

Chapter 601 Sneaking?

Ilea glanced back at the scout, unsure how much he really knew and how much he was just acting. Was she annoyed that he didn't know about her famous persona of Lilith? Was she annoyed that she might be annoyed about it? Maybe. Either way, she was pretty sure he hadn't guessed at the nature of Feyrair at the very least. Bringing the elf into Mothine and close to the Officer had been a little test and so far everything seemed fine.

Paulson was definitely a liability when it came to their team and their combat effectiveness but while Ilea expected there to be some complications with this seemingly easy mission, she didn't really think it would be that much of a problem. The only reasonable threat would be a four mark beast hiding in the walls of the fort but she assumed Paulson's suggestions were much more reasonable.

A few Slavers and probably some Baralia nobility or military hiding away, maybe even amassing power to strike back at one city or the other, maybe even the Empire itself. She assumed there must've been many groups working on just that at the moment, especially around cities that were taken with extended battles and heavy losses.

"Any tracks or traps you can see?" she asked the soldier, knowing that Feyrair wasn't exactly useful when it came to that. He too used her tried and trusted approach of literally just walking in there. With humans however, the problem of hostages was all too prevalent. And while she wouldn't stop at such threats, she would at least try to prevent them from coming up in the first place.

"I'm not a tracker," the man said. "And I doubt they'd put up traps in the middle of the forest."

"But you're a scout, are you not?" Fey asked him, the joy in his voice almost palpable. He really liked the rogue. For some reason. Maybe he really did want to eat him.

No

Eat

She sent the two words via her mind magic, knowing that the elf was at least able to receive them. His step lightened even more, a large grin surely plastered on his face below the armor.

"Yeah, well. It's just a unit in the imperial troops. Trust me there are Scouts who wouldn't know the difference between a horse and a demon track," Paulson said.

Ilea smiled. She had met a few of them and her impression was that they were good at scouting and staying hidden but she understood that individuals didn't necessarily have the spells and skills to make any of that easier. "You fought demons?" she asked the man, using her various abilities to check for any irregularities in the surroundings, both of physical, spacial, and magical nature.

"Ah, no. I was stationed in the eastern part of the Empire. Lucky enough not to face any of those, but I heard enough stories. I did fight undead ghouls before, they seem to match somewhat with the creatures I heard about. Except for the part where corpses start to rise as demons," Paulson said.

"Where's your team anyway? Don't scouts usually work in groups?" Ilea asked, finding a peculiar runed stone hidden below a few large leaves. She held up a hand to motion them to stop.

The scout didn't reply, scanning the surroundings as his hands hovered near the hilts of his swords.

“It’s just a trap, I think. Rune, looks like this,” she said and formed it with ash.

“That one makes a loud bang,” the scout said. “It’s pretty basic.”

“How do I disable it? I usually just let these things activate,” Ilea said.

“We can avoid it. Probably has a certain range where sufficient mana disturbance would activate it. A few meters I’d guess, if it’s hidden and small,” he explained. “Disabling is tricky, we’d need a rune mage, some way of mana intrusion, or a spell to essentially counter the effects. Barriers usually.”

Ilea formed a thin trail of ash, making it swirl around. “Think it would activate from that?”

The scout looked at the trail and shook his head. “Probably not. Barely registers to my sense and runes aren’t quite as nuanced as actual magic perception abilities. Usually.”

She extended the ash until she touched the rune, sending Storm of Cinders through it, hoping the time it took for the mana to reach the rune wouldn’t activate it. The rune didn’t fire, but she also learned that her spell was entirely too much for the problem at hand, the stone exploding into bits.

“I assume subtlety isn’t your forte?” the Scout asked.

Ilea looked at him. “No.”

“Figured,” the man said and followed. “Also we don’t always work in teams, but I’m not exactly supposed to share military formations and strategies with others. I would assume you figured that one out by my presence.”

“Sure, just that I met scouts before. Seemed more like a team effort thing,” she said.

“Most organizations use groups, except maybe assassins, though I hear they like to work in teams as well,” he said.

Feyrair scoffed. “No wonder you’re so weak.”

“You work in a group too,” Ilea remarked, knowing full well that Feyrair usually did his own thing even with Isalhar and the rest nearby.

“The goals justify the means, even if I may not agree with that,” he said.

“See, same applies here. The means of people dying somewhere in the middle of nowhere or in a forgotten ruin don’t exactly sound promising to most,” she said. “But I agree with you too. The issue is that people aren’t healers.”

“Too much focus on that,” Fey said. “It helps, but in the end it’s tenacity and experience that will get you through.”

“No, it’s resistances and being able to regenerate a missing heart,” Ilea rebuked.

“Both will help,” he compromised.

“I still think my interpretation is correct, but we’ll see how the Sentinels do,” Ilea said.

