

***'ding' 'Your group has defeated [Werebear – lvl 320]***

Ilea watched as the remains were eaten by the flame of creation.

"It's done," she said, putting out the flames and removing her ash.

"We saw," Horace said as he walked inside, grabbing one of the dropped torches near the entrance.

"That thing was so quick," Pain murmured. She remained outside, resting on some rubble in the stairwell.

Baleron used a healing spell on her.

*Not a level out of it, Ilea thought. Understandable.*

She summoned her hammer again and cleaned it with ash, pieces of flesh, bone, and blood wiped away in an instant.

"You really are her," Horace said, flickering torchlight reflected in his one good eye. "Did you store the body?"

"There was none left," Ilea said.

He nodded slowly. A chuckle escaped him, the sound slowly building up until his laughter echoed through the Werebear den.

The man calmed down again and smiled. "I knew it wasn't a coincidence. You were here for a reason," he said. "A Shadow, to vanquish this evil."

"He wasn't evil. Just a monster. Born by mana or taken over by a Class, curse, or corruption. Who knows," she said, walking through the hall and towards the altar.

"He has killed many," Horace said.

The others still remained outside.

"As monsters do," Ilea said, looking at the symbols. She felt magic from them but they weren't runes or connected in any way. Just infused blood, primal and full of emotion.

*Are my lessons paying off or why am I picking this up?*

"You feel it too, don't you?" Horace said as he stepped closer. His eye flickered with recognition as he looked at the stone altar.

"You've been here before," Ilea said.

He glanced at her.

"Yes," he said in a whisper, checking to see if the others were close.

"Power was promised and power he received," the man said. "May he rest in peace."

"What is this?" Ilea asked, about to tap the altar with her hand.

“Don’t touch it!” Horace exclaimed. “Powerful blood magic has been bound to this stone. Now that Andre is gone, the magic is bound yet again.”

“Now I want to touch it even more,” Ilea said. “Will it turn me into a Werebear?”

“Don’t jest... these matters are... I’m forgetting who you are. It is... an altar to Varrah, a god of blood and power. You will be offered a choice, should you wish to gain power. Andre thought himself ready. I was the only one of the Acolytes to survive his change,” Horace said.

*God of blood and power.*

“I’ll destroy it then,” Ilea said.

“That is ill advised. We should collapse this whole place. It’s the only way to make sure,” he said.

“Why not do that in the first place?” Ilea asked.

“It was the plan. I had to make sure he was here, and that he was injured enough to die,” Horace said.

“You weren’t equipped to kill that thing,” Ilea said.

He didn’t look at her, instead keeping his eyes focused on the ground.

“Are you two alright?!” Baleron called out from outside.

“We’re fine!” Ilea replied.

“I knew he was hunting still. I had... hoped,” Horace said and sobbed. “That he would die. Of old age... another predator. I got stronger. I did. But so did he.”

Ilea slapped him.

“They would’ve died because of you. You stupid selfish fuck,” she said.

He recoiled, touching his face and finding his hand bloodied.

“I...,” he started.

“God of fuck,” she said and kicked the altar with all the might she could muster.

Horace staggered back. “What have you done?”

“Hey, finding four marks to hunt isn’t as easy as it sounds. And my Blood Magic Resistance is pretty damn high,” Ilea said.

The altar splintered apart, pieces of stone falling to the ground or hitting the wall behind. A surge of magic followed, bursting out from the symbols that had been painted and were now broken.

Ilea displaced Horace out of the hall once more, using her sphere to pull the energy towards herself.

The energy seemed almost graspable, wisps of deep red magic flowing within her magic perception. It moved slow, more like a liquid than anything else.

“*You are. Worthy. Will you choose... to accept... this gift?*” a whisper resounded within her mind as soon as the wisps touched her body.

“No,” Ilea replied.

“*Regrettable. There is no vessel. I do not wish. You harm,*” the voice said, growing evermore quiet.

