room again while waiting for additional traps or enemies. None came.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 201]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

...

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 204]. For killing an adversary 50 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 148. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 149. 5 stat points awarded.

.....

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 155. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Ash Wielder has reached level 142. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Ash Wielder has reached level 143. 5 stat points awarded.

.....

'ding' Ash Wielder has reached level 149. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Blink reaches 2nd lvl 20

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 14

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 5

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 10

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Form of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 7

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 8

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 7

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 8

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 4

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Ilea jumped up and crashed into the pile of ruined and bent metal that was all that remained of her foes. She rolled over onto her back to face the ceiling with blood still running down her face. She smiled, and metal screeched against the stone floor as the first-ever Taleen metal snow-angel was born.

Turning to the joyful task of spending her new stat points, her main attributes profited again.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 155

- *Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 18*
- *Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 11*
- *Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20*
- *Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 14*
- *Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 5*
- *Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 10*

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 149

- *Active: Shroud of Ash – lvl 11*
- *Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 7*
- *Active: Ash Surge – lvl 6*
- *Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 1*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – lvl 12*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 15*
- *Passive: Heat Perception – lvl 1*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 8*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 8*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 4*

General Skills:

- *Elos Standard language – lvl 5*
- *Identify – lvl 4*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 16*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mental Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Lightning Resistance – lvl 1*

Status:
Vitality: 435
Endurance: 188
Strength: 127
Dexterity: 138
Intelligence: 391
Wisdom: 389

Health: 4011/4350
Stamina: 1398/1880
Mana: 2255/3890

Even though she was still spending points on her attributes, Ilea was noticing less and less of a difference. She was sure there was one, and the numbers reflected it, but a change from ten to a hundred obviously felt more noticeable than one from three hundred to four hundred.

She stood up and stretched before shadow sparring a little, getting used to the changes. *Now I just need a couple more of these rooms and I'll hit level 200 in no time. Edwin, here I come...*

* * *

Ilea walked through the now deserted hall to the only door that led further into the complex from the snow-angel room. There was only the constant noise of gears to break the silence, but she barely noticed that anymore.

A massive door glowed to life at the touch of her mana, and Ilea watched on as a beautiful hallway was revealed behind it. It was just as wide as the hall she'd stood in moments before, but the runes on the walls in here were much more numerous. No trees or other flora decorated this room, but what she did see made Ilea tense up.

Six Centurions were kneeling before her, three on each side of the hallway. Behind them was the most finely decorated door she had seen so far.

What to do...? she wondered as she evaluated her chances. *They don't know my abilities yet and they're at least similar to each other rather than*

new unknown enemies, but six of them? Hmm, I can blink away. They probably won't follow me all the way back. From one to six.

She grinned. *Let's see what happens.*

Ilea walked into the room. She was pretty confident in her ability to escape, as long as she remained close to the hall behind her. So far, none of the guardians had pursued her out of the rooms she'd encountered them in.

As soon as her foot touched the cold stone of the hallway, six sets of cold metal eyes flared to life. Six spears immediately flew her way. Ilea smirked and blinked to the side. The spears vanished, and the Centurions advanced.

Blinking backward, Ilea tried to get away and realized from her earlier Centurion fight that all six spears would miss if she chose random distances and directions to teleport to with each dodge. They couldn't learn her patterns if she didn't have any.

Only two of them followed her out into the snow-angel room, and she escaped from them back through the trap rooms.

Fucking impossible to get any hits in. But the door at the end of that hallway beyond them looked super massive. Definitely want to see what's behind there...

Entering the hall again, two of the Centurions had stayed outside with the decorative plants while the other four remained in the hallway beyond. Ilea breathed in and out before starting to run.

The first spear flew at her and she blinked away. The next spear she dodged by swaying to the side and letting it slide by her. She got closer and closer to the hall before all six of them were upon her. Dodging left and right, Ilea blinked above to avoid the spears that were closing in.

Another six random blinks toward the huge door at the end of the Centurions' hall, and she could finally make out what was on the other side with her perception sphere. There was a thick layer of stone ahead, perhaps twenty meters or so thick, and beyond that she 'saw' open space. Doable with her current range. She blinked through and 'saw' the spears hit the walls in the hallway behind her, but no sound reached her.

Ilea waited there for a while to make sure the Centurions didn't have a way to follow her through the door. It would be just her luck if they could simply open it, rocks and all. After five minutes, she was as sure as she'd get that they didn't have a key and continued onward.

She found herself in a small corridor that led forward. The green glow continued, although this corridor was bereft of decoration and, thankfully, Centurions. Finally, she emerged into a chamber about the size of a tennis court with a ceiling several meters high.

She could see the familiar machinery of traps embedded in the room's walls. More importantly though, there was a small one by one meter hole in the middle of the room that led downward. There didn't appear to be any other exit.

Creepy, but it's not like I came here for nothing.

She blinked right into the hole without touching anything else in the room that would presumably trigger the traps. Upon entering the hole in the ground, Ilea fell.

Darkness engulfed her, and the sensation in the pit of her stomach and the whistling of wind in her ears were the only indications she had that she was moving. The close walls she could see in her sphere were completely uniform without marking or blemish. Distance was impossible to tell as she moved down the shaft. She fell for nearly two full minutes. She definitely would have passed out if she were the Ilea from a year ago.

The walls flew by until she came out into an open space. There was no light, her own body being the only source of slight illumination.

Ilea continued to fall until, finally, the ground entered her sphere of perception some distance away.

Not ground...

She blinked upward to control her descent, then she blinked a bit closer to the still water and touched it with her foot before blinking up again.

Shit! She winced as she perceived the liquid burning through the sole of her boot. *As I thought... Should've used my hand!*

The room was massive, and the first wall, which Ilea found after five minutes of midair healing and blinking, was completely covered by what she recognized as pressure plates. They only stopped around one centimeter above the acid and covered every other surface.

So if anything big enough falls in, if they can recognize a change in the still surface, or if water hits those plates, then something might happen... she thought while blinking backward.

Ilea searched meticulously through the cavernous chamber, first through the middle and then along the walls, until finally, fifteen minutes later and

nearly out of mana, she found an opening in one of the walls. A circular entrance just large enough for her to fit through.

Blinking inside, Ilea was careful to keep herself from touching any of the walls until she finally reached a small hall where there were no more pressure plates.

At least not on the ground...

Occupying the circular room were twelve beautifully carved pedestals, behind which were chests and random items strewn on the ground. There were swords, axes, and other weapons, what looked like heavy plate armor made for someone much smaller than Ilea, and more. Some of the items were little more than piles of rust, and most showed signs of extreme age.

Treasure room?

She noticed that the pedestals themselves held pressure plates, but on top of them was... nothing. A big fat zip.

Oh, except for the very last one.

On it was a gray pyramid-shaped metal object that Ilea felt immensely drawn to. Complex runes were engraved on it, and it shone beautifully in the otherwise dark room, reflecting the little light that came from Ilea's auras.

Now what else do we have around here...

FORTY-EIGHT

Treasures and Fire

With her sphere, Ilea could see everything in the room and even what was within the various chests. She was sure now that the only traps in the room were the pedestals. Except, of course, if there was something new about the mechanisms here that she had never encountered before. She was no engineer, after all.

In the chests, Ilea saw mostly coins. They were full to the brim with gold.

Holy shit. Not that I had money issues, but this is a find for sure...

Several small items hid between the chests. As she'd noticed before, most were warped with age, but a few items remained pristine amongst the rust: some horns, a helmet, a sword, and a few other pieces.

But the most interesting thing in the room was what hid near the wall directly behind the pyramid-shaped object: a skeleton clad in armor.

Ilea slowly walked over to the skeleton, making sure not to even breathe on the pedestals. Crouching down, her auras lit it up a little. The skeleton was small and broad, just as one would imagine a dwarf to be.

So you stayed, hmm? she asked the skeleton in her head as she slowly extended her hand. Touching the skeleton, it immediately turned to dust. Ilea reacted at once and, in one fluid motion, she caught the falling armor and clothing that still remained intact. Only dust fell to the ground as she carefully lowered the gear.

Apologies... she thought as she put down the armor. She identified the gear and smiled.

[Legate Guardian Armor – Rare Quality]

The armor didn't reflect any light, so Ilea had no idea what color it was. Her sphere gave her only an outline. She moved it a little further away.

Other than the armor, which seemed to consist of five individual pieces, there was also a necklace on the ground. A noise resounded inside Ilea's head as soon as she touched it.

[Legate Guardian Necklace – Ancient Quality] – Would you like to claim the Legate Guardian Necklace?

What the...?

Before she could even complete the thought, she had confirmed the question.

You have claimed the Legate Guardian Necklace

She held the necklace in her hand. It had a thin metal string, and on it hung a small piece of metal that had a similar form to a Taleen guardian's head. It didn't look exactly like one, but it was the closest thing Ilea could compare it to. Holding it in her hand, she concentrated on it once more.

[Legate Guardian Necklace – Ancient Quality] – [Storage capacity at 7/250]

“Are you kidding me!” she exclaimed loudly.

But she immediately regretted her outburst as she saw some gears click in the walls.

Oh fuck. Guess we're out of time...

Ilea willed mana into the necklace while touching the armor on the ground. It vanished, but Ilea knew for a fact that it was inside the storage necklace as a result of her connection with it. Its use and function had appeared instantly in her mind upon claiming it.

She had definitely fucked up by talking out loud, but she couldn't help but grin anyway. She put her aura-enhanced speed to good use as she ran

around the room and grabbed the two horns, the helmet, and the sword and made them vanish as well.

The noise of gears clicking and whirring became louder and louder as she emptied everything inside the chests into her shiny new necklace. It had immediately shrunk down so as not to hang too loosely around her neck.

“Fuck all of you!” she shouted as the last of the coins vanished into her necklace.

Luckily, the coins barely took any mana to store, whereas putting the armor away had taken up as much as a use of Destruction might have. She checked her mana and found it regenerating normally.

So there's no cost to keep everything there, just one for storing things.

She heard the awful groaning noises of metal upon metal and various pieces of machinery coming to life, and, just after she grabbed the pyramid-shaped object, the sound of rushing water entered her ears.

“Shit, acid!”

She made the pyramid vanish into her necklace.

Luckily, she had meditated before investigating the room as that act used up over a thousand points of mana. *What the hell is this thing?*

But there was no time to question it as she exited the treasury with a Blink. Below her, she could already see the acid rising – and it was rising fast. Blinking up, Ilea reached the hole five seconds later and continued upward.

After blinking for half a minute up through the pressure plate-laced acid pit, she found that the original opening was gone. Only smooth stone remained. She was pretty sure it was the exact spot she had come down from.

Oh fuck no...

She started punching with all her might. “Come *on!*”

The stone readily gave in against her Destruction, and pieces of it fell down into the acid. She could hear it splashing and slopping as it rose, but she wasn't sure just how close it was. A few seconds later, she saw the liquid within her sphere.

Her punches rained into the stone as she forced her way through. Despite her devastating power, her efforts were too slow, and the acid soon reached the now sealed ceiling and pushed upward into the small opening Ilea had created, closing in within her sphere as she blinked to remain airborne.

Fuck fuck fuck was all her thoughts consisted of as she continued pummeling through stone. She couldn't see above her tunnel yet, but her Blink ability reached over ten meters further than her sphere skill.

Digging until the acid was about to reach her, Ilea held her legs close to her chest and blinked upward, appearing inside the room above. Breathing out with a huge sigh of relief, she landed on the floor and heard a distinct *click*.

Oh, for fuck's sake...

She had activated the traps. The room's exits sealed shut, and Ilea found herself staring into an array of tubes emerging from the wall with impossible speed to spew green flame at her.

She blinked out of the room as fast as possible, arriving in the corridor between the trap room and the Centurions. But even blinking wasn't quite fast enough for her to escape unscathed as the flame briefly engulfed her. Her skin melted immediately, and she turned off her perception of pain to heal the damage.

Now safely outside the room, Ilea promptly fell to the ground, breathing heavily while Reconstruction restored her body. She checked the necklace but found it completely unharmed. All her clothes and leather armor had been atomized though, and even her mace had started melting from the split-second touch of the flame.

* * *

"Fuck, that was close..." she muttered, having finally healed her wounds. The fire had moved faster than a Centurion's attack. "What the hell was all that? That was way more deadly than just a bunch of spears..."

Still, despite her words, she could not keep a smile from creeping its way across her face as she played with her new necklace. It had remained absolutely untouched by the flames.

Can't wait to find out more about this thing. Glad I could get all the stuff in the treasure room, but this is definitely the biggest win ...

"My precious!" she shouted, lifting the necklace up. "And I won't have to share any of this stuff. Fuck yeah!"

She was giddy with excitement at the prospect of inspecting all the things she'd got, but she tried to calm down a little and think about her next

steps.

Meditate first...

Consciously breathing in and out helped a lot to calm her adrenaline-laden body. A couple of minutes later, she had recovered a fair bit.

Might as well look at everything right here. Can't imagine a safer place to be than between acid and green murder fire and six Centurions...

Ilea removed the necklace from her neck and studied it in her hand. Sadly, despite having now claimed it, there was no additional information about it to what she had already seen.

[Legate Guardian Necklace – Ancient Quality] – [Storage capacity at 21/250]

Ilea tried to see what was in the necklace, and immediately new knowledge came into her head. She didn't instantaneously know about all the things inside, but she could look through them mentally. Items she knew were inside could be accessed rather easily, appearing with a simple thought.

She tried it first with the sword and continued to make it appear and disappear for a while. *This is so cool!*

After checking her mana, she noticed it only took her a tiny amount to make the sword either disappear or appear. The necklace's capacity went up or down by one upon removal or storage.

The actual identification of the sword was a little underwhelming though.

[Legate Guardian Sword – Rare Quality]

It was a silvery green short sword that looked a little like what Romans would have used. *A gladius...* Ilea thought, playing around with it a little. She didn't have a sword skill, but with her high stats in Dexterity, it didn't look *that* stupid when she thrust the sword through the air.

Rare quality, whatever that means. Gold is rare too though, and that would probably break immediately. Oh well...

She shrugged and made the sword disappear again. Removing the armor pieces next, she placed them on the ground in front of her.

[Legate Guardian Armor – Rare Quality]

Each individual piece was similarly identified, with nothing surprising about them. It was all made out of some sort of fabric with a lot of the silvery green metal added. The problem was that it was obviously made for a dwarf.

Sadly, I'm not one meter fifty tall and just as wide...

She made the armor vanish again. She noticed that it took a little more mana to summon and store the armor, but compared to her total it was negligible. The next obvious thing to look at was the helmet she'd found.

[Legate Guardian Helmet – Rare Quality]

Unsurprisingly, it was made from the same metal. It was designed to cover nearly all of the wearer's face with only tiny holes for eyes, but when she tried to put it on, it was far too loose on her head.

Sadly, unlike the necklace, the armor didn't seem to have the ability to change its size according to the wearer. Ilea had tried the whole set on just to make sure. Looking down at her naked body, she sighed.

I'm gonna store so many sets of clothes in this thing...

Next were the horns. They looked incredibly beautiful, reflecting the dull green light on their complex metal workings.

[Taleen Ceremonial Horn – High Quality – Used in Taleen celebrations]

Great, I'd hoped for a buff or a summoning talisman. What does all that even mean? Oh well.

Ilea knew without taking out any of the coins that she had gathered 2,683 gold coins from the treasury.

"Guess money won't be an issue for a while. How much is a house?" Nobody answered her question.

Seven storage units in the necklace had already been occupied before she had got it. Checking them, she found that one was a perfectly preserved book written in a language she didn't understand. There was also a set of clothes for a dwarf, cooking equipment, and a tent.

How is that seven? I'll find out in time, I guess.

She added just the cooking pot and found it was one unit. The ladle was another.

So separate things are definitely units... What about the gold then?

By moving a bunch of coins in and out of the necklace, she realized all the gold counted as a single stack.

The book is the most interesting one. Maybe Splicer can read it, or someone in that Foundation?

When she got back up, she saw her mana had reached its maximum again in the meantime as she hadn't stopped using Meditation.

"Oh wait! I forgot one thing."

Using one thousand mana to get out the pyramid-shaped object, she held it in her hands. There were hundreds of complicated runes carved into the metal.

It's beautiful. Maybe I can use it to decorate my place in the temple or something.

[The Tungsten Key – Ancient Quality]

Well yeah, with that description, it's no good for anything other than a bloody decoration. Where's my quest?

Throwing the pyramid-shaped key up and catching it a couple of times, she stored it again and continued to meditate, two thousand mana down.

Guess it's a good way to use up mana, if that helps in any way...

The necklace rested safely on her neck, and after she had reached maximum mana again, she prepared to leave.

Ilea blinked back toward the waiting Centurions, escaping similarly to how she had crossed the room before. One seemingly random spear nearly got her right before she blinked out of the second hall after grabbing her backpack. Nearly. But Ilea continued on unscathed.

Reaching the Great Hall entrance, Ilea checked cautiously if any of the other adventurers had reached this far already, but everything was still undisturbed. She had an idea just then and placed some destroyed guardians at the half-melted and bent gates to the Great Hall that would have to be moved upon coming in.

So, now the other entrances...

Ilea removed the dwarven clothes from her storage necklace and looked at them skeptically. *Better than running around naked, I suppose.*

Sniffing them, she couldn't find anything wrong with them and dressed. The pants left her calves and ankles exposed and were far too broad, but luckily there was a belt. *I don't actually dislike the style.*

The shirt was short too, but still covered the essentials. The clothes were, unsurprisingly, green. Testing a little, Ilea was able to store her whole backpack in the necklace and found that it only took up one unit in the necklace.

So I can put stuff into other stuff. Neat. It's weird to see someone without a pack though...

She then stored her notebook and its leather pouch, which each took up one unit as well. One of her two canteens of water was stored too, followed by her cloak and Hound Master's Trinket.

Adding the metal pen and a good portion of the food made the storage capacity reach only 31/250. *That's a lot of space. I wonder what Aliana's ring has...*

She put on her backpack again, which now only held food, one canteen, and her adventurer badge, and walked through the first door on the left, where she was met by yet another staircase down.

With this necklace, I can have second breakfast at any point of the day and anywhere...

Ilea smiled happily at her new trinket while playing with the gladius. She could store it or summon it in her hand because her neck was touching the necklace at all times. *Can I...?* she thought, and it turned out that, yes, she could make the blade appear on top of her foot.

On top of her head worked as well but no further away than a couple of millimeters from her body or the clothes that were above it. *Could someone wear like a ton of armor with fifty swords embedded into it as a sort of hedgehog tactic? I bet enough gold and a good smith could make something like that...*

Her thoughts trailed off as she reached the bottom of the staircase. A chasm opened before her that led onward farther than she could see. Ilea blinked through the room with nearly thirty uses of the skill and found that there was no door on the other side or any other way to go further. Her sphere couldn't detect anything behind the stone wall either.

She clung to the wall by slamming her outstretched hand into the stone. *There's nothing further up, so there's only one way to go...*

Ilea let herself fall. Every hundred meters or so, she would punch into the wall again to slow her descent and look around.

This chasm is stupid deep... and the other one before the Great Hall must be right over there... she thought, looking at the wall to her left.

A couple of minutes of falling later, she saw some stone protruding outward into the chasm. Landing on it, she was greeted by a small stone archway, but she didn't go through the enticing entrance immediately and instead looked down over the edge of the outcrop.

Can't see anything... but man, this means there could be more secret entrances down in all the other chasms too...

Stepping away from the drop, Ilea went through the archway.

FORTY-NINE

On the Trail of History

“Stone Wall!” Jeremy shouted as the Taleen machine’s swords stuck into his hastily built defense. At the same time, lightning and fire joined together to slam into the creature, but it wasn’t enough.

Arrows flew over his head to strike the ranged machines a little further away. Five of them had ambushed his group while two of the deadly bladed machines attacked directly.

“Where’s the backup?” he shouted, but he didn’t dare look back. Stone spikes stopped the sword guardian before him for a couple of seconds as more spells rained down onto the monster.

They were a group of five, sent in to explore one of the many roads in this Taleen dungeon. The full group of nearly forty adventurers had at first tried to lure out the machines into the more open squares to deal with them using their combined power, but the creatures wouldn’t follow them further than a certain point.

At the moment, there were three groups of five exploring different roads with orders to fall back to the last square should they be overwhelmed. They would go in and use up all their abilities to deal as much damage as possible and then fall back again. Dedicated tanks combined with magic support could stop the sword guardians in their tracks for half a minute or more while mages and rangers delivered their best attacks.

In the meantime, rangers or rogues would distract the ranged attackers with smoke bombs, arrows, or even teleporting skills. It wasn’t a very quick method to deal with the machines but was quite effective nonetheless. They

had only lost three people early on because the groups sent into the streets were too big and the people had gotten in each other's way.

Most of the adventurers were around level 150 to 170, with some individuals even exceeding that. It was certainly not an ordinary adventurer group, but considering a high noble had paid them and planned this expedition for months, it wasn't surprising.

Jeremy was proud of his skills. He was level 172 in his main class Ground Caller and level 166 in his second class Heavy Paladin, which made him one of the group's strongest members. He was a highly effective tank and crowd controller with some limited healing abilities.

They certainly needed those as only two people in the whole group were dedicated healers. They had been brought in from other cities, just like many of the other higher-leveled specialists. Only two other people besides the healers had some sort of ability to treat people other than themselves, Jeremy being one of them.

Some had an ability to heal their own wounds, but those skills were often limited or bound to killing or harming an enemy to trigger.

As such, he felt the responsibility. But, just as much, he felt ready.

"Switch!" was all Jeremy heard as a lance of ice hit the guardian before him, expanding into enormous crystals that encased the target.

Jeremy retreated with the other four party members who had now used up all their energy. He deflected two rounds fired at him with his heavy shield as another tank took his place.

"Good job," a woman moving past him said as she raised her massive two-handed sword and shouted at the machines ahead, instantly gaining their attention.

Reckless...

Still, he hadn't seen the woman injured even once in the past day. It was strange seeing so many foreigners. Jeremy had travelled a bit, but not far. Being a Dawntree native, there was plenty of action near home. He had joined a couple of different adventurer teams and expeditions into Karth in the past couple of years. In fact, he loved investigating old ruins and finding timeless artifacts left behind by long-lost civilizations.

This passion was what had led him to teach history at the College of Magic in his spare time. That was decent work, but he certainly preferred the exploration his job brought with it. Clearing out guardians or pest infestations was part of the job as well – but he certainly didn't like that

one. After all of the fights he'd been through, however, he wasn't the worst at it either.

While monsters were diverse, there was something to be said about the Taleen guardians. They were far more dangerous than most other creatures he had faced in their level range. *And they were made by the Taleen.* He had only been to a single other Taleen dungeon, which had been small and already cleared out. But the experience had stayed with him.

Many were interested in the dungeons they had left behind, and not just because of the machines. He knew the ancient dwarves had found a way to teleport long distances. He could only imagine the possibilities if such a feat could be replicated.

Getting back to the camp, he and his group reported their progress and then went to eat. Next to the forty adventurers, there were cooks, smiths, tailors, and many other utility workers who had been brought too.

Even managed to hire an alchemist, he thought as he looked at the old man with greasy, disheveled hair. *Commissioned healing potions... what a luxury.*

A dedicated healer was certainly miles above what a potion could do, but saving a life was saving a life. Jeremy got some food from a cook and then walked through a Taleen house inside their barricaded camp.

He looked around at the stone structure from within. *Fascinating...* It was the first actual Taleen ruin he'd been in, having jumped at the opportunity of joining the expedition. The other one had felt more like an outpost, but there were many theories on how the dwarves had expanded. Nobody knew why they had gone.

Lucky I had friends on the Forkspear payroll. Would never have known about the expedition otherwise. His small abilities in healing were what had landed him the spot in the end.

He sat on a window ledge and ate while looking at the dark, greenish scenery before him.

It's just a tunnel system but somehow they managed to make it feel like a city...

"Healer!"

A shout made him drop his food to the floor and jump down immediately from the window. Running up to a bloodied man dragging an adventurer behind him, he ignored the obviously injured but standing man,

a freckled boy who looked barely older than sixteen, and applied his limited healing spells to the man on the ground.

Blood obscured the warrior's features, and he had several deep cuts to his chest. The guardian had gone right through his thick plate armor.

Jeremy's spell managed to stabilize the bloodied man enough for the mundane healer to do his job when he arrived a minute later.

"Thanks..." The freckled adventurer who had dragged the dying man touched Jeremy's shoulder before he went back and got a fresh helping of food.

Another close one... At these levels, many of them could die in a couple of hits from their enemies. Any mistake would cost them dearly, even with perfect group compositions, plans, and healers.

"Three scouts have returned," someone said next to him as he jogged into the square to check what the rogues had discovered. Jeremy turned around as well but continued eating as he followed more slowly. *Only three have returned? Five were sent a couple hours ago... This whole expedition would already be deemed as a disaster by most standards.*

In fact, Jeremy thought it was only the pay and the fact that it was a *Taleen* dungeon that seemed to justify the deaths suffered so far.

"More guardians here, here, and here," one of the rogues said, pointing at specific parts on the big map on a table in the square as Jeremy approached. Someone else marked the spots before nodding to the second rogue, who had something more interesting to say.

"I've found destroyed guardians all the way through here." He pointed to the map after comparing it with a smaller one he had with him. "I only spotted isolated guardians in these streets but decided not to go further."

"How many destroyed?" asked Inström, one of the expedition leaders.

Jeremy found the man a little intimidating. He was a level 190 lightning mage at least and held himself in a way that screamed power and confidence. Looking at his decorated robe, Jeremy was sure the man was at least wealthy, perhaps of noble blood, but he had never worked with him before, nor seen him fight.

"Two to ten in each street and square. Both sword and ranged. Some dented, others melted. Most of them show precise cuts. As I said, it went on, but I decided to report back before I went further in."

Agor, another of the expedition leaders, nodded, though his dark horned armor and helmet didn't let any of his thoughts slip.

“We’re not the first ones down here then. Someone broke through before us. The question is if it was a thousand years ago or more recently.”

“It’s hard to tell down here,” the lightning mage said. “We have to assume it was more recent though, as other Forkspears have definitely sent people down here before. That healer we saw a couple days ago might’ve only been a small part of a bigger expedition.”

“We should’ve questioned her,” Agor said.

“And anger someone in a big family? No. And what does it change if someone *was* here before us? We are perfectly equipped for this and can retreat at any time should something insurmountable appear,” Inström responded.

“They left a path though...” This time it was Mr. Horim who spoke, the swordmaster and third leader of the expedition who had previously remained quiet. He seemed to be in his late fifties, but Jeremy assumed the man was much older.

“Whoever they are or were, they seem to have cleared a path,” Mr. Horim said, thoughtfully scratched his neatly trimmed beard. “Judging by the streets chosen, they either knew where they were going or simply charged through like some kind of maniac.”

His words quieted the others.

“I vote that we stay and continue as planned. I won’t gamble on them having a specific target,” Inström said, but Agor shook his head.

“We’re already surrounded. If things continue like this we’ll have to resupply soon, and we will lose more and more while morale drops. I say we follow the path. There aren’t many guardians we’ve seen so far that would follow someone more than a couple streets away.

“As long as we don’t make too much noise, we won’t alert them to our presence. We’ll meet either more guardians at the end, some dead adventurers, or a cleared path to... well, something,” Agor concluded, and Mr. Horim nodded.

“I agree with Agor. Should the road lead to anything but despair, we would at least save some time and maybe lives.” Mr. Horim stopped stroking his beard then and put both hands on the table.

“What about the people who are here for the experience?” Inström said, but the old man simply waved his hand.

“Then they may return again,” he answered. “The guardians have been here for a thousand years or longer, so they may wait another month or year.

We'll put it to a vote as soon as the current streets are cleared."

Jeremy was sure of his answer already and was glad the leaders had decided to be open about the plans. They put most of the bigger decisions to a general vote, although the three leaders had a veto right. He didn't think any of them would use it for this though; as Mr. Horim had said, there was no detriment to choosing an already cleared path.

He smiled as he looked at the busy square that had become the expedition's camp.

I wonder what we'll find...

* * *

Ilea dodged several spears that shot out from the wall opposite her. Bending this way and that, she sometimes even deflected them with her bare hands while slowly advancing.

She had decided to tackle the last couple of trap rooms without using her Blink skill. She thought she'd started to rely on it too much, and even though it was an absolutely amazing skill, she had to learn how to deal with things the normal way instead of just teleporting behind them. Seeing as these spear traps weren't very dangerous to her, it was the perfect opportunity.

After entering the doorway in the chasm, the ancient dwarves had confronted her with some new but generally much less deadly traps than the acid or green fire she'd encountered in the treasury. Sadly, she hadn't found any guardians to fight, but by sticking to evasion without blinking, it didn't get boring either.

Two spears closed in on her as she took one light step to the side to have them both sail past her head, one of them scratching slightly into her ashen mist. Reaching the door at the far end of the current trap room, she punched it three times and entered through the resulting rubble-strewn opening.

Another one down. That's five already, she thought as the familiar noise of notifications reverberated inside her head.

'ding' Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 6

'ding' Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 150. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ New skill available for Ash Wielder

After her experience with the acid and green fire, Ilea decided this level’s stat points belonged to Vitality.

Level 150 already – that certainly didn’t take very long. And a new skill, let me guess... ‘Ember Fireball’?

She stopped in her tracks as she continued reading.

‘ding’ You have met the following conditions: Reached level 150 in Ash Wielder class. Reached at least lvl 15 in Ash and Ember Manipulation.

Passive: Ashen Wings – lvl 1

Your understanding of Ash Wielder allows you to form wings from ash and ember. Target your enemies from above and close the distance to deliver your wrath.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen Magic

You have no more free slots for Passive skills in your second class. Please choose a skill to be replaced by Ashen Wings or choose not to gain the skill.

Ilea shakily leaned on the wall nearby, her hand digging into the stone while she quickly thought through her skills. In the end, she decided on Heat Perception, and the skill was replaced by something she’d been dreaming about for quite some time.

Wings...

She smiled, blinking back through the five trap rooms she’d come through. Coming to a stop at the small ledge over the chasm, she activated her new skill.

Ash sprouted from her back, and she looked left and right to see dark wings quickly extending for several meters on each side. They were formed

from ash and shrouded at their edges. A slight glow of ember could sometimes be seen between them.

Ilea could feel them upon activation. Like a third and fourth arm. The skill helped her move them and understand how they worked. She moved them toward her back and then closed them around her as if to hug herself.

“Ah! I love you...” she said from within her blanket of warm ash. They were a very dark gray, nearing on black, just like Shroud of Ash. “Now, let’s see how this goes...”

She extended the wings again. Moving them up and down, Ilea found the process rather instinctual as she slowly lifted off the ground. The small magic wings could easily carry her human form, whereas natural physics would have needed a massive wingspan to bear the same weight.

Ilea laughed like a madwoman as she got higher and higher. First one meter, then ten. The wings felt light to her, barely a distraction. She smirked and moved forward, soaring directly into the opposite wall of the chasm. Like a baby bird thrown from its nest, she fell, dazed, for ten meters before catching herself again and stabilizing.

Nearly thirty minutes of trying later, Ilea could move forward steadily. *Flying life ain’t easy...*

Her wings were rather powerful in acceleration, and since the walls were made from the now familiar strong white stone, blood was now running down her smiling face and arms as she had refused to heal her flight training injuries.

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches lvl 2

Heh. Ilea grinned even wider and continued.

Over the next three hours, as she figured it would have looked to observers, a winged monster fell downward into the chasm below only to spread its wings to slow down and twirl several times in midair. Ilea used her momentum from falling to quickly gain height again and speed upward at an incredibly high velocity before landing on a nearby ledge.

Sitting down, she summoned some bread and meat in her hands and began eating.

“I’m getting better at this. Holy shit though, without the skill’s help, I might’ve just fallen down and died...” Ilea said while chewing.

After finishing her quick meal, she got back to training. A couple more hours later, the skill had leveled up to level 3 and Ilea had gotten used to the feeling of flying. The last hour had been pure joy compared to the previous hours of high concentration and face-first wall banging.

She soared through the dark at an incredible speed, even beginning to sprinkle in Blinks. She slowly got used to the feeling, trying to hit the walls with precise punches and kicks as she passed them. Ilea especially liked to accelerate to full speed before slamming knee-first into the wall.

Flying through the full length of the chasm, Ilea thought her flight speed might be even faster than her full sprint, although she wasn't as maneuverable in the air because her wings didn't have the stopping power her legs did. *Preferable to fight on the ground then*, she concluded as she continued to laugh and twirl through the air.

Activating the wings didn't use up much mana, and keeping them didn't seem to have a noticeable mana cost either. As long as she didn't constantly reform them, they weren't much of a consideration resource-wise. Her stamina did sink faster, but she simply attributed that to the low level of the skill and her difficulty in using it.

Another two hours later, Ilea likely wasn't yet ready to fight a flying sword guardian, should something like that exist, but using the skill to get from point A to point B, with some skillfully executed twirls and evasions included, had certainly become possible.

She landed on the ledge and put a hand to her chin.

"Awwww, I really, really want to continue, but I should use my time alone down here productively..."

She thought back to the adventurers she'd seen back near the entrance of the dungeon. A lot of them had shown question marks when she had tried to use Identify on them, which meant they probably had people around Edwin's level there.

Something still tells me Edwin's gang were a bit different though. Standard adventurers might not be as efficient as the psycho crew, even if they are the same level. But I should probably get going all the same.

Obviously, she continued to enjoy her new wings for another hour.

Two more hours after that, she finally stopped and went back through the still-activated trap rooms, simply blinking through the ones she'd already crossed without using the skill. Another three rooms with basic spear and fire traps followed. Thankfully, none of the fire was green. Ilea

worked through them without using Blink and finished them even faster than before, still enthused by her new wings.

“I have wings!” she shouted as she activated them and caught a spear flying toward her with her bare hand. She dropped it and heard the metal weapon clang to the ground as she continued barefoot through the door.

On the other side was a gigantic hall with a high ceiling and plenty of the expected glowing green runes. It was quite densely occupied too. Ilea smiled and slammed a fist into her palm, all her buffs coming to life.

“Well hello there, darlings!” she said to the waking guardians that carpeted the ground and walls of the otherwise empty room. Even some turrets were installed.

“I’m just here to do some security system checks!” she called out while walking onward and dodging three slugs.

With the fight in the hall before the treasure room still somewhat fresh in her mind, Ilea took her time to meticulously dismantle every single guardian without taking too big a risk. Two heavy ranged ones were present, and the turrets helped as well by battering the sword guardians around her.

Blinking through the mass of enemies, she destroyed numerous sword guardians and even more ranged ones in the span of twenty-five minutes before blinking out to restore her mana. No sword guardians remained in the room when she re-entered and took care of the two heavy ranged guardians. Before she worked on the turrets though, she had an idea and blinked back outside to regain her lost mana and check her messages.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 40 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 201]. For killing an adversary 40 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 156. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 160. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 151. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 154. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 5

“Levels... levels for me,” she sang, dancing a small victory dance. She put the stat points into Endurance and Dexterity to help improve her flying further, then walked back into the hall.

Activating her skills, she let the first slug from a turret hit her. It didn’t break through her Shroud of Ash and only did marginal damage. Smirking, her wings extended, and she lifted into the air. The other nine turrets aimed at her as well, and her training began.

Dodging the slugs on the ground had become easy enough, but in the air, it was a completely different challenge. Ilea soon learned that her wings being hit wouldn’t actually damage her, but it could create quickly closing holes in the ash, which lessened her stability in the air.

She got hit a lot in the first thirty minutes of her training and had to leave to actually heal herself rather than because her mana was low. The next three attempts were each better than the last, and she even gained a level in Ashen Wings and Eyes of Ash. At that point, Ilea was able to dodge all slugs fired from the ten turrets using only her wings.

Now let’s try something a little more offensive.

Ilea flew at high speed into one of the turrets, her knee easily bending the metal upon impact, destroying the target with a single hit. The others

were quickly dispatched as well until nothing but bent metal and cracks in the walls and ceiling remained.

She gently landed on the ground, and her wings disappeared.

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Turret – lvl 160]

...

‘ding’ You have defeated [Taleen Turret – lvl 160]

No levels eh? Guess I’ll have to find stronger enemies than that...

She walked onward into the complex, leaving only a roomful of rubble and metallic corpses behind.

FIFTY

Ashen Healer

Ilea was granted her wish in the next room when she came upon a beautiful large cave with a white crystal at the top, much like the room she had found with Felicia's group. In the middle of the room was another pond, but this one was much larger than the one before. A massive rock jutted out in the middle.

On the very top of it stood a Centurion. Ilea breathed out at the sight and checked the rest of the room. *No other guardians...* she thought before quickly checking her status.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 160

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 18***
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 20***
- Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 14***
- Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 11***
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20***
- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 14***
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 6***
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 10***

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 154

- Active: Shroud of Ash – lvl 12***
- Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 7***
- Active: Ash Surge – lvl 6***
- Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 1***
- Active: Wave of Ember – lvl 13***
- Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 15***
- Passive: Ashen Wings – lvl 4***
- Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 10***
- Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 9***
- Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 5***

General Skills:

- Elos Standard language – lvl 5***
- Identify – lvl 4***
- Meditation – 2nd lvl 14***
- Poison Resistance – lvl 16***
- Heat Resistance – lvl 14***
- Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2***
- Mental Resistance – lvl 5***
- Fear Resistance – lvl 1***
- Water Resistance – lvl 5***
- Wind Resistance – lvl 3***
- Lightning Resistance – lvl 1***

Status:

Vitality: 440

Endurance: 213

Strength: 127

Dexterity: 158

Intelligence: 391

Wisdom: 389

Health: 4363/4400

Stamina: 2048/2130

Mana: 2580/3890

She was nearly thirty levels higher compared to her fight against the single Centurion in the teleportation room. Additionally, she had gained several levels in a lot of skills, not to mention wings. She shrugged and started walking.

Might as well give it a shot...

She spread her wings, and, flying closer to the Centurion, the machine woke from its slumber and aimed its spear.

And so it starts...

With her flying form, the thrown spear was easily dodged. Ilea dove quickly, but her descending kick was blocked by the Centurion's outstretched hand. The spear materialized in its other hand, closing in, but Ilea dodged the thrust by darting backward again with a flap of her ash-colored wings.

The spear was thrown again, and again she dodged. She sped up just as she had before and released Destruction and Wave of Ember into the outstretched arm.

It won't be this simple though...

Her thought was confirmed on her third try of the same tactic as the Centurion didn't summon his spear but instead grabbed at her leg with both hands. She managed to release her spells, but the machine powered through and squeezed her shin, nearly breaking the bone.

Still, being grabbed by the automaton, however painful, served to anchor her within easy striking distance of its head. Five quick punches with all her offensive skills blasted into the creature, rocking the metal before it let go of her leg with one hand.

Three more punches landed as the Centurion summoned its spear and thrust at the annoying human whom it still held in one of its hands. Ilea's wings moved with their full force as she twisted her leg and torso. She narrowly avoided the spear, which sliced across her shoulder instead. Activating Azarinth Reversal, Ilea started pumping continuous destructive mana into the machine through the leg it was still holding.

Another five thrusts followed while her destructive mana flowed into the creature. Ilea managed to narrowly dodge three of them, but two actually pierced deep into her torso. Instinctively, she had moved her body in such a way as to make the thrusts miss her vital organs.

Suffering from Ilea's destructive mana, the machine apparently didn't deem it worth it to continue this line of attack and let go of her leg. Ilea

immediately blinked upward as another thrust rent the air she had just vacated. Deactivating Azarinth Reversal, she started healing her wounds and looked at the Centurion.

I think I might have this... she thought, bending her body out of the way as the spear was thrown again.

Another three throws later, she was fully healed and advanced again. The fraction of a second the creature needed to summon its spear was enough for her to land a kick. Even though it blocked all her hits, the skills that didn't rely on kinetic force did their damage. Ilea was lucky that the majority of her damage came from non-kinetic energies. *Mana intrusion baby.*

She dodged another throw. The creature grabbed her legs again, and she responded by channeling mana into it as before. This time though, the Centurion didn't aim its spear at her body where she could dodge its attacks but plunged it straight into her ankle, just above where it held her.

The spear went through her Shroud of Ash and cut deeply into her leg, but she still channeled mana and moved in closer. Punches rained down on the machine's head as the second spear thrust sliced through her shin completely, severing her foot. Ilea blinked away, wincing at the pain and barely dodging the inevitable spear thrown at her.

Checking her health, she noticed that only about fifteen percent of it had gone after the attack.

Well, I haven't put this to the test yet...

Ilea channeled Reconstruction into her leg while dodging another throw. She was sure that she could simply close the bleeding wound in a matter of a couple of dozen seconds, but she instead concentrated on regrowing it.

I really hope this works, or life is going to be far more difficult... Maybe I could become a pirate...

New bone had started to form when pain ripped through her at an intensity she hadn't felt since the demon's mind attack some time ago. Ilea stopped moving involuntarily and had to blink away to dodge the next throw. *That was something else...*

She activated her second stage Pain Tolerance ability and continued healing. Dodging the thrown spears wasn't very hard anymore, and Ilea thought it good practice to do it while healing.

Fifteen minutes later, her foot was back, and she tried moving it. *Doesn't seem weird...* Reactivating the feeling of pain again, she felt a

strong tingle in the new foot, but otherwise there was nothing abnormal.

Guess that kinda justifies the whole class being classified as a healer class. With this ability, the rest kinda pales in comparison...

With her body once more intact, she moved in on the Centurion again.

The machine had learned that holding her didn't help and simply blocking her with its hands didn't either. Damage would come either way. A while later, with Ilea now feeling sure of her victory, the Centurion stopped throwing its spear and held it just like the one in the teleportation room had before.

"Oh no you don't..." she said, advancing once more. Blinking around the creature, her hits were blocked by the spear and her destructive spells weren't hitting the target either. Using Ash Surge, she clouded the machine's sight but found it to be only slightly slowed by the spell. It quickly moved out of the cloud and away from the rock they had fought on all this time.

Ilea blinked in close to the ground and kicked at one of the creature's legs. The hit landed right before the butt of its spear crashed into her and sent her flying. She tumbled and slid to a halt before cocking her head slightly. The spear sliced past her, missing by the slimmest margin.

Her grin widened, and she showed pearly white teeth as she ran in again. Keeping the creature moving with Ash Surge and changing from Blink attacks to aerial attacks or simply rushing in from the ground turned out to be the best way to go as, time and time again, a single hit was landed as the creature got more and more defensive.

Its health must've reached a certain threshold... Ilea thought, then she checked her own resources. *But so has my mana.* She ground her teeth in frustration and flew out of the room. *Let's hope it can't heal at least, same as the other guardians.*

After meditating for a while, she flew back into the room toward the Centurion and laughed at its condition.

"No self-repair, eh T-1000?" she asked mockingly as she continued her assault. She connected with a punch and was thrown back, only to repeat the process again and again.

Nearly fifteen minutes of fighting later, she felt something change. Seeing the Centurion change its grip on the handle again, she instinctively blinked away. A second later, the machine was upon her.

She dodged the spear thrust and punched with her right hand. The hit landed on the Centurion's torso, but at the same time, its fist rammed into her chest. She was thrown back, her abdominals heavily bruised by the attack.

The Centurion immediately threw its spear and charged at her on its six legs. The spear flew past as the machine attacked her hand to hand, ignoring any hits she landed on it. The fight continued like this as blows were traded until Ilea had to blink away and fly up out of its reach to heal her severely damaged body.

Blood dripped to the ground below as the machine never stopped throwing its spear. Once she was fully healed again, Ilea moved back in.

I'm close now...

She grew more defensive as she dodged the crazed machine's frenzied attacks that no longer showed any regard for its own health. Two minutes later, Ilea hit the creature with a solid right hook and readied herself for a reciprocal strike that didn't come.

Instead, the creature grabbed her again. Her mana immediately flowed through it, and her fists beat into its torso. The machine grabbed her with both arms and squeezed her to its metal shell in a monstrous hug.

This is new...

In that moment, her perception sped up, and her movements slowed down tremendously. Her eyes widened as her Blink failed to activate. A few frantic punches against its head left little impression on the machine. Ilea gritted her teeth before she put all her strength into her wings and pushed against the creature with all six limbs, straining her muscles as she groaned.

There was no hope of escape. Only the bullet-like speed gifted by her ability had allowed her even this small struggle. Whatever was coming, she was going to have to tank.

Ilea only had one crazy idea of how to mitigate the damage. She pushed with all her aura-enhanced strength, screaming defiance. A full second passed, and she created a distance of about half a meter between the machine's torso and her own.

Let's hope this works.

Willing mana into her necklace, Ilea summoned as much of the Legate Guardian Armor in front of her as she could fit into the space. The respective pieces appeared in front of the body parts they would normally be worn on.

For what it was worth, she also summoned the dwarf's tent behind the armor and the cooking pot in front of her head as she leaned back to accommodate both it and the helmet. Luckily, the space she had created was enough, and just as the two seconds of her second stage Azarinth Perception passed, everything had materialized.

Then Ilea activated Reconstruction on herself, stopping its reversal and the channel into the creature.

A deafening boom and brilliant white light destroyed Ilea's eardrums and burned through her retinas as she was blown backward. Explosive heat and shrapnel cut into the dwarven armor as it was pushed into her, breaking through her Shroud of Ash and destroying bones and organs. The tent was shredded to nothing as if it hadn't even existed.

Ilea was jettisoned backward, and she tumbled for nearly fifty meters before slapping hard against the wall with a sickening wet sound of blood and viscera. Her arms and legs had been blown off completely.

The dwarf's chest armor dug into what was left of her, causing even more damage than her impact with the wall as blood spurted out of her mouth. Her body had dug half a meter into the stone, and she simply hung there as blood flowed down onto the floor.

The runes and embers slowly faded from her body, and her vision dimmed.

'ding' You have defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305]. For killing an adversary 140 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 161. 5 stat points awarded.

...

'ding' Azarinth Healer has reached level 165. 5 stat points awarded.

'ding' Ash Wielder has reached level 155. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 159. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Reconstruction reaches 2nd lvl 19

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 15

‘ding’ Body of Azarinth reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 7

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Form of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 8

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches lvl 5

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 10

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 6

Slipping in and out of consciousness, all of Ilea’s mana went into Reconstruction. Over the next ten minutes, the worst of the bleeding was stopped, and her arteries and damaged or destroyed organs were slowly rebuilt. She still hung in the wall, mutilated by the explosion. She must

have kept healing herself subconsciously, as each time she woke, her mana was further reduced.

