

Chapter 355 Compromises

“I will have his left hand taken and he will be put on house arrest. Not that either will be much of an inconvenience. It will be a reminder.” Alistair said.

Ilea nodded. “Appropriate. Not much of a punishment.” She sighed. “We will see what the survivors have to share about him. If he really is as honorable and true to Riverwatch as he pretends to be, I don’t really care if he lives on.”

“Is that what you wanted to discuss with me?” Alistair asked. He looked at her with inquisitive eyes.

“That too. Too many people as well. I need to breathe.” She added and moved a chair away from one of the tables, sitting down casually. She continued to eat.

Alistair followed her example and grabbed a chair too, sitting a couple meters in front of her.

“The open schools, loans for non nobles... that one I didn’t even know was a thing. Why bother? The kingdoms and empires wouldn’t be an issue if you just kept doing whatever Riverwatch did before.” Ilea said.

“And be owned and controlled by foreign interests?” Alistair asked. “No. The war brought us an opportunity and I acted on it. I had hoped it would last longer but I have to live with it now. Education and capital for everyone will lead to a much more powerful populace. Many will want to live here simply to study their schools of magic. Necromancy is just one of the often forbidden magics, many of them useful if practiced responsibly.”

Ilea blinked closer and smiled. “We seem to be on a similar page. What about war, expansion?”

The man looked up to her. “Nobody cares about the western forests. Some leeway was given to the independent cities because of this in the first place. I do like the idea of reclaiming the lost towns but beyond that, there is enough space here. Let them slaughter each other in the east.”

“I will hold you accountable to those words, Alistair Gallian.” She said and formed a dome of ash around them. “Ravenhall will become independent of Lys. To be managed by the current leadership of the Hand.”

He remained quiet, a grin forming on his mouth as he processed the words.

“I believe we could find a way to back one another.” Ilea said. “Do keep this information to yourself until your own spies bring you news of this.”

Alistair nodded. “I believe an agreement can be reached. Lilith, of the Hand and Riverwatch.”

“Write to the Head Administrator of the city. She will manage the rest.” Ilea said. “Ah another thing... what do you think of cooperation with dwarfs and dark ones?”

“Dark ones... monsters turned sentient?” Alistair said. “Laws apply to everyone. As long as they abide by them when they are in our city, I see no problems.”

Ilea refrained from asking about elves. Right now she knew only Elfie and his crew, not about to suggest they side with the monsters that brought them so much torment. With Sulivhaan and the Hand, she had to know how they stood to it. With Riverwatch, it was less important to her.

“Good.” She said. “Then that’s settled.” Ilea got up, the ash dispelled before she filled her plate again and walked towards the door.

Alistair remained on his seat for a moment, finally standing up and brushing off his suit. “May I ask one last thing?”

“Sure.” Ilea said, standing near the door.

“Why Riverwatch?” He poured himself a mug of wine before he joined her. “I can tell you like the policies I introduced but there’s no reason other than the gold you have here. If what you said is true, we might need more help than we can provide ourselves.”

Ilea smiled. “It’s the first town I found.” She said and walked out, not offering him any more than that.

A group of guards was waiting, the officers and Vincent nowhere in sight. “Governor.” One of them nodded. “The interrogations are in progress, conducted by Valery Stormbound. We moved the prisoners into the cells.”

“Good. I will join them. Vincent?” Alistair asked as he walked closer.

“He is with them, as are some of the officers.” The guard said and looked at Ilea. “Captain Dale has continued the evaluation. He told me to inform you that he would appreciate the continued participation.”

Ilea nodded, chewing some cheese.

Alistair turned her way. “I will contact you again in regards to the letter. The information I provided in regards to Stormbreach are sadly all I have. As to the third job, do come find me once you wish to start.”

The disappearances. “Sure. I might check out Stormbreach today.” Ilea replied.

“Captain Dale will be able to provide a guide.” He said and bowed his head to her lightly. “I wish you good fortune, Shadow.”

“Cheers.” She said and walked over to the groups of people participating in the evaluation.

There were still a bunch of officers waiting to try themselves against her, their faces lighting up when they saw the Shadow approach.

Some of the guards who had been near the canteen were following her at a distance, the others went with Alistair.

“She’s back.” Dale said when he saw her. “Care to join us again? We’re nearly through with the recruits.”

Ilea nodded. “Sure.”

“Nothing is happening.” A guard commented.

“Did he even use a spell?” Another said.

Ilea waited with crossed arms, her ashen armor mostly ignoring the ice lances that slammed into it.

“This is fucking ridiculous.” The ice mage said and shook his head. He gulped and bowed to her. “I give up.” He joined the group of laughing guards and officers once more.

“If he can’t get through, I don’t know if we even have anybody that could.” Someone commented.

Ilea yawned and walked over to the buffet that had been prepared for the normal guards. Dale certainly hadn’t been kidding when he organized this distraction test.

