

Chapter 652 Acquaintances

Ilea discussed a few more topics with the woman, but nothing else of true importance. They both seemed content with future coexistence and an exchange of knowledge and other resources, though Genesis made it clear that she couldn't speak for the whole of her Order. Some other Ministers in Virilya alone had spoken out against cooperation with the Sentinels, for very different reasons.

She knew they'd cave in as soon as her organization became well known not for the name of their founder but their own reputation. *Shadows and Sentinels*, Ilea mused, leaving the temple with a smile. The tea really was quite excellent. She had gotten a pot as a farewell gift, however only after she had proven her own storage item could keep the brew at the required state and temperature. One of Keyla's meals had convinced the woman. A steep price but perhaps a fair trade for her best chef's creation.

"In Virilya. Do you have time for a visit?" Ilea sent to Felicia as she stepped out into the large port district.

"For you, always. Will need a few hours. Redleaf Estate," Felicia sent.

Does that mean I should go there in a few hours? Or now? Ilea wondered. *Well, I'm not only here for her. Might as well have a look at their House's house they took back from Arthur.*

She summoned a silver coin and gave it to a nearby beggar. "Any clue where the Redleaf estate is?"

"Thank ye. Very generous, miss healer. Redleafs... hmm... eastern part within the walls I'd say. Don't know specifics. 'pologies, miss," he said.

"Thanks," Ilea said and left, going back through the large gate and into the city proper. She teleported up the largest nearby building, holding on to a spire with an extending wing as she had a look around. The mark on Felicia suggested the woman was in the central district. *Not where I want to be*, Ilea thought and jumped off again, her wings preventing damage to the street and her self-confidence.

Mass is a good thing. Trust the millennia old monsters. Humans don't know anything, she reminded herself, ignoring the glances from passerby people.

Compared to smaller towns and villages it seemed displays like the one she just gave weren't exactly unheard of. Most of them went on with their business immediately after making sure there was no actual danger to their lives.

She still had her tails, more now than before. "Leave me alone," she said, whistling with Monster Hunter before she vanished, teleporting a few dozen times before she emerged again in a busy side street. Her eyes closed as she took in the delicious fragrances intermingling with the usual city smells. *Jackpot.*

A few copper pieces lighter, and several thousand calories richer, she continued on her wandering way through the sprawling capital. *And Feyrair is confused how humans can stay within walls. There's enough to see and do here for a hundred lifetimes.*

Street performers sang and juggled, their tricks made more impressive by practiced use of martial skills and magic spells. Bards strung their varied instruments, both advertising nearby shops and simply entertaining.

A jingle resounded when Ilea walked into a leatherworking store. She quickly chose a set of light armor made of dark brown leather lined with thin plates of dull steel. She added a cloak and went to the broad counter.

“That’ll be one gold and fifty eight silver,” the man said after inspecting the wares. “Will you need a pack to carry it all?”

Ilea summoned the coins and made the armor vanish, changing her outfit in the blink of an eye before she pulled the light brown cloak over her head, obscuring some of her features.

The leatherworker grinned and gave her a slight nod. “Pleasure doing business with you.”

Ilea summoned another few pieces of silver and placed them on the counter, nobody else currently in the store. “Can you tell me where the Redleaf estate is located?”

“About two hours walk east I believe. Close to the main eastern road. Between the glass working and eastern alchemy district. They have more than one estate, but I believe their main one was there. Don’t count on this though, I believe the Head of their House has passed away some time ago,” the man explained, not yet reaching for the coin.

“Thank you. Can I count on your discretion?” she asked, pushing the silver towards him.

“Certainly. We have never met,” he said, still with a light grin. “Miss... before you go.”

“Hmm?” Ilea asked, turning back to face him.

“High level healer, black hair, blue eyes, looking for High nobility... you couldn’t possibly be Lilith, could you?” he asked.

“Why would it matter?” Ilea asked.

“I’m merely curious. It would be quite an honor to know Lady Lilith wore the armor I myself have made. The relatives of a good friend of mine were saved by your actions during the siege.” the man explained.

Ilea quickly spread her ashen mantle over the leather armor, only covering half her body before she made the spell recede again to her upper back.

“In... credible... thank you... and good fortune!” the man said.

“To you as well,” she said and left the store, with a better idea of her destination.

Ilea tried some dishes on the way, being vigilant to the folks within her dominion. She wouldn’t really mind having a few of them tailing her but bringing them to Felicia might be a nuisance for the woman.

In the end, her new outfit coupled with some caution prevented any more people from recognizing her. High level healers in Virilya probably weren’t that uncommon with the presence of the Order of Balance.

She found the districts about an hour later, occasionally teleporting to nearby roofs to get a better idea of where she was exactly. Most of the people she asked for more specific directions were rather helpful. *Normalcy has definitely returned.*

Ilea entered a rather broad street, lined with luscious trees on either side. There was enough space for a carriage to comfortably turn. At the end of the road stood a mansion, parts of it covered in ivy, a tree growing adjacent resting a few branches on the right side of the tiled roof. A grated fence prevented outsiders from entering without climbing or wings, large bushes behind forming a natural wall. All of it seemed somewhat abandoned and decrepit.