Then a gasp of air entered her rebuilt lungs, pushing away the armor and thus reopening some wounds that had been closed. She turned off her pain perception and, in her lucid state, tried to concentrate her mana on the most critical parts of her body. It took another ten minutes of healing and meditating to stabilize herself. Her health hadn't gone up by more than ten percent in all that time.

Rebuilding the skin on her chest, she finally closed up her torso and started to work on her face. The skin rebuilt as the bone of her jaw regrew. Sight returned to her eyes as she blinked and saw the destruction before her. A small crater could be seen where they had stood before, the plants had been blackened and ripped away, and parts of the room still burned.

Debris and pieces of metal lay everywhere on the path from the crater to where Ilea hung in the wall. Her ears popped then, and she started hearing the crackling hiss of fire in the room and the low hum of gears in the walls.

Her pain was still off as she started rebuilding her limbs. One by one, they grew back. As soon as she could move her arms, she started removing the few bits of shrapnel that had managed to get past the dwarven armor.

New wounds were opened and quickly closed as she removed fragments of metal and stone from her body. Her legs healed completely as she summoned her canteen from the unharmed necklace and drank deeply.

She coughed up half of the water and let the metal canteen fall to the ground as she slowly peeled herself out of the stone wall. The burns and cuts on her back began to heal as she fell to one knee.

"I'm the T-1000 now..." she said before descending into a coughing fit.

Ilea removed the little that remained of her dwarven clothes and stored the heavily damaged pieces of Legate Armor in her necklace again. *Saved my life...*

"I summoned a *leather* tent too..." She fell on her butt and simply laughed at the situation. The adrenaline from surviving the fight and actually taking down a Centurion slowly left her body as she laughed long and deep.

"And I'm naked again, fucking great," she said finally, chuckling a couple more times as she got up. She then walked toward the crater and looked inside. Nothing of the Centurion remained.

“Quite a blast, hmm?” she commented, then she looked around the room. “Whatever Iron Man bullshit powers these things—”

She stopped herself as ashen wings appeared on her back. The pond. Water. *Yes.*

Flying upward, she soared toward the pond and let herself fall into the cool, clear water.

* * *

Rin watched as a massive bolt of lightning cascaded through the guardian, finishing it off in the process. It clattered to the ground, and so did she, completely spent.

That Inström is nuts...

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 201]. For killing an adversary 30 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

...

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Taleen Guardian – lvl 200]. For killing an adversary 30 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Sword Dancer has reached level 166. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Bladed Whirlwind reaches 2nd lvl 4

“That was the last one,” someone said. She grunted as she lifted herself up from the ground and smiled.

Rin put her stat points into Vitality, Endurance, and Dexterity before sheathing her curved swords and looking around.

The expedition had voted on taking an apparently nearly cleared route through the dungeon, and a majority of the people had agreed. Rin would likely return here with another team or even her own as soon as she reached

their levels. It was certainly effective to fight against enemies of such a high level.

They had encountered much fewer enemies than before and progressed incredibly far into the dungeon already. At least from a purely geographical perspective. Rin had no idea how big this city had once been.

“We’re gonna briefly rest here and move on in three hours!” Agor shouted. On hearing that, some people started building their cooking stations, while others went to the smiths to get armor or weapons repaired. Rin had checked her swords and they were fine, so she joined the queue forming for food.

“Scout report...” she heard someone say, and over half the people in the queue looked backward to see a healer working on a nasty cut one of the rogue scouts had received. Jasper, Inström, and Agor were talking to the man until Jasper broke off to draw something on the map that was hastily placed on a table two servants had erected nearby.

“What did he say, Lisa?” a man next to Rin in the line asked another adventurer further up ahead.

“He found a chasm a couple streets further down and a massive door. Agor whispered something about a Great Hall,” ‘Lisa’ said, and she received some confused looks as others gasped at the mention of a Great Hall. Conversations sprang up after that, and Rin tried to learn as much as she could from listening in.

“Stay increased to five hours. Prepare yourself as best as possible. The true challenge will likely start soon,” Agor declared loudly before he walked over to Jasper.

“A Great Hall, wow...” a huge man behind Rin said.

“You know anything about it?” she asked, and he nodded in reply.

“Oh yes, I’ve read some things about them before. Mostly speculation though.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“They’re rare even for Taleen ruins. Higher-leveled machines in there, I hear,” the man said, then he grinned. “And treasure.”

FIFTY-ONE

That's No Bird

Ilea enjoyed the bath for far longer than necessary before getting out again. She was very pleased with her progress, despite the near-death experience, or perhaps because of it, and put all her fifty stat points into Vitality.

I can take on a Centurion now, but that blast...

She picked up her backpack that she had dropped by the entrance and was glad to see it was unscathed. She checked the contents just in case.

Why do I still have that? she thought as she removed the still healthy green ivy from her pack. Shrugging, she put it back in. *It's everywhere, so it can't be something special, but I guess it doesn't weigh much...*

Inside were a few other random items she had picked up in the dungeon, including dust samples and scraps of green metal. She figured they might be a good way to convince anyone she encountered that she hadn't found much.

Satisfied nothing was missing, Ilea decided to move on. The only other way out of the room than the door she'd come in through was a big archway similar to the one that had led to the teleportation gate. It looked rather nice to Ilea, although not as intricately decorated as the teleportation device itself. She touched it as she went through, looking back at the idyllic scene behind her, marred now by the new crater and still smoking trees.

Over the next hour, Ilea walked through several big hallways with dozens of rooms to each side. She checked every single one of them with her sphere but didn't find anything other than some old stone beds and other rudimentary furniture.

Doesn't look residential though, she mused as she walked through another huge spartan-looking room with dozens of beds.

“Barracks!” she exclaimed loudly as it finally clicked.

There were weird contraptions on the walls of the room that would likely hold weapons, and the furniture was aligned perfectly symmetrically to allow the same storage for everyone who had claimed one of these beds.

So, I'm in the heart of the Taleen military complex here...

A couple of big rooms later, she came to a massive hall with hundreds of tables. “So, this is where you ate, hmm?” she asked nobody in particular. There were no dwarves or even skeletons remaining who could've answered.

Ilea walked through the eerily quiet room. The absence of gears and noisy pipes was immediately noticeable. *How long has it been since the last meal was served here?* She picked up a mug that stood on one of the tables. There was nearly no dust on it and the greenish metal shone splendidly, reflecting the light above.

“Where's the kitchen?” she wondered aloud, making the mug vanish. Four more mugs followed into the necklace as she made her way through the room, swiping anything she saw on the way. The fact that she had beaten a Centurion made Ilea giddy as she jumped onto a nearby table and continued her search for the kitchen like that.

Spotting something at the far end of the room, wings sprouted from her back as she flew upward and twirled before landing on the counter where the dwarves must've gotten their meals from in millennia past.

“Kitchen utensils, here I come!”

However, there wasn't as much left as Ilea had assumed. A nice set of kitchen knives joined her collection though, as did two pots. One of them looked similar to a wok, while the other was fairly standard.

Finding nothing else interesting, Ilea moved on. Three more doors led away from the big dining hall, and she intended to explore all of them. One inevitably led to a massive laundry room, sadly without any clothes inside.

“If I have to wash an army's clothes, at least I know where to go. Seeing the guardians, I bet these weird as fuck washing machines still work as well...” She touched one of them to test her theory and wasn't surprised to see some runes light up on the side of it.

The next big door that led away from the mess hall held something quite interesting. Ilea opened her arms and smirked as she greeted the room

before her. “I’d hoped for clothes, but this…”

Before her stretched several hundred meters of soldiers’ gear, carefully placed on racks and tables. Admittedly, most of it was missing, but the things that remained were still more than enough to arm a small town.

There were swords of all sizes, from small dagger-like dirks up to massive two-handed bastard swords. There were also hand axes, battle axes, and war hammers. Long spears and halberds lined one wall, and Ilea even spotted a few suits of armor, although defensive equipment was in far shorter supply than weapons.

The items the dwarves had taken with them when they had left must have been impressive because what was left over still looked to be of extremely high quality, all made from the same gleaming green metal.

Ilea took out her notebook and put the word *armory* next to the rune she had drawn before entering the first door to the left in the Great Hall’s first room. The words *washroom*, *treasury*, *teleportation room*, and some others were already on the page that had her interpretations of the dwarven runes. They were certainly not perfect translations, but she thought that good language professors could already do quite a bit with them.

Next, Ilea walked up to the nearest rack and took one of the spears in her hand.

[Taleen Spear – High Quality]

Ilea balanced it on her finger, then shrugged. “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

She then twirled the spear, still surprised at her own grace, and made it vanish into her necklace.

Ilea ran around the room, trying out different weapons and wondering at the uses of some of the strange devices. Some of them looked a little like siege weapons, and they all had runes etched into parts of the metal. Hooks, chains, and large lances were set into metal contraptions with rusted wheels. They were somewhat similar to ballistae but weren’t nearly as broad as she would’ve expected.

Ilea stocked her necklace with over a hundred swords, spears, hammers, maces, and halberds of varying sizes and shapes. All were of excellent quality, but none seemed to have any special or magical abilities as she had hoped.

Her inspection of the weaponry complete, she was now ready to move on to the piles of armor and clothes that were strewn around on tables or carefully put onto headless mannequins.

Most of this stuff doesn't fit me, she thought, but she still moved through the things and looked at most of them. To her disappointment, there was nothing that wasn't at least a little green, but she did find some clothes and armors that actually fit her. Apparently not all the dwarves were built the same – some taller and thinner dwarves must've existed. Or they made armor for other people as well. Ilea didn't know.

In total, she found five whole armor sets that fit her somewhat well. Nothing comparable to her drake armor, but at least it didn't fall off after she put it on and fastened it with enough straps. The clothes were easier, and she kept ten sets that she thought fit her the best.

She put one set of clothes on and one set of armor on top. Checking her movements, she felt it wasn't particularly limiting, though some of the edges were rather uncomfortable. It wasn't full plate armor, not when she wore it anyway, but that mostly helped with her maneuverability. Even the sets for apparently very tall and skinny dwarves had rather short arm and leg pieces, leaving quite a bit of space free where Ilea's joints were. It wasn't as protective as the armor would've been on a dwarf, but at least some of her vitals would be covered. The clothes were quite similar to the legate's, plain and greenish with a bit of shine to them.

The armor, on the other hand, was a little darker, albeit still green. It was made from the same metal as the guardians, but after Ilea went over it with a piece of cloth, it shone much more brightly. She looked into a mirror that was placed nearby and acknowledged she looked like quite the warrior.

Although the blue eyes clash a bit. I have just the thing for that though...

Ilea walked over to the pile of helmets she'd tried on and deemed fit sufficiently well. The dwarves were orderly and identical in their weapons and armor, but they seemed to have quite a bit of diversity in headgear. To an extent.

The helmets were, of course, all made from the same green metal, but some had horns on top, while others had spikes that stuck out to the side and downward. Looking at the old straps and metal rings and attachments that adorned some of the helmets, Ilea assumed that some of them had once held feathers or other things.

In the end, Ilea chose ten different helmets: four with horns, two with spikes, three with wing-like attachments, and one that didn't have any attachments at all. All of them covered her face completely, leaving only small slits for her eyes.

Her necklace showed a capacity of 181/250 at that point. *Might be useful to lug around as long as I have the space. Carrying food is certainly preferable.*

She put on one of the helmets with horns, which went out a little to the side and then curved forward at a slight upward angle.

Activating her wings, she found they grew outward from her armor without any problems. She looked into the mirror again and smiled at the dull green sheen of the armor pieces, the clothes below making the not-quite-perfectly-fitting metal pieces blend together a little more smoothly. The light of her auras slightly pushed through the clothing, and her blue eyes were almost glowing with the light reflecting back off the inside of her helmet. She liked the horns quite a bit. *They do add flair.*

Summoning one of the spears, she held it up in one hand and smiled. *Should've gone for a heavy spear or hammer class with all this gear...* she chuckled, not really meaning it.

Thinking on it, Ilea grabbed five of the round shields she'd found and put four of them into storage. Getting into a fierce stance, she looked in the mirror and nodded. Storing the spear and shield again, she continued walking around the room while chucking her helmet upward and catching it with one hand.

Sadly, there were no lighter weapon sets or brass knuckles in the armory, but Ilea already felt quite decked out. At least she could throw these weapons.

Not seeing anything else interesting in the room after half an hour of searching, she left and made for the last doorway in the hall.

Unfortunately, this room proved to be less fruitful. What she had found was apparently the pantry, but after searching the room, all she found was dust.

"All gone..." Ilea said as she let the dust trickle through her hand with unfathomable dismay. Sadly, these dwarves didn't seem to have had any runes that would've kept the food fresh. Or, if they did, they hadn't chosen to keep them activated.

Whatever the reason, there was nothing to be found inside the room and Ilea quickly left it again, sketching down the rune on the door, as she did so.

Returning to the dining hall, Ilea sat down at one of the tables and summoned some bread and meat. *Haven't tried to store a fully cooked, hot meal in here yet...*

* * *

Jeremy was in the third group to be brought over the chasm, landing softly on the other side thanks to the wind mage's magic.

A Great Hall... I never would've dreamed of this...

His heavy armor and shield still made him buckle his knees a little as he landed but he quickly jogged onward to not block the passage of others. Whatever waited on this side of the chasm, they had to be ready, and they had to have a certain amount of firepower at their disposal.

He hoped their assumptions were correct and another Forkspear had hired high-level adventurers to enter the dungeon. Shadows perhaps. It was possible they would even be open to joining forces.

Agor and Inström were already standing near the massive doorway and inspecting something on it that Jeremy couldn't yet see. Some other adventurers had joined them and were in deep discussions. He walked up to them and saw what they were on about.

There was a jagged hole in the door, seemingly melted into it.

"They've reached this far..." Agor said. "I say we enter as soon as we have twenty people here. What do you see?" he asked, directing the question at all of the adventurers behind him.

"Nothing, the room seems empty," one of them said, a man with a tattoo of a third eye on his forehead.

"There are no heat signatures," said another one, a female rogue.

"The spirits tell me of no danger," said a woman covered in gaudy jewellery and shifting silks.

Many more confirmations of safe passage followed before Inström stopped them. "We move as soon as the next group is down."

Just as he finished talking, four more people landed on their side of the chasm. Two of them had simply jumped over.

“Let’s move then,” Inström said, and he motioned for Agor to lead. The man nodded and went through the hole in the door.

Jeremy watched as more people vanished through the door and into what was considered a Great Hall. He would’ve gladly given some additional insight or warning regarding the nature of the place, but even to Jeremy, most of it was myth.

He knew that Great Halls were supposed to hold dangerous traps to ward off any intruders, but that was about the end of his knowledge. Most of the others knew that much as well.

Time to change that lack of knowledge first-hand then... he smiled as he entered the much brighter room, the dozens of magical effects from their party reflecting on the white stone walls.

* * *

Pete walked up to Jasper, who was currently standing over the map of the Taleen dungeon they had been exploring for a couple of days now. The whole group of adventurers and aides had now been brought over the chasm in the past couple of hours and had built their new base of operations inside the Great Hall.

All that remained of whatever resistance had once resided there were destroyed machines. Pete sincerely hoped that whatever had dealt with the powerful machines was friendly. This was a dungeon, after all...

Now tents had been built up, pots with boiling soup were being tended to, and a couple of smiths were loitering about, talking about the dwarven metal they were inspecting. Some people had erected tables and were playing cards while they waited for the cautious leaders to declare their next move. No entrances had been touched at all until a couple of hours ago. Scouts had been sent into the doors to the right.

In the first one, a trap had nearly cost the woman’s life, but she had managed to get to safety thanks to a short-range teleportation skill. The second door had apparently been the one whoever came before them had chosen as destroyed traps were reported until the scout had to return. There was apparently a large chasm that he couldn’t cross with his skills. People with flying abilities would have to explore further.

It seemed like Pete would be the next scout to be chosen. *Hopefully not the door opposite the entrance...*

He looked nervously at the massive doorway, which was as big as a bunch of city gates. Some mages were standing around the melted entrance at that moment, trying to figure out how it would normally have been opened.

It's already open, why waste your time? Pete asked himself as he looked at the molten part of the door and shook his head.

"It's Pete, right?" Jasper asked, but he didn't wait for a response. "You'll be the first one to enter the first door to the left. Two paths to the right are clear so far, but I want to be sure no surprises will fall onto our backs," the old swordmaster said.

Pete just nodded and walked toward the door. "Same procedure, I assume?" he asked over his shoulder. Jasper just nodded before absorbing himself once again in the map.

Agor, Inström, and some other adventurers were standing around a stump of metal that stood in the middle of the Great Hall with somewhat concerned expressions on their faces.

"Sorry to break up the gathering, I'll be going into the next door. You guys free?" Pete asked, and he got some nods and vocal affirmations from the group.

They motioned and shouted for some more people to come until a whole twenty adventurers stood behind the waiting Pete, ready to strike at whatever unholy beast would be unleashed upon his trespassing.

Let's hope it's just another trap... he thought as he breathed in deeply and poured mana into the door. It lit up and opened. Pete entered and heard the door close behind him.

He'd done this many times before, in many different dungeons. But there was something about this Taleen dungeon that set his teeth on edge. The green glow, the lifeless robots – it was all so... unnatural. Who knew what fresh horrors lurked in one of their fabled Great Halls?

He walked down some stairs and let out the breath he was holding as he saw what awaited him. *Just another chasm. Earned my pay easily this time...*

His thoughts were interrupted as a sudden gust of wind blew him back a little. Looking up, he saw a green-metal monster flying out from the depths

on ashen wings. Embers burned within the wings, and a spectral blue glow shone from inside the creature's helmet.

Fuck this!

Pete immediately turned tail, activating all his available buffs to make him swifter and avoid any possible retribution from the monster for his intrusion.

* * *

Jeremy stood next to Rin. He had met her a couple of hours ago when news of the Great Hall had spread. She seemed nice, and at least somewhat interested in the history of the place rather than just killing things.

"He's running back!" one of the mages said, her eyes glowing with a deep crimson.

A moment later, dozens of spells went off around Jeremy as people buffed either themselves or others. Mages activated some of their slower spells while some warriors infused their weapons with magical power.

A glance toward Rin told him that her two blades were drawn, a reddish glow radiating from their thin metal. He infused his tower shield with his own spell as his body grew heavier. Whatever the scout was running from would find quite the surprise waiting for them.

Two slow seconds passed before the door opened and the scout ran out.

"Monster!" he shouted, jumping over the line of waiting people.

"Did you identify whatever it was?" Agor shouted, but the word 'monster' had already made its way through the whole hall. People were now canceling spells and preparing deadlier ones, so his question was drowned out by lightning, fire, and earth cracking as people shouted incantations and battle cries.

"Incoming!" the mage with a crimson glow in her eyes shouted as a humanoid, armored guardian stepped out from the doorway. The green metal and horns made it clear that, whatever it was, it was part of the dungeon.

The blue glow coming from inside its helmet and its red aura made it understandable that the scout had warned them, but Jeremy had too much experience to simply trust a man like that, and he was too curious to attack something so ancient without good reason. Yes, asking questions first might

be dangerous, but asking questions later might result in a loss of knowledge, to be forgotten for thousands of years, or perhaps forever.

Using his Identify skill, knowledge of what this creature was came to him just as the first attacks were let loose.

[Battle Healer lvl 165]

He wanted to shout, but the noise was deafening. An arrow was the first thing aimed at the healer, but a shroud of ash covered them and their arm shot out to intercept the projectile. Catching it, a bolt of lightning hit the healer, and then all hell broke loose.

Jeremy tried to shout through the carnage but could only watch on helplessly as more and more fire, ice, and many other ranged elemental attacks battered the healer and everything beyond.

FIFTY-TWO

New Companions and Enemies

Battle Healer? Agor thought as a slight tilt of the man's head allowed him to easily dodge a lightning bolt. *Level 165? What is he?*

Fireballs and icicles crashed into the healer's armor while he dodged the pointier spells with the barest of fluid movements.

No... not a man, a woman... he realized as more spells bombarded the healer.

A sudden explosion of ash followed that left most of the expedition searching for their enemy. But Agor was able to sense her reappearance. She had flanked the entire group.

"Cease fire!" he shouted, accompanied by others shouting similar things, and the clamor in the room soon quietened.

"I believe we've met before, but I assure you, I've come in peace. This was a misunderstanding," the woman said. There was no trace of fear in her voice. She even sounded vaguely amused.

Definitely powerful.

The others were now turning around to find the healer behind Pete, a dagger at his throat. Agor looked at her and could almost *feel* her smile. He too smirked behind his dark helmet.

Interesting, was all he thought as he advanced through the adventurers, who were in varying states of anger, realization, and confusion. More than Agor had expected had immediately stopped attacking after she'd stepped out of the stairway, realizing the same thing he had.

Can't believe Inström let loose his lightning though. That old fool is getting senile...

“So, then you’re that defenseless healer girl we met a couple days ago?” he asked as he reached the front of the group, the adventurers still poised to attack, stopping a couple of meters before the woman. “If so, then give me a reason not to cut you apart right now. And don’t think that useless scout will deter me!” he barked, though he had no intention at all of attacking the woman.

“You already gave two reasons yourself, my friend. I’m a healer and I’m defenseless,” the woman answered, playing with the dagger in her hand. “Plus, you’re in luck. I’m for hire this time.”

The adventurers arrayed before her tensed before a few of them laughed. Agor merely grinned.

“Alright, alright. Come on, girl, let the man go. We’ll talk.”

He shouted for the two other leaders before motioning for the healer to follow. He was confident of taking her down if needed, and although she would certainly take some of the adventurers with her, it didn’t seem to Agor that she had such intentions.

Another one who loves the thrill...

He smiled.

* * *

Ilea lowered the dagger and went to put it in her backpack.

Fuck... She looked at the burning leather pack that had served her so well for so long. Should have left it on the stairs.

The man she had just released scrambled to his feet and looked at her with murder in his eyes. She shot him a radiant smile, then realized her smile was covered by the helmet. She shrugged and followed the loud man with the spiky armor.

I think that went pretty well. Didn’t get murdered and showed my ability without giving too much away. I can be incredibly useful to those people, and they know it. Now let’s see what I can get out of it...

She looked toward some of the people cooking, smiling absentmindedly, and one of the men shied back as he locked eyes with her. Some of the adventurers were whispering to each other, while others merely shrugged and went back to their games or preparations.

“The remains of your backpack are still on fire,” the man with spiky armor said. Two others had joined her as well. They looked equally imposing. She couldn’t see any of their levels, but something told her they weren’t as dangerous as Edwin had been.

Close enough though...

She shifted her backpack and patted the fire out with her hand. “I’m aware. I’ll have to ask you to replace it,” she responded.

The mage who had attacked her with lightning earlier started to say something at that, but the third man stopped him with a gesture.

“We’ll replace the backpack, of course. So, you sent quite the scare through some of the less experienced members of our party, although given their levels, I’m still rather disappointed,” the man said. “I’m Jasper. One of the three appointed leaders of this expedition.”

He gave her a long look, and Ilea suddenly remembered he was the man who had glanced her way when she had left the dungeon.

“I did wonder if we would see you again,” he added.

Jasper looked to be in his sixties, his eyes sharp as they looked at her. Jasper wore metal half-plate armor. It seemed he preferred some maneuverability. A single straight sword sat at his hip, the guard simple. He had a short gray beard, his hair the same color and well kempt.

“That’s Agor,” Jasper motioned to the loud man, who simply nodded at her. She nodded back with a smile, knowing he was smiling too despite his hidden features. Two large horns jutted out from the black helmet that covered most of his face. His armor was thick and made of dark steel, covered with gray fur at the shoulders and waist. A chain hung from his neck, but the symbol wasn’t familiar to Ilea. She wondered why he didn’t carry a weapon as he was clearly a warrior. *Does he fight with his fists as well?*

“And Inström, the third member of our leadership.” Jasper indicated the bald man in decorated white robes, dried blood visible on his clothes. Ilea noted the armor plating in specific areas near his heart and stomach. The man had a round face and seemed a little chubby. His black beard would’ve made him look handsome if it hadn’t been for the blood on his robe.

“Now, we’re all aware that you likely have some rather interesting stories to tell and presumably some information that could help save us quite a few lives and quite a bit of time,” Jasper continued. “I’d prefer not

to get that information out of you via... unsavory methods, but I will if I must."

A shiver ran through Ilea at that, but compared to the fear of death she'd felt all too often recently, this was more akin to excitement. *Oh, I'd like to see you try, old man...*

"Perfect, then let's trade," Ilea said, still smiling. "First things first, I have info on the room I just came out of. What do you have?"

"Before we trade, we have to make sure you're no danger to us or any of our expedition force," Agor said. "As much as I'd like to fight you, I feel we could use another healer... and whatever else you have to offer."

"And how would you confirm I'm no danger? I met your crew earlier, but I like my privacy, so I made up a story. Here's what I'm willing to say now. My name's Lilith, as I've told some of you before. I followed a group of people down here but lost their trail inside the Great Hall. My goal now is to clear out the dungeon and get as much info on it and the people I've followed as I can before leaving again. If I can do that with a whole expedition behind me, all the better."

What she'd said was certainly true, except for the expedition part, and her name. She would've preferred to be left alone in the dungeon, but considering she'd already raided the treasury, only two ways remained unexplored. And since the expedition hadn't fucked up yet, a meeting at some point had been unavoidable.

"Well, Lilith... then you may join us. All the artifacts we find, from here onward at least," Jasper said, eying her green metal armor, "go to the Forkspears. The more we find, the more we're paid. Contributions are taken into account, and any information you can provide will be seen as just that. My condition is that you only enter a room when we tell you to and otherwise stay back. I'll keep my eyes on you personally."

At this, the other two looked at Jasper.

"Do you not agree?" he asked, but he didn't get an answer. "As for what you've already found," he continued, gesturing at her armor, "I suppose you weren't employed yet, so we will let that slide." The man paused and gave her a look. He seemed to have finished. "Is that alright for you?"

"Sure. But I have some demands too before we start trading. If there are more than ten guardians in a room, you let me go in alone. I assume the lives and time you might lose are more important to you than the experience?" Ilea said. Agor chuckled at her demand.

“To me, yes. Some of the others will disagree, but I’ll convince them if they get too loud,” Jasper answered. “So, what information did you have in mind? I’d rather be done with this quickly so we can move on.”

“Is that seriously all you’re gonna check? You just believe her story?” Inström asked, his voice still calm.

Jasper looked at the bald man. “I said I’ll be guarding her. Do you not trust me to take care of a level 165 ‘Battle Healer’?”

Inström shrugged. “I just think we should get some more information out of her before we start offering her anything.”

A small spark formed on his fingertips at that, but Jasper gestured for him to stop.

“Oh, some lightning resistance training? That seems like a good idea,” Ilea said brightly. “For the info on the room I just came from, I want free service from the cooks you’ve brought, free food, free service from the smiths, and some of your lightning spells,” she finished, pointing toward Inström.

“Are you mad? I’m not going to share my knowledge with you. What would you even do with it?” Inström said this without emotion, as if these were genuine questions.

“What?” Ilea asked, confused.

“I think she means you should blast her with it,” Agor said, chuckling. Inström looked at him with bewilderment and then opened his eyes wide.

“Oh for f... Well, you’ve convinced me. You’re no danger to us... if anything, you’re a danger to yourself. One of *those*. Alright, I’ll gladly use some of my lightning on you. It’s gonna be painful though, I assure you.”

“I doubt that,” Ilea said. She wondered if she’d just given away a bit too much information as Jasper’s eyebrows lifted up a little at her statement. Agor didn’t seem to have reacted under his helmet.

“It’s a deal then,” Jasper said. “Tell us about the room.”

* * *

In her sphere, Ilea watched as the adventurers’ eyes followed her. To them, she was the healer who had survived the attacks of over ten of their own. And an oddity to be sure.

She followed their leaders to the map placed on a table in the middle of the room. Her greenish armor was a little singed and her backpack was rather unusable – all in all, she probably looked quite strange.

People looked up from their games, cooking pots, and conversations to see what was going to happen. It seemed they already knew a deal had been struck with the so-called monster, and some of them started inching closer to the table to listen in. Ilea ignored them. She had nothing to hide. Well, nothing they were likely to find out by eavesdropping anyway.

“Right here is a massive crater and parts of what I assume were a Centurion... are you familiar with them?” Ilea asked, and all three leaders nodded.

“Heard of them, never seen one. Agor?” Jasper said.

“Yeah, got one a couple years ago. Nearly lost my life to take the fucker down.” Agor looked upward, reminiscing. “Our healer died as well... Those machines are smart. So, you’re saying the people you’re following took one down?”

“Maybe... or could have happened longer ago, for all I know,” Ilea shrugged.

So he took one down? Had a team as well though. Is he stronger than Edwin? Maybe, but Edwin seemed to be protecting the others. Using their spells was the safest method, but I wouldn't put it past him to take on a Centurion alone...

As she thought back to her former companion, Ilea explained the traps and rooms that led toward the armory.

“A Taleen armory? The gear in there will certainly be worth a fortune to both collectors and adventurers. Your gear is from there as well?” Inström asked.

She put a hand into her damaged pack and extracted a dagger, handing it to him.

“Yeah, my previous gear got fucked by some of the traps. The dwarves liked fire, apparently,” she said while Inström looked at the dagger before handing it to Jasper.

“Hmm, it's high-quality gear... You said there were hundreds of weapons and pieces of armor?” Jasper asked. Some of the adventurers listening in gasped at that, and more joined them near the table.

“Yes, but you'll need people who can fly to get down there,” Ilea said. The scout had seen her wings already, so it wasn't worth trying to cover that

up.

“We have plenty who can do that. Depending on the walls, we could build stairs as well. Getting all that safely out of the dungeon is gonna be annoying. Bjorn will have to organize that,” Jasper said while thoughtfully touching his beard.

“Can you go into details on the traps?” he asked, and Ilea provided him with a complete rundown. “We’ll be able to deal with those, but it’ll take a while,” Jasper replied when she was finished. “I’ll start sending some people. Agor, please go with them and confirm her information. Be careful.”

Agor just walked away from the table upon Jasper’s request, gesturing to some others as he did so, who followed him immediately.

“I’ll get some food then,” Ilea said, walking over to the cooks. Nobody stopped her. “Can I get like six plates?” she asked one of them. “Of whatever you have.” The cook looked at her a bit perplexed before looking toward the leaders’ table.

Jasper nodded toward him, and he hurriedly got to work. Ilea walked to another table and got a chair from there before moving back beside Jasper and sitting down.

A lot of the adventurers were watching her. “What?” she asked as she removed her helmet and placed it on the ground. The first plate arrived then, and she started eating. Jasper walked away to get a chair as well.

Most of the adventurers were still standing nearby, observing the scene as if it were some exotic wildlife documentary. Ilea figured that she certainly looked less threatening with her black hair and blue eyes on show instead of remaining under her greenish horned full plate helmet.

“What do you wanna know next?” she asked Jasper when he sat down next to her. “I went through two more doors, you know.”

“That door there then,” Jasper said, pointing toward the first door to the right, where the treasury had been.

Well, maybe it somehow survived the acid... not that there’s anything left to get though.

She started explaining the trap rooms and their intricacies. “Sadly, in the hall beyond are a full six Centurions,” she said.

Should I ask to help them clear the Centurions out? Doesn’t seem wise to show all my cards, and I don’t feel like they’ll advance into there any time soon.

“Six of them, you say? That might be a problem. We’ll see though. What do you want for that information?”

“Your mages, same as with the lightning guy, an hour or so each? And I want two potions. I assume that guy over there is an alchemist or something?” She had seen the man before when she had first encountered the expedition force.

“An hour from all of them is too much time lost. I’ll give you an hour with five of them. The rest you can freely ask or pay if you feel like it. Two basic potions in addition to that is fine. Nothing special though... not that he makes anything special,” Jasper answered.

There was a short silence as Ilea continued eating, Jasper watching her intently.

“The second door on the left, then?” he prompted.

“That one was cleared by the people I’ve been following... at least I assume so. The traps have been destroyed, and there’s a massive dead monster in one of the rooms.”

She mapped out the place, finishing with the teleportation room.

“This info I give you for two things,” she said, holding up two fingers. “The first is a favor from you. The second thing... I’ll explain after you follow me inside there.” She motioned to the door they had just talked about.

“You want me to follow you in there? Alone? I’m rather confident in myself, but don’t think I trust you that far. The favor you get, albeit a small one.”

“Take that guy in the spiky armor with you then. How does that sound?” she asked, to which he nodded. Ilea smiled at him and continued eating, reaching for her next plate.

* * *

Jeremy looked on as the woman stuffed herself with what he’d counted as her *sixth* plate of food. She had apparently been here for a while and had provided information to the expedition in exchange for various things, one of them weirdly being just a lot of normal food from their cooks.

Agor had returned a while ago and was in deep discussion with Jasper and Inström. The information the healer had provided seemed to be quite

accurate.

“You wanna talk to her?” Rin asked from beside him. The two had decided to eat together. Neither of them knew a lot of people down here, and they didn’t mind each other’s company.

“Kinda. The three seem to have got what they wanted, but I’m sure she has more...” he said, looking the woman over.

“Look at Mr. Obvious over here,” Rin said. “We don’t care though, we’re here for the artifacts, and everyone has their own motives. Hers don’t really matter as long as she doesn’t betray us, which would be a ridiculously stupid decision.”

“Oh, I know that, although I’m sure she could wreak some havoc...” he said, putting down his food and walking toward the healer.

“What are you—” Rin began, then she followed him with a sigh.

“Mind if I join you? It’s Lilith, right?” Jeremy said, motioning to the chair Jasper had recently vacated.

Lilith shrugged while finishing her last plate of food.

“I’m Jeremy. So, you’ve been here alone for a while?”

“Yeah. Are you looking to trade information as well? If not, to what do I owe the honor, Mr. Jeremy?” Lilith asked. Having finally finished her meal, she looked at him with ice-blue eyes that seemed to look straight into his soul.

Then she belched.

“I’m not sure what I could offer you. Are you looking for a replacement backpack for the one we burned up?”

“I’m supposed to get one any minute actually. Ah, there we are.” One of the workers handed her a backpack that looked to have been taken from the expedition’s spare supplies. “Thank you, it looks beautiful,” she said before moving her things from one pack to the other.

Jeremy opened his eyes wide when he saw her take out a dented and partially melted canteen, some blackened ivy, and a few bits of dried meat. The woman looked at a piece that had been encased in ice, then she shrugged and put it into the new pack regardless.

Does she not map out the dungeon? Maybe she has a skill for that. Or maybe...

As Rin arrived, leaning on the table beside them, Jeremy looked for any jewelry Lilith might be wearing, but he couldn’t see anything. Still, this didn’t mean she had a device with a storage enchantment. Only a few

people could afford one. Although someone alone in a dungeon who could withstand the combined attack of ten adventurers of her level might just be one of the few.

“I’m a bit of a history fanatic, Miss Lilith, and I’d be quite happy to get any historical knowledge, documents, or artifacts that you might or might not have found in this dungeon. Little is known about the Taleen historically, and I’m pretty sure it’s been a while since anyone has even discovered a Great Hall,” he said, deciding to go with honesty.

“Just Lilith is fine. I might have something for you then. Can you read their runes?” she asked, setting her piercing eyes on him again before smiling.

Jeremy’s heart beat a little faster. That question suggested she had found some of their writings. A metal tablet, perhaps? Or a cloth scroll that had somehow survived the years?

“I’ve dabbled in them, but I can’t say I understand more than the very basics. It’s not like we have a lot of their writing remaining other than the runes you see on the walls here and there. Although I’m sure some people have more, the College of Magic does not. Why do you ask?” he asked, but she only nodded thoughtfully.

“You teach at the college in Dawntree?” Lilith replied eventually, to which he nodded. “Interesting, I’ll come back to you about your inquiry then, Jeremy. Nice to make your acquaintance.”

She got up and approached Jasper and Agor, who were walking back to her. After Lilith had left, Jeremy turned to his companion.

“Oh Rin. She’s got something good. I can feel it!”

Rin just smiled and shook her head. “You’re cute when you’re obsessed.”

FIFTY-THREE

Return

Interesting man, maybe I'll ask him about the journal I found and the pyramid key, Ilea thought as she got up from her chair to join Agor and Jasper.

Agor had returned a couple of minutes ago, and it seemed he had found nothing amiss with her descriptions, otherwise he wouldn't be so relaxed.

"It seems your information was top-notch," Jasper confirmed. "Would've definitely cost us time to get through all those traps. The weapons and armor are a solid find as well. You said you got yours there too?"

"Nah, fell off a wagon in Dawntree," Ilea said, smirking as she put her helmet back on.

"Well, I agree with Jasper, you can keep it. Doesn't matter if there's fifty or forty-nine. Guess some of our people will help themselves to... Dawntree's wagons as well," Agor said, amused, but Jasper didn't seem to find it as funny. He didn't say anything more though and motioned to the doorway that led to the teleportation gate.

"So, you wanted us to follow you in there. The scouts are out doing their jobs, and setting up a way down to the armory will take at least a couple hours. Let's do this now then, shall we?" Jasper said.

Ilea nodded from under her horned helmet before walking toward the door. Agor and Jasper followed her as she entered and led them through the destroyed trap rooms. Seeing their hesitation as they passed through them, she explained.

“I checked through here, there’s no active traps. Hope you guys have a way of flying though, through there is a big chasm much like the way to the armory.” She finished just as they entered the stairway to the turret trap room. She took their silence as an affirmative answer and assumed there wouldn’t be a problem.

Ilea jumped off from the destroyed edge of the once astonishing bridge. Flying through the air, her wings of ash materialized and moved to keep her there. She flew up a couple of meters and turned around to see the others looking at her.

“Always wanted wings... oh well,” Agor said and jumped off. He touched his arm, and a massive, dark, chipped sword materialized in his hand. He started to fall, but then he pointed the sword below and slightly behind him and a massive burst of red fire exited from the blade’s tip.

Like a rocket, he first stopped falling and then shot toward the other side with comparable speed to Ilea’s wings. Ilea smirked at the “woooohooooo!” that came from Agor, who was actually nowhere near as serious as he acted.

Jasper just sighed and jumped off too. Ilea saw with her Magic Perception that blue fields were forming below his feet to keep him aloft. He stopped and looked at her two steps later, motioning for her to lead the way. *Still doesn’t trust me, eh? Well, he’s smarter than me, then...*

She shrugged before flying off, trying to catch Agor. She closed in on him but didn’t quite manage to pass him with the lead he had. Right before he reached the wall, the fire stopped, and he made the sword disappear again as he slammed his outstretched hands into the stone.

Ilea was already waiting by the doorway when Agor joined her, having slowly worked his way down the wall. The two stayed there and waited for Jasper, who was less than speedy.

“Storage ring?” she asked. Agor shook his head and showed her a bracelet on his forearm.

“Just for the weapon. It was a gift from my favorite smith. Love that guy,” he said, stuffing the bracelet back into his gauntlet.

“Who is he, if I may ask?” Ilea asked, playing with her dagger.

“His name is Balduur Birch, resides in a village near Morhill. Mention me and bring him something interesting to work with and you’re golden,” he answered.

Jasper arrived then, and Ilea was about to move onward, but before the two followed her down into the once dark and monster-infested swimming pool, Jasper stopped her.

“I want to know why you dragged us two down here first. No secrets this time.”

Ilea sighed.

“Alright. There’s a lone Centurion down there. Likely around level 300. I wanted to beat it alone, but I guessed you wouldn’t just let me leave the expedition at this point. Plus, I figured some of your crew might want in on the experience if I gave it away too early. So, how about it?”

The two men looked at one another, Jasper lifting his right eyebrow at Agor.

“I’ll stay out of it, Lilith, but I can’t speak for Agor here. I assume it’s been a while since he found something close enough to his level to kill,” he said, and Agor just nodded.

“You and me, girl. Trust me, it’ll still be worth it for the levels if the thing really is 300. Last one I fought was around that as well, if I remember right. Wouldn’t want to miss this fight... I’d owe you one,” he finished, nodding toward her.

“Down we go then. And don’t be scared by the squid,” she said, jumping down the hole.

Before hitting the ground, she activated her wings and flew to the next doorway, looking sideways at the tentacle monster and scrunching up her nose at the now intense smell of decay coming from the corpse.

Ilea noticed that the water was ever so slightly higher since her last venture into this part of the Great Hall. *There’s a leak somewhere then...*

“Jasper, I’d prefer you leave the room once you confirm the presence of the Centurion,” Ilea said once the other two had joined her. “I don’t want to lose any experience because of you being there.”

Agor put his hand on the older man’s shoulder. “She’s right, can’t risk it,” he agreed.

Jasper just shook his head. “Sure, sure. I’ll never understand you battle maniacs...”

“How’d you get to 200 again, old man?” Agor asked him, chuckling.

The three went into the teleportation room, where the Centurion slowly came to life. The light emanating from above was reflected in the machine’s metallic carapace.

“Here we go, then. Jasper, you convinced?” Ilea asked as she took off her helmet and chucked it to the side. It landed with a clang as Jasper nodded and left the room swiftly.

“He’d have been a big help, you know,” Agor said after Jasper had left and the Centurion had started to advance toward them.

“Oh, I’m quite sure... but even you are unnecessary here, my spiky friend,” Ilea said as her buffs activated. This was no place to hide any of her power, even if Agor was here and Jasper likely had a way of seeing what was happening.

“Spiky, hmm? Well, you’re just as unnecessary to *me*... and removing that helmet doesn’t mean your armor isn’t spiky.”

His sword materialized in his hand again, and the red fire that he had used to propel himself before now came from both the sword and his body.

The Centurion threw its spear at Ilea, who dodged to the side easily, carefully advancing on the creature before getting into a sprint. Agor followed her charge and flanked the machine.

Well, maybe I can save myself some time at least...

As she reached the creature, it immediately thrust its spear at her at breakneck speed. She dodged and was satisfied when the machine turned around to block an incoming sword strike from Agor.

Using the split second to its fullest, Ilea moved in and delivered two punches before blocking the butt of the Centurion’s spear with the palm of her hand. It didn’t pierce it, but she was thrown back a couple of meters, landing on her feet. Contrary to what she’d expected, no spear throw followed, and she looked on as Agor blocked the spear attacks with swift movements of his ridiculously large sword.

Fuck it... she thought, and she blinked next to the creature’s head to deliver a kick. Destruction and Wave of Ember released into its head, followed by the kinetic force of her full weight and strength supported by her auras. It didn’t unbalance the Centurion, but its attention swiveled to her before a heavy swing of the chipped greatsword hit its torso.

There was a shrieking sound of metal on metal before both Ilea and Agor quickly retreated a couple of meters back.

“Not bad, that the move you used to get behind that scout?” Agor asked, and she nodded. “Why didn’t I get a short-range teleport move? Annoying,” he grumbled and moved in again. Ilea followed.

The two could match the Centurion for speed and certainly for ferocity. Blow upon blow was delivered, not leaving the machine enough time to focus on one of them for long enough to pin them down. Five minutes later, the machine went into its defensive phase.

“Second phase already, eh?” Agor said, clearly familiar with the change.

“They do that all the time? Third one is the reckless one then. How would you categorize the self-destruct at the end?” she asked with a smirk.

“I guess we have two experiences to confirm the theory. The self-destruct? It’s the last-ditch effort and the only thing truly dangerous about these fuckers.”

“Hah, you would be skewered by its spear with a single hit...” she said while dodging a throw. Blinking in for a punch, she hit the machine’s fist and was blown backward. Her destructive mana had been delivered nonetheless.

“That’s why there’s a healer here,” he said as his sword carved into one of the machine’s legs with a loud shriek and a few sparks. He let go of it to lean backward and dodged a swipe in doing so. Landing on his right hand, he pushed himself to the left, away from the creature’s spear thrust. The sword had vanished and appeared again in time to come between the spear and his armor.

“I do hope you can actually heal, my dear,” Agor said while skidding backward from the blocked attack. Ilea had blinked behind the machine’s head and was delivering another kick as Agor pointed behind her.

Before she could follow his gesture, Ilea was slapped away by the machine’s off-hand as it attacked both of the intruders at the same time. She flew back a couple of meters before her wings materialized and she stabilized.

“I can, probably not comparable to the healers you have with you, but I do have quite a formidable skill – I tanked most of the last Centurion’s explosion with my body and still recovered,” she said while advancing on the machine from the air.

“That’s reassuring to hear,” Agor replied before throwing his sword at the creature in an arc. The Centurion simply caught the weapon and threw its spear at Ilea at the same time. She dodged and the machine had to block her counter with its body.

“I assume the mana that enters the creature when you hit it deals damage?” Agor stated as his weapon vanished again from the creature’s

grasp to reappear in his hand. He moved in again, only to be pushed back by its spear.

“Yeah, it does, gonna take a while to whittle it down at my level but I assume you don’t deal much more damage. You’re, what, 200 or so?” she asked, delivering a kick but being caught in the process. Reversed Reconstruction flowed into the creature immediately.

Instead of thrusting its spear at Ilea as the previous Centurion had, this one smashed her body into the ground. Her ribs cracked even through the armor, which had taken the brunt of the force. Blood spurted from her lips before Agor’s sword distracted the machine again.

It used Ilea as a projectile and threw her at Agor, likely letting go because of the destructive mana still flowing into it. He caught her and skidded backward ten meters, dropping his weapon.

“My prince!” she exclaimed, looking up at him as blood gushed from her mouth and down her chin.

Dropping her, Agor summoned his sword just in time to deflect the spear the Centurion had thrown at them. Ilea turned in the air and caught herself before sprouting wings again.

“To answer your question, around 200, yes,” Agor said as he deflected three more throws, getting pushed back a little.

Ilea, having healed her light injury, was moving in again, dodging the machine’s spear while Agor advanced too. Seven more minutes of fighting later, the Centurion went into its third stage, attacking them in a much more aggressive manner.

“What do we do about the explosion?” Ilea shouted, blinking away from the machine’s assault, only to receive a shallow cut from a spear that had been thrown from a little too close by to be dodged completely.

Agor’s latest sword strike was stopped by the creature’s arm, and he had to dodge its other hand that was trying to punch him. The Centurion used the man’s own sword to slash at him after the punch, leaving no room for him to dodge further.

The swordsman was flung away by the next blow, bouncing on the ground several times before colliding heavily with the cave wall. Ilea used the distraction to land her own attack. She delivered a kick to the creature’s back before it turned around and caught her foot. She smirked at the Centurion while mana poured into it.

The machine imitated its compatriot's earlier moves and cut through Ilea's leg at the knee, at which point she blinked away and dodged a spear throw while laughing, her leg already rebuilding thanks to Reconstruction, and giving two thumbs-up to the Centurion.