Paulson cleared his throat. “Erm, I don’t want to interrupt anything but I can actually see a few tracks here.”

Ilea looked down and found something too. “A wagon?”

“Seemed to be heavy too. Want to follow it? Leads away from the main road up towards the fort,” Paulson said.

“Cargo entry maybe? But why not just use the main road?” Ilea asked, following the trail.

They soon reached a camouflaged section in the rocky hill, Ilea seeing past the net covered in leaves and sticks.

Paulson checked and lifted the thing, the three people stepping inside. They found a dark tunnel leading inward. “Don’t know why?” Paulson asked. “Never had to operate the oversized gates of a city wall or a gate, I see.”

“I think I did actually,” Ilea said but she could understand how someone without ridiculous strength or body enhancements would feel about the situation. And she assumed the highest level people in a given group were usually not the ones taking care of cargo delivery. Depending on the cargo that was. “Silence now,” she added, focusing on the tunnel.

Ilea spread her wings by now, lifting up the scout and Feyrair, his bright fiery wings too visible in the darkness. Hers were far more quiet than walking, allowing them to move near silently through the tunnel until a stone wall blocked their way.

A steel gate had been set into the middle of it, a few enchantments brimming with magical energy within the wall. Nothing against space magic, Ilea found and displaced the three of them inside.

Paulson appeared behind the enchanted wall, teleported against his will by either Lilith or the yet unnamed mage. “There were enchantments,” he whispered.

“Nothing against that spell,” Lilith said, glancing at the empty chair sitting behind the gate. “No guard.”

She continued the flight through the tunnel, the smell soon suggesting rot, sweat, and plenty of other unpleasantries. They came out into a rather spacious stone cellar, dimly lit by burning torches placed into wall sockets.

Lilith placed them down and vanished, Paulson looking around in the room while he tried to cover his nose with the shirt below his armor. There were crates, some with opened tops, others still closed. Next came cages, holding people mostly, either dead or close enough. He knew how starvation looked like and he knew a sadistic fuck when he saw one.

Lilith apparently wasn’t a stranger to such things either, currently having the man’s mouth stuffed with ash and his hands and legs bound with more of the element behind his back. Her attention however was with the slaves in the various cages.

“Check the exit Fey, make sure nobody disturbs us for a while,” she said. Something in her voice had changed, the casual tone gone entirely.

Ah, she's one of them. Makes sense why she took this job then. Or it really is a personal thing... well it looks like it's one now either way, Paulson thought and examined the rest of the large cellar.

Her healing would be more suited to help the people here, so he focused instead on the various crates, checking them for potentially dangerous valuables that may corrupt lesser men. He expected to find wine, food, and drugs but instead he found that and also plenty of weapons. The next crate held materials used in alchemy and enchantments. Dried herbs and monster pieces of either he could only know a few.

It wasn't exactly what he thought a group of slavers would hold within their storage rooms, then again many had just been merchants. He assumed they just made off with the goods they still had and hid it here. Or there really was a group ready to make a move on Mothine. Not that this here would be enough, but more people would die, which meant more paperwork and in turn a more grumpy Barren. Not a welcome prospect.

The mages, who was apparently called Fey had taken position near the exit at the end of a large stairwell leading up, casually leaning against the wall.

Lilith talked to one of the slaves in a whispered tone. She walked to the closed grate and grabbed two of the steel bars.

"He probably has a key," Paulson said offhandedly, watching as the woman quite literally bent the steel away. "Or do that, sure."

She walked out with the man in tow, his uniform quite obviously Baralia colors, marred with blood splatters that were decidedly fresh.

"Interrogation?" Paulson asked.

Lilith walked towards the stairs without a word. Her limbs suddenly jerked the soldier to the left, splattering the man against the stone wall, what was left of him smeared a few meters towards the exit before her ash let go.

"Or not, I suppose. That works too," Paulson said. He glanced at the squashed remains of the corpse and quickly followed. He started to think that maybe he should inquire about this Lilith person once he was back in Mothine. "So what's the plan?"

"They're a group of both Baralia troops and slavers. The people down here were just the undesirables. Most of the slaves are still in the fort itself. Kill at your discretion. Fey, don't kill the slaves please," Lilith said.

"Oh, but of course not," the mage said.

The mage's words sent a shiver down his spine, something about the pitch. Or his magic. It was hard to tell. It felt just as natural as the spell Lilith had used back in the city. "May I guard this cellar?"

"The door is locked. And I will know if someone shows up down here," Lilith said. "You come with me. Let me know about the ranks you see on their armor, I would like to avoid killing soldiers who don't particularly want to be here. Anyone who attacks is fair game," she said.

Paulson sighed but he knew he didn't have a choice. Again he was teleported through the door. The mage was gone he found and Lilith stepped through the corridor with lithe movements. He decided now was the time to unsheathe his swords too, just in case.

