

Erik had of course been right.

The game that reminded Ilea of pool, but with guns instead of sticks, was entirely out of her skill set. Her Dexterity made up for it a little, but any of her magic would've been considered cheating, and thus uncivilized behavior.

Erik whistled a smug tune as they made their way through the vampire city with their next target in mind.

The walk took them through the dark streets, either lit by dim red light or nothing at all.

Occasionally, Ilea felt a presence rush over the nearby roofs, but they weren't bothered in the end. She assumed it had to do with Erik's illusions. *Could have fun here with some unassuming vampires.*

Their destination was a cathedral like structure. Dark stone with a broad wooden double door, a large wheel window just above. Two towers rose above.

Ilea had hoped for the moons to finish the picture, but the clouds remained, leaving the city in its dusky red light and darkness.

A masked humanoid casually leaned against the side of the entrance, arms crossed as he glanced at the new arrivals. "Names?"

"Valery and Reginald," Ilea said.

[Blood Mage – lvl 434]

"Here for Isidelia," he spoke and gestured for them to enter. "Enjoy," he said, in a deadpan voice.

The same dim red light greeted them as they entered, a few heads turning to take them in, quickly returning to their own conversations. Most present were dressed in formal clothing, most women in dresses. Some of the men too. Others wore ornamental armor or leather dusters. Jewelry and weapons played off the red light.

A silver chandelier with dark red burning candles hung from the high ceiling of the hall. A quiet tune came from the back of the large hall, string instruments only.

The blood magic was thick here, several auras from nearby buildings overlapping, coupled with the high level Blood mages all around. She even spotted a few at level five hundred.

Some whispers were exchanged as they walked through the gathering, Erik smiling at the fanged creatures as Ilea took in the atmosphere. She spotted Berrick when they reached the center of the building, where a broad circle of stone, inlaid with metal and runes resided. Behind it, she could see stands of stone carved into the wall and extending outwards, some seats already occupied. Attentive eyes glanced at her, quickly losing interest and moving on to the next thing.

Berrick himself was standing alone and nodded her way when she approached. She saw Erik in her domain, leaving to talk to another group.

“You made it,” Berrick spoke, his arms crossed in front of his large chest, his shotgun nowhere to be seen, blue eyes staring at her.

“We did,” Ilea said and stepped next to him, turning to see the bulk of the people.

“Do you see anything? Or should I describe the scene to you?” Berrick said.

Ilea smiled. “It is rather dark. What am I missing?”

He grunted, amused. “Vampires. From all Courts. Low and high ranks alike. Talking, scheming, looking for the next shred of meaning or entertainment. The battle will start soon, I hope for you, that the clouds above will clear. Isidelia is near level four hundred. Have you seen a battle like that before?”

“How strong is the other one?” Ilea asked.

“Closer to three hundred. But depending on the blood they both drink beforehand... we’ll see,” he said and turned his attention to the still growing crowd.

“Why are they here? To judge who wins?”

“They are here because it is an event. Entertainment, blood, and a chance to mingle, to talk, to catch up on the latest rumors. There are two balls in the city tonight, but they won’t start until after this fight is over. An appetizer, for what the night will bring.”

“And what are you hoping for?”

“I am here on business. And there are keen ears listening, young human,” Berrick spoke. “You may sit with me, or find your own seat. You are guests of Isidelia. None will challenge your presence.”

Ilea smiled. “Thanks, Berrick. I’ll go find my seat then.” She gently touched his shoulder and walked over to the stands. She now saw the group of vampires playing their string instruments, all of their gear somewhat similar to what she knew from Earth but not quite the same. The only thing Ilea could discern, with her lacking knowledge, was that each piece looked expensive. Just like the weapons she had seen earlier.

One thing doesn’t change, I suppose, she thought, reminded of the ball in Morhill, and her many encounters with Elos nobility. Flaunting power and wealth.

Ilea listened to the music for a few minutes. Soon, more people started moving to the stands, chatter and laughter resounding nearby. *No solids*, Ilea thought, seeing all the drinks. *An event like this without a banquet.*

“Do you mind if I sit here?” a masked vampire spoke, his eyes not visible, luscious black hair falling to the back of his leather coat. He gestured to the seat next to Ilea.

She nodded lightly.

[Blood Mage – lvl 536]

High level, but not the highest she had seen around.

He sat down whilst fanning out his coat slightly, then leaned against the wall behind.

They remained in silence for a while, but Ilea could tell he was watching her.

“You are a guest of Isidelia, I hear,” the vampire spoke.

"I am," Ilea said, glancing at the masked being, more vampires walking or floating past to take their seats.

"She is one for curiosities," the vampire said, perhaps amused, or offended, Ilea couldn't quite tell. "The way you look around. You can see in the dark, and you remain entirely confident in the presence of a hundred predators. You are not from here, are you?"

Perceptive, are we?

The chatter all around continued, some of the vampires not taking seats but instead standing some distance from the central circle, where she assumed the fight would take place.

"I'm not. I'm from the east. A Shadow, of the Hand," Ilea said. "Who do I have the pleasure to talk to?"