"Hey, Centurion, who has two thumbs and doesn't give a shit?" she asked before dodging another throw.

"Ilea Spears!" she cried, advancing again. This time, the creature didn't catch her but tried – unsuccessfully – to pierce her with its spear. A couple of glancing strikes didn't quite manage to cut through her armor.

Unfortunately, the spear then got caught in a gap in the dwarfish metal plates, and the machine used that leverage to slam Ilea down into the ground before delivering another heavy blow.

The impact was enough to delay her activation of Blink for a split second, and the spear sliced through her lung. A ringing sound of metal on metal reverberated through her ears as Agor's sword raked across the creature's back.

"Should've gone for the head!" she shouted and blinked backward to heal the damage. "How are you holding up, Agor?"

She looked over and saw the man was blocking spear thrusts again. The side of his armor was dented a little, and there was blood dripping down from his chest plate.

"Been worse, been better... Ilea, is it?" he asked as a powerful thrust made him skid backward. The subsequent throw was sloppily dodged and glanced his shoulder piece, spinning him around. The Centurion advanced, but it was then hit by a slash from Agor that was enhanced by his twirling momentum.

Ilea had taken care of her lung wound by now, at least mostly, and moved in again to buy Agor a bit of time. Her kick was blocked by the spear's shaft, which gave Agor an opportunity to strike again.

"About that explosion, can you lift that thing?" he shouted as his massive sword hit the creature, making one of its legs buckle.

The Centurion slashed its spear at Agor with Ilea in the way, making her blink away and him move backward to dodge it.

"Should be possible if it's not actively attacking me!" she shouted back, and she moved in again from the air.

Agor met the creature's spear with his sword, and at the same time, Ilea's kick connected with its head. Moving backward from the machine,

Agor shouted to Ilea as a bright light emanated from its core.

“Spear!”

The flames around him grew more intense, their translucent edges more defined as he rushed toward the creature with his sword in front, his movement much faster than before.

Ilea understood and blinked next to the Centurion’s outstretched arm while arching backward to deliver a kick below and slightly behind its arm. The force made its arm move ever so slightly and its spear scratched along Agor’s helmet, barely reducing his speed in the process. Ilea’s kick let her bounce back in the other direction, and she landed on her feet just as Agor’s sword struck the centurion’s chest.

A loud noise boomed through the room, and the shockwave dispersed dust and debris as Ilea blinked behind the creature that had been lifted half a meter by Agor’s dash while being thrown back over a meter in the process. She grabbed onto one of its legs and spun her body with all her strength and buffs active, her runes and lines of ember shining bright.

The already airborne machine couldn’t resist as it was thrown toward one of the cave’s walls, crashing into it just as its core reached its explosive temperature. Ilea locked eyes with Agor as her spin came to an end, and as his sword slowly sank downward, a massive explosion rocked the cave behind her.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305]. For killing an adversary 140 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 166. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 167. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 168. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 160. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 161. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 16

‘ding’ Magic Perception reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 8

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 13

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches lvl 6

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 12

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 7

Grinning, Ilea put her new stats into Wisdom.
That was fun.

FIFTY-FOUR

Cards and Poison

The remaining debris clattered to the ground as Ilea blinked over to Agor and checked his injuries. *Not too bad...*

Her healing mana flowed into him, and a few deep breaths later, he was completely fine again.

“Thanks, although those would’ve healed in a couple minutes more on their own. You have to touch people to heal them then?” he asked, to which she nodded.

Got quite a bit less experience for that compared to when I fought alone. Although still not bad, and it was much faster.

“Well that sucks. You’re more a heal after battle type then. I guess we could’ve retreated to take care of our injuries,” he said as he made his sword vanish. “Pretty good experience, although it would’ve been better if I killed it alone.”

“My thoughts exactly,” she replied.

Agor removed his helmet, revealing a smile. His light skin was accompanied by a rough but clean-shaven face with two noticeable scars crossing it, both going over his nose and cheeks. The man was lucky he still had his eyes. Bright red hair that looked wild but was kept short accompanied his blue eyes that matched hers. He looked to be in his thirties. Not very handsome, but Ilea liked his smile.

He looked over at the teleportation gate.

“What’s that?” he asked, walking up to it to touch the luckily undamaged contraption.

“I have no idea,” she said as she walked past him to get her helmet, which still lay on the ground. Agor chuckled and looked at her.

“For someone so beautiful, you’re a terrible liar, Ilea. Keep to one-word replies or half-truths. I didn’t question the false name you gave before. Just a tip.”

He was still smiling as he put on his helmet again.

“You said there were six of them somewhere else?” Agor asked after a moment of silence.

“Mhm,” she answered. “I don’t think we can take them though.”

“Two or three would be manageable, but I agree.” He paused and extended his hand. “I’m Lorcan Agor.”

“Thanks. Ilea Spears.” She shook his hand and let go again.

The two returned to the squid room, where they found Jasper studying the dead monster.

“Found something?” Ilea asked the man, who shook his head.

“I’m a little confused as to its presence here, but otherwise, no. You destroyed the Centurion then. It’s been a while since I saw you this battered, Agor. Congratulations on the two levels though,” he said. “I assume the way is clear then? No more traps or enemies this way?”

Ilea nodded.

“Good, then I’ll have the scouts map out this area as well. Let’s go back. We have a dungeon to explore,” he said, jumping up. Ilea followed him with her wings, and Lorcan followed behind with his sword.

The three reached the campsite in the Great Hall ten minutes later. As the two men left Ilea and walked over to join Inström, they talked among themselves. They either didn’t know Ilea could hear them with her sphere or didn’t care.

“I think we can trust her,” Agor said.

“How’d she do?” Jasper asked, only to receive a nod in response. That seemed to be quite enough though, as he nodded back at Agor slightly. Ilea wondered at the intricacies of the nods.

Like two mute monks, an understanding transcending time and reality, she thought as she walked over to the cooks.

“Hey guys, guess who’s back?”

* * *

“Maybe you should visit the smiths first to fix you up, Lilith?” Jeremy said as he sat down at the table Ilea had chosen to eat at. She didn’t mind the company. He seemed like an ok guy. If a little nerdy.

A bard was playing soft music next to a small campfire that broke through the monotone green color the dwarfish lights gave off. The smell of food filled the great hall nearly completely now, only hours after the expedition had arrived.

A couple of guards had been posted at each entrance to the room, switching out every couple of hours. Some of the adventurers chose to sleep in individual or bigger tents that were built in the space they had. The hall was quite big, easily accommodating the sixty or so people inside it.

“Maybe I should. I’m getting free service anyway. What have you been up to?” she asked Jeremy as she slurped down the last of her minestrone soup. The silent girl who had stood at the table when they had last talked was there again, standing a little further away.

“Hey! Hey you! Reddie. Why not sit down with us?” Ilea shouted and waved. Some of the people around them looked at her and chuckled at Rin’s expression. The woman sat down, the color of her face starting to match her red hair.

“What’s your name? You’re with Jeremy here?” Ilea asked, motioning for one of the cooks to bring some more soup. The cook acknowledged her look with an exasperated stare.

“I’m a friend, Miss Lilith. I’m Rin,” the woman said. Ilea received her fresh bowl of soup and started eating again.

“Nice to meet you, Rin. So, how’s the expedition doing?” Ilea asked, but just then, a message popped up in her mind.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Dark Potion, -50 HP/s for 2 minutes. You are unable to perceive light until the poison wears off or is cured.

Wow, that cook has balls. That’s if he even knows... I’ll go talk to him later...

Reconstruction started canceling out the poison while she simply continued to eat, hardly inconvenienced by her debilitated vision due to her sphere.

The flavor is actually better like this. Now, who wants me dead?

“Scouts have been sent into all four smaller entrances,” Jeremy continued, oblivious to the attempted assassination. “Twice as many went into the one you didn’t describe. They haven’t returned yet, so it’s kind of a waiting game at this point. Some mages are still building a safer way down to the armory while others are dismantling the traps there. I was helping there myself until half an hour ago.”

Ilea finished her soup and motioned to the cook for more. He looked back, frowning at her, then nodded.

“Do you guys have cards or something? Anyone brought ale?” They both shook their heads. *I really have to go back to the city and make some use of my necklace. I can take so much with me everywhere now...*

She smiled at the thought as more soup arrived. She ate a large spoonful as the cook stood at her shoulder.

‘ding’ You have been poisoned by Midnight Dream, -93 HP/s for 4 minutes. You will fall into a deep coma if your health falls below 25%.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said, noting the confused expression on the cook’s face. He was either a good liar or had no idea what she was referring to. He glanced at her bowl and shrugged, returning to his post.

Reconstruction worked hard to keep the poison at bay this time, and her mana would’ve run quite low had it not been for her Meditation skill being active. The resulting slowed movement wasn’t noticeable while simply eating. Her poison resistance apparently helped a lot as well as her health wasn’t sinking anywhere near as fast as implied by the message – even without using Reconstruction.

‘ding’ Poison Resistance reaches lvl 17

“I can ask some of the others if they have cards. I’m sure I saw some around here somewhere,” Rin said and got up.

Ilea got up as well and took the not-quite-empty bowl of soup with her. Walking up to the cook, she locked eyes with him.

“This is good soup.”

“Yes, of course it is. And you’re eating more than your share, lady. We’re gonna run out of stock if you continue like that,” the man grumbled.

“And it’s poisoned,” she said, holding the bowl out to him.

“Bullshit.” He sipped some of it, and his face blanched immediately. “That was stupid,” he said, sagging down to one knee.

“Oh yes, yes it was,” Ilea said, shaking her head as she started healing the man.

Then she realized the poison was much more effective on him than it had been on her, doing its full damage, and seeing that the man was only level 42, he had a much smaller pool of health. That left her with little choice but to call for help.

“Healer!” she shouted as her spell struggled to keep the man from dying.

His life was slipping away when a dark green light suddenly enveloped them both and then quickly focused on the poisoned cook, leaving Ilea with just a slight pleasant tingle.

Magic Perception sure is nice...

She looked around to see a robed woman with a cloaked head, blonde hair peeking out a little at the edges of her hood. Her hands were outstretched, holding onto a wooden staff with intricate runes carved into it.

[Healer lvl 142]

Learning her stats with Identify, Ilea could hardly believe the stereotypical healer who stood before her. She looked like she had come straight from a fantasy novel or some generic RPG.

The woman closed in on them, and Ilea felt the man’s health return to him. They stood there with both healing spells active for another three minutes until the poison lost its potency.

“At least you’ll have poison resistance now,” Ilea said to the spluttering cook as he gathered himself again.

“This man nearly died! Why could you not help him unaided? Such ailments should easily be manageable for a healer your level,” the woman lectured Ilea. Up close, Ilea could see she had soft, smooth features – almost like a doll – and seemed of indeterminate age. There was something off-putting about how classically harmless and sweet she looked.

She shooed Ilea away from the cook so she could look into his eyes. After a moment, she looked back at Ilea, and her eyes narrowed.

“Hmm, you are a battle healer... so I guess that explains the incompetence. Or were you the one who poisoned him?”

Others had arrived to gawk at the scene by now, and quite the crowd was forming. Agor was among them.

“Nah, I was poisoned first, and he didn’t believe me. So, in a move of sheer genius, he took a sip from my bowl. It’s still there if you want proof.” She motioned to the bowl that lay nearby.

“Ok, who poisoned her?” Agor asked, not doubting Ilea’s story. The other adventurers and the new healer didn’t seem to question the story either after the swordsman had asked the question. There was much muttering and many suspicious glances being cast at one another.

“It’s alright, Agor,” Ilea said. “It’s not like they’ll out themselves. But let me make sure the rest of the soup is fine.”

She dunked a fresh bowl into the boiling soup before downing its entire contents where she stood. Some looked horrified at the scene, while others nodded with respect. Her heat and pain resistances did quite the job as the boiling soup didn’t hurt her in the slightest.

“It’s fine. And very good. My compliments to the chef,” she said, helping the man up.

“You’re coming with me,” Jasper said, marching up to the cook and grabbing his arm. Ilea certainly didn’t envy the weakened man.

Edwin vs. Jasper, who has the more intimidating stare? she wondered as she helped herself to yet another bowl of soup. *Fuck, this is good.*

* * *

The people around them whispered and gossiped but soon found their way back to whatever they had been doing. Apparently, it didn’t seem too strange to most of them that someone had wanted to poison someone else.

The general concern that Ilea heard was what if the poison had gone into everybody *else’s* soup. The cooks seemed most terrified at the situation and kept their heads low, but Ilea doubted any of them were actually involved. It made sense that the common folk would be more worried than the mostly superhuman adventurers. For the higher-leveled people, the feeling was that if you died of poison, it was your own fault for not having a good enough resistance.

Harsh, but I kind of get it. Still not sure who and why someone would want to poison me though.

She walked up to the oddly scary healer and introduced herself.

“Hey, Lilith’s the name. Thanks for the help, and sorry for being inadequate at healing. Any tips?”

“I apologize for the comment, Miss Lilith. I’m sure that with resistances like that, you’re not a full healer. I’m Luciana from the Corinth Order.” She bowed a little.

“Wow, you’re graceful. And beautiful. Just Lilith is fine, by the way. And no, I’m not a full healer. The skill might not be suited to deal well with poisons either.”

“Hmm, yes, a hybrid class then. Usually, whatever else might be included in the class will take precedence in the description, but you might be an outlier. Just out of curiosity, what types of damage can you heal?” Luciana inquired oh so innocently.

From her sphere and the subtle change in body language, Ilea could tell Luciana had more than a passing interest in the answer. The kind of interest that might involve a dagger to the throat while she slept. But surely a healer had no reason to be so... intense?

“Oh, yup, I’ll totally answer that. Just, uh... give me a second, please,” Ilea said, leaving the woman standing there as she returned to Jeremy and Rin, who had been watching the whole scene.

“Hey, you guys, you think I can trust the lady from the Corinth Order over there with some details on my healing skills?” she asked them quietly, remembering what Splicer had told her about healing orders.

Wait... no... she wouldn’t... would she?

“Are you nuts?” Rin whispered back. “The Order hunts down any healer class that might threaten their superiority. At least that’s what I’ve heard...”

Right. Now I’m questioning everything. Maybe she does want me dead. I guess I didn’t expect a typical healer type to be dangerous.

“They hunt people? With like a priest hit squad?” Ilea asked.

“What’s a hit squad?” Rin responded, frowning with confusion.

“Lilith, Rin is right. You shouldn’t share too much with her,” Jeremy said, looking at the healer with disdain.

I kinda want to be hunted now, just to see what an assassin healer looks like...

“I’ve barely encountered any great healers. Can they reform lost limbs?” Ilea whispered to Jeremy.

“Yeah, I think after level 50 or so that’s a pretty common thing. Otherwise, you’d see a lot more retired adventurers.”

Ilea nodded and walked back toward the healer.

“Ok, I can share, just wanted to make sure you weren’t going to murder me in my sleep first,” Ilea said with a smile. Luciana grinned back while cocking her head to the side.

“I had no such intentions,” she said with a sweet voice. Something about her eyes unsettled Ilea though. There was a sharp edge to her, something Ilea hadn’t expected from a healer. She would have fitted right in with Edwin’s psychotic group.

God damn I love you. I bet you’re the one who tried to poison me.

“I can heal most wounds and, given enough time, even limbs. I do feel like I’m not special enough to be of... interest to you, though.” Ilea didn’t mention her ability to heal even crushed organs as vital as her heart. Or her ability to heal the mind. Walter had seemed to interpret that as quite the feat back when she had fought the demon.

“That is indeed rather average. It would’ve been wonderful if you could’ve... added something to the Order,” the woman said, squinting her eyes before she bowed again. A moment later, she left Ilea standing there without saying another word.

Wow, she’s fucking creepy, Ilea thought, looking at the woman like a fascinated zoo visitor. *I wonder if she believed that or if I’m gonna be visited by the Baba Yaga of healer monks...*

Putting her helmet back on, Ilea walked over toward the smithy as she had decided to get some repairs done.

“Got some cards yet?” she asked over her shoulder to Rin and Jeremy, who started as if just waking up. Rin got up from the table they’d been sharing earlier to resume her self-appointed task of finding cards, and Jeremy joined her.

How cute. They’re gonna be a thing, aren’t they?

Ilea wandered over to the smithing area, where a massive mobile forge was glowing red.

“Hello there. Can you fix this?” she asked the smith in front of her, pointing at her chest and then leg.

The burly man looked at her with a thoughtful expression and grunted.

“I’m not fluent in smith, but I take that as a yes,” she said and started removing her chest plate and pieces of leg armor. “There you go. Do you need more of the dwarven metal?”

She received a likely negative grunt in return, and, seeing the smashed bits of dwarven metal piled on a table behind the man, she was quite sure of her interpretation.

“I’ll be back in an hour or so then.” She was answered with a rather long grunt. “Ok, two.”

She headed back over to Jeremy and Rin, who had apparently managed to procure some cards.

Now I just have to learn whatever games these people play.

* * *

“You don’t know Galtik? What a boring life you must’ve led,” Agor said, having nonchalantly joined the three at their table.

“We didn’t play cards in the land of monsters I’m from, sadly. There was only fire and pain,” Ilea answered, eliciting a chuckle from the man.

“Nice demonstration with the soup, by the way. I don’t think anyone’s gonna try and poison you anymore.”

“I was just hungry,” Ilea said as Jeremy tapped the cards on the table.

“I’m explaining, so *listen*,” he scolded.

“Yes, sir, Mr. History,” Ilea said, smiling under her helmet.

She liked the thing. With her sphere and high stats, it barely reduced her visibility, and the looks she got were becoming fewer and less creepy. *My horny disguise...* she chuckled to herself before realizing she hadn’t listened to Jeremy at all.

He had noticed too and looked at her with a stare that could have downed a flock of angry geese. A feat impossible to all but gods and stale bread.

“I apologize, teacher. I have difficulties with concentrating.”

“I noticed, but do not worry, my child. You too shall learn,” Jeremy answered with a wry grin.

Galtik was a rather simple game that, once learned, Ilea found to be incredibly addictive, and the bard playing music in the background made the whole thing rather wholesome.

Two pleasant hours passed before one of the scouts returned from the last unexplored doorway. By that point, Ilea had lost eighty silver pieces playing Galtik. Rin had wanted to play something else called Meadow, Mana, Owl but complained that nobody had the right cards with them.

“What does the rune mean, Jeremy?” Ilea asked and pointed towards one of the doors while they watched as the slightly charred scout reported back to the leaders. Agor had left the table to join the debrief.

“Dungeon, I think. I mean, we’re in a dungeon, but they had a dungeon as well. Not sure if it means there’s another dungeon in there or if they held prisoners in there.”

“Well, either way, I think it’s time we got back to exploring...”

FIFTY-FIVE

Dungeon Crawl

At least one of the scouts who had been sent into the dungeon was confirmed dead. A trapped hallway followed the door, and they had spent hours just dismantling the different killing devices. A massive elevator followed after that, taking whoever chose to use it down hundreds of meters into the dungeons.

No massive surprises there were reported by the scout, though there were sword guardians all over the place.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Ilea asked the group as she made her way toward the door.

“Lilith, I know we agreed on the ten guardians thing, but if the layout of the place is that complicated, it’s not practical,” Jasper told her, hurrying to walk next to her. “We’ll pay you differently for this bit. For now, we all go down there and clear it. You get as many as you destroy.”

“I feel cheated, but I do see how it doesn’t make sense to wait for me. May the fastest one win then,” she said and ran toward the door.

“Agor, look out for her,” Ilea heard Jasper say as she steamed away. “Please let her kill the guardians. She’s enough of a headache as it is, so I don’t want her to become even more annoying.”

“They’re about my level so I’ll let her do the killing for now,” she heard Agor reply, just before he went out of earshot. “If we encounter more Centurions though...”

Agor was soon right behind Ilea as she rushed toward the dungeons, getting stares from many of the adventurers around.

Ilea reached the elevator in no time and stepped on the pressure plate to activate it. The design was quite similar to the one she'd used before, although this one seemed a little less cared for. The chains she could see even showed some signs of rust.

Agor landed on the elevator after it had descended a few meters. "You don't like waiting, do you?"

"So you're my babysitter then, Lorcan. Well, just keep far enough away and don't interfere when I'm destroying the guardians. Unlike for you, they're actually pretty decent for my experience," she answered, cracking her neck in preparation.

"Referring to sword guardians at level 200 as pretty decent for your experience. You truly are a battle maniac..."

She could tell he was smiling below his helmet.

"Well, so are you. So don't give me that fake judgmental tone. And hey, we might find one or two Centurions down here as well... *Lorcan*." The man seemed to tense up a little at the use of his first name, which Ilea had just noticed. "Don't worry, I won't use it when others are around. Same as you're not using mine," she told him, just as the elevator slowed down to a stop.

This is smoother than some elevators on Earth. These dwarves really were remarkable. I mean, the machines are decades ahead of whatever the militaries on Earth chose to make public.

Another scout was crouched in the room at the bottom of the elevator, her eyes glowing an eerie red color. Ilea paused next to her as she jumped off the elevator.

"Hey, can you point us to the biggest clusters of enemies around here?" Ilea asked.

The red glow vanished as she looked at Ilea. She was a level 149 rogue. "They're everywhere. You'll find them easy enough. I generally see more of them that way though," she said, pointing to a deserted hallway. Ilea nodded.

"Thanks. Shall we go clear out this prison then, Agor?" The man nodded and gestured for her to take the lead.

"I'll follow the trail of death," he said, sounding like he was smirking under his helmet. The scout looked at them and shook her head as they left.

"Fucking lunatics..." she whispered, knowing full well that both of them might hear her.

Bumping her fists together, Ilea exploded into a run. Soon after, she activated her buffs. The dungeon's hallways were much tighter than anything she'd encountered in the Great Hall before. There was barely enough space to fit a single sword guardian, let alone a party of adventurers. The stone was dark, not nearly as even, and the lights were farther apart. It felt dimmer in general, but she knew it was just the much darker walls.

They're gonna have a bad time... she thought as she encountered her first sword guardian. Dodging its blades was second nature by now. Using her Blink ability to position herself strategically, she used the tight corridors to her advantage. She could goad it into attacking, then blink away so its bladed arm struck stone, often getting stuck long enough for her to deliver a cascade of blows. She could also dart behind the guardian as it struggled to attack the smaller and nimbler target in an efficient manner.

Her quickly increasing power soon overwhelmed the guardian, and she received only a few shallow cuts before the machine fell to her unrelenting assault. These small cuts closed quickly as she started to run again, ignoring the messages she'd received after destroying a single guardian.

Ilea cleared out a number of random corridors and rooms that held single or up to three guardians inside. *Not as many down here, though I suppose there's just less space,* she thought as she dodged a dozen swords from two guardians in a small stone room devoid of any decoration or furniture. The possibility of destroying guardians to level up and the danger of the expedition looming behind her, ready to steal her experience, made her a little more reckless than usual.

By the time she'd taken down the two guardians, there were some cracks in the wall, courtesy of her own body and a guardian's blade that she had sent flying after she'd had to tank one of its hits. Her armor combined with the Shroud of Ash negated most of the damage, but the force was still as strong as before.

Man, I'm already out of mana...

Sitting down beside the dented metal carcasses on the ground, she started to meditate in the now empty room.

Agor caught up to her a minute later. "Meditating, eh? Well, the close quarters help them as much as they help you... I see you've destroyed over twenty already. And you're level—"

She stopped him with a raised open palm, which she then used to dip into one of her pockets and retrieve some dried meat to chow down on.

“Don’t spoil it, I’ll get to the messages later.”

The dungeons were vast and filled to the brim with sword guardians. None of them came close to hurting Ilea more than superficially.

“I need a quick break and some food,” she said to Agor after they had been fighting for what felt like an age.

“Yeah, it’s fucking boring down here,” the man said, closing the book he was holding.

They were in another completely unadorned stone room with nothing but a dull green glow covering the walls. Three green lights were visible above, one flickering slightly.

“You’re reading? Did you at least sketch down the layout while you were walking behind me?” Ilea asked while chewing on her last piece of dried meat.

“I do read, yes. Shocking, I know. It sure would make you more interesting if you chose to learn your letters. And yes, I did map out the rough layout too. See?” He flipped to the first couple of pages of the book and showed her.

“Let’s go back then. This meat isn’t very satisfying, and there are professional cooks up there with free food,” she said. She was regretting her choice not to use the necklace to store some of their food, lest it be noticed. It would’ve likely been a risk to let Agor know about it though, so she sucked up her disappointment.

They ran back in just twenty minutes and, on the last stretch before the elevator, encountered a group of adventurers from the expedition. *They haven’t got far yet.*

“Why don’t they go through faster? You and Jasper alone could cleave through the guardians with ease,” she asked Agor as they entered the elevator room. Several adventurers perked up at their entrance.

“Even you would be gutted quite quickly were it not for your very specific set of skills. Most adventurers aren’t as mobile and self-regenerative as you are,” he replied as they stepped onto the elevator. “It’s a worthless risk to take. For the expedition, all its members, and consequently Jasper, it’s more beneficial not to lose too many people and have a lot of them come out stronger. The Forkspears aren’t the only ones with that interest. Maybe after this he’ll finally be able to open the stupid school he’s been talking about...”

“He wants to open a school?”

“Yeah, swordmaster and all. Wants to give his knowledge to worthy students.”

“Nice sentiment, I guess. Doesn’t he have enough money to just build a school?”

“You need more than just gold to build a prominent school in Dawntree, even if you’re at his level of strength and fame. There are bigger fish out there, and quite a few of them reside in Dawntree. Having a swordmaster train random pupils might be seen as offensive. Or a boon if enough powerful adventurers and noble families support them,” Agor explained.

“Politics, man... he just wants to build a school,” she said, shaking her head, the horns scraping on the walls that were rushing by as they rose.

The pair reached the Great Hall soon after and got some food from the cooks. Ilea noticed that the cook who had handed her the poisoned food was there as well.

“I... I apo... apologize, ma’am, f... for not noticing!” he stuttered as she stood before him. She removed her helmet and smiled at him.

“Don’t sweat it, and call me Lilith,” she said as she dunked a bowl into the fresh broth. Joining Agor at a nearby table, they started eating.

“You’re way too nice to people, Il... Lilith. That man quite possibly knew about the poison,” he said, looking around to check if anybody heard his near slip-up.

“Maybe, but again, it’s just politics. That might also be a reason for me to become more powerful. To be able to avoid that stuff somewhat and just be nice to someone who might have been ordered to kill me. No reason to be paranoid all the time if you’re the least killable thing in the room.” She waved off his emerging response and continued.

“I’m aware that won’t work all the time, and if people work together, I may still be killed no matter how powerful I am. But it still gives a lot of leeway for me to do whatever the fuck I want. You’ve seen how most of this expedition looks at me now – you’d need to pay them quite a bit to try and murder me.”

Agor nodded at that. “You’re not wrong, and if it’s a carefree lifestyle you’re looking for, you’ll probably find it that way. People with power tend to gain attention though, and attention means problems.”

“I’m aware of that. It’s happened before, and I’m not even the strongest person at this table. I’ll still give people the benefit of the doubt though. The ones who spit on that kindness will learn not to mess with me, while

the people I consider friends will always find me next to them in battle,” she said, and she got up to get more broth.

The cook seemed more relaxed now, and he was standing ready with her next fresh bowl.

“I tried it myself, Lilith,” he said, and she nodded as she took the dish.

The food wasn’t poisoned, which made Ilea quite happy. That was at least one person to prove her point, even though there were and would be many more to disappoint her. She knew that for a fact. *It’s interesting how personal power changes everything.*

“Hey Agor, you got a skill in the third tier?” she asked after a few moments had passed between bites of bread, using it to clean out the bowl in her hand. “I’ve been wondering for a while. Got a bunch at 2nd 20 and nothing is happening.”

“That’s quite personal information that most people wouldn’t share, Lilith.” He shook his head and smiled. Ilea took in the sight, as it was a rare thing to see the man without his helmet.

Fuck, am I developing a crush? she thought, but she smiled back anyway.

“You’ll unlock it soon enough, don’t worry about it. It’s pretty straightforward,” he said with a grin.

“You tease. What about a third class?”

“I’ve heard stories of a third class. Basically nothing more than what amounts to fairy tales though.”

“So you don’t know shit even though you’re one of the highest-leveled adventurers I’ve ever met... fucking hell, you guys need to share your knowledge,” she sighed the last bit under her breath and motioned for another bowl, which swiftly arrived.

“That information is highly guarded, Lilith. The people who actually reach those levels are so few and far between that it’s hard to confirm it, and it would quickly fade into mere rumors. You’ll get third-tier skills though, don’t worry.”

Once they’d finished their food, Lorcan stretched out his arms.

“So, back down then? Can’t wait to actually find something interesting to fight,” the scarred man said, and Ilea nodded.

Getting up, the two walked back to the elevator.

“You’ve already destroyed eighty or so guardians, and I see you leveled a bunch as well. Enjoying yourself?” Agor teased as they shot down the

elevator shaft.

“Yeah, got a few levels. You don’t have to act like you’re surprised. What about you? The guardians aren’t much higher than you, sure, but are you not bothered that I get to destroy them all?” she smirked, but he only shrugged.

“The difference between level 99 and 101 is pretty significant, but the one between 199 and 201 is even more so. You’ll find it quite annoying to level up after 200, and it’s not easy to find, let alone kill, anything with a much higher level than that.”

“I already know where I can find something like that, although I don’t think I’m ready for that quite yet,” Ilea answered. “Didn’t really notice the difference between before 100 and after though. You sure about that?”

“Quite, yes. How did you not notice? It’s like you’ve only been fighting guardians since level 100...” His voice trailed off, and she kept quiet. “Are you kidding me?”

Ilea didn’t answer him but instead posed another question.

“I don’t get it. You say there aren’t a lot of enemies out there at a higher level than 200. Are you sure? Elos seems quite vast...”

“Well, there certainly are a lot of them out there, but not close enough or safe enough for most people to reach. This dungeon is actually quite the exception in how close it is to a city. I suppose if you went further out to the North or something...”

“The North?”

“Beyond the Naraza mountain chain. I don’t know what’s there, but entire expeditions have been lost attempting to go there. The few survivors tell of lightning storms too dangerous to pass.”

“That sounds exciting,” Ilea said with a smile.

“I’m talking about people above even my level, Ilea. These aren’t just any groups of adventurers. Shadows, elites, and high-level nobility on the search for glory and treasure join these kinds of ventures,” he said, shaking his head. “And the western forests are even more dangerous.”

“Why? Elves?” Ilea asked.

He looked at her and nodded slightly. “Elves.”

“Fair, so it’s somewhat safe close to the cities. But people like you and Jasper are ready to take on higher-leveled foes. There are bound to be monsters around that are far closer,” she said, remembering the basilisk on the road to Salia.

“Yes but this is where information gets scarce or very expensive. Lucrative hunting grounds are rare, and knowledge on both monsters and dungeons can be sold for a good price. Seeing how effectively both you and our little expedition crew are leveling in this Taleen dungeon is a testament to that. Besides, you don’t want to catch the eye of nobility in power. They might just decide you’re advancing a little too far – or too fast.”

Sounds fucking stupid. No wonder people have to hide behind walls. It’s always about power. Then again, I suppose me wanting to get stronger is about power too, in a sense. But I wouldn’t prevent others from hunting.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs, Ilea’s thoughts trailed off. The scout they had greeted before was quite surprisingly not at her post but rather lying up against a nearby wall in a pool of her own blood.

Ilea blinked to the woman but found her quite dead already, a gaping wound where her heart and most of her chest should have been.

“Centurion?” Ilea asked. It seemed a spear or sword had punched all the way through the woman.

“Maybe. Let’s go find whatever did this.” Agor seemed more angry than enthusiastic at the prospect, red fire gathering around him.

“May you rest in peace,” Ilea whispered, closing the woman’s eyes. She allocated her remaining stat points and followed Agor out of the room.

They shouldn’t have come here...

When she caught up with Agor, she found him checking on five corpses in a nearby room. There was no sign of an enemy. The man got up from his crouching position over one of the dead adventurers before both of them turned toward a scraping noise in the distance.

“Let’s go,” he said as he readied his greatsword.

FIFTY-SIX

Clean-up Crew

Jeremy blocked the thrown spear with his shield and managed to deflect it toward the nearby wall. Jasper looked back at him and nodded before engaging the Centurion again. Since it had suddenly appeared from behind them and nearly taken two lives immediately, their group of seven had managed to stand against the machine for twenty minutes now.

Were it not for Jasper... Jeremy thought, looking at him, who was glowing with a slight tinge of blue and holding his fragile-looking sword with a straight-backed, confident posture.

The Centurion slashed at the old swordsman, but its strikes were deflected with moves that almost seemed too slow, but the sword was always precisely where it had to be. Jasper's sword struck the Centurion again but didn't manage to cut deeply, instead glancing off the green-hued metal.

The fact that he can even cut it...

A salvo of magic was released then from the three mages behind Jeremy. The Centurion swiped away two of the magical attacks with its spear and blocked the last one, a crystal spear, with its arm.

Another spear throw hurtled toward the mages, but Jeremy held fast. A leather-clad rogue and a handaxe-wielding warrior stood behind him as well, but they couldn't help out in the fight at all. Their speed and skills weren't on par with the Centurion, and it had nearly cost them their lives at the beginning of the fight. Jasper had ordered them to get behind Jeremy and try to protect the mages.

With their ranged attacks, they were a great distraction for Jasper and got in arguably more damage than the swordmaster did himself. Jeremy wasn't using any ranged attacks though so that he could focus all his energy on defense.

I hope Rin is doing alright... She had been with a different group, led by Inström. *We're gonna be fine with Jasper though...*

He broke off his thought as the Centurion's spear was hurled their way yet again. This throw wasn't aimed at the mages but at the warrior who was standing a little too far to the right. Jeremy moved toward him but only managed to deflect the spear slightly.

But combined with the attempted dodge by the slow warrior, it was enough to save the man's life. The spear punched through his armor and exited through the back but didn't hit anything vital.

"Get him behind me!" Jeremy shouted as those behind him tried to become as small a target as possible while moving the screaming warrior, his blood already drenching the stone floor.

The Centurion tried to circle around Jasper to get at the more vulnerable group, but it proved rather difficult in the small room. Its movements were fast, nearly too fast for Jeremy to follow, but luckily Jasper was there to block the machine's advances.

Like a shepherd protecting his sheep. Jeremy couldn't help but chuckle at his own lack of power. Still, the excitement of seeing and facing an actual Centurion made him smile. *This'll be a story to tell – if we survive...*

Again the machine's spear crashed into his shield, hitting it dead center. The enchantments, metal, and his buffs on the shield held true and the weapon didn't penetrate it, but it wouldn't hold forever.

Then the wall next to Jasper exploded and two armored figures jumped through it. Jeremy looked on as Agor immediately charged the Centurion while Lilith looked around the room and then vanished.

He needed a couple of seconds to realize the woman had appeared behind him and had started healing the warrior.

"Is he gonna make it?" Jeremy shouted over his shoulder as the Centurion focused entirely on the two expedition leaders.

"He's gonna be alright, give me a minute and then you guys are out of here," Lilith said as Agor was thrown back by the butt of the Centurion's spear. Jasper managed to get in a direct hit with the opening.

“Don’t attack! It can’t be allowed to reach its third phase!” Lilith shouted to Jasper. “We have to get everyone out of here!”

Behind Jeremy, the warrior’s eyes had flickered open after receiving the healer’s channeled mana, but he was breathing raggedly.

Agor nodded at Lilith and then at Jasper, who moved back a little to make more space between himself and the Centurion.

“Just hold him off the others, they go berserk when they near death and self-destruct in the end,” Agor shouted, swiping the advancing spear away with his greatsword and circling the Centurion to keep its attention. “Lilith, get them out and then help us out here!”

How can she help out with her level? Jeremy wondered, but, looking at the woman’s calm expression, he was somehow reassured that she could.

“Hey Jeremy, you saw the crater near the armory, yeah?” Lilith asked him as she got up from her crouching position. The warrior slowly got up as well. Jeremy nodded. “You think you can take a blast like that point-blank?” she continued, and he nodded again.

“Should be able to, haven’t come across anything that’s got through my shield before. That’s if I can focus on defense only,” he said, and she gave him a thumbs-up.

Then she motioned for everyone to follow her, and, leaving the two warriors to fight the Centurion, they all ran toward the elevator. When they came within view of the elevator room, the rogue screamed and rushed to the side of the dead scout before one of the mages ran after him.

Lilith turned to Jeremy. “You’ll stay down here... the self-destruct is gonna be difficult to avoid in these tight hallways.” Turning to the others, she shouted, “You guys need to leave – now!”

The mage dragged away the mourning man, telling him they’d burn the corpse at a later time. The warrior nodded to Lilith as they entered the elevator.

“Make sure to send the lift back down afterward,” Lilith said to him, then stalked back into the dungeons. Jeremy followed, still amazed by how calm, almost eager, the healer seemed.

They ran back to the previous room and found a bleeding yet smiling Agor and an expressionless Jasper both facing the Centurion.

“Backup is here,” Lilith said, and she threw away her helmet, revealing a grin that mirrored Agor’s.

How will she...

Lilith suddenly vanished, only to appear behind the Centurion's head and deliver a brutal roundhouse kick. The machine buckled a little at the hit, opening up a chance for the two sword-wielders to attack.

"Let's whittle this fucker down!" Lilith shouted as she dodged a spear thrust.

She's ridiculously fast... how can she keep up with that thing?

Jeremy didn't waste further time on the thought and instead prepared all his defensive buffs. He hadn't forgotten about the explosion that was supposed to come. Even though he was sure he'd be able to take much more damage than the other three, he wasn't a hundred percent sure he could take whatever had created that crater.

Still, after Lilith had come to their rescue, he had decided he had to try. As the fight went on, he applied layer upon layer of dense rock on his shield and body to both heighten his defense and magnify his weight.

"He's going berserk!" Agor shouted after many tense minutes of relentless attacking. The machine was indeed growing more savage, taking more blows for the chance to land a counter.

All three of the warriors had managed to avoid serious injuries, becoming much more defensive in the last phase of the fight. Damage was still being done as the now reckless machine left more openings than before until, finally, Jeremy saw a bright glow emanate from the Centurion, at which point all three adventurers jumped backward.

"Behind Jeremy!" Lilith shouted as she vanished and appeared behind him, holding on tightly to his back, strengthening his position. Jasper and Agor reached them mere moments later. Agor pushed his back to Lilith's and smashed his greatsword into the ground, giving Jeremy even more support.

The Centurion's spear vanished as it slowly advanced toward the group, its chest glowing too bright for Jeremy to see. Jasper held out his hand and concentrated before blue runes started floating before them.

A second later, the blast came.

Jeremy's eardrums burst immediately and a massive shockwave of force and fire engulfed his shield, pushing the braced group backward and carving a furrow in the stone below as it did.

Agor's sword cut through the ground as if it were mere earth, while the layers of stone on Jeremy's shield were shattered on impact. Jasper's defensive runes were obliterated as well, barely slowing the explosion.

Still, as the dust settled, they were still standing. Lilith let go of Jeremy and stepped out as Agor pulled his sword from the ground.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305]. For killing an adversary 130 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Ground Caller has reached level 173. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ground Caller has reached level 174. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Heavy Paladin has reached level 167. 5 stat points awarded.

* * *

“Another one down,” Ilea said, grinning widely, and she quickly checked through her messages.

Name: Ilea Spears

Unspent stat points: 0

Class 1: Azarinth Healer – lvl 183

- Active: Destruction – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Reconstruction – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: State of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Blink – 2nd lvl 20*
- Active: Azarinth Sphere – 2nd lvl 17*
- Passive: Body of Azarinth – 2nd lvl 13*
- Passive: Azarinth Fighting – 2nd lvl 20*
- Passive: Magic Perception – lvl 15*
- Passive: Azarinth Perception – 2nd lvl 9*
- Passive: Azarinth Reversal – lvl 13*

Class 2: Ash Wielder – lvl 175

- Active: Shroud of Ash – lvl 15*

- *Active: Form of Ember – 2nd lvl 8*
- *Active: Ash Surge – lvl 6*
- *Active: Body Heat Manipulation – lvl 1*
- *Active: Wave of Ember – lvl 16*
- *Passive: Ash and Ember Manipulation – lvl 15*
- *Passive: Ashen Wings – lvl 6*
- *Passive: Eyes of Ash – lvl 13*
- *Passive: Body of Ash – lvl 13*
- *Passive: Ashen Warrior – lvl 8*

General Skills:

- *Elos Standard language – lvl 5*
- *Identify – lvl 4*
- *Meditation – 2nd lvl 14*
- *Poison Resistance – lvl 17*
- *Heat Resistance – lvl 14*
- *Pain Tolerance – 2nd lvl 2*
- *Mental Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Fear Resistance – lvl 1*
- *Water Resistance – lvl 5*
- *Wind Resistance – lvl 3*
- *Lightning Resistance – lvl 1*

Status:

Vitality: 550

Endurance: 213

Strength: 127

Dexterity: 158

Intelligence: 436

Wisdom: 454

Health: 5122/5500

Stamina: 1918/2130

Mana: 1785/4540

“Alright people, good work, but let’s move on. There are other groups who might have been ambushed, and we’ve lost enough people already,” Jasper said and walked out of the room.

All of them had gained at least one level from the fight. Ilea had certainly enjoyed the fight, but the deaths of the other adventurers, ones she’d seen happily playing music or cards, started weighing on her. She hadn’t known any of the ones she’d seen dead personally, but still, they were people.

Focus on what you can do...

The group ran through the dungeons trying to find other adventurers by following the trails of destroyed guardians. Jasper was luckily the one who had planned where the groups would be going, and they quickly found the traces of a recent battle.

“Here’s one still alive,” Ilea called to the others and blinked to one of the piles of metal. The destroyed guardian was removed with ease, and Ilea started healing a middle-aged man with a long curling mustache and a curved scimitar who had been trapped below the wreckage. Twenty seconds of healing later, he opened his eyes.

“You’re... Lilith... the others...” He coughed up blood, and Ilea just kept on healing.

“Where are they? Another Centurion?” she asked after he had stopped coughing.

“Yes... straight ahead...” he said, just managing to get the words out. Ilea ignored the heavy smell of blood and nodded to the others.

“Go ahead, I’ll stabilize him. Need another moment or two,” she said, and the others left immediately, applying whatever buffs they had for speed. Ilea was done with the man moments later, wondering why the lower-leveled warrior had gone this far into the facility.

Did his hiding skills fail him?

“You’d better stay here. It should be safe as long as you don’t move. If we’re not back in an hour, go for the elevator.” The man, who was a warrior at level 160, nodded back, her fearsome reputation likely convincing him.

Applying both State of Azarinth and Form of Ember, Ilea rushed forward. She nimbly navigated the hallway, which was completely filled with obliterated guardians, until she reached the biggest room she’d seen so far in the dungeons.

It was gigantic. The room could easily hold the whole of the Forkspear mansion and perhaps a few taverns to boot. Its roof was so high that the light from the walls barely reached it.

The mess hall...

She focused on the Centurion in the middle of the room that was currently engaged by Agor, Jasper, and several mages who were protected by a bulky woman, some warriors, and Jeremy.

A little above the group flew Inström, his eyes a crackling bright blue, firing down forked lightning at the machine with outstretched hands.

Thor is here...

Ilea was elated at the fact that there were no more corpses in the room. They had held off the Centurion and might've even destroyed it in time. With the backup here, it wouldn't be a problem to deal with.

Ilea blinked toward the group of adventurers and checked them. None were badly injured. She looked upward as she saw drops of blood falling from Inström, splashing against the stones below. She sprouted her wings and flew up to take care of his injuries.

The expedition leader grunted and gave her a quick glance as she touched him and let her Reconstruction go to work before concentrating on the enemy again. Seconds later, she had healed his most severe injuries. Not that there were many.

Below, spells were being slung from the group of mages who now had two tanks to protect them against any ranged attacks. Some of the warriors would only be a liability when fighting the Centurion, so they hung back.

Fire and ice hit the Centurion while Agor and Jasper kept the machine busy up close. Ilea stayed in the air, watching the overwhelming victory unfold. She didn't feel like engaging the enemy anymore and simply stayed in the air.

Just get it over with already...

Before long, the centurion reached its final phase and kept getting battered from ranged attacks. A minute after it started to glow, the lower-level fighters retreated behind the tanks, and a few yellow and blue barriers were also conjured up by three mages before the explosion shook the room.

Ilea stayed in the air and tried hard to push against the shockwave. Partially successful, she landed with only a few minor wounds, a couple of meters behind where she'd been floating.

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Taleen Centurion – lvl 305]. For killing an adversary 120 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 184. 5 stat points awarded.

No wonder people have difficulties leveling in groups... she thought, putting her points into Wisdom.

“Anybody injured?” she asked as she approached the group, but no one seemed to be more than battered or simply tired. Some people looked at her, one of them even nodding in appreciation. Inström didn’t say a thing about her healing him.

“I’m gonna continue with clearing. You feel up for it?” Ilea asked Agor when she reached him. He just nodded and motioned for her to march on.

“Thanks for the help, Lilith,” Jasper said as he came up to her. “You saved some lives today. We’ll regroup and get the corpses out of here. Feel free to clear as much as you like,” he finished, almost in a resigned way, before going back to the group.

“Let’s go then,” she said to Agor, leading the way out of the huge room.

It would likely take a while until the expedition came down here again and there probably wouldn’t be as many of them, so she decided to slow her pace a little as they walked through the dark corridors.

“So, ever found an ancient item?” she asked Agor.

“No, sadly not, but I’ve seen some. Why do you ask?”

Ilea was gambling a little, but at this point, she was pretty sure she had enough credit with the expedition to freely leave if she wanted to, and Lorcan didn’t seem like he really cared about the others.

“Let’s just say that there’s something the Forkspears won’t be getting from this place...”

He stared hard at her for a moment, eyes narrowing. Then he burst out laughing.

“Ha! Well, I for one think whatever you’ve found is better in your hands than theirs. What is it?” he asked, but Ilea continued on in silence for thirty seconds. “Come on Ilea, what is it?”

“It’s a storage necklace,” she said, preparing herself for any reaction he might have.

“Oh. That’s disappointing. I mean, sure, it’s useful, and if it’s ancient, it probably has a ton of space inside. Just, you know, I was more hoping for a titan-slayer sword or something. I hope you’re not angry that I would’ve taken you out for that,” he said, continuing onward without even pausing.

“On a date? You can do that anyway if you like,” she said, taking a risk. Agor didn’t respond and just kept on moving without looking back at her.