They went from room to room, Lilith casually opening the sometimes locked doors with either a spell she used or by sending ash into the keyholes. He supposed subtlety wasn't her usual approach but she wasn't half bad at it. He certainly wouldn't plan a heist with her, but stealing bread from the nearby baker? Why not.

Most of the rooms were empty, some had tied up or caged slaves in them, all of which Lilith freed. She vanished with the people before Paulson could reasonably do anything. He assumed she brought them into the cellar, but he did wonder how she would know anybody showed up there. Maybe she could communicate through the mind or something. He had seen weirder spells.

Instead he searched through the desk drawers, checking for important documents or incriminating evidence. He did find a pouch full of silver that he thought could surely be used in the coming trial of the slavers who took this place.

Paulson let go of the pouch and grabbed his swords, crouching when he heard steps. He waited, seeing the door handle move. He would be hidden for a moment as the entrance opened towards his side of the room.

Two men stepped inside, the first wearing formal clothing in a deep red color, his hair black and bound in a small bun.

[Mage – lvl ??]

Shit.

The man walked into the room and glanced at the empty cage before he turned towards Paulson.

He was already gone, appearing silently in the corridor and coming face to face with the second man. Plate armor without a helmet. A Baralia soldier.

[Warrior – lvl 125]

The warrior used a quick slash technique, his hand blurring to the sword sheathed on his belt before the steel rushed out. A common first move by trained fighters.

And one that Paulson had seen a thousand times before. He went in, using the sword in his right hand to deflect the blow upwards and past his own head, all the while thrusting his second one right into the man's neck. It was his fault for not wearing a helmet and leaving such a glaring weakness.

Fleeing was the reasonable thing to do but turning his back to a warrior of that level wasn't the smart choice. Not with both of them likely being able to teleport too.

He pushed the sword further into the man's throat, locking eyes with him as the man grabbed the blade with his left hand.

Not enough, he thought, jumping back and slashing the man's unprotected fingers. He felt the magic to his left, turning to find the mage standing in the hallway.

A gust of wind came at him before he vanished, appearing with his body sped up to counter the following attacks. He dodged a blade of wind before another gust slammed into him, one of his swords clattering to the ground as he rolled on the floor and got up again, feeling magic form behind him.

Something cut into his back and pushed him to the ground. Paulson tried to use his teleportation but the spell failed.

“An imperial scout. Now why don’t you tell me what you’re doing here and how many others have come in through the cargo entrance,” the mage spoke in a monotone voice, entirely uncaring. “Get over here and pin him down.”

Paulson tried to swing his sword in an attempt to get free, a blade of wind welcoming his strike and cutting through his arm.

He bit down hard, groaning in pain as he focused on his breathing, not about to lose consciousness. If Lilith showed up again, they might still have a chance, and he would support her to the best of his abilities.

“A veteran too. Impressive,” the man said, watching as the soldier grabbed Paulson’s shoulder and held him down. The man still bled from his throat, not speaking a word but looking down with anger burning in his eyes. “Now tell m-”

Lilith’s voice came from further down the corridor, interrupting the man. “Lord Velkan?”

Ah she revealed herself, Paulson thought.

“That would be me. And who might you be, intruder?” the man said.

Velkan? Wait that’s-

A flurry of moving ash appeared in front of him, the sounds of tearing flesh and splattering blood resounding as a few drops splashed into his eyes. He opened them again to find Lilith crouching in front of him, healing flooding into him before he looked down to find her holding his severed arm close to his stump, both ends quickly fusing together once more.

The injury on his back healed too and a slew of messages hung within his mind.

‘ding’ ‘Your group has defeated [Disciple of the flowing Winds – lvl 232 / Chaos Blood Berserker – lvl 231]’

‘ding’ ‘Imperial Sword Dancer has reached lvl 139 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Shadow Scout Enhancer has reaches lvl 135 – Five stat points awarded’

‘ding’ ‘Shade Step reaches 2nd lvl 4’

‘ding’ ‘Enhanced Deflect reaches 18’

‘ding’ ‘Wind Resistance reaches lvl 3’

He turned to find an ashen limb pierced through the soldier’s arm, another one hovering in front of his face. “Not a sound out of you,” Lilith said, the man gulping in turn as he remained frozen and close to the wall, his eyes darting between the splattered flesh and the armored woman.

“You alright? Sorry for being late, I ran into some trouble,” the woman said.

Paulson stood up, checking his arm before he went to grab his weapons. “I’m alright. Didn’t expect a Baralia Lord to be hiding in here. I would make you responsible for my death however, you did

bring me here,” he froze after he said the words, weapons in hand as he locked eyes with the woman who had just ripped apart a man on the level of a Shadow in less than a second.

“Yeah, that would be on me. But you witnessed it, which is good. Not much left of the man,” she said in a matter of fact tone.