Based on the instructions however, Ilea was pretty sure this was the place. *Must've looked wonderful before the war. And with Arthur still around. I wouldn't be surprised if Felicia let this place crumble in a deliberate manner.*

There was no way to inform anybody inside of her coming, nor would anyone see her waiting outside. And so she simply jumped over the grate, landing in the stone yard where grasses and flowers had started growing through some cracks. Ilea winced when she heard the loud impact resound below her, looking down to find yet another few cracks. *Shouldn't have jumped that high.*

The door to the manor burst open, a familiar face walking out, her eyes landing on the sole intruder as magic flowed around her.

"I thought we were done with... Ilea?" Aliana asked. Her brown hair was short and well kept, the woman wearing an apron over a set of gray and red light armor. It looked custom made and not quite like anything Ilea had seen the Lys military use.

"Yes, hi there," Ilea said and waved lightly. "Sorry about the floor."

Aliana looked down. "I'm not sure what you... oh no worries. Wait you did that?"

"I've gained some weight," Ilea answered with a slight frown.

The woman grinned. "Wonderful. It's good that you're getting fed properly! Now don't stand there and come in, I'm preparing lunch. And you're invited."

"Thank you," Ilea said with a smile. "I assume you were cooking for Felicia? She knows I'm in the city."

"Am I not allowed to prepare lunch for myself?" Aliana asked, leading Ilea through the downright ancient manor. Many of the windows were open, flowers and plants placed in front of various walls where it seemed paintings would've hung at some point.

Ilea could still see a bunch of nails in the walls. She thought it charming, the fresh vegetation taking away some of the weight the dark wood had on the atmosphere. "Of course you are. It's been a while Aliana, how have you been?"

[Water Mage – lvl 208]

"Simply wonderful, Ilea. Do you want to wait in the banquet hall or join me in the kitchens?" she asked. "Been a while since we had a guest I actually cared about."

"I'll join you. But I haven't really increased my ability to cook since last time," Ilea admitted. "You get a lot of guests here?"

"I never took you for a cook. Someone who can value the worth of food however, that you are. And I always appreciated that," she said and led her into an extensive area in the back of the manor.

Ilea could see four walls caved in, some of the wood still sticking out. Whatever the rooms had been before, now everything was covered in enchanted cooking equipment. Various ovens, heating plates, and storage containers lining the elongated back wall, sunlight streaming in through several

large windows. A luscious garden with flowers, herbs, and trees growing expanded behind, giving the impression of a country village instead of a bustling capital city. The whole district was rather quiet, adding to the serene atmosphere.

Dozens of hooks lined the walls above the windows, pans and pots hanging from them with the occasional knife sticking out of the wood itself. Crates littered the hardwood floor, a pile of bones sitting in a steel tub to the side, meat hooks hanging from above, currently empty.

Aliana checked a few pots, lifting lids, and stirring. A fragrance of various cooking vegetables and herbs filled the room after she did that, the woman turning around and resting her behind on a nearby cabinet. "Not a lot of guests here. For good reason," she said and gestured to the general state of everything. "Felicia meets her notable contacts in another mansion owned by her, not previously associated with the Redleaf family and quite a bit more... modest. Though she returns here in her free time, which hasn't been a lot I'm afraid."

Ilea nodded, grabbing a nearby chair and carefully sitting down. The wood creaked a little but held. Aliana raised an eyebrow. "So this is where the political prisoners end up?" Ilea asked to distract her, nodding to the meat hooks.

The woman laughed. "Ah, not at all. She's not her father after all," she said and smiled. "No, Edwin and his... *pupil*, often bring back one carcass or the other. At my request of course."

"I thought he was drinking," Ilea said. "And he has a pupil now?"

"Oh he is. And well... yes and no," Aliana said. "It's a little complicated."

Ilea shrugged, smiling as she rested her elbows on the top of the chair, her head resting in her hands. "Tell me all about it. I'm sure we have time, you haven't even started cooking meat yet. High time we caught up on things."

Aliana rolled her eyes. "I've learned plenty about you from Felicia and the songs. Lilith, savior of Riverwatch, member of the Liliy? And you fought alongside Velamyr Ryse, let alone Michael Elyse. Quite an impressive change compared to your adventures in Taleen dungeons, threatened by a young Redleaf noble to help in his plots," she said and paused, taking in a deep breath as she closed her eyes. She looked back at Ilea and continued. "It's quite enjoyable, I'll be honest. They helped me out, you see, but it was Felicia who always wanted me there. It was her presence that kept me there. I didn't like how he treated you, but I suppose you enjoyed the benefits instead. I haven't heard of anyone growing in power as quickly as you did in those few weeks."

"It was quite helpful. Any resentment I've had towards him is gone by now," Ilea said. "And don't believe the songs and stories. I'm the same woman I was back then. Mostly."