The magic surged into her, burning into her armor and through to her skin and very blood.

There was no pain, Ilea healing against the damage as she'd done thousands of times before. She let the blood magic ravage through her own, the energy contained within her body.

"Hmm," she mused, letting the residual magic dissipate within her, absorbed by Sentinel Core and countered by her healing and sheer resilience. *Disappointing*, she thought and walked towards the exit, large ashen spheres crashing into the pillars close to her.

The hall collapsed behind her when she emerged into the light.

"What happened?" Horace asked, his voice trembling.

"That mana... I felt it from here," Baleron whispered.

"You guys should get out more," Ilea said and rolled her eyes.

"Werebear defeated, your friend can rest in peace," she added and looked at Horace. "I hope you do the right thing."

"Eat up," Ilea said, putting a bowl of stew in front of the boy she had found in the basement.

He didn't talk much, glancing at the three arguing adventurers.

"You stupid fucking retarded shit eating fuckbag of a blood sucking vulture!" Pain spat more than said, her fingers tapping Horace's armor with loud clangs.

"I'm sorry," the man murmured. It was the only thing he had said for the past ten minutes.

At least they hadn't killed him yet.

Baleron joined Ilea and the boy, sitting down with a sigh.

"You don't seem to give a shit?" Ilea said, eating a few bites of the stew the mage had cooked.

"I was surprised. But to be honest, I kind of expected it. All men have their secrets. And in the end, we came out alive, and stronger," he said.

"Yeah, because I was there," Ilea said.

"A sign perhaps. Luck is not random. We were meant to survive, and we have. Horace is only a piece of fate, as are you," he said.

"How do I get fate resistance?" Ilea asked.

He chuckled.

"Sure she won't kill him?" Ilea asked.

Baleron waved her off. "It's not the first time. He's a good adventurer. Experienced. Not the best or most honest man. We know."

"And you still stay with him?" Ilea asked with a smile.

"You should never trust a man without failings. I'm relieved this remnant of his past has been taken care of. Now we can profit from being here during the war, as we had intended," he said.

"I guess," Ilea said and sipped one her ale. She remembered Edwin and his group, even her Shadow team hadn't been exactly forthright with their intentions. It had caused a lot of issues for her, Ilea simply being more trusting and naive at her core.

She hoped her experienced had made her a little more prone to sense these things but by now she had reached such a level of power, where it rarely even mattered. The Meadow could cause major issues for her if her trust had been misplaced. By now she just doubted that heavily.

The Lily she met with scrutiny from the start. But even Hector wouldn't be stupid enough to go against her directly.

She found she didn't really mind Horace's deceit. It had made for an interesting few hours.

*Speaking of interesting*, Ilea thought and focused on her mark. It was still moving, albeit slowly.

The boy was finally eating, not quite as intimidated by the group as he had been earlier.

"Lilith," Baleron said. He seemed to taste the name as he said it, smirking in the process. He leaned back in his chair as he looked at her.

The boy looked up and glanced between them before he continued wolfing down his food.

"You really are the fucking worst piece of shit I've ever met! And I've met a lot of them!" Pain said before she left the house, slamming the door so hard it shook on its hinges.

"Is she gonna leave?" Ilea asked.

"Yeah. She's going to kill a few monsters. I'll prepare a bath for when she comes back. Always so bloody, our Pain," Baleron said, smiling wistfully.

"Maybe you could draw a bath for me in the meantime," Ilea said, leaning a little closer.

The man looked at her before his eyebrows rose.

"I can do that, if you wish. Though I believe it is something else you seek. Am I wrong?" he asked.

"Not exactly," Ilea said.

"I see. I apologize. I don't have that... need. It's not you, I simply do not enjoy it," Baleron said.

"A shame. It's okay of course. You're pretty flirty considering that fact," she said with a smirk.

