

Ilea watched as the slaves were led to another open section of the camp. One not littered with corpses and blood.

She waited until all of them had arrived. There were more than the group she had talked to before. Most of them were women. None of them were mages or warriors. There were smiths, leather workers, farmers and many other professions.

Ilea already had their attention. "Okay. I'll make it quick. I killed your master. You are free now. If you want to, Riverwatch will take you in. You will get a life, a job and a right to decide on your own fate. That is one of your choices and the one I suggest you take. The other one is to take what you can from this camp and leave, to wherever you want to go."

Murmurs went around the group after a moment of silence.

Ilea looked at them all. Some were scared and crying, others happy and crying. A few were cursing at her, others were cheering. *Alistair, I commend you for dealing with this.*

"Grab what you can anyway. Gold, clothes, weapons and gear. The way to Riverwatch will take a few days," she said.

A surprising number of them got to work immediately, grabbing their friends and going through the camp, looking for clothes or even looting the corpses she had left behind.

"Vowed," Ilea said.

They all rushed to her and stopped in formation. "Make a line. I will remove your implants."

None of them complained.

Five minutes later, they were all free of their burden.

"Do most slaves have something like that?" Ilea asked Steve.

Too expensive, he wrote.

"I see. Now, all of you. From now on you are free. I suggest you go to Riverwatch too. You can work as guards, adventurers, soldiers. Whatever you want. Your abilities will be greatly appreciated."

They looked at her, not quite understanding the words.

Always a master, Steve wrote.

"Not anymore," Ilea said and took off the ring, crushing it in her hand before she dropped the remains onto the ground.

"Think of it like this. You are now your own masters. You can decide," she said.

Why not you? You are strong.

"Because I don't hold slaves. Not even if you lot want it. If you want a last task then protect everyone while you lead them to Riverwatch. As soon as you are there report to Dale Langston. If you simply cannot comprehend having no master, he is a good man at least and he will put you to work. Otherwise, decide on your own," she said.

All of them bowed.

“Steve, do you know the way to Riverwatch? And do you think you can protect everyone while you go there?” she said.

Steve knows the way. Very little danger. Drakes, wolves and soldiers.

“Good. Then I will leave it to you to escort everyone there. Those who want of course. Everyone who wants to leave is free to do so,” she said.

Steve nodded.

Great, means I don't have to fucking escort everyone for days.

She went back to the tent, the one man still crying over Luis' body.

“I'm sorry,” Ilea said.

“Cursed demon,” he whispered, not looking at her.

“You are free to bury him and to go back to Baralia. And you are free to seek revenge. He was a man who believed himself to be worth more than others. Someone who owned people, caged and chained them,” she said.

The man turned his head her way. “He loved us. And I loved him.”

Ilea left him to mourn. *That's why fighting humans just isn't for me,* she thought. *At least now he can be miserable as a free man.*

She chuckled at the thought and shook her head. “This sucks.”

“Death is never pleasant, ashen savior,” a woman said. She bowed when Ilea turned her way. “You have set us free. My whole life have I waited. Prepared. I imagined so many ways. To break free, to escape. And I never did. I never had the courage.”

“You have your whole life in front of you,” Ilea said, unsure of what else to say.

“Thank you,” the woman said and looked up.

Ilea noticed dozens of people listening, looking at her.

“What is your name?” a man asked.

“You can call me Lilith,” Ilea said.

The camp raided, provisions and wagons prepared, the convoy set out. Protected by the Vowed who would lead everyone to Riverwatch.

Only nine people chose to leave on their own.

Ilea hoped they would make it. Their chances weren't good.

She checked the surroundings from the air, quickly finding a few fleeing warriors and mages as well as the monsters that would soon prey on them.

Hundreds of peoples' lives. Entirely changed by little old me.

She turned around and checked on the convoy, torches lighting their way. *On the right track. Good.*

The next stop was the Azarinth temple.

Iana and Christopher had moved down into the cellar, studying the well and the walls. No new bluemoon grass had sprouted but the glow was unmistakable. The roots were still there.

“Oh my fuck!” Christopher exclaimed when he turned and saw Ilea standing there.

“Oh, sorry,” she said with a knowing smirk. Blink was entirely silent. “How’s it going?”

“Well! Splendid... thank you for taking us here. It is most interesting!” he exclaimed.

“And frustratingly useless to us,” Iana grumbled. “How is your mission going?”

“Done. Well... I killed a Baralia noble’s son. How high do you think the chances are of them retreating and forgetting about this?” Ilea asked.

“Zero percent,” Iana said with a monotone voice. “Christopher, check the fourth layer on this one. Any clue what it means?”

Ilea sighed. “Ah man. Okay, you seem to be busied for a while. I will brief Alistair and Dale. Ah, he’s going to love having a murder commando under his control.”

He’s going to hate it, she thought and couldn’t stop herself from smiling, just a little bit.

