

Chapter 805 Blood

Ilea tried not to react, checking her marks before she informed Aki about those that required protection. There were quite a few of them. Ilea even considered having Felicia protected, in case their enemies had people near three hundred. *Not that it would be enough to kill her. At least it shouldn't be.*

She crossed her arms, glancing at the guests. The procession was over. The first of them started to leave. Ilea took in a deep breath and looked to the skies, the last bits of smoke lost to the winds and carried to the valley and ocean beyond.

"I..." a voice spoke. It was Andres. He stepped next to her and looked to what remained of the pyres. "You can control ash. Is that so?"

Ilea glanced his way. "I can, yes."

He nodded, quiet for a few seconds before he spoke. "I think Willa wouldn't have wanted her ash to stay here, or to be put in an urn somewhere. These mountains became her home. I'm sorry, for what I said to you."

"What you said was the truth," Ilea said.

He opened his mouth and closed it again.

She understood why he blamed her. She knew that Willa had made her own decision. That didn't change how they felt.

"Take some of the ash too, the four of you," Ilea said. "We'll scatter it together."

Andres nodded quietly before he went over to his wife and the two Sentinels.

Phoebe walked up to her and smiled, tears in her eyes as she spoke. "Ember wouldn't want to be left behind."

Ilea nodded, shuddering slightly as she took in a breath. She watched Mila and Phoebe take a handful of ash from each burnt down pyre, the parents doing the same after the two Sentinels encouraged it. They stepped to the edge of the plateau, Ilea keeping her distance as she watched.

Clothes and hair flattered in the wind before it turned the other way, one of the other sentinels using her wind magic with a gesture.

Ilea raised her hand in turn, the remaining ash lifted before she moved it towards the ocean, letting it flow through the valley until she let go.

She let the group be and joined her own. Trian, Claire, and Kyrian. "*You know of the coming attack?*"

They all confirmed.

"*Then get some rest and make sure you're prepared. And don't get assassinated,*" she said.

"*We trained enough with Eve,*" Kyrian said. "*We know their tricks.*"

Ilea smiled. "*I wasn't worried about you, Kyrian.*"

“What will you be doing?” Trian asked.

“Train a little with the Meadow. Meditate. Not like I’ll be able to focus on anything when I know this is coming,” she said.

“Then let’s hope we can avert a crisis,” he said.

“I’ve dealt with worse,” Ilea said. Though usually I just kill the monsters. Now the entire stability of the Plains seems on the verge of fucking up.

Ilea went to see the Meadow after saying her farewells. She found the domain as busy as ever, glad her gate was placed so close to the crystal tree. Few could even survive getting this close.

“Aki is prepared. He will inform me about any changes,” the Meadow said. “How was the funeral?”

“How was the funeral it asks,” Ilea commented. “Sad. Good. Some closure I suppose.”

“They have lived the lives they wished to live. It is as such that some will find rest before their time, though to be awakened is the greatest gift of all. May they return to the earth, soil, and magic, to once more find life in another form,” the Meadow spoke, its words spoken as if a prayer. No answer or comment was required.

Ilea sat down near the crystal tree and breathed in. *“There was a person too that wishes to meet you. Someone that wants to stay hidden and anonymous. She’s threatened to kill people close to me if I told anyone about her.”*

“And you communicated with a person like that?” the Meadow asked.

“She’s retired. I do believe she is dangerous, but... I think she would be annoyed if she had to actually go through with her threats. Know what I mean?” she asked.

“Someone that would threaten everyone, just in case. With enough power to do such even to you. Is she human?” the Meadow asked.

“I think so, yes. And she was interested in talking to you. Perhaps you could learn things from her. I assume she’s pretty old. A favor for a favor. I make sure you don’t leak any information on her, and she... well she’ll provide a favor once I need one,” Ilea said.

“And what could she provide?” the Meadow asked.

Ilea shrugged lightly. *“No clue, but her power alone is worth the trade. Plus I imagine she’ll accidentally provide quite a bit of knowledge. Just seems like the type who doesn’t care about much. She did mention she had communicated with you before. Though not in the same form.”*

“Hmm. Difficult to say who that might be. I have conversed with many a creature that traveled through or stopped to look my way,” the Meadow spoke. “Very well. A human near your level. I shall honor your suggestion, should she not endanger the Accords as a whole.”

“That works I guess,” Ilea sent. “And check carefully what you share.”

“I have learned to be more considerate with my answers, though it saddens me that the actions of few now limit what the many may learn,” the Meadow spoke.

“I get what you mean. But magical knowledge can be used as a weapon. I wish that we could just share everything, but that’s unfortunately not how the world works. An academy in Ravenhall will at least provide a lot of people with options, and you can still share most of your wisdom,” she said.

“It is already quite a miracle how many creatures live in my sight. Sometimes I forget that there is not mere wasteland beyond my confines,” the being spoke.

“We all learn as we go, Meadow,” Ilea said and opened a gate. She formed a rock in her hand and threw it in.