He walked over to join her, a plate in on hand and a mug in the other. “They were hoping for more of a reaction.” The man said and smiled at her.

“Should’ve done this a year ago then.” Ilea said. Some of the attacks had gotten close to penetrating her armor of ash but her resistances against the magics were too high. Coupled with all the defensive bonuses it seemed like people below level one fifty had a hard time even scratching her.

Dale nodded. “And here I thought a group of my guards could take down even a Shadow.”

“I’m not any Shadow.” She said with a smirk, her armor receding and her helmet vanishing before she shoved a spoonful of hummus into her mouth.

“You certainly aren’t.” Dale said and paused. “What did you talk about with Alistair?” He asked, unable to stop his curiosity.

“Maybe you’ll find that out in the future. Maybe not.” Ilea replied, winking at him.

It was midday now, the evaluation and bets had taken up quite some time, coupled with her short expedition into the wild. Many of the guards had already gone back to their posts, bored by the lack of success against the Shadow.

Dale sighed. “You’re not as easy to read as you once were. Too much power and secrets. How are you?” He asked.

“How am I?” Ilea asked back. She could tell he wasn’t asking how she felt about the food or the sun or even the evaluation. “Better, I think.” She replied.

He looked at her, waiting for more. When nothing came, he nodded. “That’s good to hear at least. I’m here you know.” He paused. “If you want to talk to someone a little less insane than the people you likely deal with on a daily basis.”

“I appreciate it.” Ilea said and meant it. Coming from Earth and being at her height of power, she doubted many could truly empathize. Perhaps a guard in Riverwatch, grounded in his life and morals might just be the one to offer some counsel.

Those in the Hand were reasonable enough too but somehow she had felt more comfortable with Maro, Terok and Goliath, each of them understanding a little of the absurdity surrounding the world. Maro perhaps the most because his situation was maybe even more ridiculous than her own.

I hope he’s not forming another cult. She thought and continued eating. *Oh well. One more or less.*

“I’ll need a guide. To show me where Stormbreach is.”

“You really are going for that too.” Dale said and shook his head.

Ilea looked at him. “Dale, you will understand once you get the ability to fly. Shouldn’t be too long by now.”

He waved her off. “I’m very much fine on the ground. Thank you.”

She laughed and stretched before she looked around. "Seems like most of you lot have had enough. You didn't try yet." She said with a smirk.

"I've seen enough of you to know the result." Dale said. "No reason to make myself seem incapable in front of my men. Again."

"Fair enough." Ilea replied and went back to the buffet.

"Any hunters who've been near Stormbreach recently?" Dale asked the men and women standing around the tables.

"I'm not going there again." A woman said. "It's bad enough in the forests around here, I don't want to add demons into the mix."

"Not even if she's with you?" Dale asked again, pointing at Ilea.

The woman's eyes opened wide. "She's going there?"

"I just need someone to show me the way. Once I'm in the right patch of forest, you can leave again." Ilea said.

"I'll get a team together. When do you want to leave?" The woman asked.

"You don't need a team. I'm enough. I'd like to leave in a couple minutes if possible." Ilea commented.

She shook her head. "I don't want a team to get there. I want it to get back."

"I can join in too." A nearby hunter said, tapping someone else on the shoulder. "And so will he."

"What?"

"I can help as well." A guard said. "Too long since I've been out."

"Perfect. Got your team. Let's go." Ilea said.

"No wagon?" A man said, putting away his plate.

"No wagon." Ilea repeated, her ashen limbs moving out to grab the people who had agreed to join.

The flight didn't take very long. An hour or two over the western forests. Ilea had to keep her speed down a little because of the lower leveled team she had with her. Most of them had never flown before. One of the hunters said his only flight had been a fall down the Riverwatch walls.

Their guiding certainly helped and was ultimately necessary to find the target location as quickly as they did.

Ilea flew low over the forests, the only trees remaining with any color were pines and variations thereof. She landed in front of a river, after the indication of her navigation system.

The group stumbled to their feet as they were let go, two of them using trees to balance and as a help to keep their lunches down.

“Beyond the river is the area associated with Stormbreach. Where demons were sighted.” The woman who had initially volunteered said, crouching next to Ilea. “It’s been a couple weeks since our last scout came through here. Are you sure we shouldn’t stay with you?”

Ilea looked at the man nearly puking from the flight and held back a smirk. “I’ll be fine.” She said. “A couple weeks is a long time.” She added. “I’ll fly you back a little to make sure you have a higher chance of surviving.”

“Please, no more flying.” One of them complained.

“She’s right. I’m the highest here with level one ten. If demons show up, we’re in trouble.” The huntress said and nodded to Ilea.

“You could also make camp where I set you down.” Ilea suggested.

“Keeping on the move is important. Many beasts are territorial. If we leave quickly enough, they might not challenge us at all. I’ll keep them together and we’ll return safely. I think we can make it back by sundown.” The huntress explained casually and checked her gear. “Get ready, we’re flying again.”

