

Chapter 460 Problematic Conflicts

Ilea landed in Riverwatch without being confronted by a squad of guards or arrows and artillery flying her way. To her disappointment really. If she could enter this easily, others could too.

Then again, I can't truly expect Ravenhall's level of defense. They neither have the capability nor a recent mass genocide by demons to remind them of the necessity.

She wore her leather armor and casual clothes, her ashen armor receding to her back, just below her neck.

A passing guard squad supplied her with directions towards the main governmental buildings. A quick show of her Shadow badge convinced them that she isn't a dangerous vagabond traveling their streets by night.

Ilea tried to use her Huntress skill as much as possible, focusing on Alistair as her target. A few more skills would allow her to mark more people, something she definitely wanted. It had been difficult to level the skill during combat, meaning opportunities like this were very much welcome.

A few stores were open still and the occasional worker or adventurer passed her in the streets but the difference between day and night was striking in this city. Compared to Ravenhall where many, especially in the inner two circles or Viscera, went about their business no matter what time of day. Some stores were even closed while the suns were out, knowing business would be better when the higher level people shopped at night.

Mostly inns and pubs were still active. The suns had set but it likely wasn't past midnight quite yet. As spring rolled in, the nights would grow shorter too.

Her skill informed her of a trace of mana. Instinctively, she knew it was her target. Alistair. *Don't remember him ever using a skill in front of me. Just his aura was enough? Or can I just feel the mana of everyone I've ever met with this?*

She focused on the Ascended and his magic, not picking up a single thing in her surroundings. A comforting thought. To be able to know at the very least, if her enemy walked amongst humans.

Ilea hoped her assumption was correct and the being heavily disliked these mana starved areas, being of another species and all. One that might have started at a higher level too.

She found Alistair in the city hall, where she had met him before. The same office even.

She mused on how easy it would be to assassinate the man as one of his guards checked her badge.

"The request went out earlier today. How come you are already here?" the woman asked.

Ilea spread her wings behind herself and flapped them once, a gust of wind moving away in both directions of the corridor. The sound of a violently shutting window cemented her argument.

"Lilith," the other guard murmured, eyes wide open.

It's spreading far and wide. Maybe for once the name actually helps, she thought.

The woman knocked on the door, entering upon confirmation. "A Shadow is here to see you."

Alistair appeared close to the door and opened it wide. "Ilea. It is marvelous to see you."

The man had bags under his eyes, moving a hand through his disheveled hair as he looked at her. “Well, let her in. I know her.”

The guards nodded and stood aside.

“Good to see you too, Alistair. I take it you haven’t been as well as when I saw you last?”

She formed an ashen chair and watched him teleport to his own, slumping down as the doors to the room closed, an enchantment’s effect activating.

“It has been... turbulent. Are you here just by chance or because of our request for assistance?” he asked, unsure but hopeful.

“Claire sent me, I’m here to help,” Ilea said.

He sighed and got a bottle from one of his drawers, pouring a glass and glancing at her.

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said and instead summoned a bottle of ale.

“I am... relieved that you are here. And I won’t be wasting your time with idle talk,” he downed his glass in a single motion and continued without pause. “The contract with Ravenhall was a success. Many higher ups in Riverwatch welcomed the security it should provide. Doubts of course were present too.”

“More came up when operations to save ex slaves from Baralia to incorporate into our city were launched. Quite successfully if I may say so myself. The financial and logistical support from your side was an immense help of course. Many ex slaves have already been employed by shops, smithies, and even the guard.”

Ilea took a sip. “What’s the problem then? Angering Baralia? I thought everyone is pretty much working together to destroy them at this point.”

“Exactly. Which means everyone wants a piece of their land and the riches included within. However the doubts and complaints were of a less materialistic nature. Some few individuals simply do not see the worth of slaves and the fact that we set them free. Sadly, their influence and other capabilities far outweigh the impact of such arrogant thinking.”

“Cut to the chase, governor. I plan to leave again tomorrow,” Ilea said and downed her ale.

The man blinked and nodded. “Of course. Apologies... where were we... yes, the operations. You see, Nipha has made offers and requests lately. Their interest in Riverwatch and the western cities has been known for long but the crises in the past years has made them more bold.”

“It seems they haven’t intervened in the passing of a rather large group of slavers and lords from Baralia, trying to reclaim the slaves we took from them. They are blocking roads, rile up monsters and outright attack caravans and soldiers, heavily reducing our effectiveness.”

“We could intervene but the resources we spent on this already make it difficult for me to convince all parties. It is paramount that I keep this city and its most important leaders unified. Nipha and potentially other players are ready to use any opportunity they can get.”