"I did not mean to offend, Shadow, of the Hand. Look... it's starting," the vampire spoke and pointed.

The chatter quieted as a single vampire walked to the center of the circle, wearing a white shirt, black pants, and leather boots. He had no weapons with him, his long black hair bound. The vampire bowed with a slight smile on his lips when Isidelia appeared before him. There was something else. He looked excited.

Isidelia wore half plate armor and a helmet bearing three horns that moved towards the back of her helm. Her plate was beautifully crafted, black and red, but in no way impractical. She came here to fight.

"Is he that confident?" Ilea asked. According to Berrick, the other vampire was weaker by quite a bit.

The vampire next to her giggled from below his mask. "Hmm... I'm not sure. What do you think, human of the east?" His mask was turned her way.

She glanced back at him. "Might be a way to say that he has no chance at all. Maybe he's hoping she will go easy on him, if he doesn't try to fight."

"Do you think that will happen?" he asked.

Ilea turned back towards the two fighters. She could feel the blood magic from where she sat. "No," she said quietly. "She will rip him apart. He should've worn armor," she said the last bit with a dry tone and a grin on her face.

The vampire next to her laughed. "That depends," he said and leaned forward. "I believe he knows very well what he is doing."

Ilea raised her brows, seeing the slight smirk on the offender's face, the gulp, the look in his eyes. She breathed and smiled. "Right. Yeah. I see it."

"Glain Warrington," Isidelia spoke, her voice carrying through the entire hall, silencing the crowd with the two words alone. "You stand accused of being... uncivilized. How do you plead?"

The other vampire started walking, his eyes on her entirely. "Perhaps there are those here, who would consider my words uncivilized, but would you not argue yourself, Lady Isidelia, that in love, one has to risk everything?"

A few murmurs when through the crowd. Isidelia did not respond.

“If I caused a grave offense, please, invoke upon me, the punishment you see fit,” Glain Warrington spoke, the last words spoken with a shaky voice.

“He wins, before the battle has begun,” the vampire behind Ilea whispered in a quiet tone, leaning forward slightly.

“What exactly are we watching?” Ilea asked back, her voice just as quiet.

She heard an amused giggle.

Isidelia looked up to the round windows in the ceiling, pale light now falling in from above.

A pulse of magic and she vanished, rushing forward before she impacted the other vampire, his arms raised as runes lit up below. They crashed into a barrier taking the form of a rose. Isidelia grabbed the offender’s arm and twirled, slamming him into the ground before she jumped on him.

He vanished, and she followed.

Nobody cheered, but people resumed their conversations, laughing or clapping in a subdued manner whenever Isidelia managed to land a blow.

“Not the best choice,” Ilea said.

“What would you have done, I wonder?” the vampire asked.

“I would not have been offended by a comment about my dress,” Ilea said. “And if I was here...” she added, then stopped herself and smiled, turning back to watch the ongoing game of cat and mouse, though the mouse proved difficult to catch. And still, were it about winning a battle of strength and magic, the result would be clear.

“*Say he threatened to kill those close to you. What would you have done?*” the vampire’s voice resounded in her mind.

Ilea smirked. “*A threat is a threat. Killing him would only prove my fear.*”

“*And are you not afraid? Of losing those that you hold dear?*”

She thought for a moment, watching the fight go on. The two vampires danced around each other, cutting with their claws, blood magic erupting time and time again, the offender slowly showing more and more cuts and bruises, his shirt reduced to shreds, his wounds healing quick, but not fast enough, where the other’s armor remained with mere scratches.

“*It would hurt, to lose them. But I won’t live in fear, and I will trust them, to fight for themselves,*” Ilea said. “*But there are beings that they cannot face, and should the time come, when they ask for me, I will fight to my last breath, to protect them.*”

The vampire leaned back. “*I like that answer, Lilith of Ravenhall.*”

She smiled, seeing Isidelia rip away the right arm of Glain. A violent display, right before she stabbed her fingers into his eyes, bringing him to his knees as he pleaded with blood running down his face.

Isidelia tilted him backwards and watched him fall. The barrier vanished. “Clean yourself up,” she said and flicked her hands to get rid of the blood.

Claps resounded from the watching crowd, some already getting up and resuming their chatter.

“*You still didn’t tell me who you are,*” Ilea sent through the connection.

“Can you guess?” he sent, himself now getting up and adding to the modest applause.

“I guess that we have a mutual friend,” she said.

“A friend that has presented a game to both you and me, shrouded in his illusions,” he spoke and bowed lightly, offering a gloved hand to her. *“I would suggest a proper introduction, Lady Lilith. If you would join me.”*

She looked at him and smiled. *“If you have solids to eat.”*

“I entertain many guests, and none leave unsatisfied,” he spoke.

Ilea placed her hand into his and raised herself slowly, making sure not to carry her full weight on her own. She smiled at the sudden tension in his arm and helped out before she pulled him close with the gesture. *“We’ll see,”* she said, standing and with a smile on her face.

He’s strong, though I wonder if he’s strong enough.

The vampire stepped down from the stand and walked to one of the side exits with a slight spring to his steps. He raised his arm to gesture her to follow.