"That's good to hear. You might even see him if you stay long enough. I have no idea when they come back usually but it's been three days already. I can't say I've stayed exactly the same. Taking care of a drunk noble I think has changed me, as did the classes I've been participating in," Aliana explained.

"Classes?" Ilea asked.

Aliana waved her off. "Ah various things. Felicia thinks it paramount that I learn to express myself in different languages, understand the political intricacies of the city and Empire, that I can manage trade and various other things a high noble should know. It's interesting, don't get me wrong, but this," she said and gestured around herself. "This is where I love to be."

“She cares about you,” Ilea said. “You could tell her, you know? If you didn’t feel like taking on those responsibilities or learning about topics you’re not necessarily passionate about.”

“I will be by her side for as long as I live, Ilea. And if I can improve my value to her, I will. I know she would let me go the moment I asked her, and that is precisely why I’m staying. She’s not just a friend to me, she’s my sister,” the woman said.

“I can tell,” Ilea said with a smile. “So Edwin is your brother?” she joked.

The look on Aliana’s face changed, her face distorting lightly before she forced a perfect smile. “It’s good right? Can you believe I took a class just for that?” she asked, returning to the grimace.

“It’s quite scary,” Ilea said.

“Schooling one’s face is apparently very important because in politics, everything you give away can and will be used against you. It’s tiring, I tell you. But necessary. As to your question, no. I respect the drive Edwin once possessed. He’s one of the main reasons Felicia and me are where we are now. Arthur is dead because of his efforts, your help and ours definitely helping, but he’s been at it for years and years. We would’ve been lost without him and I’ll never forget that. But since our return... well... I had thought it impossible for maturity to go backwards. And yet that seemed to be what happened to him. He’s become irresponsible, unable to part from his liquor, reckless... well he might’ve been reckless all this time, for a good reason before, whereas now he only creates more issues,” she said with a sigh. “It’s been difficult to deal with him. And while Felicia was busy trying to establish herself as the new head of the House, I dealt with him.”

“That does sound rough. Sorry you had to go through that,” Ilea said.

“Don’t mention it. It’s nothing to the time before. Or back in Baralia,” she mused. “At least I doubt now that I’d ever want children.”

Ilea laughed at that. “Understandable. So how come he’s got a pupil now? Because it doesn’t sound like he should be going on adventures.”

“He shouldn’t,” Aliana said immediately. “But it was worse for him to stay here and rot away. You know how tough he is. The jobs nearby shouldn’t be too dangerous for him. Not very lucrative either for someone at his level, but power and gold is not what we’re looking for. I thought you an intruder before... there were many. Natural with the state this manor is in. It’s gotten a little better but the influx of refugees brings the occasional opportunist or thief into our yard. Jyraiui was one of them. A performer from the west who failed to get work here.”

Jyraiui. Did I hear that name before?

“Edwin killed a few intruders when he got to them before I could, or when I wasn’t here. That one, for some reason, he spared. Talked some nonsense about training the man and going on adventures. I really have no idea why he got that idea into his mind. But here we were. Jyraiui was obviously terrified, lying through his teeth, but I thought it a good opportunity. Edwin could go out, maybe clear his head a little, and who knows, actually do something else for the world than consume expensive liquor. It’s good that Felicia invested early into a few distilleries.”

“So the guy is still here because you threatened him?” Ilea asked, a little confused at the story.

Aliana shook her head. “Not anymore. At first, sure. He’s grown a liking to Edwin. Either that or the fair pay he receives. Plus whatever they manage to get from the jobs they finish. Though that isn’t as much as you’d think. They’re either terrible or get very unlucky quests.”

“Sounds like an adventurer thing to do,” Ilea mused. “Where did you say he was from? Jyrai I mean. The name rings a bell somehow.”

“Pyro enhancer from the western cities. Apparently he did fire magic shows. I saw some of it a few months back in our yard. We had drank a little too much but it was quite beautiful. Guards interrupted but he certainly knows what he’s doing, especially that drunk,” Aliana explained.

“Pyro enhancer... ah... the fire wings guy!” Ilea exclaimed. “From the Riverwatch tournament. Ah, that didn’t go well in the end, but I guess he made it out.”

“Fire wings?” Aliana asked.

Ilea smiled. “Yeah, he inspired me to get a fire magic class. I do have wings now, but I suppose they’re a little less flashy.”

“But a hundred times more recognizable. Ash demon, Lilith,” Aliana said in a teasing voice. “Did your appetite grow just as much as your power?”

Ilea grinned and leaned forward, catching herself when the two wooden legs of the chair splintered. She displaced the chair out and away, brushing off her legs while avoiding eye contact.

“Exponentially so,” she murmured.

“Wonderful. And don’t worry about the chair. Just don’t punch anyone, I don’t want to clean up again,” Aliana said, putting a few skillets onto heated plates before she summoned a bottle of oil, whistling a tune all the while.