Ilea crossed her arms and slumped in her chair. “Why the fuck do they care? Isn’t Baralia under attack? Why come here and get some slaves back?”

“The lords and ladies of Baralia are loyal only to themselves. Pillaging rescue operations in a foreign forest suits them more than rallying their troops in their king’s defense,” Alistair said. “It is an easy target and they do hate to be wronged. I hear that all slaves of an owner are punished if a

single one escapes or is taken. Now that isn't possible because we take everyone from estates and farms. The only way to punish them thus, is to find them and take them back."

"Are they really that bored? With all the things you could do in your life? You hunt down escaped slaves to punish them," she said and shook her head.

"To them those people are property. They grew up learning that and believing that such is the way of life. Even now, I doubt many citizens of Baralia truly know in what kind of danger they are. Now they are here, to get back what belongs to them. In their minds, they are righteous," he said.

"That doesn't make it better. Just sad too," Ilea said.

The man shrugged and poured himself another drink. "War always is."

"Humans," Ilea said and rolled her eyes.

"We do have a certain charm," Alistair said. "Now I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't a precarious situation. For any other Shadow I would have offered twice the normal rate. For you however, I have something else in mind. If you finish the job, it may be possible to finally convince the others."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"You will see. It is suffice to say that the worth of the reward will vastly exceed the normal rate. I owe much to you, Ilea. And so does Riverwatch. And I will do my utmost for us to be kept in your good graces. Riverwatch will stand with you and Ravenhall and it pains me that already we are forced to ask for your help," he said and stood up, bowing to her.

"Don't bow. Wow, I'm really not cut out for this. Sure, I will help you. Just get as many slaves out of there as you can. I'd prefer if they worked in stores owned by me," she said.

"Of course. I have a squad of highly specialized adventurers prepared to come out with you, as soon as you are ready," he said.

"What are their levels?" she asked.

"Close to two hundred but their abilities are quite extraordinary," Alistair said.

"I would rather work alone, wouldn't want any of them getting killed. My tracking spell needs a few levels too. How hard do you think it would be to find them?"

"There are many. They occupy the area right outside Nipha borders," he said and took out a map, showing her the location. "It will be simple to find them. However it wont be easy to avoid open battle without covert experts."

"Why would I avoid open battle?" Ilea asked and stood up.

"I will leave it to you then. Do not overextend yourself," he said and lifted the glass to her.

Ilea wasn't sure if she could trust the man fully. He was a governor after all and as everyone with power, they were playing their little games. She was just a piece on his board as she was a piece on Claire's board.

Perhaps more a wildcard than anything else, making them adapt policies through sheer brute force and wealth. Claire owed her but more importantly, she was a dear friend. The same thing could not be said about Alistair.

The owing part, yes. But she didn't trust him quite yet. Alice had used her and there was a high chance that he would try to do the same.

Maybe everything he said was true but Ilea wouldn't just slaughter a bunch of people on the word of one man. She would ask them herself and find out why they were here.

If Alistair had been honest, that would benefit their future relationship. She hoped the man took her for what she was and not someone to manipulate.

Glad I'm not a fucking governor, she thought as she landed twenty minutes of flying later. A river flowing nearby let her orient herself. The area Alistair had marked was quite extensive, suggesting either a very mobile force or large numbers.

Making people understand that slaves are just as much human beings deserving the same rights as everyone else seems exhaustive.

Sentinel Huntress and her sphere picked up every movement, scent and living being around her as she strolled through the forest.

Ilea spotted a few wolves that promptly sprinted away upon sensing her. One nimble bear like creature climbed up a tree as if its life depended on it.

Is it the aura? Ilea wondered. She turned it off. *Deviant of Humanity.*

Another pack of wolves avoided her but didn't outright run for their lives.

She found tracks and magic residue, following the confusing trail until she glimpsed dull torchlight in the distance. Still hundreds of meters away but with her eyes it could have just as well been next to her.

I have special eyes, don't I?

She giggled to herself, noticing movement within her sphere. *Oh? Already found? Maybe he was right and I should have taken that covert squad with me.*

'ding' 'Sentinel Huntress reaches 3rd lvl 4'

"Niceee," she said out loud.

The person stalking her stayed at a safe distance, shrouded in something that obscured them.

Eve my dear, you would be disappointed, she thought and vanished.

Her hands rushed out and grabbed, finding purchase in thin air before she felt an attack coming.

Useless.

The blade scraped against her armor, a poisoned throwing knife.

"Stop it or I will snap you like a twig," she whispered and put Monster Hunter into the mix.

Her captive calmed, the air shifting before a man in dark brown robes appeared, his face covered by a steel mask.