The mood got a little heavy after that, and Ilea wasn’t quite sure what to say anymore. *Damn, this is awkward.*

The sword guardians they soon came across were quite the welcome distraction. After destroying five of them, Lorcan finally broke the silence as they walked on.

“I apologize, but I have to decline.”

Ilea took her time to think his words over.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure you have your reasons. Do let me know if you change your mind,” she said, but she didn’t expect a response any time soon.

Trying to change the obviously unpleasant topic for Lorcan, she went back to the necklace.

“I have another question about the ancient item. It’s why I mentioned it in the first place really. I was asked to claim the necklace. Do you know what that means?”

Ilea hadn’t exactly considered it at the time, but getting cursed by some ancient necklace wasn’t exactly on her list of things to try out. *Too impulsive.*

“I do... well, it’s more something I’ve heard, but I think this should be reliable,” Agor started. “It’s bound to your mana. If you die, someone else can take it. If someone steals it from you and you were bound to it for a month, the person would have to wait for a month to be able to claim it... as long as you’re still alive. You can also will other people to be allowed to use it or to access certain items inside. Someone I worked with did that once, so I’m somewhat familiar with the enchantment – and, of course, this.” He gestured at the bracelet on his arm.

“Thanks for the explanation. Glad to hear people can’t just steal and instantly empty it. So there’s no way for anybody else to access anything instantly?”

“None I’ve heard of, but some type of magic created that thing, so I’m sure there’s a way around those protections too. Now stop talking, we have

company...”

Ahead of them, two sword guardians stood up from their deactivated position and approached them slowly, and the slit in Ilea’s helmet started glowing with a colorful mixture of blue light and red fire.

FIFTY-SEVEN

Screaming Steel

“What if I want to destroy it? It wasn’t even scratched by the explosion of a Centurion that totally wrecked me,” Ilea continued, not letting up on her questioning during a lull between battles.

Fighting the guardians had already become a little boring a couple of hours ago. There were never more than three at the same time, and that simply didn’t get her blood boiling anymore.

“It’s ancient. I’ve never heard of an ancient item getting destroyed – ever,” Agor answered as he read his book.

“Interesting... Say, do you know what four question marks mean when you identify someone?” she continued, now just asking the obviously knowledgeable and experienced adventurer whatever came to mind, given he didn’t seem to care.

“Three definitely means level 500 or higher. I’ve heard four means level 1000 and higher, but I won’t say that I trust the source. I’ve also never encountered someone with three question marks, so it might only work on monsters,” he answered distractedly, obviously engrossed in the book.

“What are you reading?”

“An erotic novel... you probably wouldn’t like it.”

“What’s it about? You really think you’ve met people above level 500? Do they even exist?”

“Some guy is trying to resurrect his dead wife. I don’t know honestly, but why wouldn’t there be? Elves alone are said to be hundreds if not thousands of years old. And I know that there are monsters with incredibly high levels out there, so why wouldn’t there be someone hunting them?”

He turned a page before continuing.

“Probably not many that make it that far, but then again, there are huge numbers of adventurers. Even in Dawntree, this expedition isn’t something too extraordinary. Sure, being level 200 grants you respect and most people look at you with either fear or amazement. Level 250 and higher is rarer, but why would people stop there? As you continue to look for and fight stronger beings, there *is* a chance of dying, but you’ll inevitably grow. To me, it seems only logical that there are people and creatures with a level much higher than even 1000. Although many disagree with my opinion,” he finished, turning another page.

“Out of a thousand people, how many do you think are level 200?”

“Maybe five. Maybe more or less, depending on species, culture, and where the group lives. I’ve heard of cultures that banish people if they don’t reach that level by the time they’re thirty. Northern Plains tribes...” he said, shaking his head.

Banishing others for not killing monsters seems pretty barbaric.

Using her sphere, which was active at all times now, she saw there was a skeleton behind the wall in the next room, chained up and protected by two guardians. She stepped over to the wall and began to punch through it.

“Found a skeleton, wanna come?”

“Yeah, sure...” Agor said, turning the page. “Oh wow...”

“What is it?” Ilea asked and punched again, breaking through to make a tiny opening. She punched a couple more times to make a sizable hole, dust and stone fragments now everywhere.

“He managed to resurrect his wife, but then she murdered him... I like this book,” he explained, standing up and moving toward Ilea.

“Good for you. Glad you’re not as bored as I am,” she said, waving to the two guardians that slowly came to life upon their less than civil entrance. The dust was still settling as the machines approached.

“Oh, hey, that’s an elf,” Lorcan said, putting his book into his pack. His sword materialized in his hand, and he helped Ilea clear the two guardians.

She didn’t really care about the lost experience. It was taking her longer and longer to level now anyway. Mere guardians wouldn’t help her advance for much longer.

“An elf, huh?” she asked as the two crouched down to look at the skeleton.

“Look at his teeth,” Agor said. They were as sharp as a piranha’s.

Creepy.

She got up again and inspected a nearby table. There was some gear on it that she assumed had belonged to the elf.

“Why would they leave all that here?” she asked as Lorcan came up to her side.

The table was laden with an array of beautiful adventuring gear. There was a full set of glossy black armor that seemed to curve and swirl with an elegant yet intimidating pattern, an immaculate bow with a strange creature carved into the handle, and a few other small items of similar quality.

Lorcan whistled and touched the armor on the table. “Now that is some quality work.”

Ilea picked the chest plate up. It was made of thin metal, and she was surprised at its weight.

“Too light for us, I think. Check it out.” She tossed the cuirass, which should have weighed at least ten or fifteen kilograms, to Agor, and he caught it with one hand.

“You’re right. What is this metal?” he marveled.

“Akalishe Sanur!”

A voice boomed all around them, and both Ilea and Lorcan immediately fell into fighting positions. But nothing happened.

“Did that come from the table?” Agor asked.

Moving the pieces of armor away, Ilea found a small dagger below. Its design looked similar to that of the many Taleen weapons she had seen before, though when she looked at it more closely, she found it to be more intricate. The handle was broader, the blade had been sharpened on both sides, and there was a slight green hue to it all.

“Salina Davuur!”

The voice had definitely come from the dagger that time.

“I think that’s elvish,” Lorcan said. “Been a while since I heard anything in that cursed language.”

Ilea picked the blade up and held it in front of her face, ignoring the sizzling of her flesh where she held it. Healing the burn, she shook the dagger a little.

“Stop that. We don’t speak elvish. Do you speak our language?”

“Animal,” the dagger said. Ilea just shrugged and put the blade down again.

“You wanna have it?” she asked Agor as she looked at the armor again. “I couldn’t identify it, but I’m sure it’s at least ancient.”

“A cursed item? One with a voice? No, I use real weapons anyway. What the hell would I do with a dagger?” he said, checking out the bow on the table instead. “This one is nice though...”

“How Dare You!” the voice of the dagger exclaimed.

“I don’t use daggers either,” Ilea grunted. “Do you have a problem with me taking the armor? I like the matte black look, very elegant.”

He grunted in response.

“Why not? I don’t care, just don’t wear it in front of the others. Don’t want to have that talk with Jasper. He takes his job way too seriously,” Lorcan said and pulled the bowstring. “If I can have the bow, you can have the armor. I know someone who might like this.”

“Stop This Insolence!” the dagger screeched.

“Sure. How will you get it out without them noticing though?” Ilea asked as she made the armor pieces vanish into her necklace.

[Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor Helm – Rare Quality]

[Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor Chest Piece – Rare Quality]

[Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor Arms – Rare Quality]

[Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor Legs – Rare Quality]

[Dark Elf Juggernaut Armor Boots – Rare Quality]

“Well, maybe a friend can smuggle it out for me,” he said, not a trace of mischievousness in his voice.

“Maybe a friend can,” she said, and she touched the item to store it in her necklace alongside the rest.

[Vannok Bow – Rare Quality]

“What? Are You Mad?!” The dagger kept screaming until Ilea took it and slammed the blade into the stone table.

“How Dare You Touch Meeeee!” Its now muffled screams were quite a bit more pleasant in Ilea’s ears compared to the annoying voice before.

“Hey, at least it speaks our language,” she said as she checked the rest of the room.

“That’s everything here,” Agor said as she moved about the room. “Wanna move on? Think about taking the dagger though. You could sell it to someone. That would at least be better than the Forkspears getting it.”

Ilea nodded, and she removed the dagger from the table and stored it.

[Dagger of Akelion – ??? Quality]

“Hmmm, I guess it’s of questionable quality?” she chuckled. *Must be too high level for my skill...*

She got the dagger out again, and it immediately burned her hand as it had before.

“You’re gonna stay in there if you keep doing that, you know?” she said and stored it again. “What an asshole. You meet people for the first time in how many hundred years and that’s how you act?” She shook her head, and the two continued clearing the dungeon for a while before returning to base camp to eat and rest.

The expedition had entered the dungeon again, but only groups that could manage a Centurion were allowed back, and the clearing was done even more cautiously. It took them nearly another full day to clear out the whole dungeon, with Ilea destroying more than half of the guardians.

Luckily, there weren’t any more Centurions down there, but in the end, it was just a dungeon. Some skeletons of different species were found together with their old gear. Ilea and Lorcan came across many of them before the others, but nothing proved to be quite as interesting or high quality as the things they had found by the elf.

The destroyed guardians had netted Ilea another seven levels in both classes, but considering she now had to destroy nearly ten guardians for each level, it wasn’t a very exciting day for her. She was certainly happy about the progress and acknowledged that it was quite a bit faster than most other people’s leveling, but it just wasn’t the same to her when she didn’t leave the battlefield bleeding and missing a limb.

Currently, Ilea was sitting at a table eating some curry while Rin explained the game Magik to her. It was a bit complicated, but she was sure ‘lands’ were very important. In the middle of the lengthy explanation, which, without any actual cards to look at, was confusing to say the least, Ilea put her newly acquired stat points into Intelligence and Wisdom.

Wait, didn't I get time with some of the mages for resistance training? Damn, I totally forgot about that... and the potions and smiths as well. She got up from the table, stopping Rin's explanation in its tracks.

"Oh, you're bored."

"I'm really sorry, it's just hard to understand without any cards. We can get some in Dawntree and meet up then if you like?" she said with an apologetic smile while slowly walking backward. Rin nodded and waved her off.

Ilea made her way to the alchemist at the other end of the hall. He was looking at some of the green moss that had overgrown parts of the ruin.

"What," he suddenly exclaimed at a rather high volume, "do you think this is?" He peered at her with intense yet glassy gray eyes. He was partially bald and had long, matted hair that hung from the sides and back of his head. His age was hard to place.

"It's green moss..." she answered, shrugging.

"Exactly! How can this forgotten ruin that was isolated for thousands of years only grow this *shit*!" he shouted, throwing the moss in her face. Ilea caught it with a swift motion of her arm, surprising the man, who cackled at that a little.

"Bored, eh?" she asked. "I'm here for my two potions."

"Oh yes, yes, the monster needs its tribute. Well, here you go, woman. Take, take." He put two small flasks on the table, which Ilea swiftly exchanged for the green moss he had thrown at her.

[Health Potion – High Quality]

Ilea took one of the knives on the table and cut herself in her arm. Blood started to drip onto the ground until she drank one of the potions. The wound quickly started to close, and she noticed it had restored around 100 health points.

Neat, if I had a gallon of this in my necklace...

"How much is it usually for one of these potions?"

"Ten gold." The answer wasn't surprising. Otherwise everybody would be walking around with dozens of the things.

"Nah, guess I'm fine. Hey, ever heard of Bluemoon Grass?"

"Another elixir lost to time. How do *you* know of it?" he asked, hissing the last words. "Come, tell me. Out with it."

Mistakes were made...

"I heard someone in Dawntree talk about it. Seemed interesting. Apparently, it can help grow a beard."

"Ah, this is *typical*. Away with you, you got what you came here for!" The alchemist turned away and occupied himself with his moss again.

Thought it was useless...

She shrugged and left the strange man to his devices.

Going over to the leaders' table, which was just a normal table with a map on it, Ilea stopped next to Jasper, who was focused on the map.

"What do you see, swordmaster?" she asked and was rewarded by an annoyed groan.

"Lilith. To what do I owe the pleasure?" There was no pleasure in his voice.

"An hour with all the mages? Not sure if I can take that much though." She winked at the man, who just sighed.

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?" he asked. He straightened up and started walking toward a group of mages. Ilea followed him.

"Yes, I am," she said as they reached the mages, who were engaged in a game of cards Ilea didn't recognize.

"Lilith here gets an hour from each of you to show her your magic or use it on her," he said before immediately walking away.

Ilea looked over the mages. They couldn't have been more stereotypical in their long robes. One of them even had a pointed hat. They stared at her over their cards.

"So, who's first?" she asked with a wink. She pointed at one of them. "You, what's your main element?"

"I'm an ice mage, Miss Lilith," the level 170 mage said.

Ilea nearly laughed at that. Of course he was. He was wearing a clichéd white robe that was even adorned with crystals. *It looks like a bloody chandelier...*

FIFTY-EIGHT

Resisting

Ilea walked, with the chandelier mage in tow, toward the second door on the right, leading to the teleportation gate. The man followed until she stopped in the first trap room. A few adventurers were in that room as well, meditating, training or, as was the case for a couple of them, hiding and making out in the hallway beyond. Ilea saw them all with her sphere.

“So, please use your weakest ice magic on me. If I don’t stop, just keep using stronger magic until you hit something you can sustain for a while,” she explained, activating her auras but not Shroud of Ash.

“You want me to attack you?” he asked, and she nodded. The man looked at her for five full seconds before shrugging.

A weak ice spell hit her soon after, then a stronger one. Ilea chose not to use her second stage of pain tolerance as the pain was reduced quite a bit already anyway. She healed the damage as it was done and simply took the mage’s attacks for twenty-five minutes straight.

Afterward, the man meditated for five minutes so he could continue. People came and went, but Ilea noticed more and more adventurers stayed in the room and watched her training.

“Does she not feel pain?” someone asked.

“Monsters don’t feel pain, didn’t you know?” another adventurer joked, getting some chuckles from those around him.

“Hey, iceman, can you use a really strong attack? Like a lance or something to pierce me? You think you can do that?” Ilea whispered to the man in front of her. He raised his eyebrows but nodded.

“There’s a weak spot in my armor here.” She showed him the area where the Centurion had pierced her. The repairs were well done, but the plated leather armor’s integrity had certainly been lessened, at least at that specific point.

A much bigger amount of mana gathered near the mage’s hand before he unleashed a massive spear of ice right at the spot in her armor, piercing the metal and then her flesh. The spear was blocked by one of her ribs and stuck inside her. Ilea didn’t immediately heal the wound but simply cocked her head toward the adventurer who had been cracking jokes. Her buffs made the inside of her horned helmet glow blue and red.

The man’s smile vanished as he excused himself from the premises. Ilea watched him go with a silent laugh and then removed the spear, splattering a lot of blood onto the ground in the process. Healing up, she gave the ice mage a thumbs-up.

“Worth it,” she said, smiling from under her helmet.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Ice Resistance – lvl 1: You have endured the biting cold of ice and lived to tell the tale. One of the deadliest climates and magics will now be less dangerous to you with this skill.

“You’re sure you’re alright?” the mage asked, visibly worried at the damage he’d inflicted. He was level 170, after all, and a pure mage.

“Yeah, surprised you managed to punch through, actually. Can you try that again with my hand?” she asked. She held out her hand and removed the armored glove, activating all her buffs but still not using Shroud of Ash.

To Ilea’s annoyance, the ice lance still managed to punch through her hand. *Maybe if I level Ice Resistance? I mean, it’s not like I’d get hit by something as slow as that, but still...* she thought, looking at the man with angry eyes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

She stopped him immediately.

“Again,” she said as a mist of ash started swirling around her.

This time, the lance was deflected to the side by the ash, even though it would’ve been a direct hit. Ilea nodded and motioned for the man to continue.

The thirty minutes she had left with the man passed quickly as she adjusted her skills to take just enough damage not to lose time healing. By the end, her Ice Resistance had risen to level 3, and she noticed that fewer and fewer of her defensive skills were necessary to block the attacks.

“That’s it, I guess,” she said. “Thanks for the hour. Let’s go see who’s next.”

Ilea walked back with the man until they reached the other mages. They were now rolling dice.

“What’s your specialty?” she asked one of them, a man with bright orange robes and a hairstyle that reminded Ilea of a mullet.

“Fire mage,” was his short answer.

Ilea shook her head and looked at the next one. The most normal-looking of the group, she had long gray hair that fell loose around her face and robes that reminded Ilea of a Tibetan monk, though they were the same gray color as her hair.

“Crystal magic. I don’t know if that might be of use to you, Miss Lilith.”

“Why does everybody call me Miss Lilith? Just Lilith is quite fine, thank you.”

She motioned for the crystal mage to follow her and went to the same place. There were more people watching this time. Apparently there was only so much time you could kill with card games. Or perhaps there just weren’t quite enough cards to go around.

“She’s back, guys!” someone cried out. A cheer went up from the assembled crowd.

“I should sell merchandise at this point. Do you guys have popcorn?” she asked the female mage beside her. The woman shrugged, either not knowing what popcorn was or completely apathetic to her silly questions.

Ilea prepared her buffs and went to stand a couple of meters away from the woman.

“Let’s get started then. You’re aware of what I’m doing, right?”

“You’re raising resistances the painful way. Yeah, I know. I’ve done this to others before. At least you can heal yourself and don’t need the services of another. Quite the expensive and, well, painful way to gain strength.”

“Perfect, then let’s get started.” She punched her fists together and got into a defensive stance. “Weak first and then stronger. I’ll stop you once it’s too much.”

The woman nodded, and a thin crystal spear shot out from the ground, punching at her armor. Ilea motioned at the weakened part near her chest so that the woman could hit her directly. The next spike scratched against her skin. Soon after, blood was drawn. Ilea was sure that being hit in an actually dangerous spot would hasten the learning of a resistance.

“Are the number of general skills limited in any way?” she asked the mage. “Getting quite a few at this point.”

“They shouldn’t be. At least, I’ve never heard of anything like that,” the woman explained helpfully before more spikes pierced Ilea’s chest.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Crystal Resistance – lvl 1: Crystals aren’t just shiny decorations in old ruins and caves. You have learned that arcane scholars have found ways to turn this beautiful natural phenomenon into something far more deadly. Now less deadly to you with this skill.

“Oh, got it. Continue lovely.”

“Did you just call me *lovely*?” the woman asked. She closed her eyes for a second before more crystal spears formed and pierced Ilea.

After the hour had passed, Ilea had managed to increase her resistance to level 5.

“Thank you for the assistance,” Ilea said, and she nodded to the woman.

“That’s it? Come on, show us something better,” one of the watching adventurers complained. One of the cooks had joined the throng and was serving food, while the last surviving bard was playing some music in the background. The stairs and destroyed mechanisms in the trap room gave it a little more charm than the hall above.

“Alright, alright. Hit me with something heavy,” Ilea said, and Shroud of Ash formed around her.

“What’s your resistance at?” the mage asked. Ilea held up five fingers. The woman nodded and walked back a couple more meters. Ilea saw a massive amount of mana manifest around the mage, taking on a grayish hue with her Magic Perception.

The head of a dragon formed in the air and rushed forward, snapping its maw shut around her. The crystal teeth bit deep into her ash, then flesh, and finally bone.

Ilea's scream was accompanied by a burst of all her skills and her healing as she tried to keep the damage at bay. Then, as quickly as the attack had come, it vanished again.

Ilea was still standing, her armor pierced with dozens of holes, blood leaking from some of them, and part of her helmet was missing.

'ding' Crystal Resistance reaches lvl 6.

"You wanna go another round?" Ilea asked as her wings spread behind her. Red lines of ember formed on the exposed parts of her body, and the blue runes on her skin shone.

The mage in front of her collapsed.

What the hell was that? Cool attack, but it seems a little bit of overkill just to use it as a fun show-off skill. Heh, only cost me twenty percent of my health too.

She walked up to the mage and hoisted her up with one hand to help her back to the mage's table.

Maybe the person responsible for the poison is paying people to try a little too hard? She shrugged. What better way to tell them to fuck off than use their mightiest attacks as a source for more strength. Still, given what Aliana was capable of at max power, I'll have to be careful.

Dropping the mage next to the others, Ilea asked who'd be next. An earth mage and another ice mage followed, raising her Earth Resistance to level 4 and her Ice Resistance to level 5.

Earth Magic Resistance – lvl 4: The earth trembles as arcane beings bend its nature to their will. You have found stone and earth to be a worthwhile opponent yet stood unmoving in its destructive path. This skill will help you negate more of its damage.

Ilea made sure to have people use their finishers on the stone walls before hitting her with them, although she did let them meditate before doing so. The attendees loved the last blows and went to get more people to watch them whenever they happened.

A rather large part of the expedition forces ended up observing Ilea's training. Some people even got inspired and asked some of the mages to do

the same to them. There were two healers and a paladin present as well who could mend their wounds for free. One of the healers and the paladin agreed to that just to keep the show going.

Even Ilea chipped in and healed some of the people present. Without being able to regenerate themselves though, the ordeal was a little more complicated. Still, some managed to gain a resistance or even two.

One of the last ones of the ones at the table was a level 192 mage who told her he used the arcane powers themselves. Pure magic, so to speak.

So apparently pure magic is a red laser beam. A bit more chaotic though, more like red electricity... Ilea thought as the magic from his first attack flowed into her. It was more painful than anything else had been that day, yet she powered through. Part of it was certainly due to the high level of the mage as well.

The man continued for a while and Ilea prompted him to get more serious. Soon she had to activate her shroud to retain the ability to cancel out the damage done to her. People watched on as she screamed through the magical assault that seemed to tear at her mind as well.

‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Arcane Magic Resistance – lvl 1: Wielding the true arcane is a rare and powerful talent only accessible to a few. Its raw energies tear not just at flesh and bone but at the magical structure and minds of whoever faces them. Its red glow turns purple the more refined it is. This skill shall help you counter masters of the arcane.

The man continued for a while, raising her resistance to level 5. Her Pain Tolerance finally leveled up too, as did her Mental Resistance.

“Quite impressive. Let’s give the audience a nice finisher. Can you use it on the stone first though?” she asked the mage.

“No. Either you take it, or you don’t,” the man said, smirking at her.

Fuck, they found my weakness...

She nodded, matching his smirk with her own, all her buffs flaring up. There was a chance he might actually be trying to kill her, which made things *far* more exciting.

A huge cloud of reddish mana left the man and formed a ring in front of him, then another and another until the last and smallest ring was just a meter in front of Ilea.

“*Zhul rakuul!*” the man shouted. Purple runes formed on his forehead, and his eyes glowed a burning red before a beam of pure magic flowed through the rings and through Ilea. It was so bright that it was nearly impossible to look at.

Ilea screamed and shut off the pain near-instantly, using Meditation and Reconstruction to keep her body from falling apart under the onslaught. Her wings formed and extended out to the front yet burned away as fast as they had grown. Her arms crossed in front of her as she was pushed back a meter, then two, her feet scraping against the stone floor.

Then the surge of mana stopped and the mage dropped to one knee. Blood dripped from his mouth to the ground, the room quiet except for the ever-present mechanical clanks and whirs of the dwarven architecture.

The front of Ilea’s armor had been reduced to white-hot molten slag, and she was burned to the bone. Her forearm bones and a few ribs were exposed, even a piece of her jaw. Her bones, muscles, and skin reformed quickly as the healing magic flowed through the damaged parts.

A smile formed on her face as soon as her jaw and muscles were restored. *Only lost forty percent of my health.* Her Arcane Resistance had grown another level from that last attack too.

She laughed loudly as people watched on, horrified and astonished. Among them, Ilea spotted the female healer from the Corinth Order, a smile on her lips, but the rest of her face was shrouded under the brown hood.

The arcane mage looked at Ilea, who would have been completely naked if not for her Shroud of Ash, as all the molten metal had dripped to the ground when her healing commenced.

“You have my respect, Lilith,” he said, still on one knee but now looking at her and grinning.

“And you mine, arcane wizard.” The man collapsed at that, and Ilea quickly checked if he was alright.

Completely spent... and more than a few burst blood vessels. She healed him up and looked around.

“Anybody got a spare set of leather armor? I can pay... quite well if you’re fast,” she smiled at them, and one woman quickly got up and ran to the hall.

* * *

Decked out in some new comfortable leather gear, Ilea looked for the last person to owe her a free taste of their magic, nodding to the woman who had gotten her the armor.

Inström.

She found the man with the other leaders of the expedition, who were standing over the map again and arguing.

“The Centurions are too numerous, even if we use the whole expedition. And it’s too much of a risk,” Jasper said.

“So let’s just quickly go in, use ranged magic, and leave again after doing some damage. They likely can’t repair themselves,” Inström suggested. Ilea realized they were obviously talking about the Centurions before the treasure room.

“What if they follow? Lilith told us they wouldn’t, and some of our scouts have reported the same, but what if they reach their third stage?” Jasper said.

“Then we face the last door first and deal with the Centurions as a last effort before leaving. After all the equipment has been safely brought back and the rest of the dungeon has been cleared,” Agor said, and the other two nodded.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Ilea said, sensing a good point to intrude in the discussion. “Inström, I’ll need an hour of your time. You may, of course, continue to plan while you use your lightning magic on me.”

“Oh yes, that was a debt promised. Well, stand over there then. I’ll start low and continue from there.”

The man was surprisingly agreeable, if uninterested, and he started using his lightning as soon as Ilea was in position, a couple of meters away from the table. The intensity of the lightning increased until her Shroud of Ash was needed. The pain was surprisingly manageable.

The hour passed and Inström stopped his magic, having given Ilea another four levels of Lightning Resistance. He refused to use anything stronger on her, and Ilea was sure there’d be no way for her to convince the old man.

People seemed disappointed and slowly dispersed – until someone shouted.

“Lilith! I dare you to stand against my strongest spells!”

The man was clothed in a dark robe with a stereotypical wizard hat.

“What do you have to offer then, grand wizard?” she asked, grinning at the man.

“I bet that my mightiest spell can push you back over ten meters! Many times what any here have managed so far,” he said. Some people interjected, and others called his statement a bluff.

“Well then, bet against me, fellas, but you’ll see,” the man called, a little less dramatically.

I like where this is going... free resistances and a bit of a challenge to boot.

“You may use magic or other skills on me to see if they have the desired reaction. But for every single attempt, you owe me a piece of silver,” Ilea said and smiled brightly. “Shall we?”

She started to walk back to the destroyed trap room but paused as she passed Agor.

“When do we continue, Agor?” she asked. He just shook his head.

“There’s a lot to organize with all the things we found. Gonna take a while. Reinforcements and workers will be brought from Dawntree as we secure a route through the residential area,” he explained before he started walking back to the other leaders.

“Oh, Agor, before you go back, quick question. I kinda want to get some of my skills higher quickly. You think I could just use them against sword guardians? Should still be effective, right? Seems reasonable before we face the last room.”

“If you kill them in a reasonable time, yes. Just like you did before. Though just dancing around them won’t do you much good, given how easily you already deal with them. After a while, the skill bonus will be quite similar to simply using it on your own,” he said. “Anything else, Miss Lilith?”

She shook her head.

Going to actually have to find more dangerous monsters to fight. To level skills as well. Suppose it makes sense. Otherwise people could just cage a strong monster and let some low-level mage attack from a safe distance.

She shrugged, heading into the trap room, which was beginning to look like a wild magical beast had been rampaging through it. Or an army of them. She motioned for the challenger mage to begin.

It turned out the wizard was, unluckily for him, a wind mage, and his spell didn't even make Ilea move a full meter. However, she did ask him to continue for a while, and she managed to raise her Wind Resistance another level.

I haven't faced Felicia with this new and improved body of mine, Ilea thought, forming a fist with her hand. Edwin did have some trouble with the centurion so... No. No, I'm not ready yet. I have to be able to crush him... fairly and completely.

She smiled as the next contender stepped up.

FIFTY-NINE

Praetorian

Five hours passed, and as time went on, the contestants reduced their boasts. Some of them then even managed to pull off what they had claimed they could. Ilea was quite sure at that point though that she could crush this expedition's members with ease in one-on-one battles. The only people she wasn't sure about were the three leaders.

Warriors, rogues, and rangers had joined the contest and tried different skills and challenges against the healer. People lost and won money, and soon more than half of the expedition's adventurers owed Ilea a favor or two. She had decided favors were more valuable than pieces of silver, given her current wealth. She wasn't sure what a 'small favor' might mean to them exactly, but what she was particularly happy about were the skills she had gained and strengthened.

Shroud of Ash had leveled three times, reaching level 18. Many resistances had leveled, while some new ones had been gained too.

Corrosion Resistance – lvl 3

Many substances can be corrosive. Even the strongest stone can be eroded by the right combination of chemicals. You have been exposed to more corrosion than many others, and with this skill, your resistance to such substances will be heightened.

Light Magic Resistance – lvl 2

The power of the suns can be harnessed and enhanced by magic. You have experienced the burning heat of light and pushed ahead. This skill

will help you be more resistant to it.

Mist Magic Resistance – lvl 1

Mist magic is a rare talent found in students of the arcane adept in both wind and water magic. It is an elusive power, difficult to wield, yet ultimately destructive and impossible to avoid. You have faced it and lived. This skill will help you do so again.

Additionally, Ilea had learned that pure warriors on a similar level were as strong if not stronger than her with all her buffs active. One of them even managed to make her skid away for more than five meters upon a blocked hit. *Guess they have their own way of enhancing their strength...*

“It’s time, guys.” Agor had entered the trap room. “We’re going for the last door.”

“God, finally!” a woman with a spear larger than herself called from the crowd.

“Half an hour and we go in. Be ready. It will likely be the hardest trial we’ve faced thus far,” Agor said and left the room.

“The boss then,” a mage said, and a ranger next to him nodded.

“Likely, let’s go and prepare.”

Ilea left with the rest and got some food from the cooks. The others started preparing, but most of them seemed to just want to get it over with. They had been waiting for hours, and now the leaders had finally decided to tackle the last obvious route in the dungeon.

They had already found a lot of gear in the dungeon so expected a hefty bonus at this point. Ilea overheard an adventurer questioning going into the last door, saying that they had already fulfilled what they had been contracted to do and then some.

Jasper apparently didn’t agree with that though. “Whatever lies beyond this door, we’ll be prepared to tackle it,” he said. For the next twenty minutes, he ordered people into groups and explained different roles and possibilities.

Is this what MMO raids felt like? Glad I’m not the leader here... He’s pretty confident too, seeing how much they struggled with the few Centurions we met.

Ilea’s role in her group of five was to get the attention of whatever enemy was waiting for them inside the door. If it got overwhelming, she

would distract it and then move out after the others had fled. It made sense to her. She was pretty good at being an annoying punk to stronger enemies, especially slower ones that couldn't teleport.

Her healing ability might save one or two people's lives, but like this, she could both deal damage and protect the mages and other ranged, or slower, adventurers in the expedition.

"What do you think we'll face in there?" she asked Agor, who was standing next to her as they waited to go inside. "Faced anything bigger Taleen-made than a Centurion before?"

He shook his head and looked at her through the thin eye slit in his helmet.

"We'll see soon enough. Just follow Jasper. He's a good tactician... with this amount of people, at least."

There seems to be more to this... Ilea studied Agor for a moment but then focused on the task at hand.

"So, everybody knows what to do then?" Jasper called out. "We'll start with the scouting team, then groups one and two. Three and four will follow closely after. Fifteen seconds between each group after the scouts report back. Make sure to dismantle as many traps as possible. Tanks ahead of each group."

Ilea apparently was considered the tank of her group, especially after her resistance training just hours before.

The scouts entered after Jasper had opened the towering doors by activating runes set into the walls next to the giant entrance. Slow minutes passed until they returned, reporting no enemies or traps inside.

And so they entered. Ilea was in group two. There was a small hallway spanning only about ten meters in length and five in width right after the entrance. Beyond that was a big hall. One of the biggest she had seen in the dungeon. Even bigger than the hall they had entered from and where the whole expedition had made their camp.

Inside the hall, there were pillars lining the walls down each side. At the back of the room, perfectly centered against the far wall, stood an empty throne. It was a very simple thing, quite free of any complicated carvings, runes, or designs. Just stark white stone. Otherwise, the place was completely empty. It was almost creepy to see so much space bereft of decoration or guardians.

Group one had spread out to the right, and the more range-oriented groups three and four would soon enter behind them and cover the ones who had come in before.

There's nothing here...

The same lamps as always were lighting the room in an eerie green. There was no moss here, and the sounds of gears and pipes only came from the hall behind them, much more subdued now as they walked around the throne room.

As the group advanced closer to the throne, a lot of the adventurers tensed up and immediately signaled for retreat. Ilea, too, felt an ominous presence that made her hair stand up. Behind them, the door slid shut with an echoing boom.

Another trap... Ilea thought as everybody prepared to fight. One the scouts hadn't triggered. Interesting.

The ground in front of the throne opened up, and two machines rose into view at a snail's pace, lifted up by an elevator platform below. Their armor was made up of the same green metal as the Centurions and the guardians, but they were something new, something Ilea had never encountered before. They had the same insectoid heads and the same spider-like legs, but they were a magnitude larger than even the Centurions, almost double their size. Their form was similar to that of the spear-wielders, six legs and two arms, though everything was broader.

Different weapons as well. One has a mace, and the other... two scythes? She looked at the two machines and, at that moment, their eyes started to glow green.

"Intruders," one of the machines said in a strange mechanical voice.

"Humans," the other machine said, looking around in an almost lifelike manner. "You will be removed."

These guys are creeping me out... Ilea thought as she identified them.

[Taleen Praetorian – lvl ???]

[Taleen Praetorian – lvl ???]

"Get those doors open!" Jasper shouted as magic gathered around him. "Teams three and four, send two mages each to burn through! Everyone, prepare for battle!"

“These guys don’t feel like the others at all... something’s different,” Ilea whispered to herself. Just then, the Praetorian with the mace looked at her, and she swore she saw its eyes glow a little brighter. As if it was considering her.

The machines moved into action a moment later, magic flowing around them as they advanced toward the expedition’s forces.

Arrows started flying toward the machines as the warriors advanced steadily. Magic joined the arrows, and a roaring ball of flame, a lance of ice, and a crystal spear hammered into their enemies in quick succession.

Out of the dust flew one of the scythes, faster than any arrow, piercing through a muscled warrior’s shield and then his arm. Blood sprayed from the screaming man, painting the once white walls red.

The fight had begun.

Ilea buffed herself, colors flaring to life below her armor. She advanced on the enemies. Ranged attacks still rained down on their positions. Her Magic Perception was unusable with all the explosions and projectiles, but a couple of steps later, the two machines were within range of her sphere. A mace rocketed into view in front of her, ready to crush her.

Blinking away to the left, she looked at her previous position to find the Praetorian standing there and then moving to its next target with a powerful leap. The distance it covered seemed impossible given its bulk. With a single leap, it landed between two of the ranged groups at the rear.

This wasn’t the plan. The melee fighters and tanks could usually hold guardians back. Even Centurions.

The vulnerable ranged attackers barely managed to react before a giant mace splattered the crystal mage Ilea had trained with just earlier that day. The massive two-handed metal weapon destroyed the woman’s body and left little recognizable material behind.

Spells rained down on the machine but only scuffed the green metal as it attacked again.

“Fuck, this is bad...”

Ilea blinked closer to the Praetorian, but she couldn’t shake the image of the pulverized crystal mage. It brought back memories of the deaths in the prisoner dungeons. And even of that first battle outside Riverwatch.

The mage who would’ve been killed next managed to teleport away just as Ilea had done before. She glanced to the left to see the second enemy

wade through the group of close-combat fighters, both scythes dancing gracefully around its body.

She blinked again, appearing behind the Praetorian's head to deliver a kick. Her spells activated on impact, but something felt wrong. As if the energy that was supposed to be released inside the enemy had been rejected.

Ilea flew backward, using her wings now, as more spells pummeled the machine.

What was that?

She blinked in again. This time she chose one of the beast's legs and paid close attention. The energies created by her offensive skills seemed to be blocked by something layering the machine like a bubble. Looking around, she saw that most of the magic being used by the other adventurers was suffering the same fate. *We're not dealing any damage... They have shields!*

A bright bolt of lightning impacted the machine, before it spread out on the near invisible surface. Ilea heard Inström curse.

Then the mace swung her way, and as she was preparing to blink, a burst of mana rippled through her, emanating from the mace. Her blink was disrupted, and all she could do was fly upward in panic. The weapon caught her legs, making her spiral through the air before she crashed hard into one of the pillars.

She hung from the pillar while healing herself and looked around the room. Four of the warriors were dead already, sliced completely in half or decapitated, their blood staining the once pristine floor. Another mage had died right after Ilea had been hit by the mace. All that now remained of them was a wet splotch of red near the Praetorian's feet. It turned to face the bright beam of lightning emanating from Inström.

Suddenly the machine jumped to join its counterpart, which in turn threw both of its scythes toward the other Praetorian's last position. The lightning mage still channelling his spell was cleanly sliced in half. Jeremy, who was with the close combat fighters, took a blow from the mace head-on, and Ilea could see the dent in his shield as he was thrown backward, sliding to a stop only fifteen meters further back.

"This is a massacre... we have to get out of here," Ilea said to herself.

She turned to check the door, where four mages were burning through the stone with different magics, looking over their shoulders every few seconds as sweat coated their faces. The bodies of their comrades lay only a

few feet away. Corpses now littered the hall as the surviving adventurers desperately tried to regroup, many of them obviously injured.

Ilea blinked downward and knocked aside a warrior who had been focusing on the now weaponless scythe machine just as the other Praetorian's mace was about to cave in his chest. She turned around just quickly enough to blink away from a flying scythe as it returned to its wielder.

"We need to get out!" Agor shouted in the middle of the chaos, deflecting a flying scythe with his greatsword. The warrior Ilea had saved was back on his feet and had joined Jeremy, who was advancing on one of the Praetorians.

"Everyone too slow and with no teleports to the door! Crack that stone open!" Jasper shouted, deflecting both scythes with quick movements of his sword, aided by blue magic. Ilea blinked in again and threw an enhanced punch at the scythe machine, but again her abilities were blocked by the creature's magical shield.

She still managed to get the machine's attention though and had to dodge the scythe coming her way. Reduced to her physical damage only, her blows might as well have been shots from a nerf gun for all the good they did. Ilea was sure that the shields wouldn't last forever, but the Praetorians hadn't shown any sort of reaction to anything the over thirty-strong expedition had thrown at them so far.

Everywhere she looked were dead bodies. People who had only a few hours ago been laughing and betting on her antics, or even helping her train. All dead. Ilea would usually have enjoyed such an overwhelming challenge. But this was why she preferred to fight alone – allies complicated things. Right now, all she wanted to do was help them escape.

More and more mages and close-combat fighters were working on getting through the stone, but it would take a while to break it all down. Time they certainly didn't have as another warrior was smashed underneath the massive mace. The machines continued to skitter about the room, occasionally leaping at single targets. Keeping them occupied was almost impossible.

Ilea dodged two more swipes of the dreadful scythes when the mages finally broke through the door. Without hesitation, the survivors started sprinting out in single file.

“We can get out!” a scout shouted next to Ilea and started running toward the door, only to be cut down by a scythe and hurled away, his body spattering against a nearby wall.

“We need more time – stand firm!” Jasper shouted. No magic was hitting the Praetorians anymore as everyone was trying to get out of the deathtrap they’d found themselves in.

The two machines concentrated fully on the few remaining close-combat fighters who were quick enough to dodge their blows. Ilea, Jasper, and Lorcan were three of them. She also recognized the girl Rin and had seen the other three warriors before as well. One was the mustachioed scimitar-wielder, another a muscular woman gripping a black metal war hammer, and the last was a younger man with burnished bronze armor and twin short swords.

They worked hard to dodge and attack as best they could, but the bronze-clad warrior was soon hit with a flying scythe. Ilea blinked toward him but could only watch as the mace of the other Praetorian landed on top of the unlucky man, spattering her with blood and guts.

A scream of terror and frustration left her lungs as she blinked away again. Why couldn’t she stop this? Wasn’t that the point of all her power and levels? She shook her head and refocused on the battle. There would be time for self-doubt later.

Thankfully, nearly all the adventurers had fled through the opening by this point. Appearing behind one of the pillars, she saw with her sphere that one of the scythes was flying toward her from behind the stone, forcing her to dodge to the side. The pillar was sliced in twain, the scythe cutting through the air where she had stood a moment ago.

Ilea slid to the ground next to the pillar, watching as the blade was recalled to its owner, glowing faintly. Her hands were shaking as she tried to wipe away the blood from her face and neck. The bronze warrior had looked younger than her...

Fuck, fuck, fuck... was all she thought before slapping herself in her face to dispel the shock. She got up again and blinked toward the others.

Just as Lorcan took a direct hit from the mace.

The blow sent him flying, ending with a hard crash into a pillar that crumbled and nearly fell on top of him. Ilea could see his armor was massively dented inward, his body crushed beneath.

He... he’s dying...

She forgot all about distracting the machines, blinking to Lorcan instead. She started healing him whilst trying to bend the metal back to allow his bones and organs to recover.

“Leave!” Jasper shouted, and the remaining warriors started running to the opening in the stone. Ilea shouldered Lorcan and ran as well, maintaining her healing touch.

Glancing sideways, she saw Jasper jump backward before an incredible amount of mana gathered around his weapon. The Praetorians looked at him and advanced slowly before they were engulfed in a storm of blue fire that roared from the tip of his sword.

That won't stop them for long... Ilea thought as she ran, nearly tripping on the abattoir's worth of corpses that littered the floor. Mid-stumble, she felt her hairs stand up and time slow down. She saw the scythe flying at her from behind and she threw Lorcan up, just enough so she could use Blink to dodge away and so that the blade could pass harmlessly below his body. She appeared a couple of meters away and spun on her feet to catch the falling man.

The blade passed harmlessly by both of them and embedded itself into the wall. Aiming at the doorway, Ilea threw the injured man with all her strength. Lorcan had regained consciousness a moment ago, and his eyes first flickered and then widened in alarm, but he managed to move slightly to avoid hitting the stone as he flew through the air.

Ilea watched on as Agor landed safely outside before she blinked through the wall.

At least, that was what she had planned to do.

When she failed to blink, she looked down and saw a meter-long blade sticking out from her stomach, blood and some of her guts splattering against the stone floor.

Her mouth opened and closed as she touched the blood-coated metal, her lips quivering as her mind refused to accept what had happened. She could feel pain spread through her, accompanied by a biting cold she had never experienced before.

SIXTY

Scythes and Swords

Touching the blade, Ilea deactivated her perception of pain. She still felt the tug as it slowly slid backward out of her body, grinding against bones.

Then her sphere recognized the mace bearing down on her.

As the blade exited her torso, she blinked through the wall, falling to her knees on the other side. She gagged and puked all of the remaining contents in her stomach onto the ground before her as she tried to heal the wound.

It's... not... closing...!

She looked down at the blood soaking past her hands as she tried desperately to keep inside what wasn't supposed to come out. Her vision was just growing blurry when a warmth started to fill her. She looked up to see a mage, the fire mage from earlier, helping her stay on her knees. Looking down, she saw the man was holding together her wound and burning it shut.

Ilea didn't feel any pain but screamed nonetheless. She closed her eyes as tears joined the blood on her face. The man moved around to her back and continued his burning magic to stop the bleeding.

With a grunt, the arcane mage from Ilea's training collapsed to the floor next to her, having used his powerful beam attack to collapse a large swathe of stone above the door to the throne room.

More spells followed, and a wave of dust clouded everyone's vision as more and more stone fell to block the path they had created. Ilea entered a state of meditation as she assessed the scythe's damage with her healing spell.

The blade had miraculously missed her spine, but a lot of other things had been sliced through. More unsettling though was the fact that she wasn't healing anywhere near as well as usual.

Whatever that bitter cold was, it now fought against her healing spells and her natural regeneration. And if that wasn't bad enough, Ilea found herself losing mana much faster than usual. She deactivated any buffs that wouldn't aid her healing or perception, and simply sat there trying to fight whatever it was that still lingered in her body.

The mage who had saved her life was now running away toward the chasm before the Great Hall, along with many other adventurers. The smiths, cooks, and other workers were either frozen by fear or running as well.

"Will they come for us?" someone shouted to her left, joining the shouts of others as Ilea forced herself to open her eyes. Her mana was draining too fast and she had to do something quickly.

Suddenly, an incredible wave of mana that came from the throne room silenced most of the people still standing near the entrance. Almost immediately thereafter, a massive boom filled the air.

The Praetorians were trying to get through the wall of stone.

"Run."

The word was spoken in a quiet tone, but it carried easily through the silent hall. A moment later, the sounds of activity returned as everyone started running back toward the exit with all possible haste. Ilea was happy to see Agor among them, although he wasn't quite moving freely. She got to her feet and started moving, only to fall down three steps later.

Gambling a little with her mana, she activated her wings and made herself move through the air. The wings didn't make the rest of her body and muscles move as much as her legs did, which irritated her injury less. She could still feel the cold spreading inside her and was once more grateful for her Pain Tolerance skill that had likely already saved her life.

Now to keep it that way... she thought as more powerful blows echoed rhythmically from the throne room.

Using her wings, she soon passed the lower-leveled workers and some of the less speedy adventurers. Ilea's vision swung to the left upon hearing the screech of metal on stone. A Centurion had suddenly come through from the door to the treasure room. The machine threw its spear at one of

the smiths, piercing his chest, and the man was thrown backward, instantly dead.

Why are they...?

Then another blow echoed behind her. She glanced back to see a Praetorian crawling through the debris, its eyes glowing a bright green. The Centurion's eyes glowed similarly as it slashed through the fleeing expedition members.

Ilea reached the door, but seeing the bottleneck and over a dozen people trying to squeeze through, she blinked through the stone and kept flying.

I can't save them...

Her body was growing ever colder, and she saw her mana was reaching its end as she flew over the people entering the residential part of the dungeon.

Even though they were following the path they had already cleared out, the despairing adventurers found sword and ranged guardians advancing through the roads. Ilea looked on helplessly as Jasper rallied survivors around him to push through. Many of the guardians from a road to the right joined the other machines, effectively cutting Ilea off from Jasper's group.

Checking her mana, Ilea felt shock ripple through her. She continued flying with full speed, entering the nearly clear road to the right. She only had a paltry amount of mana remaining, and it was dropping fast. Her wound remained raw, burned shut but oozing blood, the weight of her body straining the injury as she flew.

Blinking inside one of the buildings in an effort to lose the guardians that had seen her, her wings disappeared as she slid down the wall, steadying herself with her arms.