"I've been told. That is something I can enjoy," he said and winked. "Though when the interest is obvious I try to be upfront about my affliction."

Ilea shook her head. "That's not an affliction, Baleron. It's simply who you are. Some men like women, some like men, others simply don't enjoy the act of sex at all."

"Thank you. You're actually the first woman who has reacted in this way," he said.

"Didn't exactly expect anything else from around here," Ilea said.

Horace joined them in silence. He had collected himself a little but the verbal beating he took left obvious marks.

Ilea chose not to share her healing.

"I should've told you," he said after a while.

"You should've," Ilea said. "You're lucky I'm not quite as vengeful as the songs suggest."

“That I am,” he said and chuckled to himself.

“Make sure Pain doesn’t torture people anymore,” she said instead.

“We keep her in check,” Baleron said. “She’s had a troubling childhood and it’s gotten better over the years. Most of her wrath is now focused on monsters.”

“What will you do?” Horace asked, glancing at her.

“That’s none of your business, Horace. I do suggest you leave this place soon,” Ilea said.

“That we will,” he said. “Plenty of settlements between here and Baralia.”

“Your dept is vast,” Baleron said as he glanced at the man.

“How much you reckon?” Horace asked.

“Causing my death... five gold pieces. Withholding important information, fifty silver,” he said.

Horace grumbled to himself. “Pain will want even more. Ah fuck. Is there any ale left?”

The mage happily handed him a bottle.

*Adventurers*, Ilea thought with a slight smile.

She felt much better already, the slog of the past months falling away with the questionable company of the three adventurers and the survivor boy.

*I’m just not made to stop rituals of mass destruction. Small scale stuff is just more enjoyable, like fighting Astral Spirits in a frozen realm.*

Being around the Lily members and more importantly Meadow had ripped her out of reality. It turned out her break had been the right decision, to ground herself a little.

*Still one massive battle to come*, she thought, already a little more excited than when she had left Erendar earlier that day.

*Only one thing left before my hunt begins anew.*

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Modano finally spotted the smoke rising in the distance. He wiped at the sweat rolling down his brow, inadvertently glancing at the rune on his hand.

It hadn’t been a dream. It was real. It was right there.

The demon had marked him.

It was said that Lilith slaughtered the army of Wynehold single handedly. The old adventurer was right, it really was her. He could feel it. Something deep within his mind had told him to run, to hide.

*She looked so normal.*

*Watch over me Atiom, guardian of mankind. Let the mark fade and my shame be washed away.*

He knew they would've killed him had the woman not appeared. He had no choice but to agree.

Already he had stayed in the forest, had barely survived. And now he had to find the very people he had sworn to forsake. *Rapists, murderers, slavers.*

He had known Baralia was on the wrong path, the teachings of Atiom were clear. All men are meant to be free, are meant to fight and protect. They were not meant to destroy.

It was good that the Empire had come, to bring an end to the High King's tyranny. He looked behind himself when the thought crossed his mind.

A sigh of relief left him when he found nobody here to strike him down.

The suns would soon set, little light of the day remaining as he walked through the forest.

He had his armor and his sword but many monsters here would be too much for him to kill alone.

*Another mark*, he thought and saw the sign scratched into a nearby tree. Freedom it meant, freedom from the army, from Baralia.

He had been too naive to see that one master would be replaced by another. The same atrocities committed with different excuses.

*Get a grip. She will come. You can still save those who are worthy.*

He continued, soon seeing the distant lights of fires burning in the dark and torches held by patrols.

Modano didn't know what he feared more. Atiom, King Baron, or Lilith. He knew that he was afraid.

The camp was near. By now he saw the simply stone and wooden barricades the deserters had constructed.

*You're a deserter too*, he thought and looked at the mark.

He knew he could just go in and seek shelter. But the mark would remain. *She will come for me.*

His instructions were clear and he didn't dare go against the Specter of Ash.

The mark on his hand dissolved as easily as it had appeared. He felt a cool breeze flow through his hair.