Through stepped Maureen, her body clad in wooden armor with a strange metal like sheen. Her eyes twinkled when she laid eyes on the Meadow. She wasn’t bothered by the mana density.

Ilea wanted to be there when she arrived, just in case she tried something funky. Not that she assumed the woman was even close to opposing the Meadow. But humans were crafty, that much she knew, and the Meadow in the end was quite amicable.

Maureen bowed. *“My formal greetings, Endless Meadow.”*

“And my greetings to you. The tree. Indeed, it is good to meet your true form, young healer,” it spoke.

“She’s a healer too?” Ilea asked as she watched Maureen step away and vanish.

“Indeed, though not one like you. Many who study wood magic will find its inherent healing prowess. This one has reached understanding in leaves specifically. She is the first I know who has come this far,” the Meadow spoke.

“You admire her,” Ilea said. She didn’t have to pretend. She was a little jealous.

“She remains a human, and not one it seems who wishes to push her limits any longer. That time for her, I believe, has long since past,” the being spoke. *“Though yes. Few of your kind seem to reach your heights of power. She is one of them, and for that, I believe some respect is justified.”*

Ilea raised her brows and smiled.

“You don’t count of course. Because you’re my friend,” the Meadow spoke. *“Her disregard for living creatures has already irked me when her shrouded form sought to contact me. She will not disrespect my wishes here in my domain,”* the Meadow said.

“Where did she go?” Ilea asked.

“This space is not meant for her kind, but for those I consider friends. A cavern beyond this domain will do for her,” the Meadow said.

Ilea couldn’t help but smile a little. *“Thanks. I thought she’d be here all the time now.”*

“I would make fun of you, were the situation different,” the Meadow said.

“Feels strange that you’re not,” Ilea said, though she admitted that her being so vulnerable towards a friend, especially the Meadow, wasn’t exactly normal either.

The next few hours passed quickly, meditation and space magic riddles occupying Ilea’s mind as she waited for the coming night.

Aki interrupted her earlier than expected. One of the Executioners appeared near the tree, its eyes glowing bright and its shield slightly visible. "Ilea. I lost Cless."

She stood up immediately. "What do you mean you lost Cless?"

"She was supposed to stay in her room. Both Claire and I told her and she agreed. But now she's gone and there's no trace of her in Ravenhall."

Ilea stood up. "Show me where."

"We can't use the gates. They'll know we're coming."

Ilea grit her teeth. *Why. The one fucking person I didn't have a mark on. I swear to fuck if she's just teleporting around for fun.*

"Is anybody there? Claire or Trian?" she asked.

"Claire," Aki said.

"Anyone who can track?" she asked.

"*I am getting you a team,*" the Meadow spoke before a team of Sentinels, two floating sprite like dark ones, a dwarf, and a mantis like creature appeared. All were confused to an extent but focused quickly, likely being briefed by the Meadow.

Ilea checked her marks and activated her third tier transfer. "*Coming in, hide somewhere,*" she sent to the woman before both her and the team vanished.

They appeared in a well lit room, two large windows providing sunlight. Both were open. Large canvases littered the room, some with paintings, others empty. Claire was pacing.

Ilea found the traces in the fabric and latched on, connecting everyone else in the room with her. They appeared near a village, wooden houses and pine trees visible.

An old man nearly fell out of his chair as the team started to spread out, magic flaring up from all of them.

Ilea healed the man's mind. "A little girl appeared here, not long ago. Did you see where she went?"

He opened his eyes wide. "Cannae tell ya, was asked to shut me mouth."

Asked by whom?

She summoned a gold coin and put it into his hand.

"Someone is hiding," the mantis spoke with strange clicking sounds between the words. It pointed towards one of the houses. Smoke started rising from the chimney.

Hiding mages, people told to shut their mouths. She was kidnapped.

Ilea threw the coin at the man and looked into the house, her anti teleportation aura active. There was nobody there. She charged her space magic and sent a wave into the general direction.

Stone and earth was raised, the wooden beams cracking inwards as the door was ripped from its hinges. The entire thing creaked and shook, the front wall broken in when she heard an impact from inside that sounded different.

Ilea appeared next to the sound, now noticing a strange flicker in her perception. Her ashen limbs lashed out and caught something. A spell hit her. Blight. She ignored it, her skin alone resisting the

magic as she moved the invisible being closer. Feeling her way out, she grabbed the person's neck. "Drop the spell."

"Alright, alright, please don't kill me I'm just doing what I was paid to do, please," a young man spoke, his eyes and hair black, the latter slightly greasy.

[Illusion mage – lvl 204]

"Where is the girl?" she asked.

"The girl? That's why you're here? I thought she was just supposed to paint something," he spoke.

"Where is she?" Ilea said again.

"They left into the forest," he said. "I... I'm not from here, Lilith. I don't know where they went."

"Leaves, recently set alight. A signal," a Sentinel spoke, looking up.

One of the sprites floated up, wind magic forming as it tried to disperse the smoke.

"Tracks. Fresh," one of the Sentinels said from outside.

"Old man says there's a castle out there. South east, about twenty kilometers," the dwarf said.