She quickly activated her sphere and saw a guardian entering the house from below, so she blinked to a house further up the road. Another two blinks later, she had reached the square and blinked again inside the big building that stood over nearly all of the squares.

The Praetorians had apparently called all the guardians to themselves as Ilea heard more of them advancing from the side roads. *We should've cleared all of it*, she thought as she entered the next house through a door.

She coughed into her arm as quietly as possible before continuing. She walked through door after door until she came up on the next square.

I'm nearly out...

Then she hid again as she heard more guardians advancing through the roads. Her health had stopped dropping now but the cold feeling remained, and the wound refused to heal at a reasonable pace.

Using the last dregs of her mana, she summoned the Dark Elf armor and put it on with agonizing slowness. What remained of her leather armor was nearly entirely in pieces. The helmet fitted snugly on her head, its two black horns protruding downward and to the front while her face was covered entirely by dark metal with openings only for her eyes.

It took her two minutes to put the rest of the armor on, as she was moving slow enough to meditate at the same time. Afterward, she glanced outside and found no more guardians advancing.

I need to get further away.

Limping through the next square, she reached another side street and moved through the identical houses. Three minutes later, she reached another square and continued on through the houses for another two streets.

This should be far enough.

There was a thud outside. Suddenly a sword guardian burst through one of the windows and was upon her. Without her active buffs, Ilea was moving considerably slower, her reduced defenses and damage leaving her vulnerable.

Her health was still not much higher than it had been after the Praetorian's scythe had pierced her. With her increased movement, it even started to drop slightly. She saw the blades coming, but her body reacted sluggishly. The machine's blades scraped across her armor before one of the sword arms found purchase between her neck and left shoulder blade.

Ilea didn't feel the pain and used the chance to punch the guardian with her Reversed Destruction spell, gaining small but precious amounts of mana with each hit, glad the machine had anything to steal at all.

The guardian jabbed one of its blades into her right leg at the knee, shaving off even more of her precious lifeforce as blood flowed. Screaming, Ilea activated all her buffs.

Suddenly the tide turned, and Ilea's blows rattled through the machine like gunfire, destroying it in less than ten blows. She collapsed together with the machine, but even before she hit the ground, she blinked upward and across to the other side of the street, right into one of the houses' attics.

Falling to the ground, she made sure to lie sideways in case she passed out. Seeing no other way, Ilea summoned the remaining potion she had

stored a while ago and one of the dwarven shirts she had. Her hands were still shaking as she opened the potion and drank its contents. Other than the warm sensation that went through her, the liquid didn't change her state greatly. The potion was in fact far less efficient than when she had tested the other one.

She ripped the shirt apart and used some of the cloth to bandage her new wounds. Having stopped the bleeding by putting on as much pressure as she could apply without causing more damage, she focused internally and started meditating again.

Her mana was still not regenerating as fast as it should have, but she didn't have trouble anymore with keeping her Reconstruction spell up. She decided to keep State of Azarinth up as well as it enhanced her hearing. After quickly checking how much mana it used, Ilea also activated Body Heat Manipulation to make herself as cold as the stone beneath her.

Her eyes were closed as her body fought whatever that scythe had done to it. For the first time in quite a while, Ilea felt afraid. Tears formed in her eyes, yet she refused to cry. She tried to focus on her meditation. For once, the general calm she had felt since learning the ways of Azarinth began to fade. She was all alone, in a strange world, and she might very well be dying.

I'm tired...

She thought of her bed back in her apartment on Earth as tears fell unbidden to the floor beneath her.

At least the adventure was fun.

Then exhaustion took her as her body continued to try and heal itself.

* * *

Sometime later, Ilea woke up coughing. She stopped herself immediately, hearing a slight irregularity in the hums of machines outside and in the walls. Her lips were dry and her body was cold. Blood had soaked the shreds of cloth she had used as makeshift bandages around her wounds and filled the room with the smell of iron and death. Ilea could just make out a distant scream as her eyes closed and she faded from consciousness again.

* * *

Another indeterminate amount of time later, Ilea woke up again and felt that some of her mana had returned. The cold feeling in her stomach was still there, but she summoned her water canteen close to her face and struggled to remove her helmet, which she let clatter to the floor next to her head.

With a shaking hand that was still covered in blood, she opened the bottle and splashed some liquid onto her face before putting it to her mouth to drink deeply.

Coughing immediately, she stopped as nearly a third of the remaining water escaped her mouth onto the stone below her. She let go of the bottle, trying not to cough again. She then summoned some jerky and made herself eat a bit of it.

Checking her status, she found she had received a message while unconscious.

***‘ding’ You have learned the general skill Curse Resistance – lvl 1
Curses are seldom cast and even more seldom survived. You are one of
few individuals to tell the tale. Not a pleasant one, to be sure, but with this
skill, you might be able to survive it again, should the need arise.***

Ok, got it... don't get cursed...

Ilea drifted off to sleep again.

She dreamed of Earth, of a world where survival only meant having a job and putting a meal on the table.

“Welcome to shitty fast-food place 87, what can I do for—” The obese customer morphed into a Praetorian before her eyes, and Ilea woke up in a cold sweat just as its scythes reached her face.

She breathed heavily and started to cough again.

Fuck I hate this...

She grabbed the canteen and carefully drank some of the water.

Checking herself, she found that her injury was still there, but she had more than half her mana now, and it was slowly rising. Her health remained steady, not having risen or fallen since she'd last checked. *I'm recovering then.* She smiled a little.

But so many died... She tried to not think of the corpses, but the images entered her mind nonetheless. *I have to get out of here... see if others survived... help if I can...*

Ilea made herself move a little. Deactivating Pain Tolerance, she gritted her teeth with a gasp and turned it on again. *How is this possible...?* She looked down, touching her stomach with her hand. She was shaking less now, but it was still there.

She tried to use some of the dwarven clothes to clean herself as well as possible. Considering the amount of blood that had stuck to her – her own and that of others – it didn't really make a difference. She drank half of the remaining water and used the rest to wet some of the cloth to clean at least her face.

Next she removed the blood-soaked tatters of clothing from her wounds, reopening them partially. She saw to her great relief that they were slowly closing with Reconstruction now. Her mana was draining again but at a much slower pace than before. A normal pace, though some of the cold feeling remained.

She sighed and struggled over to the stairs to sit down. *What the hell were those machines...?* She deactivated Pain Tolerance again and gritted her teeth, the physical pain a helpful distraction from the mental images of death that replayed in her mind.

Her fists clenched and tears started falling from her eyes as she bit down on a rolled-up wad of clothing. She had to stop the pain again.

I'm a mess... she groaned, but then she chuckled to herself, reminded of the time she had faced her first drake at level 1. *Guess there will always be a drake...*

She looked up at the stone ceiling and started meditating. It was hard, but the high level of the skill managed to calm her down a little, coupled with her Reconstruction. The images were still there, though their impact felt dulled.

Glad I have these skills—

Her thought was interrupted as she heard a noise outside. *Guardians?* Her sphere activated, and she saw three people sneaking through the house on the other side of the street.

She tried getting up once, then again, before finally making herself move. The trio had settled down in the house opposite, one of them coughing heavily, a substance falling to the ground before them.

Ilea slowly walked downstairs. The cold in her stomach was nearly gone, just a lingering reminder of what she had survived. She paused, nearly puking, before she looked both ways down the street and walked to

the other side. Her body should've been mostly fine, at least that was what Reconstruction told her, but it still felt stiff and unresponsive.

She reached the other side without alerting the three people until she entered the building. Knocking on the wall slightly, she saw with her sphere that the three turned toward her, two of them drawing their weapons.

"It's Lilith..." she said, rounding the corner.

In front of her was Jeremy, battered and bloodied. His helmet was missing, and many cuts and cracks covered his armor. No shield could be seen, and even his sword was chipped in places. On the ground was Rin, her eyes glassy. A gruesome diagonal gash through her chest was covered in dried blood. Fresh blood colored the ground below her.

The last one in the room was the chandelier mage. Ilea nearly smiled. He was the one who had first helped her with her resistance training. His robe was no longer very pretty, and he was holding a small dagger covered in icy spikes.

"Let me look at her," she said immediately, ignoring the stares and still-raised weapons as she limped past them and knelt down next to Rin. "Praetorian?" she asked Jeremy, who looked out toward the street before kneeling down as well.

"No... guardian," he said, his voice dry and hoarse. Ilea checked Rin and used some of her mana to heal the wounds. No longer under the full effect of the curse, it wasn't an issue.

Two minutes later, Rin was as good as new, closing her eyes in relieved exhaustion. The others hadn't spoken a word but only looked on as she took care of the woman. Jeremy's eyes softened a little, but he soon focused on the street again.

"I'll hear them if they're coming, you can relax a little. Were you followed?" Ilea asked, turning to Jeremy and touching his shoulder lightly to start healing him.

"No... we finished them. Help Stevan first..." he said, motioning to the ice mage who had started leaning on the wall behind him. Ilea nodded and walked over to the man, touching his arm. He twitched but relaxed as the healing magic flowed into him. There were several cuts and bruises on the man, and part of his torso was seemingly frozen.

Does that happen if he uses too many spells? she asked herself as she fixed the damage. *I need to conserve my mana a little, in case there are others.*

“Jeremy, let me take care of your worst wounds, then we’ll go upstairs. It’s a little safer. My magic is still a bit fucky from a curse so I’ll need some time to completely take care of you two.”

Jeremy nodded and walked over to her. Twenty seconds later, she had taken care of the worst of his wounds, and he nodded to her before gingerly lifting Rin from the ground.

They went upstairs and reached the attic, where all of them sat down, Rin’s head resting on Jeremy’s thigh.

“I thought we’d die, Lilith,” he whispered a couple of minutes later, snapping her out of her fragile meditation.

“I thought so too,” she answered quietly. “Those enemies... How can we stand against something like that?”

Jeremy just shook his head slightly.

“Taleen dungeons... well, I certainly learned some history.” He looked down at his battered armor.

“I have some things that might help,” she said, summoning three suits of armor. Rin and Stevan would have no problems wearing them, and Jeremy would be fine with some adjustments with the straps.

“A storage device,” Stevan said in wonder, touching one of the suits of armor.

“I don’t have any more water,” she said, summoning half of the meat and bread she still had. She divided the food into four shares, then, looking at Jeremy’s sword, she asked, “Short sword or bigger?”

Jeremy’s eyes opened wide as he took the offered food and stuffed it in his mouth, shaking slightly.

“Short sword...” he said, and Ilea summoned the Legate Guardian Sword with one of the round shields, handing them to him.

“I... I can’t...”

“If we’re planning on surviving this, you’ll need these,” Ilea answered with finality. “Stevan, you just need mana I assume, so meditate.”

The man was nibbling at some dried meat and looked at her.

“I already am, of course,” he whispered coldly, and she nodded.

“What happened out there?” Ilea asked Jeremy. He stopped looking at the sword, and his eyes turned cold again.

SIXTY-ONE

Sharing is Caring

“We fled the hall after the throne room, but the guardians closed in on all fronts,” Jeremy began. “We were in the main group with Jasper and Agor, fleeing while destroying any guardians that blocked our path. A while after, we were separated by a Centurion. Rin was hit badly, and Stevan here managed to drag her into one of the nearby houses. We held off the guardians that came for us and managed to advance a couple streets further back.”

Jeremy chewed on some bread and swallowed hard before continuing.

“Two of them followed us. Their eyes were glowing, just like the Praetorian’s had. They wouldn’t relent, so me and Stevan took them down. It was a close one, that fight...”

He sighed and nodded to Stevan, who was staring into nothingness before him.

“You were hit, weren’t you Lilith? By one of them? I saw you on the ground when you...”

Jeremy stopped talking, and, looking down, Ilea saw her hands were shaking. She clutched them together to stop it and looked at him with a frown.

“The scythe... it was cursed. A fire mage saved my life.” She remembered the person burning her wounds to stop the bleeding. “The internal bleeding still nearly killed me due to the curse.”

“Curse... I thought that was what you said earlier, but it didn’t register. What have we gotten ourselves into?” Jeremy said, focusing on the street again.

“We’ll move further back and out of this hellhole as soon as she’s up again,” Ilea said, nodding to the unconscious Rin. She summoned two more swords and placed them next to the armor that lay prepared for the woman.

Jeremy nodded and silently finished his food.

“The others...” he started, but Ilea stopped him.

“We would die trying to save them. You saw those machines, what they can do. None of us here can stop them.”

“But we have to try... don’t we?” He stopped talking and looked away. “The cave before the main dungeon begins. We were told that if the worst possible outcome happens, that’s where we should all regroup.”

“Then we’ll go there. We’ll wake her if she doesn’t wake up herself in half an hour. The longer we stay here, the more dangerous it gets.” Ilea finished her food as well, pulling her helmet back on.

The thirty minutes passed in silence, other than for the sounds of both Jeremy and Stevan donning their armor. The mage had noticeably calmed down compared to before, though he was still staring at nothing. They all had rather similar demons to fight, and Ilea was glad when the prescribed time had passed.

Gently, Jeremy woke up Rin, who took a deep breath, her eyes opening wide. Her breathing was initially frantic, but it calmed quickly as she saw it was Jeremy looming above her. She hugged him and started sobbing quietly while he held her close.

“Lilith saved us, my dear... We have to keep moving though, I’m sorry,” he said, releasing her from the hug.

Rin looked at Ilea with hopeful eyes before she looked down again, having seen Ilea’s cold stare.

“Your armor and swords. Can you fight?” Ilea asked, and Rin nodded weakly.

“Thank you...” she began, but Ilea waved her off.

“Thank me once we’re out of here,” she said and got up to check the street. Rin quickly ate the food that had been left for her, then she put her new armor on and held one sword in each hand.

“Do you guys want helmets?” Ilea asked. Jeremy was the only one who accepted, and she gave him the one without any attachments on it.

“Thank you for the gear,” Rin said. Nobody seemed bothered by the fact that Ilea had hidden a storage device from them.

“Let’s move then,” Jeremy said, seeming to be in higher spirits now that Rin was up again. Ilea was glad he took the lead.

Focus now, you’ll get them out of here alive... she told herself as they moved quietly through the houses until they reached the next square. There were no guardians they could see, and so they continued on for four more streets.

In the fifth square stood two sword guardians. Their eyes were glowing green, and they were looking around as if they were searching.

Ilea couldn’t help but think they were looking for *her*. That cursed scythe wanted to finish what it had started....

She pressed herself up against the wall of the house they were in and gritted her teeth. She wanted to sink down onto the ground, haunted by the memory of the cold curse washing over her, the scythe piercing through her stomach...

Jeremy touched her shoulder.

“Are you ok? What did you see?” he asked, but it took her a few seconds to calm down.

“T... two sword... guardians,” she said in a whisper. Jeremy looked at her, worry in his eyes.

“You can take them, right? I saw the remains. You even beat a Centurion,” he said.

It was clear that Jeremy wasn’t sure the three of them could take on the two guardians while carrying injuries. They needed her to be on point.

You can do this. Ilea heard the voice of her mind speaking. *They’re just normal guardians. You’ve faced worse, much worse, and you’re stronger. Stronger than you’ve ever been.*

But then the bitter cold resurfaced. Gnawing at her thoughts, at her rational mind, leaving only a hollow mix of doubt and guilt.

You aren’t cut out for this... you’re just a college student far from home... out of your depth... so many died... you couldn’t save them... you ran...

Ilea clenched her muscles, Reconstruction flowing into her mind and through her body, but she remained unmoving. The voices of the others in the room sounded distant.

“It’s just two of them. We cannot linger,” Stevan whispered to Jeremy, who had gone back over to the mage and Rin. “We can take them down, and she can heal us after if anything happens. Come on.”

Ilea saw Jeremy look over at her again, then he nodded. Rin too looked over at Ilea with sympathetic eyes before she nodded. Determined.

“Let’s go. As quietly as possible,” she said as her dwarven blades started glowing red. Jeremy’s shield became encrusted with rock, while magic frost started gathering around Stevan.

“I will open...” the mage said, stepping out of the house. Using her sphere, Ilea dully saw a spike of ice form and hit one of the guardians. The two machines engaged the group, and Rin and Jeremy ran at them with weapons drawn as spikes and mist of ice hit the guardians to slow and damage them.

Rin received a cut to her arm as she entered the first guardian’s guard, slicing the machine with both of her blades. Jeremy blocked the other machine’s weapons as spikes of earth hit the enemy from below, summoned with each blocked hit caught on his shield.

The first of the guardians fell half a minute later, a spike of ice finishing it. The three focused on the second enemy and quickly downed it. Rin’s glowing swords cleaved through its neck before she landed with a flip.

Her arm was bleeding heavily as they returned to Ilea, who was still healing her mind as she watched them without reacting. She felt numb.

“We have to continue. We have to fight. I’m sorry, but we have to,” Rin said. She didn’t mention her bleeding arm, but when she gently touched Ilea’s shoulder, mana flowed through Ilea and fixed the woman’s wounds. It happened out of instinct, like muscle memory. Ilea felt like she was watching herself, removed from her own actions. Rin smiled and tugged at Ilea’s arm.

“Thank you. We’ll get you out of here, alright?” she told Ilea, and she held her shaking hands tightly with her own.

Ilea watched the scene in her sphere as if she was still watching the battle. She felt detached, distant...

Stevan scoffed as he looked at her, but then he shook his head, focusing again. Some of the apathy left his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said in a whisper that Ilea only heard thanks to her sphere.

Something about seeing Stevan, the freaking *chandelier* mage, pull himself together and even *apologize* felt so ridiculous to her. She took in a rasping breath and smiled, tilting her head back before she shuddered, the memory of the cold vanishing with the gesture.

She gritted her teeth and balled her fists, fear replaced by anger.

What the hell was that? she thought, confused about the panic and fear that had suddenly gripped her.

‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches lvl 2

It’s still there...

Ilea activated her Pain Tolerance again. She hissed, and Rin immediately checked on her again, stopping the other two in their tracks.

“Walk on... I’m fine...” Ilea said through gritted teeth. “I have to... do this...”

She forced herself to keep walking. The pain was less terrible, but it was still there. Remnants of the cold were in her, yet it wasn’t as prominent as earlier. The pain helped her focus.

Need to get out of here...

The four of them kept walking, entering the houses again to avoid more guardian encounters. Two streets later, Ilea groaned. She had tried to speak, but the pain had gotten to her lips first.

“What is it?” Jeremy asked, checking their surroundings.

“People... there,” Ilea said, pointing to a house on the left beyond the square in front of them, where she had seen four people on the first floor. She grimaced through the pain of raising her arm. Her tolerance had leveled again five minutes earlier.

The group entered the house, and Jeremy announced their presence before they went up to the first floor.

“We’re from the expedition. Can you hear us? We have a healer,” he called up, and Ilea saw the people start moving agitatedly. Two of them were preparing to fight.

“Come up then!” a familiar voice replied. Ilea recognized it as the voice of the arcane mage who had blocked in the Praetorians before their flight. They went upstairs and found the arcane mage and another mage, who had bloodied clothes but otherwise wasn’t in too bad of a condition. One of the smiths was with them, holding a smith’s hammer, ready to strike. The last of the group was one of the scouts who was without both armor and weapons.

“Anybody hurt?” Jeremy asked, but the arcane mage, who seemed to have become the leader of the small group, shook his head.

“We didn’t encounter any more guardians after the initial assault. If you have food and water though...”

Ilea summoned the last of her food and handed it to Rin, who was standing a little behind Jeremy. The mage had likely noticed the storage item but didn’t seem to care at that moment. Rin handed the food to the group, whose eyes lit up as they went through it in seconds.

“No water, sadly. But it shouldn’t be too far to the regroup location. Maybe a couple hours,” Jeremy said.

The arcane mage nodded. “Thank you. We’ll move on then, or do you need a break?”

Jeremy shook his head. “We move on.”

They all got up before the last of Ilea’s armor clattered to the floor.

“This is the last I have.” A spear, a war hammer, and two shields fell to the ground as well. “A spear?” She looked at the scout, who nodded.

“A spear...” he said, and he grabbed the weapon and a shield. The smith threw away his hammer and grabbed the war hammer and the other shield instead. They nodded to Ilea, who was looking at the ground before her. The bitter cold was whispering that these new allies would surely die, and she had to force herself not to listen as the battle between curse and Reconstruction raged in her mind.

The group continued in silence for the next hour. Luckily, no more enemies were encountered, and they soon reached a part of the residential area they had cleared out before.

“We’ll be out in an hour,” the arcane mage said as they walked through another house. An empty square lay outside before them, and Jeremy motioned for the group to follow the mage’s lead.

As they reached the middle of the square, the tank suddenly spun around and deflected a spear with his shield. The weapon continued into the closest house and vanished again.

“Get back!” he shouted as he looked over at the Centurion that had emerged from a side street.

Ilea gasped, and the cold bloomed within her, deadening her senses and filling her with fear. She stumbled backward, and the smith grabbed her, strapping his shield to his back.

“Come on, lassy, we’ll only be in the way,” he said calmly, rushing her to the nearest house. The rest of the group faced the Centurion.

Useless... weak... the cold whispered to Ilea.

Fuck off, she thought, her fists straining. But she was a liability at present, she knew that much. She would fall back for now and watch with her sphere.

“Can we just run away?” the scout asked.

Jeremy shook his head. “We have open space here, and these things are damn fast. Mages to the back, we’ll have to whittle it down. Prepare.”

Then the Centurion was upon them, and Ilea watched on as the group moved into a formation. The mages attacked it from behind while the scout and Rin circled the machine and Jeremy tried to hold its attention, clashing his new sword against his shield.

Die... they will all die...

She closed her eyes and tilted her head to the side, breathing hard.

No they won't.

The smith watched from the doorway as Ilea leaned on a nearby wall, her breathing ragged. He alternated between looking at the fight and her.

Jeremy was thrown back by the Centurion’s attack before it was distracted by Rin’s burning blades. The scout managed to get a spear attack in before being punched back by the enemy and hitting his head hard on the stone floor.

Magic missiles were being fired by the mages, exploding as they hit the Centurion and forcing it to try and block them with its spear.

Weak...

No... she thought as the cold rose up inside her once again. I'm not...

They will suffer...

“No...”

Her own voice began to drown out the whispering cold that sounded so much like her. The pain in her body was agonizing, the bitter frost in her stomach all-consuming.

They will die...

“No... I won’t let them.”

The back of her fist hit the wall next to her, slapping onto the stone with barely a sound.

You will lose...

“No...” she said, louder now. The smith was staring at her with worry on his face.

Her left arm rubbed tears away from her eyes as they focused. Looking at the battle through her sphere, she saw Jeremy was bleeding from his side.

Rin circled the Centurion before being thrown back, hitting the ground hard.

You will fail...

“No,” she said again, her voice echoing in the large empty room. Lines of red and yellow fire formed on her body as she punched the wall again, causing it to crack. The smith looked back at the noise with wide eyes.

You will die...

“No!” Ilea shouted, blue runes shining inside her armor as her fist blasted through the wall, reducing it to rubble.

She saw Jeremy, still reeling from the last spear he had deflected, with horror on his face as the Centurion advanced on the downed Rin. The mages were attacking non-stop, but the Centurion didn’t seem to care. The scout was scrambling to his feet unsteadily.

Rin looked at the advancing spear and closed her eyes. Then the sound of metal on flesh rang through the air. Rin gasped and opened her eyes – unharmed.

“I said, no...” Ilea said to the machine quietly, struggling to hold the spear in front of her.

The Centurion yanked the spear from her grasp and thrust it at her. She moved her body slightly to the right. The spear glanced off her Shroud of Ash and the armor below before a jab from her right fist hit the machine’s outstretched arm, sending destructive mana through its body.

The machine continued its assault, but none of its hits seemed to connect. The mages continued their barrage as Jeremy used one of his small healing spells to steady the scout, who was still swaying from his head wound.

Ilea moved in time with the Centurion, seeing Rin scramble backward before pulling herself up and circling the machine again, and she blinked behind it when it tried to grab her, sending mana through it when it managed to grasp her arm. Its spear was deflected again and again by her armor and shroud.

She moved her body ever so slightly at all times, never allowing a direct hit to land. Focused entirely on the battle, her fists hit with all the strength and mana she could muster.

There were dozens of scratches on her armor by the time the machine went into its final aggressive phase. She stopped attacking and simply

dodged the crazed machine and deflected its wild attacks that were directed at the others.

The magic and her occasional flow of destructive mana whittled the enemy down until its core started glowing. She blinked away immediately before the Centurion could grab her and managed to get a couple of meters in front of it, putting herself between the machine and the rest of the group.

“Jeremy!” she shouted, and a dense wall of rock formed in front of her, which was immediately atomized by the explosion. Ilea held her ground, blocking any large debris from hitting the mages behind her as she narrowed her eyes. Metal and rock were still falling when she turned around.

“Anyone else nearby must’ve heard that. We have to move,” she said, a slight smile on her face below the helmet and a warm feeling in her stomach.

‘ding’ Curse Resistance reaches lvl 3

She ignored the rest of the messages but noted that both her classes had leveled by one. She put her new stat points into Wisdom as she knew she would likely need to do a lot of healing when she reached the others.

The group ran back to the dungeon entrance, Ilea at the front. Thanks to her sphere, she noticed Jeremy glance at Rin, and both were smiling at each other.

The last stretch of the way was littered with destroyed guardians and even another crater that had obviously been created by a defeated Centurion. Some corpses of adventurers were strewn about as well, but it didn’t deter the group as they ran faster, driven by hope.

Suddenly, Ilea stopped and turned around. The rest of the group continued running, but Rin slowed down and shouted to Ilea.

“Lilith, we have to go! Come on!!”

Ilea looked at the empty street with clenched fists, slowly raising them to remove her helmet. It vanished in her hands.

The street was lit up by the same eerie green light that characterized this dungeon, illuminating the destroyed guardians of this ancient place.

“There will always be a drake,” Ilea said quietly before she turned around.

And for this one too, I shall be back...

SIXTY-TWO

Survivors

“Will they follow us outside the dungeon?” one of the mages shouted as they ran through the caves, arcane magic lighting the way.

“They shouldn’t!” the scout shouted from further back.

Ilea was running at the rear, sometimes looking behind her to see if anything was following them. The doors were too small for the Praetorians to follow immediately, but she was sure they could break through in time.

“It would be highly unusual...” the arcane mage said, “...but we don’t know much about the Taleen machines, especially the Praetorians...”

He kept on talking as they ran. Twenty minutes later, they reached the rendezvous location deep in the caverns below Karth. They were greeted by torches and shouts, the stalactites and natural rock formations quite a welcome sight to Ilea after the monotonous designs of dwarven homes and streets.

“We have more survivors!” a warrior shouted, beckoning the group over. Ilea jogged up to the camp after everyone else and looked around.

A pitiful fire was sputtering its last breath, barely illuminating the dark caves and downtrodden faces. Some of them looked up to check who had joined them, while others seemed preoccupied with other things, be it grief, fear, or anger. Ilea noticed that some of the adventurers didn’t seem as fazed as others. In fact, those wrestling with emotions were relatively few. Most of the survivors were getting on with practical matters like getting some sleep, sharpening weapons, or meditating to restore mana. It seemed a little callous at first, but Ilea assumed they were all somewhat used to the fatal outcome of a failed expedition.

I need a warm bed and some nice snacks...

She sighed, sitting down by the fire, just as a big hand landed on her shoulder, making her twitch a little.

"I'm glad you survived, Il— Lilith. You've seen better days," Lorcan grunted, sitting next to her. He didn't mention the startled twitch, for which Ilea was grateful. She wasn't sure if it was the lingering effects of the curse or just her own frayed and battered nerves, but she hated looking so vulnerable in front of strong fighters like Lorcan.

"Glad you survived as well, Agor."

No further words were spoken as both weary adventurers stared into the flames, joining the others in their solemn musings. Across the fire, Ilea saw that Jasper had survived as well, though he was now missing an arm. She forced herself to her feet and walked over to the man, though not before briefly touching Agor's shoulder in a similar gesture to the one he had offered her.

"Jasper. Your arm," she simply stated before she started healing.

"Thank you, glad you made it out. Didn't think I'd end up saying that to you... monster."

His arm twitched as bone, then muscle, and finally flesh were reborn through mana.

"Thank you for saving them," he whispered, glancing over at the others in Ilea's group. *He must've heard about the Centurion. That or he simply assumed I did.*

Whatever story he'd heard, not a word was uttered about her stockpile of armor or the necklace. It was perhaps a trivial matter after what had happened, yet it was one that would demand a reaction from the expedition leader had he been made aware. The fact he remained ignorant of Ilea's secrets was a testament to the companionship Ilea's group had forged with one another in the little time they had spent together.

A bond formed by blood. Or something like that...

Nobody had managed to bring any food with them, and some bellies were rumbling in the dark. Conversations were kept to a minimum as the group rested. Jasper had decided to wait for another three hours before they returned to the Root and, subsequently, Dawntree.

There were twenty-two people in all, eight of them from Ilea's group. A surprisingly high number of survivors, Ilea thought, having seen the slaughter first-hand. She decided to wait with the other leaders should

somebody injured arrive who she could perhaps save with her magic. But the hours passed, and nobody else turned up.

“We go then. Maybe some scouts can return at a later date to find the remains,” Jasper said, getting up from the stone he had been sitting on.

Ilea stayed seated for a moment. She had played the fight in the throne room before her eyes time and time again, thinking of a way she could’ve changed the outcome, but nothing came to mind.

The feelings of fear, and even guilt, were confusing. These were things she hadn’t felt in quite some time. Differentiating between what the curse had done to her mind and her own musings was difficult. Watching others die, coming close to death herself, being so helpless and unable to even scratch the enemy... it was different to simply being caught in a near-fatal dwarfish deathtrap. The overwhelming odds hadn’t given her the thrill they usually would have. Not when there were other lives on the line than her own. And, she realized, she was also afraid to die herself. She had made a new life here, one she didn’t want to lose.

This world has become my own... she thought as she got up and followed the group out of the dark cave. It would take a couple of hours for them to reach the Root, but she was in no hurry.

It gave her time to think.

For the first time since her encounter with the drake on that very first day, the danger she’d found herself in had felt real. Sure, there had been times of pain – physical and emotional – but Ilea realized that, up till now, she had treated the whole thing like a video game.

Like a dream, but now I’m awake – and I’m still here...

She closed her hand and looked down at her fist, her weapon. This fast-food worker turned battle healer had made colorful, interesting acquaintances and even met people she would consider friends. She had grown powerful. Powerful enough that she had to consider her actions within a group like this. Powerful enough that she had perhaps been able to change things before and would be able to change things in the future.

Ilea was briefly taken out of her reminiscing when she encountered the expected stretch of water. She decided to fly over it and landed gracefully on the other side. Touching her wings, she moved her fingers through the levitating ash and found no residue on her fingers after.

Warm...

She smiled at the magical limbs she'd always wanted. A comfort after everything that had happened.

Her arrival in Elos had been confusing. She still had no clue why or how it had happened. Ancient magic, perhaps? Or a botched demon summoning? Either way, it felt real. It *was* real. By now, there was no way for her to deny it.

The explanation Ilea liked the most was the simple idea of an accident. A shift in the fabric that connected her old universe to this one. It didn't feel like she had been chosen. There was no ring to destroy, no deity asking Ilea to do their bidding. She was just stranded here, to do as she thought best.

For months she had trained alone in that stone chamber, her Meditation and Reconstruction skills the only things that had kept her from going mad. She smiled a little at the memory.

Dungeons, monsters, necromancers, and a road trip had landed her here. In a dark cave accompanied by a group of survivors who had lost friends and companions to ancient machines guarding their lost city, long forgotten by their likely once proud owners.

More interesting than fast-food, that's for sure.

A slight smile quickly crossed her face and faded again.

"What are you gonna do after this?"

Lorcan had been walking quietly next to her up until he posed the question. He was wearing his helmet, but the whole ensemble looked much worse for wear since the Praetorian battle. He would likely have to give it in for extensive repairs or even get a new set altogether. Ilea's group was still wearing the dwarven armor she had given them, but reclaiming it was the last thing on her mind at that moment.

"I don't know," she said. She walked on quietly for a couple of minutes. "Travel more. Not get caught up in any more expeditions."

"You're not responsible for any of them, Lilith. They all chose to come here, knowing the risks," he said calmly.

"Yet it hurts."

"Yet it hurts," he agreed before the two fell back into their mutual silence.

After a few minutes passed, Ilea spoke again. "I'll need some time alone, outside of cities. Maybe try out my wings a little more..." She smiled as she said it. The thought of soaring through the skies was an enticing one after all.

“Can’t say I don’t envy you,” Lorcan said.

“What about you? What’s your story? And where to from here?”

“That’s a tale for another day, Lilith, should we meet again. For now, like you, I will take some time off. As much as we lost many in this endeavor, we’ve gained quite a wealth of information and goods. Though much of it is still down there, we know where to get it. The Praetorians will likely return to their resting place after a while. It won’t be me going back down there though...”

Ilea blinked her eyes as the mention of the Praetorians brought back the flash of a scythe piercing her stomach. She almost missed a step as she started concentrating on controlling her breathing.

Not entirely dealt with, I see. Not until I come back and destroy those green-eyed fucks.

“Are you sure you want to continue traveling?” Agor asked, a little worry seeping into his voice.

“I’m alright. The settled-down lifestyle isn’t really for me. Not if I have the possibility to just fly away whenever I want. Besides, I’ve not been doing this for long. I think, with time, I’ll work it out,” she answered, giving him a weak smile.

“That you might, or you might not. Don’t be afraid to talk to someone though. Even the strong need help at times,” Lorcan said.

Surprisingly progressive for someone wearing metal armor and using a sword to fight monsters.

“Don’t worry about me,” she replied.

Lorcan turned his intense eyes on her. Somehow his gaze felt different to Ilea in that moment. Using her sphere, she saw his body tense up slightly, and his hands clenched before he released them. He shook his head slightly, staring ahead without a word. A memory, perhaps. She didn’t pry.

“I think I’ll visit some friends,” she said after a while. “And I’ll find the people I’ve been looking for down here.”

“Not friends then?” Lorcan asked, seemingly having overcome his brief bout of sentimentality.

Ilea gestured with her hand but stopped when she realized that it was still trembling slightly.

“Not really. Well, one of them, perhaps. I’d like to know where they are though and why they did what they did. No way I’ll be able to follow their teleportation.”

“Hmm, I get that. Well, I hope you find them then.”

They continued in silence for the next hour. The hardened adventurers were all used to not eating for prolonged periods of time, and whatever they had left was given to the surviving aides from the expedition. The smith who had been with Ilea’s group had refused all of it though.

Hang on, we’re stopping...

The survivors had come up on the underground lake, still shining with its untouched brilliance.

“Here is nice...” an older warrior said, and a few around him nodded. Most others were quiet.

“What’s this about?” Ilea asked Jeremy, who was standing next to her. He looked at her a little confused, but then he nodded.

“A place to say farewell. Often there’s nothing to recover, or it’s too dangerous to get what has been left...”

One of the surviving members shot a fireball above the lake, and it fizzled out a couple of dozen meters later.

A lance of ice followed, exploding in splinters that reflected the light emanating from above. More spells followed after, and Ilea saw some people close their eyes. Some were saying prayers, while others simply stood there. All of them respected the ritual, and Ilea too found it to be somewhat cathartic. Ten minutes of silence passed as spells continued to be released sporadically.

As she watched the display, Ilea slowed her breathing and let her mind return to the brutal events of the last two days. Blood, death, guilt. She silently apologized to those she hadn’t been able to save and promised that she would continue to grow stronger – in more ways than one.

Ilea didn’t consider herself a particularly spiritual person, but the silent words gave her some small measure of closure. She left a little of her guilt in that chamber.

The group continued in silence, the last few miles melting away. Finally, as if resurfacing from beneath an ocean, Ilea found that they were coming closer to the Root. She felt refreshed and was eagerly anticipating some hot food.

I’ll definitely try to store some proper meals from now on. And maybe some milk to test expiration...

Contrary to its usually lively atmosphere though, the adventurer village was completely empty. A few mugs lay discarded on the ground. Thinking

that she was missing something again, Ilea looked at the others, but they seemed just as confused as she was.

“Something’s wrong...” a warrior said.

“Keep together,” Lorcan said as they advanced toward the gate.

Ilea looked at the shops and streets of the Root as they walked through it. Pieces of cutlery, empty potion vials, and broken tankards lay in the dirt. All were partially trampled as if people had left in a hurry.

Coming up to the gate, Ilea saw more guards than before standing on top of it. All of them were heavily armored, and spells started to shine as soon as the expedition came into range.

“Halt! Who goes there?” someone on the gate shouted as Jasper stepped up.

“I’m Jasper Horim. Leader of a Forkspear expedition. We’re returning home,” he said, and the spells blinked out at the mention of his name. “What the hell is going on?”

“Come on in then, you’re more than welcome. Open the gate!” the guard shouted. The gate slowly opened, and they began to file inside.

Ilea noticed a mage using some form of magic that scanned all of them as they entered. After casting his spell on each adventurer, he nodded to another man in armor.

I don’t feel anything... Did he just check us? For what?

Up ahead, Jasper was joined by the man who had greeted them. He was a level 160 warrior with heavy armor and long sideburns.

“Mr. Horim, thank the gods you’re back. They have returned. The elves are back, and the city is locked down.” The guard spoke in a hushed tone, yet Ilea heard him as if he had been standing next to her.

Elves? Now? After all that? Fuck... Ilea thought glumly, her dream of a nice fluffy bed and some hearty food evaporating instantly.

“Have they breached?” Jasper asked, to which the man shook his head. “Agor, let’s go report to Bjorn then. Everyone else, go to the Forkspears’ main estate. We’ll meet you there once we’re done,” he finished, then he ran off up the tunnel.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Lilith. Until next time. Maybe we’ll have time for stories then,” Lorcan said as a red flame covered him, and he quickly followed after Jasper.

Ilea just nodded and followed after them.

“Wait, we have to check you first,” one of the guards said behind her, but she ignored the man and kept walking. He closed in on her, but she shot him a glance over her shoulder that stopped him in his tracks. She was a high enough level that she could have passed for one of the expedition leaders, and her blood-covered and mangled armor might have helped too.

“Alright, alright, you go,” the guard said, giving in. “The rest of you though, we have to quickly check your wares and gear. Even in wartime, the rules apply.”

Ilea hurried down the tunnel. A cold breeze reached her, making the torches on the walls flicker.

“Agor!” she shouted, seeing him up ahead and summoning the bow she had stored for him.

He turned and looked her way.

“Catch!”

She threw the weapon, and the man stopped in his tracks before he caught the bow, raising it high.

“Thanks! Until we meet again,” he called, winking, before he resumed his run.

Ilea slowed her pace, for the first time taking in the feeling of nearly being above ground once more. The air became less stale with each step.

The cold wind was bringing something wet with it, and as Ilea moved on, she saw snow blowing into the tunnel. She raised her hands and touched the snow on her chest plate.

It's already winter...

She continued walking, quickly reaching the second gate, which was guarded by much fewer people than the first. One guard called to her as she entered the city.

“Miss, I need to see your badge, please!”

Ilea just pointed above her head where the man would see her healer tag in his mind's eye. Since his level was barely above 100, it was likely not a possibility for him to know her exact level.

A strange light was moving through the sky, and Ilea looked upward as she reached the bottom of the city to see a fireball come rushing down before exploding against an arcane barrier that flickered to life. The barrier seemed to cover the entire city.

The fireball erupted in a torrent of flames before being dispersed by wind and snow, which Ilea thought had to be magical in nature as well.

Some of the few remaining people in the streets cowered at the sight, but more simply ignored it. Ilea stood there, simply taking in the sights and smells as the snow that fell on her was soon joined by ash. And it wasn't hers. Looking around, she saw smoke coming from several places in the city, and even some fires were visible.

What had been a lively city just a few weeks prior had turned into something else entirely. People darted through the streets, coats clutched tight around them, their expressions solemn and their eyes haunted.

Others were carrying small paper-wrapped parcels or standing in long queues in front of extremely well-guarded houses. After hearing one parcel-carrying family arguing over who would get which part of the 'ration' that day, Ilea realized what the lines were for. It appeared the leaders of Dawntree were now controlling all food sources, given a siege was underway.

Ilea walked through the city, quietly taking in the atmosphere.

"Her... grab it," someone whispered to her left, and two men quickly closed in and went to snatch her backpack. Ilea just blinked away and kept walking, hearing confused chatter behind her.

A stray dog growled at her as she continued on her way, its ribs visible through its fur. She shuddered and kept walking until she reached the school. The premises were deserted, but in the entry hall, she found someone still working at the reception desk.

The entry hall was quite a large space. Two sets of stairs led to the upper floors on either side of the reception desk. All of it was white, spotless, and smooth, undoubtedly an earth mage's doing.

"Hello there." She waved as she entered, attempting to smile. The middle-aged woman at the desk looked down her long nose at Ilea and adjusted her spectacles.

"The Academy is closed. And, I assure you, there is nothing of worth to be taken here." She went back to writing on the paper before her.

"I'm not here to take something – I'm looking for a friend. Aaron. He's a teacher here," Ilea said as she walked up to the desk.

"He's not here. He likely joined the defense or is with his family."

"Does the city need healers?" Ilea asked, but the woman shook her head.

"The Corinth Order has a large presence here, so what we need are barrier mages. I don't know how long they can keep it up."

“Barrier mages, huh? No way in and no way out?”

“Why would you want out? This is likely the safest place to be for hundreds of miles.”

For me, but not for people like Dale or Roland...

“I have to go,” Ilea said, heading back outside. “Give him my well wishes should you see him.”

As she exited, she heard a grunt in response.

* * *

Once outside, her wings spread and she started flying upward.

“This does seem rather safe,” she said, looking at the city’s defenses and the mages standing on top of many of the casting towers. “Which means there’s nothing left here for me. Do survive, Lorcan. I want to hear those stories one day. Hopefully won’t be before long.”

She flew to the rocky side of the city that led down the mountain and landed next to a mage whose mana she saw was being channeled into the barrier. She looked down one last time, gazing at the many buildings of the city covered in snow, magic flaring up like goutts of flame.

“Any of the scouts gotten out?” she asked the robe-clad woman next to her. If she was surprised by Ilea’s arrival, she didn’t show it.

The woman looked at her and nodded. “Several, yes. I doubt the elves have caught them either. As usual, they don’t seem to be very organized with their assault.”

Ilea nodded, happy that the burden of reinforcements didn’t lie on her. It seemed to her that food would likely be the biggest problem for the city, but then again, they had the caves within and certainly some magical ways to grow more. What she was worried about were the cities that had less of a defense than Dawntree.

“Any news from other cities?” she asked.

“Elf sightings near Salia at the very least. Nothing from further east. Though in the last few attacks, they went as far as Riverwatch,” the barrier mage answered.

Lightning crackled as a truly massive bolt hit the barrier, filling the sky with sparks, but it held true.

“Mind if I quickly jump out?” Ilea asked, and the woman turned her eyes to Ilea for the first time, her brow wrinkling in confusion. “Will a teleport disrupt the barrier?”

The woman shook her head. “You won’t be able to get back though. Once you’re out, you’re out.”

Ilea had made her decision. She wouldn’t wait here while Salia and Riverwatch were potentially under attack. Perhaps it was some of the guilt she still felt for what had happened in the Taleen dungeon, or perhaps it was because of what had happened in Riverwatch. She wasn’t the same person she had been then, and if she could help, she would. She took in a deep breath, clenched her fists, and blinked through.

Snow kept falling as Ilea spread her wings, and the slopes of Karth passed below her as she started to fly southward to Salia.

Don’t you dare go dying, Roland. I have to show off my wings first.

She smiled slightly at the figures quickly closing in on her from above. Her body started to glow blue and red below the armor, and a horned helm appeared in her hand.

There will always be another drake...

SIXTY-THREE

Politics and Power

“What do you mean you’re cutting the pay?” Jasper had a look of disbelief on his face. “We mapped nearly the whole dungeon – a Taleen dungeon! I’m sure you understand how difficult such a thing is.”

Bjorn Forkspear walked up to the massive window behind his desk and looked out of it. Snow was slowly falling, while flashes of magic could occasionally be seen in the distance, hitting the city’s defenses.

What a fuckhead, Lorcan thought as he watched the conversation from the side, leaning against one of the cabinets in the room. He locked eyes with one of the two guards in the room while stroking his bracelet. The man was close to his level at 204, while the second guard was even higher-leveled. He was also sure there were more guards waiting just outside or even above and below this room.

Bjorn didn’t seem like a man who would let two high-leveled individuals into his office without a castiron guarantee of his safety, though Lorcan was sure that Jasper could kill the nobleman before the guards could even blink.

“Jasper, please mind your tone. You’re talking to one of your betters. I am aware of the difficulties and of your findings. That is why you will receive pay and not a prison sentence. You’re responsible for over half the expedition’s deaths, including Douglas Inström and a renowned member of the Corinth Order.” Bjorn turned around after the last sentence and looked at Jasper.

“With all due respect, Mr. Forkspear, the circumstances of their demise were completely out of my—”

The noble shut him up with a gesture.

"I am tired, Jasper. I am tired of hearing excuses all day long. You will take what you get and you will leave, and so will the rest of the expedition. Now, onto something else. There was a woman with you, I hear. A healer with black hair and blue eyes. Do tell me, was she an approved member of your expedition?"

"She was not. We traded information."

"Information? And what could be so valuable that you would listen to some lone stray lost in a dungeon?"

"The woman had explored some parts of the dungeon already, Mr. Forkspear. She saved a lot of lives and time with the information she provided."

"Well well, then maybe I should give the money to her and not you... but I digress. The woman, you see, was spotted meeting with one of my dear little sisters. A sister whom, as of now, is missing. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" Bjorn asked Jasper, who just shook his head in response.

"That was the first time I'd ever seen the woman. Lilith was her name. She didn't mention a connection to the Forkspears."

"Lilith... Well, that isn't her real name. Or perhaps she lied to the poor girl. No matter. Did she survive as well? I would like to have a talk with her."

"She did. She came out with us."

Bjorn nodded to one of the guards, who left the room.

"The woman is still below level 100, I presume?" the nobleman asked.

"What?" Jasper's eyes opened wide, and Lorcan struggled to stop himself from smiling widely.

Below level 100...

"I think you'll find that guard to be a little lacking, should she resist," Jasper said to an evidently confused Bjorn. The man shook his head and sat down on his chair.

"You shouldn't be joking in times like these, Jasper Horim. Now then, if that is all, do leave. You will receive your pay downstairs."

Jasper only nodded and left the room without another word.

