

“After all the things you’ve been through, all the monsters you’ve fought?” Fey asked.

“I didn’t do that to be seen as a monster. I just liked doing it. Kind of prefer to be ignored when I enter a city,” she said.

The elf laughed. “Very well. I understand in a way. Though with your high level, few reasonable people should ignore you. Perhaps I too should find some common clothes to experience what it means to be a normal human.”

“Eh, if you’re level fifty, pretty much every adventurer just shows question marks. Also I’m sure there’s a tailor around somewhere,” Ilea said with a smirk. She definitely wanted to see the elf act like a harmless human.

He grinned. “You use gold pieces in exchange for things, right? May I borrow some?”

“You can have them, I’ve got plenty. Just ask what things cost before you give them everything,” she said and handed him a few pieces.

“I know that much. Humans and your deceptive ways,” he said with fake disdain.

“You just can’t accept that a level twenty shop owner could win a battle of wits with you,” Ilea said.

He looked at her. “Perhaps you’re right. Then I shall go and see who will win the upcoming battle,” Fey said.

“Can I mark you? Would be easier to find you afterwards,” Ilea said.

“Of course,” Feyrain said and offered his hand, the spell forming a rune on the back of his hand. “Cursed by Lilith. Spectacular.”

“Go away,” Ilea said, looking at the laughing elf who slowly made his way through the small town. “Don’t kill people,” she added in a low whisper that only those with enhanced hearing would pick up.

He just waved her off.

Ilea let him be, hoping he wouldn’t create issues for them as she made her way through the muddy streets and towards the inn. The building looked run down but built on a sturdy stone base, a broad thatched roof with long faded color showing its age. An unconscious man with a large belly sat near the entrance with his back to the wall, the smell of alcohol and puke quite apparent.

Charming little town, Ilea thought, looking at the two horses drinking from the trough nearby. She already inspected the various people inside with her sphere, going up the steps before she opened the heavy wooden door.

Inside she found a common room with a few wooden tables and chairs, a large hearth to the right with a fire burning within. Oil lamps illuminated the rest of the room with a few windows still letting in some of the sunlight from outside. The atmosphere seemed solemn, about a dozen patrons present, most of them silent and focused on their mugs.

Only a few even glanced her way, murmuring to their friends about outsiders. One made a comment about healing orders as well.

Ilea already focused on her target, a woman sitting at the bar with her back to the entrance. *The most attentive one here, and she's not even looking my way*, Ilea thought with a smile. She walked over and sat down at the bar a few meters away from her, glancing at the inn keeper.

A burly man in his forties, handsome and with a hard look. A large greatsword was fastened to the underside of the counter, the man being the likely wielder.

[Warrior – lvl 58]

“Ale,” she said and placed a silver coin on the counter, glancing at the woman to her left.

[Ranger – lvl 125]

The man filled a mug and placed it down close to her. “You’re new. Healing Order, or looking for work?”

“Neither. I’m looking for someone,” Ilea said and summoned another piece of silver, smiling at the man’s reaction to her storage item.

Haya tensed up a little but didn’t show it, still not looking her way.

“And who is a healer looking for in Samethol?” the innkeeper asked, leaving the coin on the counter.

“A healer came here and took a job recently. Clearing out a mine, sightings of Shredders. I’m looking for him,” Ilea said.

“Lad went to the mine over a week ago, haven’t seen him since,” the man said and took the coin. “Mad look that one. I suggest you forget about it.”

“You’re a Sentinel too?” Haya finally asked, sipping on her ale.

Ilea nodded to the innkeeper and tasted the beverage. “Yes. I’ve come to make sure he’s not in trouble.”

The woman looked at her now, two green eyes taking her in. She wore sturdy leather armor, gray in color and worn. Two small crossbows hung from her belt, various quivers fastened to the back of it. An additional two large hunting knives and various pouches hung from another belt strapped diagonally around her torso. Messy blond hair had been tamed into a simple bun, a gray leather tricorne hat similar to the one of the guard near the wall rested on her head.

Her face showed signs of old scars, her mouth tightened into a perpetual frown. “He was wild. Came here covered in blood and stinking like a drunk monster.”

“Not the best first impression. I apologize on his behalf,” Ilea said.

“No. Certainly not,” the woman said.

Ilea sighed. “Did he kill anyone?”

Haya sipped on her ale again. “No. Thought a few of the less bright miners took offense at his behavior. He didn’t even flinch when they punched him. Bottles shattered on his skull. He simply asked me about the Shredder job when I interrupted the one sided brawl, showing the tattered note. Are you sure you’re from the same Order?”

“Organization,” Ilea said and smiled. “Yes, I’m sure. Though perhaps I’ll have to have a talk with him about his hygiene.”

The woman sighed. “Good luck with that. Barely listened to me and was off when I told him of the mine’s location.”

“Would you be so kind as to share that location with me too?” Ilea asked.