She checked her notifications on her way to Riverwatch, making sure to fly low and through the forest. Ilea ignored all the messages about defeated, no, slaughtered people. She knew that should she get involved in the war directly, thousands more would follow. Thousands who thought their beliefs to be righteous.

‘ding’ ‘Sentinel Sphere reaches 3rd lvl 15’

‘ding’ ‘Ashen Wings reaches 3rd lvl 16’

‘ding’ ‘Monster Hunter reaches 2nd lvl 7’

On the other hand, you could save thousands, she argued. Some of the warriors had chosen not to fight but if she went into their lands, attacked their homes, it may be different. Uprooting so many people and bringing them into an existing city or a newly built settlement required tremendous resources, otherwise more suffering would surely follow.

With the fires of war already raging in Baralia, it was easy to justify the funding of operations to extract former slaves. Her network so far was sadly not wide enough to provide large scale support. The Sentinels would hopefully fill in that gap in a few decades or even years.

She assumed the empire and any other country involved were after not just gold and land but the people too. Employing former slaves seemed like a sure way to boost one’s economy. Especially if those slaves were skilled and experienced workers.

Ilea decided to keep her involvement low for now. The operations launched in Riverwatch were in part funded by her and Claire, making her feel somewhat responsible. She didn’t know what kind of fate a freed slave would have if she attacked and slaughtered their masters. The ones extracted and brought to Riverwatch however, those she could employ and feed. Or people she trusted would fill that role.

She landed in the city, the cover of night masking her approach. Once more she was glad her wings were near black and not bright lightning like Trian’s.

Sentinel Huntress and her sphere quickly led her to Dale's guard station, picking up traces of him in the surroundings. A few blinks brought her in front of his office.

He sat on his desk, working through the night with a straight back and strained eyes.

Ilea wondered when he had last seen his family. She knocked and watched him sigh and relax back into his chair before he straightened again. *Captain*, she thought with a smile.

"Come in," his words were muffled through the thick wooden door, simple in design but sturdy.

She opened it and stepped inside, closing the door behind herself with an ashen limb as she took in the gloomy atmosphere.

His office had remained the same, a testament to simplicity and efficiency. An officer's dream. The only source of light was an oil lamp placed slightly behind his table.

"You look overworked," she said and formed an ashen chair.

He sighed. "And you look like an uninvited dangerous Shadow, ignoring boundaries such as walls without a hint of remorse." He leaned back again, crossing his arms. Despite the hour, he managed a slight smile.

"The perks of power. And teleportation," she said and sat down. "I'm afraid I'm bringing more work."

"As is tradition," Dale said.

[Warrior – lvl 149]

He had leveled again.

"Are you aware of the request sent to Ravenhall?" she asked.

He quirked up an eyebrow. "The one sent today? Yes, the officers were consulted. You came so quickly?"

He's not even surprised anymore, Ilea thought. She was a little bit disappointed. *Could show him some other shit.*

"About Baralia stopping attempts at slave extraction from the southwest part of their territory," she explained.

Dale opened a drawer and grabbed a few sheets of paper. "Let me guess, you already went and took care of it? Did you consult Alistair at least?"

"I did, both of those things, here comes the new work bit," she said.

The man started laughing, grabbing a pen before he calmed down. "Okay, shoot. What did you get us this time?" he sounded genuinely excited.

Ilea explained her earlier encounter briefly, happy to find the man showing a reaction this time.

"The Vowed... and you killed an actual Harken... to think they sent one of the sons because of this," he shook his head and sighed. "Wouldn't you assume that a war on your doorstep is more of a concern than a few hundred escaped slaves?"

“I don’t know them. Maybe Riverwatch just seems like an easier target than the Empire,” she suggested.

“Possibly. Well, it was inevitable. You scared them away but if their lands don’t get attacked, we will have another strike to prepare for. They may not hide in the forests anymore,” Dale said. “I will report this to Alistair immediately.”

“How come the Harkens aren’t involved in the war yet? I thought the empire was sweeping Baralia, aided even by the other surrounding kingdoms,” Ilea said.

“We don’t have the full picture. The Empire seems more focused on rebuilding and securing their own lands right now. Powerful high level teams have entered Baralia but it’s a large country. I doubt this conflict will be over anytime soon,” the captain explained.

“I would have expected more,” Ilea said with a sigh.

“It took them a year to break the siege of Virilya. I believe a majority of that time was spent on internal politics but if they had the power for a swift strike against Baralia, they would have done so much earlier,” Dale said.

“When do you expect a strike? If they don’t get held up by Empire forces?” she asked.

“Difficult to say. A small scale attack could happen in a few days already. But Ilea, you don’t have to stay because of your attack. Alistair asked for assistance in taking out the enemy, not to help defend the city. We are prepared,” he said and looked at her.

“You don’t believe me? Or do you just think us that weak?” he asked. “I’m not insulted... just curious.”