"You, adventurer," Bjorn said to Lorcan, not even looking at him. "A serf will write down your report. Wait with Jasper."

Yup, massive fuckhead.

Lorcan followed Jasper out the door and walked downstairs with him.

“Enough for the school?” Lorcan smiled without humor. Jasper gestured for him to shut up, but Lorcan wasn’t quite in the mood. “You could’ve just murdered them all. They’re not paying enough, and you know it, old friend.”

“His death would not help my goals,” Jasper answered.

“Yeah, he had level 200 guards too. What the hell are they offering?” he asked, but he already knew the rumors that circulated around nearly all the noble houses in Dawntree. They were the law, after all.

“Don’t you want to save your new friend?” Jasper said as he stopped in the entrance hall. Lorcan thought the chandelier hanging far above was quite eye-catching.

“They’ll find her to be... rather uncooperative,” Lorcan laughed. “I’m not even sure you could take her.” The other man just shrugged.

“You have a report to give,” Jasper said as a man walked up to him with a gilded chest in his hands.

“I do, I do,” Lorcan said, glancing at a short woman in servants’ robes who was eying him expectantly.

“You want your money now?” Jasper asked as he received the chest.

“No. Give it to the others.” With that, he walked over to the little woman, who gestured for him to follow. “See you, old man.”

A grunt was Jasper’s only response as Lorcan thought about what he could twist or exclude from his report without too much trouble.

* * *

Jasper went to distribute the money and inform the survivors about the bad news. Some were annoyed, but most of them took it with a shrug. The pay hadn’t been cut by much, after all, and there was an ongoing elven attack to worry about. Considering the Forkspears as future employers or enemies was something to think about at a later time.

“Have you seen Lilith?” Jasper asked Jeremy, who he knew was on friendly terms with the woman. He wasn’t as close to her as Agor, but close enough, and he was quite sure his old friend wouldn’t share a thing with him anyway.

“She went into the city before us. I don’t know where she is now,” Jeremy answered while looking up worriedly. A flash of purple lit up the evening sky. Jasper nodded.

“Should you see her, the Forkspears are looking for her. Bjorn specifically. I suggest she hide.”

Jasper left after that to join the city guard and its defenses. As he had done with every attack in the past fifty years.

I wish you luck, girl, though I have a feeling you’re the type to make your own...

* * *

Ilea was a beacon in the snow storm raging outside of Dawntree, her wings easily cutting through the wind. Something deep inside her subconscious rejoiced at the freedom of flight and the unstoppable speed she was moving with.

Her more pressing concerns were outlined by the three pursuers whose attention she had gained by her hasty departure. She wasn’t annoyed or angry though, she could’ve likely sneaked away more safely or learned more vital information in the city, but Ilea only knew one thing for certain.

That she wanted to get away. Away from Dawntree and all the people she had met in the past weeks. She had the goal to go check on Roland, Dale, and maybe even Walter, but, if she was honest, she really just wanted to get away.

She glanced behind her as one of her pursuers attacked another with lightning magic. Her Magic Perception let her see the defender use ice magic to stop the attack. *Infighting...* she thought as she pushed down to the south.

The third elf had managed to get past the two squabbling ones and cast a beam of condensed fire at her, which she easily dodged. *All mages, huh?* Her lips twitched upward. Adrenaline filled her body as she found herself in a highly dangerous situation again. The difference was that this time she was alone. The freedom of having no one to protect was almost as liberating as the wings on her back.

Alone with the enemy... as it should be.

She pushed on, occasionally dodging magical fire that threatened to burn her. *Maybe I shouldn't...* She didn't try to dodge the next beam of fire, and, when time didn't slow down for her, she realized nothing close to a death blow was coming her way. The fire slammed into her back, seeping through the joints in her armor and burning the clothes and flesh beneath.

With her Heat Resistance at level 16, the fire attack did only minimal damage. The wounds were healed in the next five seconds. The fire elf had gotten even closer to her, while the other two were fighting a little further back.

A moment later, Ilea emerged from the storm, and a snowy landscape opened up below her. The suns didn't manage to shine down onto it, the clouds gray and looming above. She continued downward as another beam of fire sped over her shoulder. She was a couple of hundred meters away from the ground but kept descending. *I don't want to bring them to Salia. And I can't lose them in the air...*

She went for the densest patch of forest she could see and dove into it. Trees flew past as she moved left and right to avoid destroying any of them before she halted her momentum with a Blink and deactivated all her skills except for the sphere.

Ilea hid behind a tree and looked behind her. An elf landed moments later in a massive explosion, toppling several trees with the impact.

[Mage – lvl ??]

Undefined, hmm. Engaging seems stupid right now. I want to check on Salia as quickly as possible. She thought on what to do as the elf scanned his surroundings. His magic was blinding in the eye of Magic Perception, and he didn't seem to see her sphere.

Then the elf sniffed the air, and it looked directly at her.

“Found you, human.”

Its voice sounded like a loud whisper, but this time Ilea heard it quite normally. The pressure in its obviously magic-infused voice did nothing to her.

Ilea blinked to a tall pine tree thirty meters away, staying at an angle where the elf wouldn't see her. An explosion of fire rocked the earth where she had just been standing, but she kept on blinking to the next tree and then the next.

The explosions continued behind her, though as she moved, they went further and further away. Looking to her left, she saw a small lake, frozen over and covered by snow.

Then she heard the crash and boom of another elf arriving. Another five blinks later, she looked back and saw the ice elf and the fire elf fighting on the lake.

They both teleported around while magic came and went, sending explosions and shards of ice through the lake and the trees beyond. Both of them were flying yet had no wings, and both of them were also wielding the strongest magic of their respective element Ilea had seen so far.

Contrary to what she had seen men do, these two would engage in close-combat battles, teleporting close and using powerful magic at point-blank range, often risking injuring themselves with their own attacks. *They likely have massive resistance to the element they're wielding...*

She turned around and continued to blink, regulating the heat in her body so that she would blend into the environment as best she could. She soon took a sharp turn to the right and kept blinking through the forest while staying airborne. No trace would be left behind except her smell, which would be left wherever she appeared between her blinks, but she couldn't really do anything about that right now.

She hoped the elves wouldn't see her blink usage or her sphere. From the distance she had looked at the fight from, Ilea could only see magic when highly volatile spells were being used. *Let's hope they have similar limitations to their Magic Perception...*

Twenty minutes of constant blinking later, Ilea finally stopped at a tree to meditate. She still had plenty of mana, but should she be forced to engage one of them, she wanted to be topped up. The explosions had stopped a while ago, though Ilea was sure she would still hear them despite the distance she had come so far. *One of them won, and the lack of explosions following my trail tells me it was the ice mage...*

She kept on rushing through the woods, trying to orient herself to the south without quite being sure if she was on the right track. An hour later, Ilea was sure she had lost the elves.

At least for now. Let's hope whatever they want in Dawntree is more important than me.

Another hour later, Ilea finally found a road. The snow crunched below her armored boots as she looked through the white forest and the road that

split the scenery. With a heavy sigh, Ilea closed her eyes and took a deep breath of cold air.

Her instincts told her that it was too cold, that she should seek shelter, warmth, and food, but her body desired nothing of the sort. She felt powerful. Yes, cold too, yet it didn't matter.

Her wings sprouted out of her armor once more and Ilea flew over the road, staying lower than the trees on each side. Half an hour later, she came to a hill, and, after crossing it, the forest beyond opened up.

In the distance were more hills, beyond which was smoke. The sky above the smoke was awash with a ruddy red glow. Ilea increased her pace yet continued to follow the road, her ashen wings moving gracefully in the winter air.

Determination filled her, and all traces of her recent smile were gone as she closed in on the city. More and more of the landscape seemed familiar to her.

As soon as she reached the hill overlooking the city beyond, her breathing quickened. A slight cold spread in her abdomen, but it quickly faded again as she worked to steady herself. Lifting her hand, she found that the shaking lessened slowly.

Let's go, Ilea. Time for round two.

SIXTY-FOUR

Snow and Ice

Salia lay in flames, a beacon of light in the gray and white landscape. Ilea rushed closer to it, skimming the ground in flight, swiftly reaching the walls and blinking beyond. She landed on the closest house and looked over the city.

Fires still burned, but Ilea didn't feel they had started recently. The corpses of guards and adventurers littered the wall behind her and the streets below, interspersed with those of civilians and non-combatants, though there were fewer of those. The devastation was stunning. She was finally brutally aware of why so many people she had met spoke of the elves in hushed, fearful tones.

What the hell happened in this city?

Roland...

She took in a deep breath and crouched, remaining careful in case one of the elves was still pursuing her. If Roland was still alive, leading one of them to his home was the opposite of what she wanted. There was also a chance some elves had lingered after the attack. She would need to be wary.

So much destruction...

Her mind was inevitably drawn back to the Taleen dungeon and the Praetorians. Her breath caught in her chest. She tried to think clearly, using Reconstruction and Meditation to keep herself focused. A moment passed as her breathing slowed. Ilea found herself calm, despite the circumstances.

Something to think about later.

Looking over into the next street, she saw a number of wild animals feasting on the dead. A group of humanoid shapes scampered about the

area, scavenging and feeding. A pair of yellow eyes blinked as one looked in Ilea's direction.

[Goblin – lvl 22]

She hadn't seen a goblin before, but figured they may have come from a nearby dungeon – drawn by all the death. A brown bear wandered into the street as Ilea watched. It roared at the small green creatures, claiming its share of the spoils, and the goblins immediately scrambled away to another street. Ilea ignored them all and blinked into the nearest house.

The inside of the structure was eerily untouched. She didn't notice anybody and, using her sphere, couldn't make out anything even moving except for the light snow that still fell outside, covering up the bloodied streets below.

She looked around the room for a moment more, then blinked back outside to continue on her way. The death toll was staggering, and it left Ilea in a kind of fugue state. Escaping Dawntree had filled her with excitement, but now she felt that cold feeling clutching at her gut once more.

She headed straight for Roland's house, afraid of what she might find. Two streets further on, she came upon five nazarks going through a small residential house. The thatch-roofed family home appeared to have escaped the worst of the flames.

[Nazark – lvl 52]

The beast's skin was caked with dried blood. and its red eyes glinted in the firelight as nearby houses burned. It was a far lesser evil than the elves, but Ilea knew from experience that it was still more than capable of tearing a man limb from limb.

That wasn't her problem though. Even monsters had to eat. Better they get their fill of dead meat than the alternative. She would've let the pack be, but her sphere told her there was someone hiding in the basement. Blinking behind the first monster, a Taleen dagger appeared in her hand and she stabbed right through the beast's skull.

She ground her teeth, not even looking at the dead monsters as she moved on from one to the next. The process felt like she was cleaning up after something horrible had happened. But she hadn't been there. The streets were quiet, snow-covered, with beasts roaming the alleys and squares in search of food. An abandoned battlefield. Unsettling but not overwhelming, she thought. Perhaps it was just because of the healing affecting her mind, or perhaps because of everything else she had seen in the past weeks. It was quiet death, not the terror instilled by cursed Praetorians.

Ilea shook her head to get rid of the thought.

She quickly emptied the place, her silent footsteps never alerting any of the opportunistic monsters. One by one they fell until she stood over the last of them. Their blood left gruesome patterns across her armor.

Ilea quickly blinked down into the basement right behind the person hiding there, an armored woman in her teens.

[Warrior – lvl 42]

Ilea saw the woman was terrified by her sudden appearance, and the teen's body tensed to scream.

Darting forward, she clamped her hand over the woman's mouth. She spoke in a soothing manner, trying to calm the woman as she struggled to get away.

"I'm not your enemy," she said a few times, and the woman stopped resisting a moment later. She had a nasty cut in her side which Ilea healed, still holding her mouth shut.

"I have some questions and then I'll leave you be."

The woman nodded nervously, and Ilea let her go. The startled warrior fell back against the wall behind her as she looked at her savior.

Ilea knew her black and bloodied armor coupled with the horned helmet didn't make for the friendliest first impression. She also found she didn't care in the slightest.

"Elves came and destroyed the city?" she asked.

The woman nodded quickly. "Yes! They came in the night four days ago and I barely managed to hide away. They herded a lot of monsters in front of them and destroyed the gate to let themselves in... A nazark got me

badly, but you healed me, thank you! I don't know what I would've done down here, I'm sure they—"

Ilea stopped her there. "Thanks, that's enough."

As Ilea blinked out of the basement, she heard the woman from below ask for her help before yelping in surprise when she found herself alone again. Ilea closed her eyes slowly and summoned a Taleen sword, then slammed it into the wooden floor before blinking outside again.

A somewhat coordinated attack then, herding monsters even... just for fun? Or because they needed something to cause chaos?

She looked around the streets. Dozens of corpses both of humans and monsters littered the ground here as they had near the walls. She moved one of the corpses to uncover a dead elf staring back at her.

They're not invincible, at least... And they've left already, as far as I can tell. No sounds of combat, and elves don't seem the type to stay when there's nothing left to kill. Maybe I'm the first to find the city in this state, she thought, ignoring some goblins and nazarks who were fighting over a shiny sword they had found. Tragedy for some meant treasure for others, it seemed.

Ilea ignored the dead, moving on through the city. She felt numb. Before very long, she had arrived at Roland's house. It looked unchanged, no different from the day Ilea had awkwardly met Roland's wife and kids at the door – and, later, the rest of his unique family.

Nothing was moving in or around the house, but her sphere already told her of some of the things that had happened inside. Blinking into the living room, she found Samantha's dead eyes staring back at her.

The sight hit her like a physical blow. Images of the Taleen dungeon surged into her mind. The scythe. The cold. The fear. Those she couldn't save.

With a deep, ragged breath and sheer force of will, she pushed the feelings away, shaking slightly. There was nothing she could do for the woman now.

She could hear a ringing noise in her right ear, the continuous sound getting louder as she started hearing her own heartbeat.

Slowly kneeling down, Ilea closed the dead woman's eyes and moved her body into a more peaceful position. She moved through the house and repeated the gesture for the others. Sophie, George, Jake, Mark, Anja, Loki, Cristine. Their wounds at least suggested they had died quickly.

The ringing didn't stop as the icy wind of winter howled in through the broken windows. Roland and Lily, however, were nowhere to be found, even after Ilea had checked all the rooms and the cellar.

In the end, she moved all the corpses into the living room and looked at each of them one last time. As she stood, she felt a coldness in her gut, though this was different from the curse. It was as if her very insides were frozen. The noise in her ear was gone now. Her wings spread and all her buffs activated as she stood there with her eyes closed and head bowed.

"Rest now and find peace," she whispered. It wasn't an eloquent prayer or something deserving of the people she had known here, but it was all Ilea could give.

She left soon after and closed the door behind her. Roland and Lily were still out there somewhere.

She looked down the street, snow-covered corpses littering the cobblestones. Her eye twitched slightly. Something had to be done. But first she needed to help those who may have survived. And she had a hunch where Roland and Lily might be, should they still be alive.

Ilea stopped a couple of steps from the house and looked back at the broken building.

No father or husband should see this, she thought, and she blinked to the neighboring house. She looked through a few houses until she found some beds and even some stacks of hay for horses, and she moved everything she found to Roland's house, piling it all inside.

Having done that, she jumped inside a nearby house that was still smoldering and grabbed a large beam of burning wood. A loud groaning tore through the room as the wood fought against her strength. Ilea groaned, breathing louder. It came loose with a snap, and she moved it to the stack of beds and hay she had prepared inside Roland's living room, setting it alight.

She stood outside and looked on as the fire took hold, at first gradually, then it blazed into an outright inferno as everything was consumed. As she watched, she could feel the heat from the fire, her own magic blazing within her. The cold feeling was gone.

The fire was crackling and pieces of the house were still falling when Ilea heard someone land behind her, the snow crunching in the process. She saw the being within her sphere. The sharp teeth. Something in her cracked. Splintered. The ringing in her ears returned.

“Ah, humans... so very... emotional,” the elf said, glancing at Ilea’s impromptu funeral pyre as she turned toward him. She wiped at her eyes with both hands, her magic surging.

It was the ice wielder from earlier. He was tall, even for his kind, and muscular. His hair and eyes were slate gray, and his robes shone with blue runes.

[Mage – ??]

“That armor. Where did you get that?” he asked. “No matter, you will die like all of your kind here have.” He gestured around them while walking forward, a smile on his face.

“You can’t hurt them anymore,” she said, her words calm, the shaking in her hands gone. She was focused. Focused on one thing only. This, at least, was something she knew how to deal with.

“Not them... but you. You I can hurt, and who knows? There are other settlements you creatures inhabit. Hiding behind your walls...”

Every word brought with it magic that froze the ground around him, pushing the snow aside before it froze entirely.

Ilea closed her eyes, taking in the flames behind her one last time with her sphere, before she opened them again and looked at the creature.

“Are you done?” she asked, raising her fists.

The elf hissed as a lance of ice formed above Ilea and stabbed downward. She blinked to the right and ran through the side streets. A handful of wolves that had been foraging nearby yelped and fled from the explosion of magic behind her.

“Not here...” Ilea whispered as she ran through the streets, feeling the magic surge behind her. As she came upon a small square, she dodged to the right as a lance of ice rammed into a shop front on the far side, exploding into thousands of tiny shards.

The elf appeared from the street behind and faced her, wrath and joy merging into a gruesome display on his still-grinning face.

“Running is *pointless*, hu—”

Ilea blinked in and punched the elf with everything she could muster, releasing all her spells in the process. The monster was thrown backward and slammed into the side of a butcher’s shop, breaking through the rear stone wall and coming to a stop in the street beyond.

“You *dare*?” he said with a hiss as he got up, wicked black claws extending from his fingers. The blow didn’t seem to have visibly damaged the elf at all.

“Stop talking,” she said as he advanced again.

An armor of ice formed around the elf’s body, completely encasing him from head to toe in thick blue ice that pulsed with magic. Despite the heavy ice suit covering his limbs, torso, and head, the mage continued to move unimpeded. At the same time, spikes materialized from all sides, attempting to pierce Ilea. She blinked, jumping from roof to roof to avoid the magic that advanced relentlessly, tiles exploding outward behind her.

“*Die*, human!”

The elf was focusing on his magic, likely creating yet another ice lance, as Ilea grabbed loose bricks from the half-destroyed shop and threw them at him. The impacts didn’t even crack his new ice armor, but they certainly helped to piss him off.

“You will di—”

Another brick hit the elf square in the face, his head jerking back at the impact.

Hmm, I’ve gotten better at throwing, Ilea thought, a wicked grin forming on her face.

She had no idea if she had grown enough to defeat an elven mage. Frankly, she didn’t care. She had failed her allies in the Taleen dungeon, and, what was worse, she hadn’t even managed to get through the shields of the Praetorians.

But Roland was a friend, and after what the elves had done to his family, she was going to throw everything she had at the monster in front of her. He’d regret following her here. Of that she was certain.

As the elf’s spells continued, she noticed that whenever she stood still, the air and ground would begin to freeze around her, so she had to keep moving through the houses and streets. The elf followed her into a candlemaker’s shop, its door hanging loosely on its hinges. Ilea blinked back to punch her pursuer, cracking his ice armor and actually managing to send her destructive mana inside it.

With his armor, he was now too heavy to be thrown away like before, but Ilea was satisfied to see her mana reach his core. As her follow-up punch hit though, the mage was ready. Ice spikes shot out of his armor, skidding across her ash-covered and plated forearm and piercing her arm

near the elbow joint. The spike carved a huge chunk out her arm and blood spurted from the wound. Seconds later, the blood turned to ice as a much more worrying secondary effect kicked in.

She removed the spike as it finished freezing her blood and began on her insides. Her Ice Resistance certainly did its job, but even with it at level 6, nearly half of her arm was frozen in seconds. She immediately began to heal what she could.

“What...? You... *are* a healer after all then...” The elf smiled at her, blocking a thrown candlestick with a dismissive flick of his arm. “You think this will—”

A massive wooden display cabinet flew into the elf and knocked him into the side wall of the store. He gasped as the air was forced from his lungs. Ilea kicked the back of the heavy piece of furniture, splintering the wood in the process and driving through it toward her target.

Before she could land the attack, Ilea felt a surge of magic. She screamed and blinked into the street as an immense explosion of cold froze most of the building solid. The elf burst out from the stone roof, his eyes glowing blue from behind the ice armor helmet he had created. It had gained some small chips and cracks, but those were quickly reforming.

“You’re starting to annoy me,” he said, shooting over a hundred shards of ice at her all at once. Ilea hovered in place with her wings and protected her eyes with her arms as the projectiles clanged against her armor, piercing through every gap and exposed section they could find. She removed the pieces quickly before they could freeze her body and looked back at the elf.

She’d suspected she might be outmatched. She also knew that this elf had to have an insane amount of mana to be casting so many spells. And every piece of ice was potentially deadly.

But she found that she wasn’t worried. Maybe she just didn’t care. She wanted to crack his armor. Then his skull.

She grabbed another brick and threw it. The elf deftly dodged it. Blinking in again, she punched before he could recover. Ice spears suddenly jutted out from his ice covering to pierce her ash and then her skin, canceling her momentum.

Her close-combat style was an issue. Given his ice armor and its ability to sprout spikes in an instant, it was hard to get close to him. She couldn’t keep healing frozen limbs after every attack.

Ilea summoned a Taleen spear and tried to engage him from a little further away while still dodging his relentless ice shard attacks. To her dismay, the spear didn't even manage to scratch the armor, and eventually the elf simply grabbed it and froze it until it splintered and broke.

"A storage item? So the hunt wasn't a complete waste of time..."

The elf smiled wide and launched another barrage of ice, which Ilea dodged by blinking into a nearby townhouse.

How much mana does this guy have?

She blinked close again to level a swing at the elf, but again, her arm was impaled mid-strike and biting cold spread through her flesh.

This time though, Ilea persevered and used her Reversed Reconstruction to trade damage with the elf. Her arm froze almost entirely, ice forming in her blood and turning the skin a disturbing blue-gray as her arm was encased in ice. She turned off her pain and gritted her teeth.

"What *are* you?" he said, blasting her away from him with a torrent of ice shards. Ilea used her right fist to smash through her frozen forearm before she started to regenerate a new one.

She ignored his comment and blinked in again, punching more mana into the elf before being pierced again. This time the elf went for her eyes, and she only just managed to move her head at the last second before blinking away again.

I'm gonna run out of mana soon. Been healing myself constantly... Ilea thought as she blinked through the nearby houses. Whenever she stood still, shards of ice would strike down in a forceful hail, freezing even the stone. She tried to get away by blinking in random directions to throw off the elf's pursuit, but she found he was always just a second behind her. She could never get far enough away to catch her breath or meditate and regenerate significant amounts of mana.

The problem was that the elf was regenerating as well, and Ilea felt that he was fighting very economically. His attacks were precise and deadly yet not over the top, except for that one move where he had frozen nearly an entire candlemaker's shop.

Just as she appeared on a well-worn cobblestone street, three lances of ice smashed into her chest and sent her flying. She skidded to a halt on the snow, the metallic tang of blood filling her mouth before she spat it out and refocused.

"Why do you fight it, human? It's in your nature to *die*!"

A hundred shards formed in the air above her and rained down. Ilea summoned a Taleen shield to weather the attacks. Even with her buffs active, the pressure of the spell was immense, each impact like the strike of a war hammer. But she held fast. None of them touched her, and she made the shield vanish again.

“You are insignificant! All of you!” the elf bellowed.

Another volley hit with the same result as before, infuriating the elf even more. Then she blinked in again, delivering a kick to his side, cracking the ice before her leg started freezing.

“Fuck you.”

‘ding’ Ice Resistance reaches level 7

She smiled at the buff and ran through a small church courtyard, dodging partially destroyed statues and piles of rubble. A gust of cold wind followed behind her and a thousand small shards of frozen water slashed at any piece of exposed skin, but Reconstruction stopped the spread of the cold and healed the small cuts in moments.

Mana exploded from the elf. Another frost nova turned the church’s statues into ice sculptures, but Ilea had already blinked twenty meters away, flying in the air. She had been ready for it this time.

I don’t think I can kill this guy... Her mana was low and her usual tactics had been ineffective. Even running wouldn’t work forever. She gritted her teeth, her anger only made worse with frustration. *How can I do anything if I can’t even fight one arrogant elf?*

Her thoughts were interrupted when a golden lance impacted her enemy and slightly cracked his ice armor coating. She blinked away before checking where the attack had come from.

She saw nothing at first. Then she spotted a small flash of light from an unremarkable hilltop several hundred meters beyond the city walls. Another lance struck the elf, who narrowed his eyes and looked around, irritated.

Someone’s helping, she thought, and she quickly blinked into a refuse-filled alleyway to start meditating. The alley was dark and the entrance obscured by a collapsed wall, which she figured might buy her some time. She needed to get as much of her mana back as she could while the elf was distracted.

He was also in the range of her sphere, so she could still see him. He had spotted the distant attacker now, dodging another lance and sending spears of ice in retaliation.

He can shoot that far...? She was surprised yet again at the elf's strength as the last of her wounds closed and her mana started to regenerate rapidly.

Next Ilea saw a figure with a gargantuan war hammer fly toward the elf. It was difficult to make out his form with her sphere, so Ilea blinked to a nearby rooftop to get a better view. As she did so, the elf dodged and the new combatant's hammer splintered the ground instead, sending a shockwave through the vicinity. Even Ilea, her rooftop nearly twenty meters away, was a little unsteady on her feet as the wave rippled through the ground. The large warrior sported heavy full plate armor. Entirely black.

More golden lances struck the elf, who was thrown off his feet and into a large nearby tavern. The war hammer man followed the elf inside. Ilea was back at a third of her mana as she saw yet *another* person rush past her house and after the elf. This one was clad in black armor too, their face, hair, and skin hidden below the light leather and metal armor. Wisps of shadow danced across the material as the person became more difficult to see. The silhouette had two curved daggers and moved faster than Ilea at full speed.

The Shadow's Hand.

The new figure entered the tavern only moments after the elf and the pursuing war hammer-wielder. Seconds later, both shadows jumped out of the tavern window as a nova of frost exploded within, only just missing them but still covering their backs with burning frost and throwing them to the ground.

The dagger-wielder screamed and slowly got up, limping badly, while the one with the war hammer stood and shielded her protectively.

A female rogue... and a warrior?

She was just getting a handle on these new fighters when another shifting black form, a mage, flew into view above the other two. The lance-firing one, perhaps? Mana formed in front of this new magic-wielder and was then unleashed on the tavern. Its color was purplish-black in her Magic Perception and seemed to shift and pulse.

The air distorted as stone began to crack, the entire house creaking before it was pushed downward. It hadn't quite collapsed on itself so much

as been entirely crushed. Ilea was in awe of the display of raw power as she watched the stone walls crumble. She jumped down from her vantage point with over half her mana restored and rushed up to the woman she assumed was a rogue.

“I’m friendly,” she said and started healing the rogue, who relaxed immediately as the mana flowed into her.

“Save some of it for the monster,” the warrior next to her said as he lifted his hammer and jumped inside the torrent of magic covering the tavern.

“What is he...?” Ilea muttered as she saw the elf was the only thing still standing in the middle of the ruined tavern. The stone around him was completely flattened. Ilea finally realized what she had seen.

Gravity magic...

As the warrior jumped in, the gravity-distorting effect stopped until his hammer was right above the elf. When the magic activated again, the hammer and all of the man’s strength landed on the elf. Magnified by the pulsing gravity well, the attack cracked the icy hide of the elf, who released another frost nova. The spell was immediately forced downward and only managed to freeze the warrior’s legs.

The gravity magic stopped and the rogue rushed in again as golden lances peppered the elf once again from another angle. Ilea blinked in and punched the elf four times, sending her mana through him using cracks the warrior had created in the icy armor. She saw the rogue punch the daggers through similar openings before rushing away again.

The elf screamed.

Ilea knew what was coming.

They’re too close.

She threw the massive warrior to safety, as he was helpless with his legs frozen. She then dived and hugged the elf, ignoring the ice spikes that punched through her ash and armor.

She felt the frost nova explosion punch into her, half her body frozen in a mere moment. Ilea tried to scream but her jaw was frozen solid. All she focused on was pushing Reversed Reconstruction into the enemy. Her eyes were frozen, as was the majority of her body. The elf’s damaged ice helmet cracked and then shattered as her hands reached around its head. With the resistance gone, her unfeeling frozen thumbs pushed into the creature’s eyes.

With her sphere, Ilea saw the warrior had crawled over to his war hammer as a bolt of magic impacted the elf's head right next to her arm. Moving his body, the warrior threw his hammer upward over Ilea and the elf as they grappled before, with a pulse of purple, the gravity around them was increased and he brought the huge weapon down with incredible speed.

Ilea watched as the hammer impacted the unprotected skull of the elf, completely obliterating its head, torso, and her own arms that had been holding it. All three of them collapsed as the increased gravity stopped, and Ilea's mana rushed in to restore her body.

More lances of mana impacted the destroyed body of the elf as the rogue advanced, grabbed her daggers, and started driving them into what remained of the enemy.

He's dead. It's done.

SIXTY-FIVE

Shadows

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Ethereal Ice Weaver – lvl 293 / Fortress of Ice – lvl 258]. For killing an adversary 100 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 193. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 194. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 197. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 184. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 185. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 188. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 18

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 19

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Form of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 10

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 19

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches lvl 7

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches lvl 8

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 14

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 15

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 10

Ilea lay there smiling at the man in front of her, overwhelmed by the number of levels and skill advancements she had received.

He was only a hundred levels higher... I remember getting much less for the Centurion I killed with Agor...

Her body continued to heal as more and more of the ice on her cracked and fell away, and as soon as her throat and lungs returned to their former glory, she started laughing. A loud and hearty laugh.

The rogue behind her was still stabbing the lifeless remains of the elf while the warrior on the ground just smiled below his helmet. Both of them were wearing pitch-black armor with wisps of shadow moving on it from time to time, obscuring their form at a distance.

“Yup, Shadow’s Hand...” she grinned, the name a lot less comical after everything that had happened. She turned on her Pain Perception again, finishing the process of healing. The gravity mage had landed in the meantime and calmed down the rogue. He too was wearing black armor but with an additional mantle on top made of leather that had little decoration but seemed to have sections that were reinforced with steel.

Ilea moved over to the warrior after she’d finished her healing. Her mana flowed through him, but she couldn’t even feel his legs at this point. She felt her hands shaking, her adrenaline finally fading. Ilea felt immensely tired. Composing herself, she looked down at him.

“I have to take off your legs before healing them. How’s your Pain Resistance?”

“High enough. I’m no masochist, but I’ll welcome a necessary way to level it higher. Go on then.” His voice was deep and calm despite the circumstances.

Ilea removed his helmet, revealing an unremarkable man in his thirties, scars all over his face. She then summoned a dagger and put its handle into the man’s mouth. He bit down and closed his eyes. She couldn’t care less about them knowing about her storage necklace. She was too tired.

Next, she punched through the ice around his legs and ripped away some of the armor pieces. Silently, she stood up and summoned a greatsword. She activated her buffs and cut through the man’s legs, lopping them clean off slightly above the knees where they had been frozen.

He screamed as blood spurted everywhere, pulsing with each beat of his heart. Ilea knelt down and stopped the bleeding first. The rogue had regained her senses and now looked on, standing alongside the mage as Ilea did her healing.

Still vigilant, given the recent danger, Ilea immediately noticed when a fourth Shadow arrived and took up residence on the roof of the house next to the destroyed tavern. They looked on in silence. They must have been the one launching the golden lances. Perhaps a ranger? Ilea was unsure.

The warrior’s legs slowly rebuilt as he screamed and screamed until the mage lifted his hand. A quick burst of mana shot into the warrior’s head and

his skull impacted the cobbled street, knocking him out. Ilea meditated while healing him, and twenty minutes later, his legs were as good as new. It took longer to heal someone else's limbs than her own, it turned out. She sat down on her ass and looked up.

"Is he dead?" the rogue asked, but the mage shook his head.

"No, she saved him. And she saved us a lot of time finding a healer too," he said.

Ilea saw the rogue was level 203. The three others were too high for her to see.

"It's *you* who saved *me*," she said quietly, looking at the elf's remains.

"You have gained much more experience than we have. So the damage dealt by you in the earlier fight must have been substantial. Do not undersell yourself, child," the mage said. Ilea noticed now that instead of a helmet, the mage wore a strange mask. She found she couldn't see beneath it with her sphere.

"Child..." She said the word out loud, confused at the choice but too tired to care much. "Let's leave. I know a place that might be a little safer. It's deeper in the city, maybe we'll find survivors there."

She was too exhausted to pay much attention to the fact that no objections came from the others. Not even when she simply grabbed the unconscious warrior and made for the sewer entrance where she remembered Lily had taken her. The other three Shadow's Hand members followed her quietly as if it were the most normal thing in the world.

They marched through the devastated city without a word. Either the scavenging creatures had fled during the explosive fighting, or they were smart enough to avoid such a powerful group. Either way, Ilea and her new companions encountered nothing living during their walk.

On arriving at the sewer entrance, Ilea simply walked in.

"Can one of you find people down here if there are any?" Ilea asked. "I can only spot them when I'm close."

The mage motioned to the rogue, who took the lead. The group walked on for about fifteen minutes before the rogue stopped in front of a wall and nodded. She'd found something.

"Teleportation?" Ilea asked, looking at the mage, whom she assumed to be the leader of the squad.

"Only me and her," he said, pointing to the rogue. Ilea nodded and used her right fist to smash through the brick wall. One punch was enough to

make a big enough hole for them to move through.

The group continued. The mage took the lead then and Ilea let him, as the reputation of the Shadow's Hand group would help with any misunderstandings should they actually find someone.

The space inside was like a tomb, dusty and dry. Still, it was better than the rest of the sewer. Perhaps this was a network of unused basements or areas that had been excavated for the sewer but never used. Her sphere told here immediately ahead were a series of interconnected spaces.

"Next room, six people. They're nervous. Two mages, I think," Ilea said, and the mage nodded before entering with absolutely zero caution.

The others followed just in time for them all to see him deflect an arrow and an ice projectile with purple-black flashes before taking a rock spike directly to the chest. It didn't even leave a scratch.

A small group of haggard adventurers was arrayed in front of a small archway that led to another larger room beyond.

"Stop attacking!" someone shouted, and no more projectiles followed.

Whispers of 'Shadow's Hand' went through the room as the rest of the group followed the mage's advance. Ilea wasted no time and walked straight up to one of the defenders.

"Is Roland alive?" she asked. The man just looked at her with wide eyes. "Roland. Berserker. Uses two axes."

The man's eyes opened further. "Yes... yes, he's here, not on shift. You know him?"

"He's the reason I'm here. I'm a friend. He's further in?" she asked.

The man nodded. "Yes, but we have to check you first. Let me—"

Ilea had already blinked behind him and started to look around the larger room. There were nearly forty people in the small space, and it reeked.

Shit, piss, blood... and fear too... I've smelled too much of that lately.

"Roland, where are you? It's Ilea!" she called into the room. Only a few coughs and frightened shouts at her sudden appearance came in response to her words.

"Dad, it's her! It's Ilea!"

A bundle of clothes in a corner became a tiny person who darted toward her.

"Lily..." Ilea smiled, and she knew it was the brightest smile she had shown since the Praetorian encounter.

It wasn't for nothing, she thought as she knelt down to embrace the girl.

"Ilea, you're suffocating me," the girl said after a couple of seconds. Ilea let her go, looking at the dirty face and ragged clothes.

"I'm sorry, it's just..."

Tears formed in her eyes, and Ilea couldn't stop them from rolling down her cheeks at the sight of this innocent girl caught up in this completely ridiculous mess.

"Well look at that... Can't blame you for crying at my beautiful sight," Roland said, strolling into view and smirking at Ilea. His right arm was missing and had been sloppily bandaged. Ilea repressed her urge to punch the man and got up to heal his arm.

"This is going to hurt. I need you to bite on this," she said, summoning another dagger. His eyes went wide as he looked at the weapon.

"Ilea, when did you get a... aah—"

She shoved the weapon in his mouth.

"I said, this is going to hurt. Bite down."

Roland listened this time and bit down until the arm was as good as new. The healing went a little better than with the warrior. Maybe it had to do with Roland's lower level or the sheer mass of the previous guy's legs.

"Ilea, how did you find us and why are you here?" Roland asked. "What happened... where did you...?"

She stopped him and made the dagger vanish again before nodding at the crowd around them.

"We need to talk. Alone."

His eyes met hers, and he nodded.

"Lily, we'll be back soon. Wait here," he said to the girl. She grinned and didn't look like she planned on listening.

"Lily, can you help me? I need someone to round up all the injured people and get them organized by the severity of their wounds so I can heal them. Can you do that?" Ilea asked, her tone as serious as possible. The girl nodded, a new purpose filling her eyes, and she trotted off to start on her mission.

Roland and Ilea walked silently out of the room and back to the newly created entryway. There, they found the haggard-looking guards talking to the Shadow's Hand mage. The rogue was trying to wake up the warrior, while the fourth member, the one Ilea assumed to be a ranger, stood silently

in a corner. They hadn't spoken at all since appearing after the elf's death. Yet no one had mentioned it.

"The Shadow's Hand... why are they here?" Roland asked. "Don't tell me you joined them... With that armor and all, you look the part... What's your level, by the way? I can't see it anymore. Not that that surprises me."

Roland continued his questioning, but Ilea dragged him to the only empty corner in the room before turning to face him.

"No, I did not join them. I went to Dawntree and took part in an expedition. Many died. I got some gear and a storage necklace out of it. When I heard the elves had attacked outside of Dawntree, I rushed here in the hope that... fuck... Roland, I'm sorry..." She trailed off, feeling her face flush with shame and frustration.

Roland looked on as he processed all she'd said. At her final words, his eyes lost their life. He lightly punched her chest as his lips quivered.

"None?" he asked weakly, and she shook her head. The man's shoulders sank as Ilea removed her helmet and hugged him. Her wings sprouted and wrapped around Roland as he mourned the loss of his family.

Some of her own tears joined his as they held each other. The members of the Shadow's Hand ignored them completely, and the few survivors who looked their way soon turned away again upon meeting Ilea's gaze.

Five minutes later, Roland managed to pull himself back together a little, and Ilea helped him sit down and lean on the wall.

"Mage," she said. The man looked at her. "I assume the breach has been closed already?"

He nodded and gestured at the restored wall, then turned as one of the survivors, a level 80 rogue, returned via a more traditional entrance.

He doesn't appear to be wounded. Did he go out to scout?

"Ranger. Can you look after him?" Ilea gestured at Roland's softly shuddering form, and received a slight nod in return from the ranger. Despite her black leather armor that obscured her form, Ilea could make out now that this ranger was a woman. Ilea had developed an instant liking for her after she had landed on the house next to the group and remained silent ever since.

"Roland, I'll be back soon with Lily. We'll talk about the next steps then."

She said it knowing he hadn't heard her at all. Should he not recover, the ranger would at least know his daughter's name.

The ranger knelt down next to Roland and removed a flask from her pack as Ilea approached the Shadow's Hand mage.

"What's your name?" Ilea asked the man. The guards flinched at her question, but the mage didn't react at all.

"In our Order, it is considered offensive to ask for names. They are only to be given. Mage is perfectly fine, but you may also address me as Sulivhaan if you must," he said.

"Sulivhaan then. The injured are being gathered as we speak. I'll need to heal them after, so since time is short, I'll get straight to the point. Why did you come to this city?"

The surviving adventurers looked at each other with open mouths, as if they were seeing their first eclipse. Ilea looked at them. There were too many eyes here, and too many ears.

She blinked to another room she knew to be empty, and the mage appeared nearly immediately after.

"Be careful. Though it is but a small amount of mana, there are many who can detect it. There may still be elves above," he said, but he didn't seem to be scolding her.

"Our purpose here is with the Order. And so it shall stay. Yet I feel you are not inquiring about the depths of our plans." Sulivhaan waited for her to nod. "Excellent, it is never good to assume, even when one may be right at nearly all times."

Ilea didn't feel like the statement was arrogant, more like he was merely stating a fact.

"We are here to investigate the elves and their recent movements. To kill ones who are acting alone or in small groups. The one you were fighting was especially dangerous. You would have died if we hadn't intervened," he said, again simply stating a fact.

"Yes, I would have," she said. There was no feeling of gratefulness, only a dull acceptance of the fact. *I couldn't do it. Not how I am now.*

"What do you know of the elf, then, and how did you start to fight?"

"I came from Dawntree. The city is under siege. I don't know how many of them are there, but at least three followed me initially. They fought each other for the right to hunt me... at least, that's what I assume. I then came to Salia in the hopes of finding Roland. I found his house and was burning it down when the elf appeared. I don't think he tracked me here. It's more likely he came to the closest city in the hope of finding me."

“The Dawntree incursion is new, but it was to be expected,” Sulivhaan said. “They won’t break through, so we shall focus on other places. Salia is lost, and so are Venea, Wolf Fort, and Stormbreach. Though many were saved by quick interventions.”

“Do you know about Riverwatch?” Ilea asked the mage.

“As far as I know, no attack has happened there, but my information is a couple of days old at best.”

I’ll go there after we’re done here then.

“Do you have information on the elves’ abilities?” Sulivhaan asked.

Ilea recounted all the spells she had seen either at Dawntree or afterward during her own battles.

“That will help a little,” the mage said after she had finished. “What will you do now? I cannot deny that your assistance with the elf helped us achieve victory without casualties. The levels gained by the others are thanks to you. Otherwise, we would’ve lost promising recruits again.”

“Recruits? They’re over level 200,” Ilea said.

“The Order only accepts recruits at level 200. If you wished to join though, I’d be able to give a recommendation. It would be an honor to have a warrior like yourself in our Order.”

“I’ll think about it. Didn’t really plan to join any cults today though. Where is your Order based again?”

“Ravenhall,” came the short answer.

“Ravenhall. My first reaction is to make a joke about the choice of name, but with all these people dying, it just doesn’t seem funny anymore...” she said in a quiet tone.

“Interesting. Are you perhaps from a distant land?” Sulivhaan asked, and Ilea locked eyes with him.

“Yes... and children’s stories there warned us about sharing too much with dark mages shrouded in shadows.” She shrugged.

“Yet I am no dark mage. I am merely interested in geography. Though perhaps you are from a different realm altogether? If so, our librarian would certainly be interested. Another reason for you to visit, at least.”

That piqued her interest.

“I’ll visit. Why do you care so much anyway? And why did you choose to follow me here? It could’ve been a trap.”

“There was no reason for you to intervene. Of course, you had been fighting the elf before us, but I had expected you to run away after we

showed up. Yet you did not. You also used your storage device in front of us so casually that it was surprising. Those are the reasons why we have followed you here. You gave us your trust as a courtesy, the reasons for which do not matter. It is a gesture seldom rewarded, and I am glad I did so today.”

The man sighed. “To answer your first question... I see something in you. Something that many young ones have. Most of them do not reach the level of power you already have but perish long before. Too many like me...”

He suddenly stopped, his face impossible to read behind his mask.

“I have said too much already, but I will explain more, should you choose to visit. Do not give up.”

Ilea felt confusion wash over her as the man teleported away. She stood there for a minute.

Another realm? So there's finally someone interested in that. I'm not sure what he meant, but maybe there's someone there who knows why I'm here...

She blinked back to heal the injured. On her way, she saw that Roland had regained some of his color and was talking to the ranger, or rather *at* her. She nodded sometimes but stayed silent.

Only around ten people had injuries that hadn't healed on their own in the time Ilea had been down here, and she took care of them quickly and quietly, ignoring all questions and thanks.

“What's your level, Ilea?” Lily asked when she was done.

“I'm 197, dear,” she said and rubbed the girl's head. “Don't ask people that though. They can get angry sometimes.”

“Why?” came the inevitable question.

“Because it gives people a certain power over you if they know your level. And a lot of people want to take advantage of others. Not all of them, but many.” She smiled and thought of Alice.

“So I should never tell them?”

“That, you will have to decide for yourself.”

“You just told me... but maybe that was a mistake?” Lily looked at her mischievously. Ilea was glad the girl could have a nice moment like that. The inevitable tragedy would come sooner or later. It wasn't her place to share it. That was Roland's alone.

“Maybe it was, little one. Not the first time I’d have made a mistake.” The girl nodded attentively before Ilea walked back to Sulivhaan.

Lily did follow her this time and hid behind her, looking at the mage. “Ilea, he’s scary.”

“Then you better not tell him your level and prepare your weapon... Do you have it still?”

Suddenly a black dagger appeared from below the girl’s clothes, angled at the mage. A moment later, the girl hid behind Ilea again.

“You have to choose your opponents wisely. Sometimes retreat or diplomacy is the way to victory or survival,” Sulivhaan supplied unexpectedly, eyes falling on the little girl. Ilea felt like the man was smiling behind his mask, but she couldn’t be sure.

The girl nodded, considering the mage’s words while toying with her dagger.

“Oh, I never thanked you Ilea!” she exclaimed suddenly. “Thank you for the dagger, I *love* it!!”

“It’s alright. I’m glad you like the weapon. Don’t forget to thank the man for his counsel. Did you listen to what he said?” Ilea asked, smirking.

“Yes, one has to choose one’s opponents wisely. And sometimes running away is better.”

“Smart one, that kid,” one of the survivors commented.

“What have you planned for the people here, Sulivhaan?” Ilea asked, turning the conversation toward a more serious topic.

“They are their own masters,” was his simple reply.

So he doesn’t intend to help them or care for them. Only fight the elves.

“What about you then?” she asked.

“There are many possibilities. Though, as you mentioned, there were *three* elves following you...”

She smiled at that and nodded.

“I’ll play bait. As long as you let me have a little fun before you intervene,” she said, her smile widening.

“You could die, child. And you will if you do not take this seriously. Do not let your thoughts of vengeance get in your way,” the mage told her.

“Let me worry about my own life, old man,” she said, walking over to Roland, the smile leaving her eyes.

If I die, I die. Maybe I can take one or two of the fuckers with me.

SIXTY-SIX

Hunting

The mage's words echoed in Ilea's mind as she returned to Roland's side: 'Do not let thoughts of vengeance get in your way'.

I'm thinking more about his vengeance than mine, she thought as she reached her friend and knelt down next to him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked him, nodding her silent thanks to the ranger. She said nothing, as per usual, and gracefully excused herself, retaking her vacant spot by the wall.

"As well as you might expect," Roland sighed, though a little life had returned to his eyes. "George always said he wanted to move..."

His head sank again.

"Do you want to see the house?"

Roland nodded, and she helped him up.

"We're going out now. You, stone mage guy, close up behind us," Ilea said.