Outside, an inconspicuous adventurer waited for them.

Erik laughed, then spread his arms wide, and bowed. *“Here we are. Old friend, and new. One world, and another.”*

“You are an old fool,” the vampire said and walked closer, then hugged Erik. His mask disappeared to reveal a clean shaven face with no blemishes, his eyelashes accented with makeup. He let go of Erik. *“You are both invited to my home. Come.”* Broad bat like wings broke out of his back with a sickening crunch of bone and flesh. He breathed in and grinned, looking at Ilea with his two fangs showing, dark red eyes taking her in, his grin widening.

[First Vampire – lvl 903]

She glanced at Erik and shook her head. *“You could’ve just introduced us,”* she said, her armor forming as wings of ash and black glass appeared on her back, just as broad as the vampire’s.

“He knows me too well,” the vampire spoke and bowed his head. *“Verillion Carn. It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Four Mark, and Dragonslayer.”*

“Ilea works fine,” she said. *“Nice to meet you, First Vampire.”*

He vanished and appeared far above.

Ilea looked at Erik. *“Entertained?”*

“Already fading. But I’ll find something else soon, I’m sure,” Erik said with a happy smile, then vanished.

Ilea sighed and looked at Aki. *“I guess I’ll be like that too when I’m that old.”*

“You’re like that already,” the machine said.

She patted it and teleported up to the other two.

A short and fast flight later, they reached the largest castle atop the split mountain, seven towers rising with hundreds of windows glittering in the moonlight. The walls were carved into the stone of the mountain itself, expanded, and reinforced.

Verillion Carn landed in the courtyard, where a dozen people were waiting, all wearing formal clothing.

A middle aged man bowed at the vampire. "Welcome home, my Lord."

"Tamur. Please prepare a feast for humans. We have guests," the First Vampire spoke.

The butler glanced at the other two, his eyes widening for a split second before he caught himself and gulped. He bowed. "Of course. What of the other guests, my lord?"

"Leave them be. We will use the Griffon hall," the vampire spoke as his wings snapped back into his body, his leather coat replaced by broad silver pants and shoes of the same color. He wore no shirt. "Come then, and welcome to my home."

Ilea followed with a smile on her face, watching the near four mark enter his castle through the massive gate, the two metal doors twice as thick as her, steel bars visible above, a grid that could be let down in case of an attack. Dozens of enchantments were present all around, and she could tell the source of the central ritual protecting all of Marrindayne resided somewhere below this castle.

Inside, she blinked her eyes. A thick smell of blood and sex permeated the air, a trail of blood going through the broad hallway decorated with paintings of differing styles, the walls and high ceiling dark gray stone, detailed carvings everywhere. Each doorway was a grand piece of art, the floor covered by an immaculate red carpet. Besides the blood of course. Moans resounded from two rooms on the left, sounds of battle from a hall on the right.

Verillion walked on and Ilea followed, taking glances into the rooms and halls connected to the central hallway. She got stuck on the third room. A blood soaked orgy of fifteen people, chains and whips the least dangerous equipment that she saw. She realized that Erik had already wandered off.

"Does it make you uncomfortable?" the vampire asked, turned around and looking at her.

Ilea took a last glance into the room and walked on. "To be honest, yes."

He laughed. "Would you like to try and join?" He walked on.

To the right, she saw the entrance to a gallery, a single vampire standing at the center of the hall, painting on a broad canvas. The next entrance showed a workshop, two people looking at a pistol made of steel, eight chambers and a barrel that reminded of a revolver.

She imagined his question was both a joke and just as much a serious offer. Perhaps one day, it may be interesting, if she ever grew that comfortable with her sexuality. But she would want to invite Felicia too. And besides, there were other problems involved with such an event. "I don't think you want that. There is a rule against killing, and my blood is far from safe."

"I can only imagine what the blood of a Dragonslayer would do to my kind," the vampire said as they came into a wide and decorated hall, two curved stairwells leading up, two hallways leading away, one left and one right. Verillion took the hallway to the right. Here, most of the doors were shut, the ones open revealing fully furnished living quarters with comfortable looking beds.

"The one who tried went wild and attacked me," Ilea said. "Our mutual friend will be able to tell you more."

"I'd rather try myself," Verillion said. "It's been a long while since I've tasted blood as exciting as yours."

Ilea grinned. "You'll have to draw blood for that to happen."

“Oh, this night is turning into something quite exciting. But I must not lose myself,” he said and opened the double doors to another broad hall, a long and wide wooden table stood at the center, a dozen chairs all around. Enchantments came to life, basking the room in not dim, but bright light. “Erik spoke of danger, and he is not one to speak such words lightly. You came as representative of an Alliance in the East, though that is the extent of what I know.”

Ilea raised Aki. “I mainly wanted to see your lands and your kind. This is the representative.”

“Shrouded in illusion?” Verillion asked.

“Still?” Ilea said. “Where’s Erik?”

A pulse of blood magic went out from the First Vampire. A pulse of arcane returned. And an illusion was lifted.

The Vampire raised his brows and crossed his arms. “So it is true. The One without Form, has fallen.”