Modano gulped and nodded to himself. He gathered his resolve and marched on.

He knew one of the guards at the entrance, walking with as much confidence as he could muster.

"Modano! You survived!" the man said and laughed, punching the other guard in joy.

*Caiden. I was lucky.*

"I... was ambushed, injured. I had to take shelter in the houses until my wounds had healed. Sorry for showing up so late," he said. Most of it was true. He just had been ambushed by the adventurers and not wild beasts.

"Come, I think there should be some warm food still," the guard said.

"Are you sure, we should inform the boss," the other man said. He didn't look quite as convinced.

“We will. Hey Donovan, take over for a few minutes, will you?” Caiden said, gesturing to a man sitting at a campfire nearby.

The man nodded and stood up.

“You take over an hour before my shift ends,” he said in a hoarse voice.

Caiden sighed. “Yeah, yeah. Alright.”

He gestured to Modano again, already walking towards the crude stone buildings and tents that had been set up.

Modano ignored the others, walking slowly and trying to look exhausted. He didn’t exactly have to act.

*This looks somewhat permanent.*

*They even added windows, he thought and gulped.*

The company had over two hundred soldiers, only a few had left to join back with their families or to get to a nearby city.

*How will she even get in here? They have a perimeter, guards, experienced warriors and scouts. This isn’t just some random bandit camp.*

*How will I get out again?*

*Conner will see through my lies. I should’ve thought of a better story.*

*Still have time.*

*Maybe I can add to it.*

“Here you go,” Caiden said and handed him a bowl of steaming food.

Modano blinked, brought out of his musings by the gesture. “Thanks.”

He didn’t dare sit down anywhere, wolfing down the food where he stood. He hadn’t eaten anything in a while. Lilith hadn’t exactly been that accommodating.

*Lilith. Right.*

*Atiom give me strength.*

“How has the gathering of helpers gone?” he asked.

Caiden glanced at him. He looked at the ground before talking. “Good... good. Some folks are unwilling to support us, as expected. It’s the best for them of course. Otherwise they’d get killed by deserters or imperial troops.”

“That’s true,” Modano lied.

He finished his food and tried to smile. “Thanks, I really needed this.”

“Of course. I owe you more than a bit of food,” Caiden said, laughing.

“I was wondering. You know I’ve been in this area from time to time. Maybe I know a few of the prisoners, could convince them to join our cause,” he said. He had never been in this part of Baralia.

He suppressed a gulp.

Caiden nodded without a second thought. "Sure. They're all inside a simple stone hall a few of the mages created. We try to talk to them as often as possible.

"You don't want to get some sleep first? You'll have to report to Conner later too, I'll be honest, I wouldn't want to be in your boots," the man said and chuckled.

"I don't want them to rot in there, or get interrogated. Not if I know them," Modano said.

"Your choice, come on then, I'll bring you there," Caiden said.

The two walked in silence. The winds howled through the camp, a monster calling into the night from time to time. Nothing here should be approaching the heavily guarded and bright camp.

It was reasonably safe in the area according to their scouts, as long as the company remained together. Occasional attacks would happen but that was the way of things.

"Here we are," Caiden said, motioning to the large square stone building without windows. It had a single entrance guarded by a soldier leaning his back on the wall. He didn't even notice their approach.

"I'll take my time. Can I find you again at the entrance?" Modano asked.

*Just in case.*

"No, I'll be sleeping for a few hours now that Donovan took over. I'm in sector three, fourth tent on the left. Just come and wake me if anything comes up," Caiden said and lightly punched his shoulder. "It's gonna be fine. You'll see."

The muffled screams that resounded from a distant stone building snuffed out that hope.

It was exactly why he had left in the first place.

*And now I'm back.*

"Sure. Thank you," he said and turned away.

Silence reigned over the nearby vicinity.

*I'm here Lilith. I did as you asked.*