“And you’ll go rescue him? I’m sorry lass, but you don’t strike me as the cavalry. Not after what he showed here. I know your... organization was supposedly founded by Lilith herself, but I suggest you get a team together first. Maybe even locals who know the mine, if any are willing to go back in there,” Haya said.

Ilea finished her drink in a single swig. “So you want me to get into a brawl too?”

“I would appreciate if you don’t. I can see that you’re strong, but if you don’t take this seriously, you’ll die just like he did. Shredders are not your common monsters,” Haya said.

Ilea smirked. “Frightening monsters, yes. The location?”

“Don’t give me that attitude, girl. No matter what your level is, if you don’t know what you’re facing, you’ll die. And I won’t have another adventurer lost in my town. So get a team and come back to me,” Haya said and motioned to the barkeep, her mug filled yet again.

I suppose Fey was right in some ways. But isn’t this the best part of this charade? Ilea thought and activated her Deviant aura.

Everyone in the room froze, Haya immediately jumping up and grabbing her crossbows, aiming at Ilea with a dangerous look in her eyes. Her breathing was ragged, her heart beating quickly, but she was in control still, not pissing herself like some of the patrons.

Ilea did feel a little about the latter but she wanted to get the point across, feeling a little offended at how she was treated. She was one of the founders of the Sentinels after all.

“Try me,” she said, standing up with her mug still in her hand.

“Don’t. Come... closer,” Haya said through gritted teeth.

Ilea casually walked towards her, smirking when the bolts were released. She let them hit her neck, the wooden bolts breaking against her skin, pieces falling to the stone floor when her aura vanished. Ilea sipped on her ale and smiled at the terrified expression on the woman’s face.

Did I go too far?

“The location, if you please,” she said.

To her credit, Haya had put away her crossbows, both knives in hand, magic flowing around her. Sweat dripped from her brow as she glanced at the innkeeper.

“Calm down,” the man said to Haya, his hand hovering close to the handle of his large sword.

The door opened and a man dressed in a black velvet doublet and a kilt stepped inside, his head covered in a round metal helmet with wings of steel fastened to each side. “Here you are!”

Ilea burst out laughing, nearly spilling her drink as she steadied herself on the bar. The rest of the patrons started chuckling too, the tension of the moment fading away for a moment.

“What is it?” Feyrair asked. “I think I look splendid.”

Ilea calmed down, brushing away tears as she nodded. "Oh my dear, you do. Wonderful really."

"Do I not look normal?" Feyrair asked one of the men sitting nearby.

"Lad, you look like a jester," the man answered, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what had just transpired, looking into his mug as if to determine the state of reality.

Ilea offered her mug to the innkeeper. "Another one, and I still need that location."

Haya had calmed down too, still gripping her knives as she glanced between Ilea and Feyrair. "You Sentinels definitely know how to make an impression."

"He's not a Sentinel," Ilea said.

"I'll take you there myself," Haya said and nodded to the innkeeper.

He looked at her for a long moment before he grabbed Ilea's mug and refilled it.

"I appreciate it," she said. "Thanks," she added, taking the mug and walking towards the door.

"I combined the pieces I liked most," Fey said to her when she walked past.

Ilea smiled. "You do you. Might be a trend if you keep it up. But I suggest a simple robe or duster, brown or black pants and shirt, maybe a hood."

"Sounds boring," the elf said and followed her, Haya stepping out behind them.

"How far is it?" Ilea asked.

Haya reloaded her crossbows and fastened them back to her hip. "Half an hour if we run. With you, we could ignore the roads."

"Sounds good," Ilea said and reformed her ashen armor, spreading her wings a moment later. "We'll fly."

Haya stared at her for a full two seconds, blinking a few times afterwards. "Alright."

She grabbed the hand Ilea held out to her, ashen limbs fanning out to envelop the tense woman.

"Point me in the direction."

Haya did as she was asked to, Ilea ascending quickly before she sped up, followed by the handsomely dressed Feyrair, some of the common folk in the town watching them rush off.

"This way," Haya said, looking down at the quickly moving landscape. "There's the main entrance."

Ilea landed and let go of the woman, stepping closer to the open cave entrance supported by beams of wood, small tracks of steel leading into the darkness beyond.

Feyrair landed and joined her.

Haya watched the two people casually step towards the mine's entrance. They ignored her completely, the location the only thing she could've given them. Neither were in her range of identification but she could feel their magic.

She had met plenty of overconfident adventurers and even Shadows in her time near the border. But the presence she had felt before was something entirely different. That woman wasn't what she looked like. She was a demon, a monster, something inhuman. *And I shot at her. You're damn foolish these days.*

The war had put her on edge, every other stranger coming to town a refugee, deserter, or slaver. When the massive boy had come and declared himself a Sentinel here to rid the mine of Shredders, she had hardly believed a word. An unheard of organization of fighting healers. She had inquired of course, learning that Lilith had something to do with them, the songs of the famous healer having reached Samethol long ago.