Unexpectedly, the full complement of Shadow's Hand members followed her as well. The warrior was back on his feet again and nodded to her.

"Lily, we'll be back shortly," Ilea said to her with a smile. "I'll have a small present for you as well!"

Upon leaving the room, her smile left though, and the group walked sullenly toward Roland's house. The snow crunched below their boots as they walked through the less and less bloody streets. The suns were peeking through the clouds a little now and no fresh snow was falling, though it wasn't warm by any stretch.

More monsters had come in the meantime, skulking back to scavenge now that the noise of battle had once again died down. Goblins were fighting over tattered bits of cloth and burned furniture they had found. Oddly, they all steered well clear of the small group. Ilea was pretty sure it wasn't because of her.

Reaching the house, all they found were ashes and a hint of the foundations. Ilea was glad not to find any silhouettes of people left inside, only bones fractured and scorched by heat. Roland cried quietly as they all stood there in silence. The ranger stepped forward and unstrapped her bow before loosing a single arrow into the air. It glowed with a golden hue as it expanded to the size of a lance and flew on for hundreds of meters.

Ilea touched Roland's shoulder and kept her hand there for a while.

"I'd like to have a moment alone..." Roland said, and the group quietly left him to mourn.

Sulivhaan motioned for them to follow him, and he led the group back to the body of the dead elf they had left behind. He had to hiss at the rogue to restrain herself, as she had already unsheathed her daggers and was approaching the mangled corpse.

"What do you plan on doing?" Ilea asked the mage.

"I intend to make... an example of him. You may wait here while I go. Rogue, come help me."

The corpse suddenly began to float as his magic took hold, and the two walked away, leaving Ilea behind with the two others.

"Thank you for the help. You may call me Rock," the warrior said, holding out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Rock. I'm Ilea." She shook the man's hand and had to activate her buffs to avoid getting her hand crushed.

"Ha, I actually didn't break anything. That very rarely happens. It's an honor, Ilea," he said.

Ilea checked her status in the following silence and put her newly acquired points into Intelligence. She needed to hit harder if she was to face more elven mages. Quickly going over her gains again, she saw that Shroud of Ash reaching its second stage was the biggest change, and she quickly read it through before checking her status.

Active: Shroud of Ash – 2nd lvl 1

Shroud yourself in a mist of ash, increasing your resilience by 60% [180% after bonuses].

2nd stage: Your resistances also benefit from Shroud of Ash's bonus.

Category: Body Enhancement – Ashen magic

Status:

Vitality: 550

Endurance: 213

Strength: 127

Dexterity: 158

Intelligence: 521

Wisdom: 504

Health: 5500/5500

Stamina: 1893/2130

Mana: 5529/5040

That's basically tripled my resistances, or is it just in addition to whatever the base resistance provides?

A couple of weeks ago, she would've likely rejoiced at the outcome, but seeing Roland looking at his house had left her in quite the opposite mood. The three waited for a while longer until Roland showed up, having followed the fresh tracks in the snow to find them.

"Ilea, can I ask for something?" Roland said.

She nodded.

"I'm going to join the others again. We'll discuss what to do next, but it's too dangerous for any of us up here. With the possibility of more elves...." He trailed off, and she just nodded.

"Whatever you want Roland, just tell me."

It turned out he just wanted her to bring the people some food, water, and other necessities like blankets and fresh clothes. There was plenty around in the city, and it would take the goblins and other vaguely intelligent monsters quite a while to strip it clean.

"I'll come back here after I've returned with him to the hideout then," Ilea said to the others, but Rock stood up and stopped her.

"I'll take him. You go look for the things he asked for," the warrior said.

“Aren’t we being a little too casual? An elf could come by at any minute.” Ilea was a little confused by how willing the man was to go alone through a city he had nearly died in just some hours prior.

Rock chuckled.

“Sulivhaan knows. As soon as he says there’s danger, there’s danger.” It seemed like a fact to him, and Ilea found no reason to doubt his word.

I’d be dead without them already, so why the hell not? She shrugged and got up.

“Then I’ll see you later,” she said to Roland, who nodded to her.

Walking off, Ilea intended to find food and water first. She noticed a couple of steps later that the ranger was following her.

“You wanna come?”

She didn’t receive an answer so shrugged and walked on. Three side streets later, the ranger stopped behind her and knocked on one of the buildings.

“What is it? You think there’s food in there?”

“Storage,” came the reply. It was the first word Ilea had heard from her lips. She had a surprisingly soft voice.

Inside, the store was a complete mess. Monsters had certainly made this place an early target, but Ilea could see what was underground with her sphere and knelt down.

She grabbed the handle of the cellar door and ripped it away, sending it skidding across the floor for a couple of meters as she walked downstairs.

“Teleport?” the ranger asked, but Ilea just shook her head.

“You’re with me, and you can’t teleport, can you?” It was more stated than asked, and Ilea walked down into the cellar.

The ranger had been right. There was plenty of food down here. The attack had happened less than a week ago, so only the most fragile produce was suspect.

“Do you know if food perishes while inside storage items?” she asked the ranger, who shook her head. “So it doesn’t?”

“It shouldn’t,” the ranger said.

“Good to know.” Ilea stored all the food in the cellar inside her necklace, filling around forty units of storage with vegetables, hardtack, meat, and grain while intending to leave as much as they needed with Roland.

The two quietly moved on and checked different stores and buildings, some of them owned by the city itself. Salia was, after all, an independent city, so there was a city armory and treasury as well.

An hour later, the two had gotten enough weapons, food, and water for the survivors to continue to stay survivors for at least the next couple of weeks. The ranger left to go and report to Sulivhaan, while Ilea went to dump all the things down in the hideout.

Blinking down into the sewer, there were discussions going on all over the place. Their coming had galvanized the survivors with hope. Seeing Ilea appear, most of them quickly shushed each other to listen to whatever she had to say. Slightly letting them down, Ilea said nothing and walked to Roland.

"I have the things you've asked for," she said as crates of food appeared around her, followed by weapons, blankets and clothes, armor, and shields. Backpacks and water canteens were included, but they were all empty in order to be stacked in her necklace. There were wells in the city, though with all the blood and corpses, Ilea didn't think it the best idea to use them. She had, however, found a large metal water tank inside one of the shop's cellars that she had taken with her. It apparently wasn't too big to fit into a single slot.

"You've done more than asked, Ilea. Thank you," Roland said and hugged her. "We'll organize everything here and inform you when and where we plan to leave," he continued. "You sure you won't come with us?"

Ilea looked at him. *He hasn't told her yet... though he's hiding it well.*

"I'm sorry Roland, but I'll have to find my own path, wherever that may be," she said, shaking her head. "Though I have a hunch it will be a bloody one... at least for the next couple of weeks and months."

With that, another box appeared, though it looked quite different from the others.

"From the city's treasury. Before the looters get it, I thought the actual owners should have it."

Roland nodded, but it was obvious he didn't really care about money right now.

If it can provide some help with Lily then it's worth it, Ilea thought as the survivors walked up to the crates and started looking through the weapons and clothes and distributing them all.

Ilea turned to Lily and knelt down next to her.

“I have a little something for you too, something you can remember me by. We probably won’t see each other for quite some time, but I promise I’ll visit.”

She smiled at the girl as the Hound Master’s Trinket appeared in her hand. She then fastened the small necklace around the girl’s neck and hugged her.

“I’ll miss you, Ilea!” the girl said and smiled. Ilea smiled back at her, then she looked at Roland. Their eyes locked for a moment before she nodded and vanished.

* * *

I’ll miss you too Lily... Ilea thought as she walked through the streets. She found the ranger waiting for her where they had fought the elf and followed her lead as she moved on. The two walked in silence until they left the city, heading out of its demolished gate that was now little more than a pile of melted metal and wooden cinders.

Ilea stood still for a moment and took in the sight. It seemed like the Shadow’s Hand had gathered up all the dead elves who had fallen in the city and put them up on metal poles, pierced vertically, crotch to head. Ilea shook her head but didn’t mind the display of violence.

For a man that speaks of diplomacy and retreat, he certainly knows how to send a message.

“You disapprove?” Sulivhaan asked as he reached her.

“No. I find it below us as humans, though I understand the usefulness.” The mage seemed happy enough with the answer and simply watched on as the rogue prepared the last corpse.

“Eleven of them for the whole city?” Ilea asked. The others remained silent.

Ilea went back into the city soon after and simply walked around, waiting. Her wandering took her to a fancy-looking bookstore. Its gold-gilded sign was scorched and its expensive stained glass windows were smashed, but some of the books remained intact. Ilea opened one of the heavy leather covers. *A novel.* She smiled.

The next few hours were spent filling up crates with books she was interested in and putting them into her storage necklace. She left it at ten crates before she continued onward. Only some of the books were purely chosen for their beautiful covers, though nearly all of them looked very nice to her. Looking at the prices, she had certainly made quite a steal with the find. None of the monsters had been interested in the books.

Ilea also found a map of the city and held it out in front of her while walking through the streets, the snow crunching beneath her feet. She was lost in thought when a startling whistling noise made her perk up. She made the map vanish and ran toward the noise, her helmet appearing on her head as she blinked onto one of the buildings.

In the distance, she could see a streak of fire coming closer at a rapid pace. *The next one then... the one who was hunting me before but lost to the Ice Weaver.*

She waved at the distant figure, and, moments later, the top two floors of the house next to hers exploded as the monster struck it like a meteor. When the flames cleared, she saw an elf, more muscular than the last, with golden blond hair, grinning at her with its horrible needle-like teeth.

“Ah, you. I remember your smell. So that wretch didn’t find you... what a waste of breath he is,” the elf said, looking around before focusing on her. “More survivors here too, I see. Good, I’ll hunt them down after you.”

“Stop. Talking,” she simply said and blinked in, striking at the elf with all her might. He blocked the attempted punch with his hand and held her fist while smiling, flames roaring to life around him.

Ilea smiled back as her mana entered his body, making him hiss in surprise. Her Shroud of Ash combined with her high Heat Resistance made the fire licking at her manageable. Soon, her armor began to glow white-hot. Her skin was melting, and she had to start healing herself, thus stopping the mana flow into the creature.

Using her left leg, she kicked the elf in the hip, knocking him off balance and letting her blink away. Her skin reformed quickly and her eyesight returned to her just as a beam of fire surged toward her. She spun to the left but still felt the heat prickle at her skin as it passed.

“You *hurt* me, human. That is unforgivable...” the elf said. Then he charged.

Similar to the last one. Arrogance doesn’t even come close to describing their demeanor.

Ilea blinked away, intending for the elf to follow her. There was a possibility of a third elf joining them, so she couldn't risk losing too much time.

Another beam of fire surged toward her, and, seeing it head for a cute clothing shop she wanted to check out later, she twirled around to block it with her arms instead of just dodging it. With her shroud and her healing active, she could actually weather the attack completely.

Fucking annoying pisser, she thought as she continued to run and blink closer to the western gate of the city. She had to block more and more hits as the elf seemingly got just as annoyed with her as she was with him.

Ilea burst out of the gate and landed in the cold blanket of whiteness, rolling through it and finally cooling her red-hot armor. Steam rose from the evaporated snow as she turned around and blinked another twenty meters further back. The elf slowly walked out of the gate with a massive grin on his face.

"A good hunt. So seldom these days. But now please stop running, I'm at—"

He stopped as he noticed the strung-up and mangled corpses of his brethren and then literally exploded with fire. It was as if he were a candlewick that had just been lit, or perhaps a flamethrower. The red flame turned blue as he rushed at Ilea with an inarticulate screech.

A screaming meteor barreled toward her, but the elf's claws never landed on her as an unexpected massive shift in gravity pushed him down. Three streaks of gold came from a nearby hill and sliced through his skin just as the rogue appeared behind him with her blades held high. The gravity pushed her arms and subsequently blades downward into and down the elf's slightly bent back before she jumped away from the inferno.

But the elf fought on and pushed through the gravity. His eyes were fixated on Ilea, and he completely ignored the other humans as they joined the fight. With another howl, he vanished and appeared before Ilea. He swung a burning claw in triumph, but it was stopped by her own hand. Even as her hand withered and melted, more destructive mana flowed into him as the gravity around them began to become heavier again.

Ilea let go of him at the last moment and blinked away, and just as the gravity pressure kicked in fully, a war hammer blurred into view above the flames, descending with the full might of enhanced gravity. The elf raised

his hands up and actually blocked the hammer, then an explosion of flame sent the warrior and the hammer flying in opposite directions.

Spotting the Shadow's Hand mage hovering nearby, the elf sent a torrent of fire his way. It was so hot the air around the attack became distorted, but Sulivhaan simply teleported away. Two yellow lances found their target before the elf vanished too.

"You dare... do this... to me?!" he said, more bewildered than angry.

Ilea appeared before him and sent him skidding backward with a punch. Blood leaked from his mouth as two blue flaming swords appeared in his hands.

"You leave me no choice..." he said, suddenly appearing next to Ilea. She moved her torso downward to dodge the horizontal swing but had to blink away to dodge the second sword coming at her a little delayed from the other side.

The rogue appeared behind the elf but had to jump back again as one of his swords nearly cut her in half. Gravity increased again around the elf, but he teleported away, this time to Rock, who blocked the swords with his hammer. The fire licked his armor, causing it to glow, and he yelled as he was hurled backward.

Two golden streaks were deflected by the elf's swords, and he retaliated by shooting a white-hot condensed fireball toward the distant ranger. Ilea advanced again, bobbing and weaving, trying to find an opening while avoiding the blades. The rogue tried the same from behind the elf, but neither of them found purchase. Rock interrupted the exchange with his hammer, slamming into the middle of them and creating a small crater and a blast of wind that sent them all skidding back.

A distant explosion grabbed their attention as the hill where the golden streaks had been originating burst into flame. The elf smiled and sprinted at Ilea, only to find himself floating up into the air. She didn't squander the opening and punched him directly in the chest with all her power. The elf was sent flying straight at Rock, who swung his hammer sideways, combining the elf's momentum with all his considerable strength.

A satisfying crunch sounded out as the hammer hit and the mangled body was sent spiraling into the snow. The elf squirmed and coughed blood onto the quickly melting slush beneath him, but two daggers dug into his back a moment later.

He burst into a yet brighter flame, forcing the rogue to retreat or be incinerated. The others also had to retreat a couple of steps because of the immense heat radiating off the elf. Ilea saw with Magic Perception how his wounds were beginning to close and his bones were moving to snap back into place.

Shit...

She blinked into the inferno, landing on the elf's chest, and she started pounding her fists into his skull. With each hit, her mana was sent into him with destructive waves as her body and skills fought to keep herself from melting away. Cracks formed on the elf's skull that leaked flame even as her own skin was being melted off.

With a final hit, her now skeletal fist broke through, and the elf's skull caved in with a final gout of flame. The fires around her died in a matter of seconds. Ilea was glad she was still covered in armor. Though everything below it had third-degree burns, only the uncovered parts had actually lost their skin completely. Only the combination of her new second stage of Shroud of Ash, her second stage of Pain Tolerance, and her self-healing power had allowed her stunt to work. That and the added power from Sulivhaan's magic.

She sat there on top of the elf as her body regenerated, and it was only several minutes later that she reactivated her Pain Perception again and got up.

Two down, one to go...

SIXTY-SEVEN

Evolution

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Fire Bearer – lvl 244 / Sword of Atun – lvl 229]. For killing an adversary 40 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 198. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Azarinth Healer has reached level 200. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 189. 5 stat points awarded.

...

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 191. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Azarinth Sphere reaches 2nd lvl 19

‘ding’ Azarinth Reversal reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ Azarinth Perception reaches 2nd lvl 12

‘ding’ Shroud of Ash reaches 2nd lvl 2

‘ding’ Form of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 11

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches lvl 20

‘ding’ Ash and Ember Manipulation reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 16

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 11

‘ding’ Heat Resistance reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ You have reached level 200 in your primary class. 3rd-tier skills are now available.

‘ding’ You have 1 skill point to bring a skill into the 3rd tier.

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth Healer becomes Azarinth High Priest – You have healed many on your path to strength.

- Has saved one hundred people from certain death.*
- Leveled the skill Reconstruction to the end of the 2nd stage.*
- Has the Azarinth Healer class at lvl 200 or higher.*

The Azarinth High Priest is only second to the elders. She has laid down the path of war to save lives and is a beacon of light for the weary on her path.

Would you like to evolve your [Azarinth Healer] class to [Azarinth High Priest]? No current stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and

skills may become unavailable.

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth Healer becomes Azarinth Juggernaut – You have proven yourself unmovable.

- *Has killed a being one hundred levels above their own.*
- *Has killed five beings fifty levels above their own.*
- *Leveled the skills Destruction and State of Azarinth to the end of the 2nd stage.*
- *Has the Azarinth Healer class at lvl 200 or higher.*

The Azarinth Juggernaut is the elite of the Azarinth order. She is sent in against all odds and stands against hordes of enemies, supported by her brothers and sisters in arms. Combined with High Priests and heavy artillery, she forms the core of the Azarinth fighting force.

Would you like to evolve your [Azarinth Healer] class to [Azarinth Juggernaut]? No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth Healer becomes Azarinth Blood Berserker – You have proven yourself unkillable.

- *Has killed a being two hundred levels above their own.*
- *Has killed five beings one hundred levels above their own.*
- *Has fought fifty beings above their level at the same time and won.*
- *Has regenerated 50% of their body on their own after winning a fight.*
- *Has leveled at least four skills of Azarinth Healer to the 2nd stage.*
- *Leveled the skills Destruction and Azarinth Fighting to the end of the 2nd stage.*

Has the Azarinth Healer class at lvl 200.

The Azarinth Blood Berserker is a rare elite fighter of the order. Myths and legends shroud this warrior, and only a few have seen one fight. They are only unleashed at great peril and will slay thousands before they fall. Their regeneration and resilience are as feared as their bloodlust.

Would you like to evolve your [Azarinth Healer] class to [Azarinth Blood Berserker]? No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

‘ding’ Requirements met for class evolution: Azarinth Healer becomes Azarinth First Hunter – You are the first hunter, the strongest of your kind.

- *Has fought and killed a being at full power one hundred levels above their own while alone.*
- *Has fought and killed ten beings fifty levels above their own while alone.*
- *Has leveled at least five skills of Azarinth Healer to the 2nd stage, and at least three of them to the end of the 2nd stage.*
- *Has at least ten Resistance skills at lvl 5 or above.*
- *Has the general skills Fear Resistance and Mental Resistance.*
- *Has the Azarinth Healer class at lvl 200.*

The Azarinth First Hunter is often sent alone on scouting missions to unknown lands and dungeons or is used to hunt and kill priority targets that are otherwise untouchable. They often prefer a more solitary lifestyle and are feared even by the elders. Never more than ten First Hunters have existed at the same time.

Would you like to evolve your [Azarinth Healer] class to [Azarinth First Hunter]? No current skills or stats will be lost. Be aware that other evolutions and skills may become unavailable.

Ilea breathed out, still standing over the destroyed elf. She would need time to properly review all of this and make a decision. Still, she had a gut feeling already.

She walked up to Rock and healed the burns he had sustained. The rogue was fine, and Ilea actually smiled when the ranger rejoined them a couple of moments later.

“Congratulations on reaching 200,” Rock said as Sulivhaan landed. “What are you gonna choose for your first 3rd-tier skill?”

“I’m not sure yet. How do I get more than one?”

“You get a 3rd-stage skill point every twenty levels after 200. At least, that’s how it’s been for me so far. Though the skills you can choose vary. Each has separate requirements,” Sulivhaan helpfully supplied.

“When do you think the next one will appear?” she asked. Sulivhaan was silent. “Well, I’ll go check out the city some more then. I’ll likely hear the fucker coming anyway.”

She walked away as Sulivhaan started to talk to the rogue about her advancements. The dagger-happy woman had gained two levels from the fight.

Ilea put her new points into Intelligence and Wisdom before she got her map out again to find the city library. The walk was quiet, and the smell of blood and smoke was less prominent already thanks to the layer of snow covering the corpses. The weather was shifting again, and Ilea guessed the snowfall would return shortly.

She came to a stop in front of a massive building with beautifully designed architecture. It had smooth, domed ceilings and curved pillars that flowed like water captured in stone. Some of the designs defied gravity and physics. The building was something that would never be achievable on Earth and clearly was the work of magic.

Ilea shooed away some goblins and entered the building. *Now, where would be a good reading spot?*

Walking up to the reception, Ilea saw blood smeared on the official-looking book in the middle of the counter, but luckily it had been closed when the attack had happened, so the pages remained clean.

She opened it up and flipped through it, quickly finding what she had been looking for. A map of the building itself. Prominently placed on the top floor was the office of the top dog in the library.

Ilea simply blinked upward twice before she entered the luxurious room. *This is more like a penthouse.* There was a massive desk in the middle of the room and walls lined with bookshelves. More importantly though, there were two very comfortable-looking leather chairs and a

fireplace. Nothing was burning in it at the moment and it gave the room a gray, eerie atmosphere, but that could be changed quite quickly.

Ilea took the golden lighter that was above the fireplace and looked at it. *Nice.* Clicking it, a small blue flame appeared before her, but there was no spark. Magic Perception told her that, yes, it was magic. She placed some of the wood that lay next to the fireplace inside it and lit it.

Walking around the room, she looked through the shelves until she found something interesting. It was a book about magical creatures and where to find them in the world. She liked the beautifully painted pictures inside and wondered what something like this might cost without mass-printing being a thing.

Ilea sat down with the book after having moved the chair a little. Now she could see both the crackling fireplace and the snow falling outside.

Opening the book, she started to read.

The worm of madness can be found in the great Isanna Desert. It is vulnerable to light-based magic, though scholars are still uncertain how that is possible given that the monster is blind. It can track its enemies through tremors in the ground and even fluctuations in the air. Be wary of its illusion magic that can turn even the strongest warriors mad.

After half an hour had passed, Ilea had read up on many interesting yet terrifying creatures. She was most interested in the backgrounds of the pictures, which depicted beautiful lands and vast natural wonders, though she wasn't sure how much liberty the artist had taken in creating the work. The last part of the book was outright declared as fiction, as many of the monsters had never been confirmed to exist and their levels were unknown.

One depiction showed an elongated creature on all fours, its limbs thin and long and its skin a slight tinge of purple. Its ribs were pronounced, but what disturbed Ilea was its head. The thing looked like a strange flower, blooming, with tentacles at the center. She focused on its long fingers before turning the page, a shudder going through her.

The shit people can make up...

Finally, Ilea put the book into her storage necklace, quite interested in continuing it at a later point in time. Feeling quite comfortable, she decided to review the possibilities for evolving her class. *The healer one is right out. Blood Berserker looks better than the Juggernaut, but the bloodlust*

reference freaks me out a little. Re-reading the last class, she accepted it immediately. It was the one her gut had told her to choose anyway.

Azarinth First Hunter seems right up my alley with those descriptions. And it has the highest requirements, though that doesn't have to mean anything, I guess.

She was sure that Blood Berserker and First Hunter were much rarer because it stated one had to be exactly level 200 in Azarinth Healer to get them. So, the requirements had to be filled before that time.

Class Change: Azarinth Healer becomes Azarinth First Hunter

Vitality +15

Strength + 15

Dexterity + 15

Endurance + 15

Intelligence +15

Wisdom +15

Body enhancement magic is improved by 200%

All healing magic skills are improved by 100%

Natural health regeneration increased by 1% per minute

Food, water, and sleep needed to sustain yourself are reduced

Skills changed by Azarinth First Hunter:

[Reconstruction] becomes [Hunter Recovery]

Active: Hunter Recovery – 2nd lvl 20:

Send a healing pulse of mana into yourself or your ally with a touch. This skill can be continuously channeled. The effects on your own body are vastly improved.

2nd stage: Your control is increased greatly, and you can now focus your healing on specific parts of the body. As long as mana and health remain, your Hunter Recovery will restore your body. Lose your head and see for yourself!

Category: Healing

[Azarinth Sphere] becomes [Azarinth Hunter Sphere]

Active: Azarinth Hunter Sphere – 2nd lvl 19

Perceive everything in a sphere around you while this skill is activated. See without light and through obstructions. The higher the level, the further the sphere reaches.

2nd stage: While your sphere is active, all other senses are immensely heightened. Sounds and smells within your sphere will rarely go unnoticed. You may choose which senses are enhanced while the sphere is active. Additionally, you gain a vague idea of traps and hidden paths inside the sphere.

Category: Aura – Perception Aura

[Body of Azarinth] becomes [Body of the First Hunter]

Passive: Body of the First Hunter – 2nd lvl 14:

Your body is changed by magic. All pain is reduced by 25% [50% after bonuses]. You slowly heal even fatal injuries without the help of healing magic. Your natural regeneration is improved by 66.5% [133% after bonuses].

2nd stage: The magic of Azarinth settles inside your body. Your resistance to magical damage is increased by a static 25% [50% after bonuses], and your bones are three times as dense.

Category: Healing

Skills gained in Azarinth First Hunter:

Passive: Hunter's Sight – 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.

Category: Body Enhancement

You have no more free slots for passive skills in your first class. Please choose a skill to be replaced by Hunter's Sight or choose not to gain the skill.

Ilea sat quietly in her chair as the snow fell outside, reading over the changes once more.

Are you fucking serious...?

Laughter welled up inside her, and she held her hands up to her face. Then Ilea laughed like a maniac. She laughed until her abs hurt, nearly doubling over. Tears soon joined the laughter as both joy and sadness mixed in her mind, creating a cocktail of explosive emotions.

After everything that had happened, she felt like a gladiator who had been fighting barehanded, bruised and bloodied, her comrades dead. Only to find her reward for winning was a sword with which she could have saved them. She felt a phantom cold stir in the pit of her stomach, but she clenched her jaw and pushed the feeling away.

Despite the ironic sadism of the situation, Ilea slowly calmed down. Her mind was stronger now than it had once been. She steadied herself until a deep sigh left her.

“And you give this to me *after* those mother *fucking* Praetorians... I could have... oh God, Roland... I could...”

She tensed up before slapping herself in the face.

“No. Enough of this... self-pity. I can’t change the past.”

The words felt hollow to her.

Focus on what’s before you...

She looked over the skills again. The most notable change was the two hundred percent to body enhancement magic compared to the one hundred percent increase before. That change alone would make her an incredible amount stronger, faster, and more resilient.

Ilea summoned a dagger and cut into her arm. The dull pain helped her focus, and she watched the wound close quickly with the help of Hunter Recovery. It was certainly an improvement, but just how much remained to be seen.

Hunter’s Sight... finding clues about my prey. With my enhanced senses, that’s going to be invaluable when I’m actually hunting something. The only skill I can reasonably give up though is Magic Perception. It had certainly warned her of incoming attacks before, but in the great scheme of things, its bonuses were lackluster compared to many other skills she possessed. Neither seems like a bad option, but so far, I think a way to track enemies seems more useful than seeing magical stuff.

She considered it and finally switched the skills, giving up her Magic Perception. With her new addition to her sphere that allowed her to sense traps and hidden paths, it felt less valuable than before, and it was certainly less useful than Hunter’s Sight.

As she settled into her new skills, trying them out one by one, Ilea suddenly felt something was wrong with one of the shelves near the fireplace. Using her sphere, she couldn't see anything behind it, yet there was definitely something wrong. Her body felt heavier as she got up, and she nearly stumbled. Activating her buffs made her yelp and gasp as she felt the power flow through her.

Moving through the room with her newfound buffs active, she found the experience confusing at first. The increased speed combined with the changed weight of her bones was interesting to say the least.

But with all her stats and perception skills, it took her mere minutes to get used to the changes. Even switching the skills off and then on again wasn't as confusing after a few attempts.

She slowly breathed in and out while standing in front of the window. Then, turning away from it, Ilea activated her increasingly familiar spells and clenched her fists.

Time to see what this power can do... First, secret passages.

Ilea walked up to the bookshelf she deemed weird and examined it.

SIXTY-EIGHT

Books and Nobles

Ilea touched the bookshelf and found that she could take out the books as normal. Most of them were piled on the ground, where she put them carefully in a stack. Some that interested her joined her storage, which still had a substantial amount of free space.

“Natural Wonders of the Plains...” She flipped through it and found some very impressive-looking paintings. The absence of the internet and the perfectly shot high-resolution pictures made her really want to visit some of the depicted places. “The hot springs of Baz Ager... Why not? I can fly, after all.”

She chuckled a little as her wings sprouted and absentmindedly touched her arms. Then she sighed and made the book vanish.

“What am I doing...?” she said out loud, and she punched her hand through the now empty shelf in the wall. There was no mechanism there, and she could see nothing behind the wall with her sphere. Her arm had passed through the wood easily.

“Runes, hmm?” she murmured as she looked at the pieces of wood in her hand. Three kicks brought down the rest of the bookshelf, and Ilea found that she could see a pathway now with her sphere. It was a small pathway, and it led into a single room.

“Huh, there are people in there... Hey!” she shouted and blinked right next to them.

A sword clad in purple flame sliced toward her. She moved her head slightly to dodge the diagonal swing and caught the arm that held the sword

before using her other arm to slam into the attacker's elbow. Bone broke, and a woman screamed.

"Calm down, guys! I'm human," she said, letting the woman's arm go. The sword fell from her limp arm, but she caught it with her other one and held it out against Ilea, a purple glow in her eyes.

"How did you find us? Who are you?" the woman said, changing her stance to favor her non-injured side.

Ilea looked around and saw about seven occupants, all below level 50, except for the woman before her. She was level 167, and Ilea had seen her before. They all looked sallow and sunken-eyed. They were the gaunt faces of those who hadn't eaten properly in days, perhaps weeks.

"I know you... Where have I seen you before?" Ilea relaxed her pose but kept her buffs up, just in case the woman did something stupid. "I came here with the expedition that encountered a basilisk, maybe there?" Ilea wondered aloud, completely ignoring the woman's questions.

The purple glow remained, but the woman did lower her sword a little now. Ilea figured it was understandable that she was too stressed out and tired to trust a stranger so easily.

"Again, who are you?" she asked, but in a less hostile tone this time.

"Why is everybody so fucking angry around here? I'm obviously not your enemy, and you're starving," Ilea said as she made food appear from her storage. The people around the room looked at it hungrily as it fell to the ground, but nobody made a move.

"Oh my God," Ilea said with a tinge of annoyance, and she kicked some of the food toward the people clustered around the room, who finally took it and started eating.

"There's a group of people leaving the city soon," Ilea continued. "They have the equipment, food, and money to build a new life somewhere else. Which means we're leaving. Grab your stuff. I'll take you to them."

"More survivors?" an elderly woman asked while others ate.

Further questions were directed at Ilea, but she just ignored them and looked at the purple woman's sword. It was a beautiful thing, and the glowing buff made it even better. The dirt and blood caking the woman's skin made her look like some sort of movie hero.

"Why...?" she asked as she slowly lowered her sword.

Ilea carefully closed the distance, slowly touching the woman's arm before she healed the injury that she had caused.

“You... what?” the woman exclaimed, looking at her arm and then at Ilea. “Why help us? You don’t know who we are... You don’t owe us anything...”

Ilea just shrugged and walked toward the passageway to the big office. “You’re people. Isn’t that enough?” she said, and then blinked through the tight passage.

The group emerged ten minutes later and found Ilea sitting in the big leather chair reading a book about Salian cuisine. She closed it and got up.

“There you are. Follow, please.”

“What’s your name, warrior?” someone asked behind Ilea as she walked out of the room. It was only her sphere that let her know which man had spoken to her.

“Warrior? Is that what you see when you look at me?” she asked. His body language made her think he was afraid of her. Maybe he thought he had offended her.

“Yes, ma’am, it’s what Identify tells me. I cannot see your level.”

Interesting... so I’m not a healer anymore. Well, I do only have one healing skill. Guess it changed when I became a First Hunter.

She didn’t react outwardly and led the group down and outside. She was walking through the snow, when the group tensed up at some nazarks in the next street. The purple woman unsheathed her sword, ready for battle. Ilea just kept walking until one of the beasts foolishly charged her.

Her fist lashed out and crashed into the beast’s skull, completely obliterating it in the process. Blood, pieces of bone, and flesh splashed on her black armor and face. *Should’ve worn the helmet*, she thought as the other nazarks quickly ran away after seeing their compatriot splattered with one punch.

Ilea knelt down, scooping up some of the snow to clean her face before continuing onward toward the survivors’ hideout in the sewers. The group hesitated for a moment but followed after her, though they kept a bit more distance from her now.

Soon after, Ilea turned around when they’d arrived in front of the hideout wall.

“Earth mage?” she asked. One teenager came up to the front a little timidly. “Can you open the wall and close it behind us?”

The kid started concentrating, and, slowly, the wall opened up before Ilea blinked through. She walked up to the two survivors guarding the

entrance, who had already drawn their swords.

Level 50... you'd be eaten alive in seconds... She walked straight between them as they sheathed their swords again. Everyone had seen her before so this time there was no hostility.

"Wasn't she a healer before?" one of the guards asked the other as they moved to the opening to help the survivors through.

Ilea reached a now thoroughly equipped group of survivors. It was quite a change compared to the raggedly clothed bunch from before.

Roland looked up from the axes he was checking and locked eyes with her.

"You look tired," he said. Ilea just smiled. She didn't say that he looked the same. Both of them knew. It wasn't a tiredness brought by a lack of sleep either, but one only remedied through time.

"I found more survivors," she said, just as the first ones entered the room.

"Any fighters? We're direly lacking in those," he whispered, knowing she'd hear. Just then, the purple woman walked in and his eyes grew wide.

"Valery Stormbound..." he breathed. He looked at Ilea, confused, and then back at the woman.

Valery walked up to them and greeted Roland. "You're an adventurer from around here, I've seen you before. You lead these men?" she asked, gesturing around.

"I've seen you before as well, Miss Stormbound. I wouldn't say I lead. In fact, I'd be grateful if you were to take over," he said, and she nodded at that.

"I'm glad there are more survivors. We'll have to get supplies for the journey. Can't stay here. And the city's treasury. We'll have to get the gold to start a new life somewhere else, further east. Provisions and weapons come first. Did you already send out scouts into the city?"

Ilea ignored the woman and just nodded to Roland while touching his shoulder.

"There will be one more of them coming for sure. We'll get you when it's done," Ilea said, and he gave a weak nod.

Both of them then looked into a corner of the room where Lily was practicing with her dagger.

Then Ilea left them to return to the library and possibly other buildings in the city that caught her eye. She felt a little bad about being nearly as

interested in exploring the city as in going back to Riverwatch to check up on Dale and Earl, but so far, she'd heard no reports of danger in those areas.

Still haven't checked the 3rd-tier skill either...

She walked out of the hideout again, the wall closing up behind her.

* * *

"Who is she? I don't remember her from that caravan that encountered the basilisk," Valery asked Roland as he checked the equipment. He didn't fault Valery for not remembering Ilea. She would have only seen her briefly, and through the rain.

"She's a friend," was his response as he continued checking weapons. Valery grunted and looked through the things as well.

"You went through the city then? Got all this gear?"

He shook his head but kept quiet.

"She did then? What did she mean about one more of them coming?"

"Another elf, I think," he answered.

"Is she insane? What's her level anyway? One warrior can't stand against an elf..." she whispered in a worried tone.

"She's not alone. The Shadow's Hand is in the city. One squad at least. And they're hunting elves," he said, which made her quiet down for a while. She shook her head and continued going through the gear before moving on to talk with other people.

Roland was glad that someone like Valery had shown up. It was hard enough to keep himself together for Lily, but for everyone else? He wasn't sure how long he could have managed it.

* * *

Ilea came out from the hideout into the main sewer and found the Shadow's Hand ranger standing there.

"He's here?"

The ranger nodded and darted away. Ilea blinked above ground level to see clouds gathering, darker than they'd been before. Unnaturally so. The shimmering blue figure hovering in the middle of the clouds told her all she needed to know.

“Let’s get him then,” she said to herself as her body started to glow and her wings spread out from her back.

Ilea launched herself at the elf, reaching him in the span of a couple of seconds, her new speed translating to faster flying as well. A massive bolt of lightning struck her a split second before she reached the elf, but she didn’t stop, letting the energy flow through her instead.

She tensed up slightly, but with her second stage of Shroud of Ash and her new class that made nearly all her defensive skills stronger, she only lost around seven percent of her health to the hit. Her fist landed with a crash that sent the elf tumbling through the air, destructive healing and embers spreading through her enemy.

Ilea’s health had already been topped up by the time the elf stabilized himself, her new Hunter Recovery far more potent at healing her own wounds than Reconstruction ever was. She watched as several golden arrows flew to greet her new foe. The elf twisted and spun, and not a single attack landed.

Still, the creature roared in outrage. She ignored his screaming and shouting and blinked closer, avoiding the lightning it threw at her as best she could. Its speed was hard to react to, but the elf’s hand gestures were not.

Ilea felt like all of her movements were smoother. She felt the air rush past her, felt her muscles tense. This was no longer a fight for survival. This was a hunt.

She reached the elf again and landed another punch. This time he grasped her forearm, and a torrent of lightning was channeled through her at the same time as she released her own destructive mana into the elf while smashing her fist into his skull. The creature was sent flying and she began to fall, her body smoking and crackling with electricity.

Ilea controlled her descent and managed to crash into a house, coming to a stop on the ground floor after crashing through two others. Her body was sizzling as it rebuilt, the burnt flesh, muscles, and organs reforming rapidly.

She grinned. *This feels amazing.*

‘ding’ Lightning Resistance reaches lvl 6

She grunted as she got up. Her health had taken a big hit, but she was sure the elf wasn't doing very well either, considering the way his skull had been dented by the last couple of punches. Glancing up, she saw the holes in the thoroughly wrecked floors.

I did that?

She cracked her neck and walked out the door and back into the snow.

A couple of streets away, she saw lightning strike from above. A person clad in shadows leaped from the roof of a nearby building, jumping toward the light show. Ilea smiled as the adrenaline flowed through her, and her buffs flared as she blinked closer. She felt the power in her veins. The magic of the first huntress.

The elf was bleeding and stumbling while lightning arced around him to burn the surrounding warehouses. Ilea saw how the air distorted before spikes of iron flew downward and carved through the creature and then buried themselves deep in the earth.

The monster buckled under the gravity magic and fell to one knee before the rogue came flying in from above, daggers held high. The elf dodged a little to the side, but the blades still struck his shoulder and bit deeply into his flesh before an arc of lightning sent the rogue flying. When the gravity pressure faded, the elf stumbled again, trying to say something, but his words were drowned out by the blood pouring from his mouth.

Ilea blinked and caught the rogue just as she was about to hit the ground, the impact making her slide in the snow. She quickly checked over and healed the woman before she let her go and teleported to the elf, who raised his arms as lightning formed and expanded, the magic enveloping her.

Ilea raised her arms and gritted her teeth, healing flooding her entire system as she pushed on. One slow step, and then another. She couldn't help but grin as her body was burned and recovered, her ash sizzling with lightning sparks. Teleporting again, she brought her fist down on the elf but found him dodging to the side. She followed, her steps quick and sure. Two more punches missed, and he blocked a third with his arms, lightning flaring up as Destruction and Wave of Ember slammed into his system.

She grappled the elf with her left arm around his neck, channeling reversed healing into his body as she kept punching with her right fist, the awkward angle irrelevant because of her intrusion spells. Bones cracked

and blood splattered to the ground, but then a surge of lightning sent her flying back.

Ilea tumbled and came to a sliding stop, coughing up a bit of blood as her healing flowed through her. Then she heard heavy steps, and she glanced to the side.

Rock walked out of a nearby storage silo at a brisk pace, his war hammer at the ready. The now kneeling elf hissed with a strained tone and shot a bolt of brilliant white lightning toward him, but the strike was interrupted by a golden lance that deflected the magic away.

“Oh—” was all the elf managed before Rock’s massive war hammer crashed into his side, breaking every bone and fusing certain things that should not be brought together. Ilea was impressed that he still seemed to be alive as another burst of gravity magic bore down on him.

The group watched as the creature screamed, slowly becoming paste. His screams soon became pitiful moans and gurgles. Ilea looked over to where the silent ranger was standing in the distance and nodded at her.

A moment later, a golden lance entered what was left of the creature’s eye socket and ended its suffering.

SIXTY-NINE

Return

‘ding’ Your group has defeated [Stormbearer – lvl 232 / Lightning Weaver – lvl 221]. For killing an adversary 30 or more levels above your own, you receive bonus experience.

‘ding’ Azarinth First Hunter has reached level 201. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 192. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 193. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Ash Wielder has reached level 194. 5 stat points awarded.

‘ding’ Wave of Ember reaches 2nd lvl 1

‘ding’ Ashen Wings reaches lvl 9

‘ding’ Eyes of Ash reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ Body of Ash reaches lvl 17

‘ding’ Ashen Warrior reaches lvl 12

Ilea looked at her hands and took in a deep breath.

Now that was something. I might've even been able to take that one on my own.

She wondered how she would've fared against the ice elf with her evolved class. *Doesn't matter anymore.*

The group stood over the mangled enemy in silence. Ilea walked up to the corpse and tried to store it in her necklace. Mana left her body, and the corpse vanished.

"Oh, so that works," she said. Nobody commented on it.

"Those were the three elves who would've followed you immediately. We probably have at least a couple of days now until more will try to find the dead. More likely, however, they won't even bother," Sulivhaan said.

"What will you do then?" Ilea asked, and the man looked toward the north.

"Dawntree is either still under siege or has been breached. I doubt we will find many more stragglers here. I thank you for the help."

Sulivhaan extended his hand, which she shook, and then the mage flew off without another word. The rogue followed after nodding once toward Ilea.

Rock extended his hand as well. "Where will you be going?"

"Riverwatch will be the first stop. After that, no idea..."

"Do visit us in Ravenhall. We'd welcome you, should we all survive," he said, smiling. Then he too nodded once and followed after the others.

Ilea was watching their forms fade into the distance when the ranger landed next to her and extended her hand.

"Navalis," the woman said.

"I assume that's your name?" Ilea asked and shook her hand. She didn't receive an answer, so she took that as a yes. "Ilea. I hope to see you again someday."

"*Sal var nakuun*, Ilea," Navalis said. She walked away before Ilea could ask what the hell that meant.

I'll just assume that was something profound.

The snow crunched below her boots as she walked off, elf blood still dripping from her armor onto the white carpet below. The snow kept falling around her as she headed through the deserted city covered in blood that was already turning cold.

* * *

She reached the hideout soon after and simply smashed through the wall. *They won't be needing this anymore.*

The guards tensed up but relaxed upon recognizing her. Ilea passed them with a slight chuckle. She found the survivors armored, armed, and packed for travel.

As prepared as they're gonna get... She thought back to her first expedition with experienced adventurers and couldn't help but smile a little. *Let's hope they don't encounter any murder machines on the way.*

When she found Roland, he was showing Lily how to slip off her backpack in an emergency. He looked at her approach and gave a tentative smile.

"Hey, so the last one's dead?" he asked. People around them quieted down to listen to Ilea.

"He is. So, where will you be going?" she asked.

"East. The first city we find intact is where we will decide on how to continue. It's best if we stay together for as long as possible. Valery will take the lead. She's well respected and has connections with the guild in other cities."

Ilea nodded at his answer and was mostly satisfied.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Riverwatch, then I'll see."

He nodded slowly, looking down.

"You did a good thing here..."

Nothing else seemed to come to him as he put a hand on her shoulder, and Ilea mirrored his gesture wordlessly. Then she ruffled Lily's hair and said her goodbyes.

Once she was sure they were ready to go, she left the hideout, heading back up to the devastated city.

* * *

Ilea stood inside an abandoned mansion, looking into the old and probably disgustingly expensive mirror before her. The woodworking on the frame was something else. Ilea made her armor disappear and looked at the

tattered pieces of cloth underneath that still remained before she summoned another set of Taleen clothes. She got dressed slowly and then tried to summon the armor directly onto her body.

Sadly, the pieces just fell down and she had to put them on normally. First the chest piece, and then the arms and legs. All the straps were put into place and fastened before she looked at herself in the mirror.

“You’re not smiling, Ilea,” she said. She smirked a bit at herself before walking closer to the mirror. She touched it. The mirror vanished, and then Ilea blinked up onto the roof.

Snow fell on her cheeks as she peered up at the sky. A cold wind blew as she cast her eyes around the scene before her.

First Riverwatch, then maybe I’ll come back here to look through some things. Oh, wait... two things I can’t miss.

Her wings spread, and she flew at a high speed toward the library. Blinking inside, she touched the leather chair she’d been sitting on and made it vanish into her storage.

Then she did the same thing to the thirteen corpses before the main gate, removing them from their grotesque positions and making them vanish before flying eastward.

How high can I go? She began to accelerate upward, helped by her newly strengthened buffs.

Five minutes later, she was still rising. There was no troublesome change in air pressure or oxygen as far as she could tell, but the clouds gradually became denser and churned like a storm. The cold got so intense that only her Ice Resistance and Shroud of Ash held off the incoming damage.

Ilea smiled through the whole ordeal. Flying hundreds of meters above ground was just as exhilarating as she had dreamed it would be.

What if there’s a dragon or something?

She stopped flying upward. Though she didn’t expect there to be something way up here, the memory of the unexpectedly overwhelming power of the Praetorians flashed in her mind and made her dive again.

If something just a couple of hundred levels above her own could destroy her so easily, what would a dragon be able to do? Would one be a higher level than the basilisk? Come to think of it, the basilisk hadn’t seemed particularly resilient compared to the Praetorians.

Did I imagine the four question marks?

She kept flying straight, going neither up nor down. She had found that the wings gave her a new instinct that let her know where she was in relation to the ground. It had proved a rather useful ability as she flew through the clouds, her embered wings cutting through the icy air.

The adrenaline of flying and the possibility of danger managed to make the whole journey exciting as Ilea started to rise again. *You can just blink or fly away if something shows up*, she thought as she looked upward and kept ascending. Up there, silence greeted her as she broke into a quiet space between the clouds.

It reminded her of the rare times she'd taken a plane to get somewhere. Though this time she was outside, feeling the wind against her skin and the cold moisture against her magically warmed body.

The clouds moved past her nearly stationary form, and Ilea found herself hovering above a sea of dark, roiling clouds. The setting winter suns in the distance illuminated the scene with their dying light as Ilea looked up to see the mountain of Karth protruding out from the clouds below, only to be swallowed up again further above. She felt small in that moment, small and insignificant, yet at the same time free and unstoppable.

"I can fly!" she shouted, and she let herself fall while laughing as loud as her lungs would allow. Half a minute later, her wings sprouted again, and she accelerated rapidly toward the ground until she came out of the clouds and saw the white winter landscape spread out before her.