Ilea nodded. “If you say so. I trust your judgment.” She thought about bringing them back to Riverwatch instead of setting them down somewhere twenty minutes away but decided against it. They wouldn’t agree and having so little trust in their abilities wasn’t going to help anyone. *Might even get some levels if they fight monsters on the way.*

It took her half an hour to transport the group a chunk of the way back before she returned once again, this time at her full speed. There had been scents and tracks of monsters but nothing had approached them so far.

Ilea looked over the river and towards the forest that held Stormbreach. Another one of the western mostly independent cities. Southwest from Riverwatch but nowhere near as far west as Salia or Dawntree were located.

Decimated by the elves, for whatever reason. Damn near completely wiped out. She thought about the monsters and their possible motives but couldn’t really think of anything.

Big number of Taleen getting close and they needed to flee eastwards into human territory? An oracle’s whim? A bet among the young warriors? Maybe she would find out at some point.

Many of the people she had met on the way had lost people to the elves and their nonsensical attacks. The least she would do is ask why. Not that she expected a satisfying answer.

Might turn out that the Miststalkers are sentient too and they’ll ask me why I killed so many. For my stats going up doesn’t really seem to cut it. Then again, elves could hear and understand humans, could discern their sentience from a mere beast.

She jumped over the river, fifteen meters wide at least and raging with an icy flowing current.

Landing in the dirt, Ilea summoned her black obsidian hammer and clad herself in ashen armor. *The hunter is here.* She thought to herself and grinned, letting the hammer rest on her shoulder.

Its substantial weight was felt but was no longer a concern.

I wonder what a level three hundred strength focused warrior could wield. Add in a bunch of multipliers and it'd be pretty ridiculous.

The forest wasn't too thick, the trees without leaves and barren in the late winter cold. The so called human plains were a little lower than the western lands, their temperatures warmer.

Temperature, if not magically amplified was not a concern for Ilea of course. *Good thing I didn't appear here in Winter.* It would have likely been a quick death. Either outside or in the azarinth temple ruin.

Voices were audible in the distance.

Ilea focused on the sounds, moving quickly through the thin layer of frost and snow that had remained from the previous night.

She crouched as soon as the voices were distinguishable from the howling winds and rushing river.

"Shut up human. You always want to run, always thinking of betraying our great master." A sluggish voice formed the words, each pronounced with wet noises in between.

"I'm just suggesting it. None of us is here by choice." Someone else said. The human presumably.

Ilea moved closer, only using her blink to stay hidden and make as little noise as possible. She stopped when her Sphere was in range of the walking group.

Her eyebrows quirked up in surprise. *What's that? A forlorn DnD group?"*

There was a creature that looked a little like an orc or a big goblin, maybe a more burly Nazark. She felt like a racist thinking about it. They surely had distinct features but she just didn't care much to learn about it all.

Ilea's goal here was to fight monsters, not to better inter species relationships and diplomacy. *I'm distracted again.* She smiled at the thought, knowing that she would have been terrified looking at the group just a couple years ago. Now she was getting lost in thought for a second time in the span of a single minute.

A human adventurer was among the group, as was a demon spawn, moving in silence. *Don't tell me they speak.* She simply watched through her sphere.

The fourth and last member of the bizarre group was a lizardman, half a meter taller than all the others and with a big scaly tail brushing over the earth behind him.

"You've sseen what happenss to the essscapeesss." He said. "Be glad we're on patrol duty and not entertainment."

He moved his forked tongue out and looked around. "Leave this place. There is nothing here for you. We told you before."

He's talking to me, isn't he? She remained quiet, confused at the situation.

"Is he still here?" The human asked.

"Why can't we just eat him?" The orc asked with wet sounds.

"We talked about this before." The human said and shook his head. "You just don't get it."

The orc lowered his head and made a weird purring noise. "Intelligence is low but I try to remember."

“Don’t be mean to the orc.” The lizardman said. “Let’s just ignore him.”

Him. So it isn’t me?

Noises came from a nearby ledge overlooking the group, someone stepping out from a bush and looking around with frantic movements. “Do you bring news from Stormbreach?” A man asked.

Ilea had to move her head out a little to get a glance, her sphere lacking in range.

He looked middle aged, the hair he still had was thin and in chaos. A human. He wore a thick white and red robe.

“There are no news, it’s been the same as it was.” The human adventurer said and kept walking.

“No people disappearing?” The robed man asked and stumbled over the ledge, nearly falling before he caught himself.

“No. But you will if you don’t leave now.” The lizardman said. “Know that not all of uss are ssoo understanding.” He was talking in a more intimidating voice now. “Leave.”

The older man nodded, obviously frightened by the lizard person. “I will stay in this forest. One way or the other.” His voice was soft, the departing group either ignoring it or not able to hear.

Ilea smiled to herself and kept her eyes focused on the man. *This seems to be a more interesting mission than just killing a bunch of monsters.*