Ilea started closing her hand before she grit her teeth and summoned a gate. She threw the man inside and teleported out.

"It is possible they have seen the smoke," the sprite floating near the building spoke, its voice a whisper.

Ilea didn't want to think about what the signal meant.

"Direction," she said as her wings thrummed with power.

The Sentinel crouched, taking two seconds before she raised her hand and pointed.

Ilea shot off straight into the forest, teleporting as fast as she could past the firs. She could feel the wind whip against her face, her wings grazing trees and ripping through branches. A scream resounded then was silenced. She could feel her stomach sink. Her eyes squinted, two figures in the distance. *Cless*.

The girl was on the ground, the other person a hooded figure wielding a curved sword. They cut away roots grasping around their legs, raising their sword towards the girl when Ilea flew through the figure. Blood and guts splattered against the nearby trees, some still flying up when Ilea was next to the girl. A deep gash showed on her right arm and chest, she was crying.

"It's okay now," Ilea whispered, falling to her knees before she raised the rapidly healing girl to her chest. *Cless'* pulse remained fast, tears rolling down her cheeks as Ilea pressed her close. *Not another one. Not today*. She felt her own cheeks warm as wet impacts resounded on the earthy ground around them. "Keep your eyes closed," she said and kissed the girl's forehead.

A minute passed, then two. A spell was lifted, the search team stepping into light as they joined the scene.

Ilea brushed away the blonde hair of *Cless*, blue eyes staring at her with tears still welling up.

"What happened?" Ilea asked.

"Y... you're not allowed here..." she said and cried again.

“It’s okay, Cless. You know me. I can help, what’s wrong?” Ilea asked.

“They said they would hurt Squiggly if I told anyone-” she spoke and burst out crying again.

Ilea felt a shroud of shadow magic form around them, one of the sprites casting its magic.

“They were bringing her to the castle,” one of the Sentinels said.

Ilea formed another gate to the Meadow’s domain, an Executioner stepping through, followed by Claire.

“Cless,” she cried out and rushed over.

Ilea let the woman take over, displacing all the bits of gore she could see in her dominion. “They told her they would hurt Squiggly if she told anyone.”

Some of the people present raised their brows.

“Her pet, a mind magic creature,” Claire said quickly as she stroked the girl’s hair. She looked at Ilea. “Thank you. All of you,” she added before hugging Cless close to her chest.

“If she doesn’t arrive at her destination, we might have a problem. These are almost certainly the same people behind the coming attack. If they’re informed, we will lose our advantage,” Aki said.

“Why even take her?” one of the Sentinels said.

“She’s close to Ilea,” Aki said. “But I suspect there is more to it. The illusion mage you sent through told us she was supposed to paint something. They prepared a canvas.”

Ilea shook her head. “I don’t get it. Why?” She checked her marks, knowing they were once again in the territory of Nipha. “We’re in Nipha.”

“Suggestion,” one of the Sentinels said. She brushed her brown hair out of her face to reveal green eyes. “If there’s nobody left to inform anyone, we can end this here.”

[Battle Healer – lvl 242]

Raka. Already so far past two hundred. The girl looked different than when Ilea had last seen her. She was quiet as far as she knew, usually in the background. Now she could see her lips tremble slightly, her jaw clenched.

“It’s the only real option, eh,” the dwarf said.

‘ding’ ‘You have defeated [Blade Dancer – lvl 212]’

“The sword wielder was at two twelve. These people aren’t just random bandits,” Ilea said.

One of the Sentinels pulled something out of a nearby tree. “An insignia. Baralia military as far as I remember.”

“It is,” Aki said.

“We’ll have to strike fast, before anyone can get away,” Ilea said. “They might have teleportation gates.”

“We have people for detection,” Aki said. “We have organized another two Sentinel teams and a few trusted Shadows specialized in detection. Please open another gate to the Meadow.”

Ilea did as he asked, watching fifteen people come through, more magic instantly activating to hide the group.

“Are you going to save Squiggly?” Cless asked, sobbing.

“We’re going to try,” Claire said.

The mind magic beast, Ilea thought. Blackmailing a child and going for the kill when someone follows.

She looked at Aki. “*You should check our cities for blood magic runes and ritual sites. Just in case.*”

“*I already did. But the cities are large, and I can’t attract too much attention,*” Aki said.

“*You know what could happen, if we miss a single ritual,*” Ilea said.

“*That’s why we have to get them all today,*” Aki answered. “*Please open a gate to Iz.*”

Ilea did, Hunter Praetorians and Executioners exiting through the connection in the fabric.

“We have around four minutes. They’re expecting Cless to be arriving soon. Lilith, how many marks do you still have?” Aki asked.

“Enough,” she said, applying one to Cless.

“Everyone with magic to hide and obscure, get a mark and move in. Let us know what we’re dealing with. Then we strike,” Aki said.

Everyone confirmed, Ilea moving through and leaving her marks. “You can send twenty words to me, once per hour. I can respond. Don’t waste them. Four per team.”

“Now go,” Aki said.