“I know little about how to defend a city. Ravenhall, with the Shadow’s Hand was overwhelmed and decimated by a couple thousand summoned demons. I doubt Riverwatch could hold against something similar. There are... things out there...,” she didn’t continue.

Dale smiled knowingly. “I know. I have seen some of them too, despite my comparatively low level, Ilea. Most will stay away from the noise and smells of a town, let alone a large city like Riverwatch. We’re talking about Baralia, humans. Not wild beasts. We have an idea about their troops. If Lord Harken doesn’t mobilize his whole army to attack us, we will hold.”

“What if he does?” she asked.

Dale tapped the table a few times as he thought. “Then perhaps our new ally would be inclined to help. I’m sure a few Shadows would tip the battle in our favor.”

“You seem to know exactly how strong they are,” Ilea said.

“I said we have an idea. Of course we don’t know enough. One rarely does. It seems unlikely that they would move enough troops to challenge our city. For what? Freed slaves?” he said.

“For a murdered son,” Ilea said.

The man didn’t counter that argument.

“In any case. It may take a while for you lot to call for help. Which is why I visited you first. I have a skill with which I can mark someone. I can find them. Plus they can release it to call for me. Thought you should have one.”

“Me? You place too much trust in me. There are far more powerful and capable people in this city. Alistair being one of them,” Dale said.

“Whether that may be true or not, I don’t call them friends. This mark isn’t meant as a gesture from Ravenhall for Riverwatch. It’s meant as a gesture from me to you. If someone kidnaps your family or if you face an enemy too powerful to overcome, call for me. If your city is under attack and you need assistance, call for me. I will be there. Perhaps not immediately but I will come, that I promise to you,” Ilea said.

“I think of you as a friend too, Ilea. I just think you may be overdoing it. I helped you out when we found you near the city but that hardly qualifies for you to be at my beck and call,” he said.

“I trust your judgment. Obviously don’t call for me if it isn’t necessary. I know you would do the same for me. Give me your hand,” she said.

The man complied and soon sported a runic mark on the back of his hand.

“Do you know how to use it?” she asked.

Dale nodded. “Incredible. How much power you used just for that. As if it was nothing. I could see the mana that flowed into it’s creation.”

“Don’t forget that I took out a camp of slavers in less time than it took me to get there. A group your city deemed difficult enough to warrant help from Ravenhall,” she said.

“Fair enough,” he said and smiled. “You’re really something. What’s your current level anyway?”

“Three forty eight, and I should get a third class if I get to three fifty. According to an ancient Fae,” Ilea explained.

Dale nodded. “Sounds about right. Don’t lose yourself up there, in your level of power.”

“I try not to,” she said and smiled. “Talking to you always helped with that, you know?”

“Thanks,” she added. “And not just for helping me that one time. Thanks for showing me the ropes, giving me gear when I had none and for seeing me as a human. Even now.”

He opened a drawer and got out a fancy looking bottle and two glasses. “It just shows me what we’re capable of. And it’s good to know not everyone in your leagues is a noble born twat.”

Ilea chuckled and watched him pour, taking her glass right after.

“I thought you didn’t drink on duty,” she teased.

“There’s a first time for everything, isn’t there?” he said and looked at the mark on his hand. “Plus, I can call a Shadow now, might just be safe to have a drink now and then.” He turned his hand a few times.

“Maybe you’re right. So, just call me if anything comes up,” she said.

“I will. Are you staying in Riverwatch for a while? I would assume we ripped you out of an important schedule. Or were you about to leave on an adventure again? To the west this time? Or eastward?” he seemed genuinely interested, taking a sip of his drink.

Ilea wondered how close to Whiskey it actually was. She preferred other beverages.

“Just for a little while. Hopefully not even a day. Say, have there been any news on a Basilisk on the road to Salia lately?” she asked and leaned forward.

“You don’t honestly think of...? Ilea, as a friend, and your elder, I strongly advise against this plan of yours. We are talking a legendary creature... one rarely even seen, never without casualties,” he said. “It’s a four mark, isn’t it? You’re not even a three mark yet!”

“Humans start at zero,” she said and shrugged. “What do you think a Basilisk gets born at? Three hundred? Eight? Maybe a thousand?”

“It doesn’t matter... there’s a reason creatures like that are at the top of the food chain. Traps won’t help you with this, neither will careful planning, tools and weapons. Something like that is a force of nature,” the man said.

“I didn’t exactly have a plan in mind. But I have to see. Last time we fought it seemed... beatable? And I wasn’t even level one hundred. None of us were,” she said.

“And still, you lost dozens of people. Take it as a grace of fate, if you will. It won’t happen again. Can you not wait until you’ve reached ample strength? With your progress it can’t be too far off until you yourself are a natural disaster.”

Ilea frowned. “But then it might be too late for an achievement!”