[Rogue – lvl 191]

Ilea removed the mask which revealed a man in his thirties, various scars showing on his clean shaven face. He was bald too and didn't have a tongue.

"Great. The silent assassins. How fucking original," she said and rolled her eyes. "Are you a slave?"

The man didn't reply.

"Hmm... what's that?" she said as her healing mana examined his body. Her sphere helped too.

"Interesting. What do they do? The things in your teeth?"

His eyes opened wide and he shook his head slowly.

"What? Tell me or I'll just rip them out, your choice," she said.

The man made a noise but talking proved difficult without one of the relevant organs. The injury seemed too far back to be healed.

"Do you want to gesture?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Okay, good. Don't do anything stupid," she said and grappled him with several ashen limbs, letting go of his arms.

The man made two fists and then opened them quickly, moving his hands away.

"Explosion?" Ilea asked.

He nodded.

"Same happens if I remove them?"

He nodded again.

"How powerful are we talking?"

The man shook his head.

"Do you trust me?" Ilea asked.

He shook his head.

"Do you want to be free?"

He didn't reply.

"You're with Baralia, right?" she asked.

The man didn't deny.

Ah what the hell, if he dies I'll have taken out one of their assassins.

She filled his mouth with ash and hardened it to keep it open. "Now this is going to hurt, my dear. I suggest you think of something pleasant."

Didn't think I'd become a dentist too, life leads you on interesting paths, she thought as her healing mana flowed into him, two ashen limbs wrapped around the relevant teeth.

"On three, one, two-" she ripped the teeth out with blinding speed, the explosions muffled by ash, unable to penetrate the encased space. Ilea was sure her Blast Resistance had helped tremendously.

Catching an explosion within a closed off space. Pretty ridiculous if you ask me.

The wounds were already healed, new teeth grown to replace the old ones.

“Hah, now you’re free. Bet you didn’t expect that when you woke up today. Now I want some information or I will have to kill you,” she said, watching the man grasp at his jaw with both hands.

His eyes were wide open as he looked at her and the ash holding him in place.

The sound had been muffled enough not to reach the distant light but Ilea thought it possible that someone could show up.

He looked back and once more touched his jaw.

She felt he was in great distress but not because of her.

“Scared your master will kill you because the implants are gone?” she asked.

He focused on her, tears forming in his eyes as he nodded. He made a pained noise. A request perhaps.

“Look. As far as I see, you have two options here,” she flowed healing magic into the man. “One, you go back to your master, who surely trained and groomed you since you were a wee child. They would likely kill or punish you for taking out the implants, right?”

He looked around frantically.

“Option two. You cooperate with me, I kill your master and set you free, as well as any other slave that is in that camp,” Ilea said.

The man locked eyes with her as his breathing slowed down. The turmoil was clear.

“I don’t have all night. Do you want to live or do you want to die?” she asked.

He closed his eyes, tears flowing down his cheeks before he nodded.

“What, die?” she said.

He shook his head.

“Live. Good choice. I would have chosen that too. It’s fun. Living. And now you’re free. As soon as you told me what I want to know.”

He gestured to his mouth and the obvious lack of tongue.

“Tell in a figurative sense. You can write I assume?”

The man nodded.

“Great! Fantastic.”

It soon became clear that the extent of the enemy forces had been underestimated. Not just by Ilea but by Alistair as well.

The camp ahead was just the long reaching arm of one Lord Harken, the noble in charge of Wynehold, which was the southwestern most large city in Baralia. They came to retake the slaves stolen from their lands.

Seems like Alistair didn't lie. So much for not getting massively involved in this war. Eh, we're freeing slaves, aren't we?

She sat with the freed man, his resolve broken as he wrote down the answers to all her questions.

As if he's just fulfilling an order.

“How old were you when your training started?” she asked.

He looked up and showed four fingers.

“Four years old. Do you even understand the concept of freedom?” Ilea said.

He didn't reply.

“No master. Nobody to take orders from. You decide on your own,” she said.

He listened but it looked like he didn't hear.

The man wrote something and pointed at her.

Master

Ah fuck. That's exactly what I didn't want to happen, Ilea thought and sighed.

“We will figure that out later. For now, we'll need a plan to free all the slaves in that camp and disrupt these operations. Can you sketch me a layout and tell me how many people there are, if they're slaves or not and how powerful they are?”

The man nodded.

Ilea stopped him for a moment and looked into his eyes. “What's your name by the way?”

The pale man just shook his head.

“Of course you don't have one. I'm Lilith. Nice to meet you,” she said. He might still escape or betray her, in which case she preferred him use that name instead of her real one.

He mouthed the word and continued the sketch.