She had done what was necessary to get the boy out of her town. Haya hadn't believed he would actually go into the mine. And now she was standing here with a monster and a ridiculous mage dressed in mismatched pieces of formal clothing. *Should I just leave? No, let them go inside first and then go.*

"Shredders tend to hide. They're a pain to find if they're scared," the mage spoke, glancing at his companion.

The woman was now clad in ashen armor, her wings gone, but the thin tendrils of ash still moved silently behind her. *Strong enough to carry me*, Haya thought, finding the movements mesmerizing. The careless girl from before was gone, replaced by this creature devoid of fear.

"Then I'll just have to get them out myself. Maybe Gael will come out too," the woman said and cupped her hands in front of her mouth.

Haya held her breath when a monstrous roar reverberated through the vicinity and into the mine shaft, the hair on her back standing up as she felt her body freeze in a familiar sensation.

'ding' 'You heard the challenge of a powerful healer – You are paralyzed for four seconds'

Her eyes trembled lightly as she focused on her breathing.

"You froze her," the mage said, glancing back at Haya. He chuckled before he turned back to the entrance.

Who are these people.

Haya remembered a melody, the sounds ringing from somewhere in her mind. The bard that traveled through Samethol a few months ago, his voice coming back to her as if he stood right next to her.

Ashen wings of peerless might.

Elegant and mystifying.

She will not refuse a fight.

Lilith, guardian undying.

Her eyes opened wide when she heard monsters break out from the mine, a single wisp of white flame flickering on the outstretched palm of the unconcerned mage. She felt the heat as if it was an inferno, the terrifying sounds of moving Shredders coming closer.

She saw the beasts come out in the frenzied search of their challenger.

Heat surged as the white flame burst out, flowing into the massive creatures and the mine shaft beyond. Haya tensed up as the heat singed her skin, staggering back when an ashen limb lashed out at her, circling her arm.

She couldn't shake it off, moving away still as her eyes started to water from the smells of burnt flesh and skin, the heat making her gasp for air. And yet it didn't matter, powerful healing flowing into her from the ash, soothing both her body and mind, the slight burns vanishing in an instant as her breathing calmed once more, her body in a constant battle of heat and regeneration.

Haya gasped when the flames finally subsided, falling to her knees as she coughed a few times, covering her face with a piece of cloth to counter the smell.

"You alright?" the woman asked, glancing at her with kind blue eyes. *Lilith*.

She couldn't bring herself to talk, terrified of the implications.

"Did you break her?" the mage asked.

"No. You nearly did, with your flames," *Lilith* rebuked.

"Ah... apologies. I'm not used to dealing with... people like her," the man said. "Should we go find your student?"

Lilith walked closer and touched Haya's shoulder, healing flowing into her once again. "You seem to be alright. We'll report to you when we're done. I suggest you go back now, I'm not sure if we got all of them."

Haya managed to nod slightly, steadying her hands as she watched the two step into the mine, past the burnt piles of ash, flesh and bone. It seemed so obvious now, but she simply hadn't thought someone like that would come to Samethol of all places. *I need some ale*, she thought and staggered back, turning around before she started running through the familiar terrain. She glanced back from time to time, unsure who she expected to be hunting her.

"Gael!" *Ilea* shouted through the corridors.

"More remains, he came through here," *Feyrair* said, lifting a battered carapace. "He uses a blunt weapon... did you get your own beast?"

"He just likes killing monsters. Nothing wrong with that," *Ilea* said.

The elf hissed with joy. "Humans aren't quite as boring as I assumed. Ben really was right."

“Hundreds of years old and you finally come to the conclusion that sapient species are diverse and interesting. Bloody genius,” Ilea commented, trying to pick up anything with Sentinel Huntress. The trail was there but so far all they found were monster corpses.

“I blame my upbringing,” Feyrair mused. “Being thrown into the wilderness with nothing but magic isn’t conducive to one’s education.”

“Fair enough,” Ilea said.

“So what do you know of this Gael? You did meet him before? A student, so a healer too?” Fey asked.

“Yeah, he heals alright. I think mostly self regeneration though, but that’s how he became one of the strongest Sentinels so quickly. He doesn’t work well in a team and uses a berserker like Class that gets him into a frenzy. Though he does have some control over it, but who knows. Maybe he lost it here. I’m honestly surprised he never missed a report before this,” Ilea said. “Then again, no idea how long he’s been going on missions.”

“Could be he found something too strong to beat. Those who forego the mind in favor of strength are bound to fail,” Fey said.

Ilea giggled. “Ah, really now? Like how Elves fight creatures far beyond them instead of retreating?”

Fey looked ahead. “Even for me, it’s not easy. And I don’t have Classes and magic that muddle my mind in favor of tenacity or lack of pain. Now think what that could do to a young Elf.”