Ilea ground to a halt as quickly as possible, coming to an almost immediate stop. With her strong body and all her skills, the force that probably would've killed a normal person simply halted her motion.

Enough fucking around... time to check on Dale.

She made her way east and easily covered distances that would take weeks for carts in mere hours. Only air stood in her way, and she found its resistance to be rather lacking.

Luckily, Ilea had a massive mountain to orient herself by, otherwise she was quite sure she would've already been lost ten times over. Nothing stopped her on her way, and she reached Riverwatch later that very night.

It was pitch black by the time Ilea arrived. The stars were covered by a gray mesh of clouds, and Ilea could only see anything thanks to the glowing buffs that came with her classes and skills. Her sphere was second nature to her by now, and she deemed it much better at perceiving her surroundings than her eyes were.

She could make out some fires in the distant city and landed in the forest nearby, deciding to go the rest of the way on foot, should the worst have happened already. Then she realized she still had a few things to do.

Better do this now...

She put all her remaining stat points into Vitality. Investing more into the stat was a no-brainer, given her resistances and regeneration. Next, she looked at her freshly leveled Wave of Ember skill.

Active: Wave of Ember – 2nd lvl 1

Burn the inside of whatever your body hits with a surge of heat and embers.

2nd stage: The flame burns on. Targets hit will have fire burning through them. Time and consecutive attacks will increase the effect.

Category: Ashen magic

Not a surprising change, but it's gonna help out in longer fights.

The last thing Ilea had to do as she crouched inside the dark forest, covered in snow, was to look through her possible third-tier advancements.

3rd-tier skill points available [Azarinth First Hunter]: 1

Skills available for 3rd-tier advancement in [Azarinth First Hunter]:

- ***Hunter Recovery***
- ***State of Azarinth***
- ***Blink***

Well, that's less than expected. No further information on what they do either?

Ilea decided almost immediately on Blink. It was the skill that had saved her life most often, the skill that had enabled her to move so quickly through levels, and the skill that had made the first drake she encountered a stepping stone to her current power rather than the meal she would've otherwise been destined to become.

'ding' Blink advances to 3rd tier

Active: Blink – 3rd lvl 1:

Immediately appear at a distant place. Distance based on the level of the skill.

2nd stage: The time between blinks is reduced greatly.

3rd stage: You may set one destination with a touch. You may change it every six months. You may travel to this destination once every three days.

Category: Teleportation Magic

Hah, Edwin would be jealous! Long-distance travel... this will save me tons of time! Though I'll need a place to return to first...

Ilea set off through the forest and wasn't interrupted in her walking until she came rather close to the city. She noticed that the last couple of dozen meters of the forest had been burned. Likely to let the defenders know of any incoming attack ahead of time.

Ilea entered the city after stating her business. The guards were more on edge than she was used to. Elves had apparently attacked, but not to the extent they had during the tournament.

And this time, the defenders had been ready. High-level individuals from other countries and even members of the Shadow's Hand were present.

She wanted to check on Dale first, but she was informed by some of the guards that he was home and likely asleep after an extensive shift during the attacks.

Alive and well then. Good.

SEVENTY

A Dark Night

Ilea walked through the silent city, enjoying the light breeze and the snow crunching beneath her boots. She decided to check on her blacksmith now that she knew the city was safe, at least for the time being.

Reaching her destination, she was glad to see that Earl's shop was still standing and that someone looked to be working inside.

She reached the door and opened it. The well-oiled frame moved smoothly and silently as the bell at the top announced her presence. *New addition?*

"Earl, are you in?" she called, though it was more a warning for him. Her sphere had answered her question twenty meters ago.

"Oh look who it is!" the smith exclaimed, coming out from the back of the shop laughing. "Come on in Il— what... *what is that?!*"

He rushed to her faster than she'd ever seen him move before. Ignoring her outstretched hand, he touched her armor while stumbling over his words.

"Ilea, what... where did you get this?"

Ilea wanted to change the subject, to perhaps have a normal greeting and some small talk, but the smith was thoroughly enthralled. Slightly exasperated, she removed a bracer and handed it to him, and he scrambled back into the workshop with his newly acquired treasure.

Let's hope he doesn't ask what happened to everything I've destroyed in the meantime.

Ilea sighed and looked around the room as the door closed behind her, making the bell ring once again. With a blink, she followed Earl into his

workshop and appeared next to the blacksmith, who was looking at the bracer through a series of different magnifying glasses.

“Are you alright, old man?” she asked with a smirk.

“I am, I am... this! What is it called? It’s yours, I assume?”

“It’s Dark Elf Juggernaut armor. It’s a whole set. Found it in a Taleen dungeon,” she said. “What’s it made of?”

“I don’t know... I don’t know, but the feel of it... let me tell ya, rarely have I laid eyes on something quite as spectacular. Has anything managed to scratch it, dent it?”

She thought quickly and shook her head. “No, nothing. It’s quite durable.”

Should’ve worn it before going into the Praetorian fight...

“Yes, that seems to be the case. Though it doesn’t have any ability to stop magical attacks or the elements...” he said as he put the bracer on top of different runes that lit up with ice and fire before the whole thing was engulfed in a red mist.

“Don’t break them, alright?” Ilea chuckled to one side, opening a hidden drawer to reveal her old leather armor. Her nose crinkled with a sniff before she put it back. Thinking about it again, she removed the destroyed armor and the traveling clothes that were stored in the drawer as well and threw them all into the closest open furnace. Several were readily available, given it was a smithy.

Earl remained focused on her bracer. “This metal, this rivals the strongest alloys I’ve come across. I hope your magic and elemental resistances are high if you want to keep using it though, girl.”

“I can’t complain,” she said as she held her hand in a nearby furnace. Her hand did burn – it was comparable to touching a kettle filled with boiling water.

“Can you paint it pink?” she asked, which finally shocked the man out of his reverie.

“What... no! I will not do such a thing, are you mad?!” he asked, and Ilea chuckled.

“I was kidding. I’m quite fond of the matte style. Can I have that back now?”

He handed her the bracer slowly.

“You be careful, people might want that.” For the first time, he looked into her eyes and grinned a little. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re alive! I see you

gave up the healer thing too. And a Taleen dungeon? Get anything else interesting from there a smith could use?”

“Perhaps. What about the drake scales and the windpuma hide armor we were going to make? Haven’t got around to getting all the material for that yet though.”

Earl looked at her with a puzzled expression. Then he burst out laughing. It took him a whole minute to stop.

“Drake scales? Well, well, well. That’s rich. Don’t be offended, silly girl, but what you have there is a little bit more advanced than what I could ever make you – no matter the materials. And trust me, I’m proud of my work.” Then he turned serious. “Now, show me what you have. I’ll buy the remaining stored scales too if you don’t need ’em.”

“Sure, a couple gold?”

“A couple gold, she says. You’ll get one gold and thirty silver for them and that’s it.”

Considering what she could sell Earl, Ilea summoned one of each Taleen weapon onto a nearby workbench.

“Taleen steel... now that, that *is* rare. Not nearly as interesting as what you’re wearing, but it’s good steel. I’ll buy them off you if you’d like to sell.”

She just nodded and ignored his calculations for gold.

“How’s the elven attack been for you?” she asked.

“I’ve barely had an hour to sleep, if that answers your question.” He paused and glared at her. “And how dare you get a storage item before me. Do you know how useful that could be for me?” Earl grumbled while picking up each weapon and checking it.

“It’s pretty useful, yeah,” she commented, making the gold he handed her vanish as he grunted angrily. She didn’t even count the gold. With her current total, it hardly mattered.

“Oh, and I have this annoying little fuck.” She summoned the Dagger of Akelion, which immediately started to spout offensive vulgarities. “Don’t touch it, it burns,” she added before tossing the thing into a nearby furnace.

“Why did you do that? And where did you find a sentient dagger? What does the appraisal say?”

“It’s called the Dagger of Akelion. Quality says three question marks.” She removed the dagger from the furnace. Unsurprisingly, it didn’t even

glow. "If you don't shut the hell up, I'll leave you in there," she said, and a little more surprisingly, it actually did.

"Never seen that before with anything. Maybe you'll find something about it in the library. Otherwise, go ask the bloody dwarves. I'll still buy it if you wanna be rid of it though. Could be a collector's item."

She twirled the dagger around in her hand, then shook her head lightly.

"I'm afraid it's not for sale," she said. "You have a matching sheath?"

He nodded and passed her one that looked about the right size. Fastening it around her waist, she put the dagger inside, where it immediately began shouting again in an incomprehensible tongue.

"Dagger, you can either be in that sheath or in my storage item," she said calmly, and the dagger fell silent again.

"I know you speak this language, and if you want something then you ask for it like a normal dagger... person... thing," she said. *Why am I even talking to this little shit?*

She held her hand to her forehead and sighed.

"Need a drink?" Earl asked.

She closed her eyes and nodded, to which the smith walked off.

"I want to see," a familiar voice said, and Ilea looked down at the dagger.

"You want to see? What do you mean? The sheath? You can't see out?" She waited for the dagger to nod but realized a second later that that wasn't likely to happen.

"Yes," came the answer.

"Earl, do you have anything more open? Less closed-up metal. The dagger wants to see," she said to the smith, who had come back with two small wooden mugs.

"With what eyes?" he asked, handing her one of the mugs.

"With the ones I'll tear out of your *skull*, human!" the dagger shouted. Ilea made it vanish into her necklace.

"A rude one, eh?" Earl murmured.

"Just get me one, please. And thanks," she said, downing the drink. "Mmm, that's good."

A minute later, the smith returned and handed her a metal sheath that would show the blade. The dagger didn't fit perfectly, but it would stay inside well enough. A strap on top made sure of that.

Ilea summoned the dagger and put it inside the sheath.

“Happy? Then *shut it*,” she said. She didn’t get anything by way of response.

Earl was looking through the Taleen weaponry again, commenting on some small things to himself while Ilea looked at herself in the nearby mirror. Their peaceful moment was suddenly disturbed by the bell above the door ringing again. Earl went out to the workshop to see who it was while Ilea used her sphere to see what was going on.

She noticed the people seemed tense, their hands close to their swords. *Now, what business do you have with Earl?*

“Oi, smith, how’s it looking on gold? Must be rather lucrative, what wi’ this attack an’ all,” one of the men said, his words clear to her enhanced ears. She could even see the sweat on his face.

“Yeah, and what with all the guards protecting the walls, their eyes are quite... occupied, my friend,” a woman commented.

There were now three people in the store, excluding Earl. Judging by their attire and weapons, Ilea thought the man was a warrior, the woman a mage, and the last man, who hadn’t talked yet, was a rogue or something similar. Even as she watched, the warrior unsheathed his sword and pointed it toward Earl.

“Hand over your gold right now, old man,” he said.

Then his eyes widened as Ilea used Blink and appeared in front of Earl.

60, 46, and 82. Should theoretically be a cakewalk, Ilea thought as she identified the intruders. *Guess they’re mercenaries or adventurers, low-level ones maybe tasked with keeping the peace so higher-level ones can focus on the elves? Or maybe they’re just opportunists.*

“I suggest you leave. Earl’s closed,” she said, and the smith chuckled behind her.

“Not if they’re buying.” It was said jovially enough, but Ilea heard a slight tremor in his voice that pissed her off immensely. Earl was a good person. They were fucking *shaking him down*. A red mist began to fill her mind.

“Shall we risk it, Lucy? I can’t read her,” the warrior said, talking to the woman in robes.

“All the strong ones are out there, bravely defending the city. Go for it.”

The man started grinning immediately while Ilea just glanced back at Earl.

“Sorry for the mess,” she said as the warrior’s sword closed in on her neck. She appeared behind him and grabbed *his* neck, unsheathing her dagger and stabbing it into his side. The blade cut directly into his heart, but it seemed the man had invested quite heavily in Vitality as he didn’t immediately die.

A sudden pressure forced its way into Ilea’s head and a light headache formed as the rogue appeared next to her, jabbing at her side. Letting go of the now heavily bleeding warrior, her arm shot out and caught the rogue’s blade. She let go of her own weapon and punched the shocked rogue in the face, cracking his skull with the first punch and then smashing it entirely with the second.

The resulting explosion of flesh and blood painted the windows of Earl’s shop red, and the mage screamed and teleported outside to sprint away. Ilea leaned down and picked up her dagger from the ground before stabbing it into the warrior’s skull, ending his life.

She felt cold. After feeling so vulnerable. The Taleen dungeon, Salia, the elves. So many had died before she’d got the power to change things. And after all that, some pieces of shit had tried to rob a friend.

Not a trace of a smile could be found in her expression as she slowly got up again.

Can I please just have one fucking moment of peace?

Earl looked on in horror as she grabbed the two corpses and dragged them outside. She put one on each shoulder and followed the remaining attacker.

A couple of streets later, she tossed the corpses into an alley and looked around. Hunter’s Sight then got its first real use as she looked around for clues. The previously panicked mage had obviously calmed down a little and had started to use her teleportation magic to sneak away.

Sadly for her, her smell was still in the air wherever she appeared, and Ilea could perceive everything in an over twenty-meter sphere around her – and the mage’s ability had nowhere near the distance of her own.

Hunter’s Sight drew her attention to motes of sweat and fear in the air, drew her eyes to obvious hiding spots, and generally seemed to pull her in the right direction. Her new skill coupled with her sphere let her find the obvious trail immediately.

With enhanced senses and a way to highlight everything that led to her prey, Ilea’s target didn’t stand a chance. Two blinks later, she was standing

in front of the mage, who had teleported into a basement.

Unfortunately, there were other occupants too. The mage had stumbled upon a family who must have taken to their cellar to hide from the night's attack. When Ilea appeared, the mage grabbed a small boy clutching a wooden duck and her hands began to glow. Nearby, a man and a woman in worn but serviceable tunics screamed in surprise and alarm.

"Really? A kid?" Ilea asked. Any doubt she'd had about her intended course of action fled as her anger intensified.

"I'll kill him... Let me go and we're fine. I'll disappear. Nobody got hurt and all is forgotten, how about that?" The mage's voice was panicked and raspy. She stared wild-eyed at Ilea, awaiting a response.

Ilea simply blinked in and delivered a crippling punch to the woman's side before she could react, breaking at least a couple of ribs. She didn't use any buffs to ensure exactly zero heavily traumatized kids that night.

At least from traumas caused by her.

The woman shot into the wall, hard, before she gasped once and teleported out onto the street. Ilea could still see her as she crawled away while crying out piteously for help.

"Are you alright? Did she hurt you?" Ilea asked the boy.

The father ran to the boy and hugged him while his mother walked up to Ilea.

"You will let her go?"

Ilea didn't answer.

"She threatened to kill my boy! Hurt like that, she won't get far..." the woman said as she went over to a corner of the room to get a dagger Ilea could see inside a chest.

"She tried to rob a friend of mine. Don't worry, I won't let her go," Ilea said before blinking upward onto the street, precisely above the crawling mage.

"I did give you guys a chance to leave, you know," Ilea said before stomping down hard on the woman's head, ending her life immediately. Her brain matter turned the fluffy snow into a nightmare of brownish-red sludge, tainting the once pleasant night air with the metallic scent of blood.

The anger faded, and the rage she had felt – the tension that had been building for so long – was finally released. She had protected Earl, protected the kid.

She looked at the blood on the street and shivered. She stood there, her face covered in blood from the people she had slaughtered. Tears ran down her face.

Fuck.

She stomped on the woman's head again.

"Fuck!"

Her boot came down again, a crack going through the cobblestone below. She'd expected to feel relieved. Or satisfied. Instead, she just felt tired.

A couple of minutes later, Ilea walked back to Earl's place and shut the door behind her. The man was calmly cleaning the window and wall when he looked up at her.

"Thanks," he said quietly as she walked past him to grab a fresh towel for her face.

SEVENTY-ONE

Old Beings

Ilea walked outside to put some snow on her towel. It melted slowly as she put it to her face to wipe away the blood and grime.

“Why do you cry?” someone asked, and Ilea tensed up before realizing it had been the dagger, which was covered in blood just as she was.

She continued silently cleaning herself for a while before unsheathing the dagger, giving it the same treatment as her face.

“Because I killed people tonight.”

“I do not understand. Did they not attack your ally?” the dagger said, but it kept quiet after Ilea didn’t reply and instead simply walked back inside.

“I’ll use your bath, if that’s alright?” she said to Earl, who grunted in response, still cleaning up the mess she’d caused. She blinked to the room that held the tub and started activating the runes installed around it.

Feeding mana into one of them released a slow stream of water into the tub, and it was filled a couple of minutes later. Ilea undressed in the meantime and tried the other runes. The one for heat was, of course, the most important one, and as soon as the tub was full, steam began to fill the room.

Ilea sighed happily as she let herself sink into the hot water. Luckily Earl was quite a bit bigger than her, making the space phenomenal.

I’ll have to get something like this.

Half an hour passed in silence as Ilea thought about her night. She sighed again and rested her head on the tub’s edge while playing with her necklace.

Nearly all her First Hunter skills were in the second tier now, except for Hunter's Sight and Azarinth Reversal. For Ash Enhancer, only Shroud of Ash, Body of Ember, and Wave of Ember were in the second tier. A few were close, but some were quite far off as she barely used them. Like Ash Surge at level 6. Or her wings, which were at level 10.

I should try to get my second class' skills higher somehow before it hits 200...

Her head sank a little deeper into the water before she exhaled to create bubbles.

I killed three people today and this is what I think about?

She chuckled and smiled in her bathtub. "This is who I have become..." she said, and she balled her hand into a fist.

Weirdly, she realized she was ok with that. Yes, it had been gruesome, but she'd rather they were dead than Earl, or that little boy. She had done the right thing. Or, at least, she had done what she thought needed doing at the time. She was powerful enough to have an impact. She doubted many of the adventurers she had met would have acted differently. Perhaps there wouldn't have been *quite* as much blood... But she was done doubting herself. Done worrying.

Maybe I should get a new haircut or a tattoo to signify the change...

She grinned, determined not to lose her humor at least. Getting out of the bath and putting her clothes back on, she dumped the armor into the tub and scrubbed it with a nearby brush. Twenty minutes later, she had it looking halfway decent and put it on over her clothes.

Earl was waiting downstairs when she returned. He had stopped cleaning at some point, yet Ilea could still smell the blood.

"You're cleaner as well, I see," he said, and she nodded in response. Earl seemed different to her somehow. It might've been nothing, but Ilea was sure her actions today had greatly influenced his opinion of her, though whether positively or negatively, it was hard to say.

She had certainly changed since she'd come to Elos, though what certainly had the most impact on others was her sheer power. People treated her differently now compared to how they had even just a couple of months ago. It was a weird feeling – and a little scary. It certainly made her not want to stay in Riverwatch for much longer.

"I'm gonna leave again soon, I think," she said into the quiet room. Earl didn't answer, and Ilea simply walked up to him and extended her hand,

which the man took.

“I’ll come back if I find interesting things for you or if I need a good smith. Good luck, Earl.”

“Good luck to you too, Ilea,” he said to her back as she walked out, letting the door close behind her.

Walking through the city for a while and thinking about recent events, Ilea came to a stop at a bookstore. A nearly burnt-down bookstore, and not one unfamiliar to her. It wasn’t Splicer’s shop but the skill book store that had set her onto the path of her Ash Wielder class.

Her wings extended, and she smiled as she walked around the deserted and quiet store. The night was dark above her, and snow was mixed with ash in the store. She moved around the store and touched some of the still-standing shelves before flying up and above the city.

Riverwatch itself was lit up by many torches and lanterns, though nothing came close to the walls around it. She could see people patrolling in the distance. Beyond was darkness, the wild, and probably elves lurking behind rocks and trees, waiting for a foolish adventurer to leave the fortified settlement. Leaving would likely make her a target.

“Fuck that,” Ilea said out loud into the night before her, activating her buffs. *I’m not gonna let some abomination of the fairer race stop me from exploring this world. Not now I’ve got to this point.*

She thought about informing Dale or visiting Splicer first but decided not to in the end.

I do need advice though. But no one knows the answers to my questions because so few people level like I do. Dale, Aaron, Roland, even Lorcan. At this point, I’m an aimless wanderer and will die somewhere in a fucking dwarven dungeon if I don’t get some information. And more personal strength, of course. And there are only a couple people who can help me with that.

“Time to make a delivery,” she said, flying out of the city. She was wary, though considering how close her goal was, it wouldn’t be much of an issue.

Diving down, she landed in the forest before any elves showed themselves, her knees bending and snow crunching beneath her feet. Looking around, she took note and regulated her body heat to become the same as her surroundings. She put her helmet on to hide most of the light her buffs were giving off.

And then Ilea started to fly. Low but fast. Her incredible speed and reflexes helped her dodge through the trees while being concealed by the darkness and clouds that hid the moons and stars above.

The elves would likely not be able to follow her quick movement by smell, but if it came to an encounter, Ilea was sure she'd give them more than just some bruises. Usually, her tenacity and healing was the reason she overcame tougher enemies, but now, with her increased flight mobility and a close city to dive into as a last resort, she'd be a nightmarish cockroach for most enemies.

Thankfully, she didn't sense anything during the short trip. It certainly took longer than simply flying above the forests, but Ilea reached her goal uninterrupted. Looking back and above, there was no sign of any movement.

"They will not follow you here," a voice said, and Ilea looked down at the dagger.

"You're talking."

"I am."

"How do you know they won't?" she asked, looking through the trees behind her.

"They would've attacked a while ago if there were any around."

Ilea glanced at the dagger and walked into the Calys mines. "You know quite a bit about elves, don't you?"

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't."

"Why the sudden talking without sounding like a spoiled noble being lynched by a common rabble?" Ilea asked.

The dagger kept quiet for a while as Ilea walked through the dungeon. She had killed the largest monster in this place, but the dungeon didn't cease to be, though the stalker hounds that were around scattered away immediately upon sensing her.

"I... don't know," the dagger said eventually.

Ilea raised her brows when they came to the cave she'd fought the Alpha Hound in. She knew there was another entry but avoided it since she didn't want to lead any potential followers directly to the necromancers. And elves hated dungeons.

"I've had... many owners," the dagger continued.

"All of them elven?" she asked as she walked up to the pristine skeleton of the Alpha Hound. Something or someone had removed the flesh quite

thoroughly.

“No. Though for a long time that was the case. I think... things were different, but my memories are hazy.”

“How were you made? Or are you a person put into metal?” she asked, noticing for the first time the connection between her mana and the dagger. It was minuscule, barely noticeable and lacking any visible impact on her mana pool.

“I do not know. My earliest memories are of being a dagger. Seeing the existence of magical beings, mind magic, curses, and artifacts, I cannot say for sure that I have ever been an entity outside of this metal.”

“Why the change of attitude toward me?” Ilea asked as she jumped down into the deep hole at the back of the cave.

“I have memories of many owners, and I remember some... something of what it felt like to talk to them. I conclude that the connection I have with my owner influences my character. The dagger you met when you found me was still much the same as the one it was a thousand years ago.”

Ilea stopped in her tracks. “You were down there alone for a thousand years?”

“More... I believe, though I’m not sure.”

“You didn’t go insane? Wasn’t that lonely? I can’t even comprehend being alone for a single year,” Ilea said. The dagger was quiet for a while but eventually answered.

“You have the Meditation skill?” it asked, and Ilea nodded. “I don’t, though it was a similar experience, at least compared to what people have told me about the skill. Time flows faster and mental strain caused by a lack of social interaction has less of an influence. Not that it would matter to me anyway. I’m a dagger, after all.”

“That you are. It’s certainly interesting.” Ilea paused. “How do you want to do this? I mean, travel with me.”

“I don’t understand your question. I’m a weapon, and you use me.”

“I use my fists to fight. I could certainly profit from your knowledge, but I’m not keen on slavery though, so I won’t be your owner. Unless you absolutely require it for some odd reason.”

“I’m already linked to your mana, so you will influence me. If it is my knowledge you deem useful, then so be it. I am very sharp.”

“Are you talking about your mind or your blade?” she asked, though she didn’t receive an answer. “I’ll keep you around, but not without your

consent. Don't want a level 1000 righteous knight to hunt me down because I've been accused of slavery or something."

"I don't mind traveling with you," the dagger said.

"There you go," Ilea said with a smile on her face as she walked on. The two didn't talk after that. Ilea was content with the quiet and would question the dagger at a later point in time. She didn't know about the inner workings of the being she had found, so she couldn't assume what it thought about the quiet.

By this point, some patrolling undead with pieces of stinking meat still attached to their shambling bodies had noticed her, but they didn't seem interested in attacking. *Maybe they remember me?*

The necromancer tunnels looked exactly the same as they had before, and Ilea already felt claustrophobic, the feeling enhanced by her newfound ability to fly.

The common hall was empty when she entered, leaving the sword-wielding undead at the door guarding the entrance. She stood still in the quiet tavern and perceived it in its entirety, down to the rock covering all sides of the cave and the mold growing behind the wooden shelves.

She sighed, drinking in the familiarity, and, taking off her helmet, she sat down to pour herself a much-needed drink.

* * *

Finally, the door opened and Walter walked through, smiling as he saw her. With a smile of her own, she poured another mug of mead.

"Well, isn't this a surprise," he said as he walked down the stairs. "I hadn't expected you again so soon."

[Mage – lvl 204]

Ilea smirked a little. *Very close now. I wonder if I could see Edwin's?*

She finished filling up the mug and walked back out from behind the counter with two drinks in her hands.

"Neither had I, Walter. Come, sit with me," she said, putting the mugs down. The man looked at her a little bit hesitantly but nodded in the end.

“I trust you didn’t lead anybody here... with what is going on in Riverwatch at the moment.” He took his mug and touched it to hers, creating a hollow echo in the otherwise quiet room.

“We should be fine. Likely nothing the two of us can’t take,” she said, drinking a bit of her beverage. “This is really, really good. Do you sell it?”

“I’m not sure we can take down an elf, Ilea. Even with your absurd growth. What the hell did you do?”

She was a little annoyed that he had ignored the question about the mead.

“You’re a good brewer, my friend. I’ve had a couple rather interesting weeks. Filled with a Taleen dungeon, a mysterious group of nobles, curses, and the dead.”

Walter stared intently at her as she finished, and Ilea was aware that he was on edge. They had only known each other for a short while, and she had jumped over a hundred levels in her main class. She was now able to challenge him if she wished to do so. At least from a level perspective.

“That is very few words but quite a lot to take in, Ilea,” he said, now visibly tense.

Ilea realized she had been staring at him, lacking her usual stupid grin. She rectified that and got up slowly. *Why is everyone so fucking jumpy around powerful women?*

“Walter, calm the fuck down, it’s still me. I’m just here because I’m in need of your counsel,” she said, turning to one of the empty tables just as the door to the common room opened for the second time since she’d been there. “And I’ve come bearing gifts,” she said, smiling at the man just as Indra and Lucia entered the room.

Two dead elves still wearing their armor materialized on the tables as the other two approached, greeting Ilea. Walter’s eyes opened quickly as he nearly stumbled in his haste to get out of his chair. Indra was upon the corpses before the first drop of blood reached the ground. His magic was in full effect already, Ilea’s return already forgotten completely.

“A true scholar,” Ilea said as she sat down again. “Well, I hope you like them. I remember you were quite short on elf corpses. And there’s more where those came from.”

Lucia had picked up on the mood immediately and joined Walter’s side of the table while he shook his head.

“Alright, alright. This isn’t how I should be welcoming a friend who has saved one of our own. I’m sorry, Ilea. It’s just a bit much, you know? Level 201, the elves, and you have a storage item? Well, whatever, fuck all that. Let’s get more drinks,” he said while extending his hand toward Ilea.

She got up and shook it while locking eyes with the man.

“A lot has happened, but I’m still a friend. Don’t think you’ll get rid of me that easily,” she grinned.

SEVENTY-TWO

Decisions and Ale

“...and that’s when I left Riverwatch and came here.”

Ilea finished her story with a raised mug toward the group of people in front of her. Everyone had joined after Lucia decided to inform them about her return. Drinks and food were sitting on the table and a small fire was burning in the hearth, its light intertwining with that of the torches.

“You should really work on your storytelling,” Celene commented, hitting an uncaring Ilea with her usual unwanted criticism.

“So the Shadow’s Hand saved you?” one of the initiates asked while Ilea grabbed some of the food and started eating.

“Well that’s convenient, isn’t it?” Harthome commented.

“What level do you think the Praetorians were?” Walter asked while Ilea chewed.

She swallowed and took a drink from the ale he had brought halfway through the story. She lifted her hand and showed him three fingers.

“Three hundred? That sounds dangerous...” Lucia said in awe, a frown creasing her beautiful face. Though it didn’t seem like she was worried about Ilea, considering the tight grip she held Walter’s hand with.

Walter, on the other hand, seemed to understand the meaning and took a deep gulp of his drink.

“You survived...” he said, looking deep into her eyes.

“I did,” Ilea said.

“Amazing! Amazing! This is unprecedented, hah!”

The sudden exclamation from Indra stopped any further questions. Apparently he had found something deep inside the chest cavity of one of

the corpses. Nothing Ilea could see.

“Indra, you’re ruining my tables. Can you take them to your rooms?” Walter more ordered than asked. Indra nodded emphatically and motioned for the initiates to help him move the corpses. Even so, the blood dripping all over the place clearly wasn’t helping Walter’s mood.

“Elven blood...” the barkeep said, shaking his head at the rare resource coloring the stone ground. The heavy smell of iron was a reminder of elven mortality – and their own.

“Those are certainly astounding gifts worth a lot, Ilea. And you say there’s more?” Walter asked, looking at her.

“There are. But the first ones are free. The rest... I need information, and some of your brewery creations. I can see eight barrels in the back, but I bet you have more. I want six.”

Walter chuckled and then started flat out laughing. His actions were met with an awkward silence by everyone except for Ilea, who was waiting for his response.

“You bring elven corpses to a necromancer brotherhood and ask for *ale* in return?” He calmed down and smiled brightly at her. “Well then, you shall have it.”

“Great! Your stuff is really good, Walter. You could sell this at least in Dawntree and Riverwatch. Though I have to say. I haven’t tried whatever the nobles have yet...”

With that, a desire sprouted within her, but she decided it would be something for a later time. Looking around, she saw the other members of the Vultures were talking among themselves, obviously not wanting to interrupt her conversation with their leader.

“Dawntree? Oh, I don’t know about that. But I’ll also agree to the other part of the bargain and try to answer the questions you have,” Walter said as he went to get more ale.

“Alright. The first thing I want to know is how curses work. I couldn’t heal anymore, and suddenly my mana was regenerating much slower. Also, I feel like it got inside my head...”

Walter was already nodding.

“Hasn’t happened to me yet, but I know of two people who have been cursed. Went away for both of them after less than a day. One of them had similar symptoms as you described... Luckily she managed to kill the beast

that did it to her and waited the curse out.” He took a sip from his drink before continuing.

“The other one had their total health reduced for a couple hours. He told me he felt like absolute crap, worse than the worst sicknesses he’d ever had. He hid in a hole until the stuff went away. Not much you can do, it seems. How did you manage it?”

Ilea finished her mug of ale and explained. “Hid in a hole, basically.”

The others nodded at that, and Harthome chuckled.

“Mate, I’d like to have seen you get gutted by that scythe...” she said, though her grin removed the malicious edge her words might’ve otherwise had.

“So if you try to fight it, you’re probably dead?” Celene asked.

“Just a lot easier to kill,” Walter said.

“Well, that’s not really new information for me... but I’m glad it’s nothing more permanent,” Ilea said, looking at the empty plates in front of her. Shrugging, she summoned some food from her storage device and continued eating.

“Where’d you get that, by the way?” Harthome asked as he grabbed some of the dried meat she had summoned on the table. Walter sighed and walked back to the counter to get more food.

“Dwarven dungeon. Same as the armor,” Ilea said after swallowing. “You know anything about why the elves started attacking again?” she asked, welcoming the fresh plate placed on the table by Walter.

“Not really. It’s not like anyone understands why they do anything. It’s been at least a decade since the last large attack. Is it more widespread than just Riverwatch?” Walter asked.

Ilea nodded. “Yeah, Dawntree is under siege and Salia has been completely destroyed. Lots of corpses there for you guys – if you manage the trip,” she said with a chuckle.

“Is Salia where you got the elven corpses as well?” Harthome asked.

“Mhm, yeah that was certainly fortunate. I’d probably be dead if I’d faced all of them at once,” Ilea said. She paused, not wanting to go into her fights with the elves again. “So you guys don’t really know a lot either? Ever heard the name Edwin Redleaf?”

“I think I heard the name... A noble house in... Baralia... no, Lys I think,” Celene said. “Though I don’t know more about it. I can go check my books. Just come and see me in a while.”

“Ravenhall anywhere near that?” Ilea asked, and Walter nodded.

“It’s in Lys. A big contributor to the empire’s taxes,” he said.

“You think I should go?”

“To Lys, you mean? It certainly has some nice places to live, though you don’t seem like the kind that looks for safety and stability. Not that the wilderness there is any better than further west.”

“Fewer elves,” Harthome commented, and the others nodded.

“Yeah... that,” Lucia said.

“I meant Ravenhall,” Ilea said. *Seems like a good place to get more information on Edwin, plus the Hand is there – and I’ve been unofficially invited.*

“There are nicer cities in Lys,” Celene said.

“You mean to join the Shadow’s Hand?” Walter asked. “You’re over level 200, so it’s a possibility. But it’s not something I’d suggest if you’re not ready to stay for a while.”

“I’d thought about it, yes,” Ilea said. “What do you mean about staying there? They’re mercenaries, right?”

“That they are, some of the best out there. Last I heard, you had to be level 200 and pay a ridiculous amount of gold to join without any strings attached. Most join with a contract where you do jobs for them until your debt is paid.”

“Define ridiculous,” Ilea said and continued eating.

“Three hundred gold, but for that, you get lodging, food, training, information, jobs, and, most importantly, a team to work with,” Walter finished.

Doesn’t seem like a lot. I guess it would be if it hadn’t been for that dwarven treasury...

Luckily she was still chewing, so she didn’t react visibly to the amount of gold. She trusted the necromancers to an extent, but money had a lot of influence on people.

Sometimes even I make good decisions.

“So you get the same thing, but if you pay, you have no debt?” she asked. She got a confirming nod from Walter.

Why the hell not, then? I do need the training. Especially against other mages and trained individuals. Can’t be lucky all the time. Ilea finished the food and summoned more. The women were looking at her with envy, but

she didn't really understand what that was about. *Plus, I can find out more about Edwin, Felicia, and Aliana while exploring...*

"So it's Ravenhall for you then?" Harthome asked.

"Maybe. I'll think about it some more. What's the Necromancer Hotel fee for a night?" Ilea asked.

Lucia chuckled.

"For those dead elves, you can stay for a lifetime... or three. We don't have the gold to pay for them, but if you need anything, just ask," Walter said, and the others didn't seem to have a problem with that.

"Sure, happy to be your corpse delivery service," Ilea said with a smile. "Guess I'll stay for a couple days before I leave for... probably Ravenhall." She summoned her notebook and grinned at the others. "Anyone good with maps?"

* * *

It turned out that enchanters have to be rather precise with their drawing abilities, so Ilea's map was updated quite significantly. She got her barrels of ale and mead and left two more elf bodies with the necromancers. Four were still in her necklace, and she decided to keep them for now.

After she left the common room and headed to her room for the night, she found that the lodging left just as much to be desired as the last time.

"If only I could get back that bed. Maybe I can put one in my storage," Ilea said to herself as she lay on her straw bed, tossing her dagger up at the ceiling and relaxing after too much socializing.

"You certainly could. Though it probably wouldn't last long from what I've seen of you so far," the dagger said while spinning through the air. "And on an unrelated note, that ale and information you got is not nearly enough compensation for the value these people seem to have for elf corpses."

"What's your name?" Ilea asked.

"What?" the dagger asked back. "Did you not hear my remark about your so-called trade of goods?"

"I did hear you. It's just that I don't care. Even though the information I got isn't worth much for most people, to me, it is invaluable right now. And I still have some corpses if you want to bite into some flesh."

“I suppose that’s alright. You could still ask for some funds if you wish to join that mercenary band you talked about.”

“You’re not answering my question, dagger,” Ilea said and threw it upward with a little more force. This time, the metal bit into the ceiling, and a little bit of stone fell down toward her. With a deft movement, she deflected the debris away from the bed.

“I don’t have a name. I believe I’ve been called many things, though none were what you would consider a name,” it said while dangling from the ceiling.

Ilea summoned a dwarven blade and threw it up to hit the dagger. She missed and had already started to throw another as the first blade clattered to the ground.

“Dagger of Akelion, that’s what it says. Not your name?” she asked, summoning more food.

“Where do you put all that food? Are you perhaps a space mage disguised as a warrior?” it asked. Ilea’s response limited itself to chewing, so the dagger continued after a while. “I do not know where the name comes from. It holds no meaning for me.”

“Sure, sure. So do you want to give yourself one, or should I? I really don’t mind, but I don’t want to keep addressing you as my magical dagger,” Ilea said, continuing to eat.

She wondered where all the food was going herself. Likely a change connected to her status and growing levels, or perhaps her healing skills. As long as her favorite hobby didn’t impede her fighting capabilities, it was fine for her.

“If you really need to address me differently, then you may choose,” the dagger said as finally a sword hit it and knocked it down again. Ilea snatched it from the air.

“Mjolnir? No, too generic... and I’d have to melt you into a tiny hammer. What about Dagon, for dagger? Or Bloodbringer?” Ilea asked while twirling the blade in her hand.

“You’re really bad at this. The first name is interesting, but you deem it generic?” it said. “Something simple will do.”

“What about Damocles?” Ilea continued.

“Aki will do.”

“Aki? From Akelion?”

“Why not? It’s short.”

“Aki it is then, though I have to say your originality isn’t as superior as you made it out to be.”

“I am influenced by you.”

“Are you male or female?” Ilea asked suddenly, furrowing her brow.

“I am mostly metal.”

“Though of phallic form,” Ilea commented.

“Though of phallic form,” the dagger confirmed.

“You’re a *boyblade* then. Don’t spin away though,” she said while getting up. “I’m getting bored.”

“Your references elude me. How are you bored? You’ve been sitting here for only twenty minutes. Meditate. Your skill will grow,” Aki said.

“It’s in the second stage. That would take months,” Ilea said, donning her armor that had been lying around the bed.

“Then you could leave for Ravenhall. The city you were talking about. Or do you desire to do something here before?”

“Maybe... it’s mostly that I mentioned to Walter that I’d stay a couple days,” Ilea said, sheathing Aki and leaving her room again, closing the wooden door behind her.

“I believe he will understand. Seeing the way they treated you, I believe there’s little reason for you to consider them,” Aki said.

“What makes you say that? They didn’t treat me badly.”

“They did not. I was talking about how you compare in strength. I believe they fear your strength, and for good reason. Thus, you do not have to consider what they think. At least not too much.”

Ilea decided to go to the common room and talk to Walter again. It’d been barely four hours since her arrival, and she was already planning to leave again.

“As much as I’m learning the importance of strength, you don’t have to be an asshole to everyone just because you can kill them on a whim. And I think these guys have more tricks up their sleeves than me,” Ilea said.

“Perhaps you’re right. Many of my previous owners did not think that way, as far as I recall,” Aki said, ending their current bout of conversation. It was nice to have someone around. She felt she had been in her head for a little too long.

And it can cut fruit, I guess. She smiled at an arrogant dagger of myth being reduced to a fruit slicer. Though she had the feeling that Aki wouldn’t care, if he actually cared about anything at all.

* * *

“Harthome, the fool, lost another bet,” Walter said as he stood behind the counter, practicing his renowned glass-cleaning skills. They must have been at least in the third tier, if not higher.

“We only ever use mugs, why are you cleaning glasses?” Ilea asked as she leaned on the counter.

“Because, my dear Azarinth Healer, glasses get dirty. You smell the mold, don’t you?” the barkeep remarked. Ilea shrugged and shouldered her pack before she made it vanish.

“Well, Ethinu, I’m gonna visit again in the future if I manage to survive. In the meantime, I hope you make more ale.”

“I will, I will. And we’ll pay you back for the corpses. Sure you don’t need anything else?” the man asked, but Ilea just shook her head.

“I’m alright, thanks. Having a place to come back to with friendly people is enough,” she smiled. She really meant that. This place was as close to a home as she had these days.

Though the beds aren’t nice enough to use my Blink’s third-tier skill here...

“I’m glad to call you my friend, Ilea. I’m sure you’re going to go far. But the Hand will have some opinions about necromancers and the dark arts. I hope you won’t come back here with a cleansing squad.”

“Same. Well, if I do come, I expect to find some elf zombies while you play heavy metal with black eyes to strengthen them from behind. That would be a sight worth seeing,” she said, though she didn’t lean further into the joke as, with her strength, it might actually be a considerable risk for Walter and the Vultures. “I’m joking, of course. Your location is safe with me. Mental Resistance at level 8. They’ll need some figurative war hammers to crack my skull,” she continued, tapping her head.

“Don’t worry. There are others I trust much less than you. At least in their ability to keep this location hidden. With the elves coming out in such numbers, it’ll be a good time for us,” Walter said, finally putting his glass down.

Ilea nodded. “Lots of corpses and fewer available guards or hunters. Yeah, I can see that. Just make sure you don’t turn into an evil overlord controlling an army of undead. Careful what you summon too,” Ilea said, more seriously than she had intended.

Walter laughed and walked out from behind the bar. “We will be, otherwise I’ll send a letter to the Hand. There have to be some people there who would be crazy enough to help us.” He smiled and held out his arm, which Ilea grabbed close to the elbow.

“I’ll see you,” she said and let go.

“Be as safe as you can be. And find someone to have your back.”

“Yeah, I’ll give it a shot,” Ilea said. “Tell the others for me. I’m not one for excessive goodbyes.” She turned and walked to the door while summoning her helmet.

“I know you aren’t,” Walter said to her back, grabbing another glass to clean.

SEVENTY-THREE

Ravenhall

Ilea came out into the still dark forest. The sky was a little clearer now, and no snow fell in the vicinity. She double-checked her armor. All the straps had to be in order, something that took less time by the day now that she was wearing it most of the time.

Maybe I shouldn't show up with this in Ravenhall. Try to lay a little more low. Though that usually goes right out the window whenever something happens.

She thought about it some more and decided to ask her new traveling companion.

"You should be able to summon it directly onto your body. I thought you were just paranoid and wore it at all times because of that."

Aki's answer surprised Ilea as she had tried and failed to apply that technique. She looked into the night with a skeptical expression.

"You sure? Maybe my necklace doesn't work that way."

"You just suck."

"I could just have a smith melt you down into some earrings."

A grunt was her only reply.

Ilea looked around again and decided to step out into the wild. Using the same tactic as before, she flew a little over the ground so as not to disturb the snow. This time she went slower, trying not to alert anything with keen eyes.

The map told her to go east. Where the human empires and kingdoms resided. At least in this part of the world. There would be a mountain range

to the south and near the sea where Ravenhall was located. With her bird's eye view, she wasn't too afraid of getting lost.

She had planned to explore anyway. Her only time-critical goal was finding Edwin, Aliana, and Felicia. *I doubt they'll die, and every day, I get stronger. The same is true for them, but I have a feeling I've been doing rather well in that regard.* She smiled.

Hours passed in silence as Ilea flew through the snowy forest.

Through the long night of travel, the weather had cleared, allowing for the two suns of Elos to make their appearance. The land was cast in light, at first slowly, then faster and faster, soon bidding farewell to a dark night filled with blood.

She soon saw the mountain range in the distance, past the snow-covered plains. These new mountains were massive. Eight of them towered above the hillier terrain, the tallest cutting into the clouds above. It wasn't quite as majestic when compared to some pictures Ilea had seen of the Himalayas on Earth, but it was certainly more impressive than anything she'd actually seen before.

Ilea reached the mountains after hours of travel without a single monster interrupting her flight. It took a while, but the sensation of flight and the vast landscapes below made the trip more than worth it. She flew up and landed at the highest snow-covered peak, gazing at the scenery below. Before her was a massive valley. A pine forest stretched out below, the tightly packed trees broken by a frozen lake. Sunlight shimmered on the smooth surface of the ice. A snow-covered road led up through the valley, past the forest and the lake, stopping at the gray stone walls of a fortress city.

Where the walls of Riverwatch had felt like a mere necessity, it seemed like this city had been built with a siege in mind. The walls were high and thick, and the tightly packed buildings she could see beyond were made of stone. Some roofs were tiled, others entirely flat.

Guards stood atop the battlements and even some of the houses. The only colors besides gray that she could see were those of the banners fluttering on steel poles. Even some of those were gray and black.

The entire city was built against the side of a mountain. The far side was carved into the natural stone formations, and an incline led up from the city gates to the center and then higher still toward the mountainside.

This was a city built within a fortress.

“So this is Ravenhall,” Ilea said. She decided to walk the rest of the way. In the distance, she could already see carts and people going in and out of the city.

When she neared the end of the forest, Ilea stopped to get her things ready, trading out her armor for a fresh set of Taleen clothing and her backpack, making sure to nestle her money pouch with a few silver coins into the bottom.

Disguise complete. Perfect time to join a mercenary team then...

She smiled to herself as she headed out of the forest and joined the main road heading toward the city gate. It was a massive thing, and the walls were even more imposing now that she was this close.

Processing at the gate was fast, and she didn't have to wait even a minute.

“Reason for entering? Fee is two silvers,” the guard said, quickly looking up at her with a bored expression on his face.

“Shadow's Hand,” she stated, handing two silver coins to him that she pretended to get from her backpack.

The guard nodded, seemingly used to seeing high-level people going into the city. He was at level 122 as well, quite high for someone working as a guard.

Ilea walked into the city and went into the first restaurant she found.

Time to explore then.

*I wish to dedicate this first book of mine to A.
And the time we have spent with one another.*

Afterword

There are quite a few people I would like to thank. This thing has become way bigger than I ever expected.

If some of you slip my mind and you feel slighted, do contact me. I might include you in book two.

First I'd like to thank Drew, for pushing me to actually have this work edited and published. And for getting me in touch with the right people.

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And last but not least a big thanks to Portal books, for publishing the first book of Azarinth Healer.

If you've read all this, then thank you too. I'm excited that all of this has come together in the way that it has. If you've liked the novel, I'd love it if you left a review or rating, it helps a lot, and I'd love to hear what you thought :). Here's a link to the amazon page: <https://geni.us/AzarinthHealer1>

As a last thing, I'd like to place two personal recommendations here, if you're looking for something else to read. 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 2.

Rhaegar

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