

“It’s been an hour.” Kevan said casually, taking a sip from his tea. “Also, we’re being watched.”

“I’m well aware of that.” Dale replied.

He had a lot of trust in Ilea but maybe she had bitten off too much this time. *What would I be able to do if she really did?*

“I could help, you know?” Kevan said, his cup of tea placed back on the small plate. The man leaned back and smiled.

Dale couldn’t help but chuckle. “No offense but I don’t think you’re in the same league as she is.”

“You’re right. Yet I am the one here. At the very least I could get you out of there if things get dangerous.” Kevan said and looked towards the warehouse.

Dale wasn’t sure. “Why should I trust you? I could get a squad together and force my way in.”

Kevan turned his way. “That is a risky move. With the little information we have. You wouldn’t risk your men for that. Yourself however, I believe you would risk that. For her... for those still missing.”

“I would.” Dale admitted. Despite the danger, despite his own family. He couldn’t get Vin’s face out of his mind.

“As for my reasons. I’m bored. That mad healer damn near killed me and now she forced me on this fool’s errand. I want to go home and lie down.” Kevan sighed.

Dale believed him. He had seen and talked to his fair share of people. Kevan wasn’t a liar. “We go and ask to speak to the owner. Find out more. You help me get out if they are stupid enough to attack.” They could buy Ilea some time with a distraction. If she really was in danger, they might be able to prevent her death with the leverage of the guard.

Kevan rejoiced and stood up. “Finally.” He dusted off his robe and disappeared in a dark red smoke.

Dale found him waiting downstairs. “I’ll be back in a couple minutes.” The captain said and looked for a patrol.

“Why?” Kevan asked, looking at the warehouse.

“I’m not going in there without anybody knowing about it.” He replied. It was the least he could do to protect himself. These smugglers would be dealt with, one way or the other.

Ilea was getting bored of the talk. Even the food and drink was sub par for a rich smuggling company.

The so called office was just another room with a little more care put into the walls and floor. Tapestries, magic lights, luxurious carpets and beautiful furniture adorned it all. It smelled of booze, incense and sweat.

Mauro wasn't alone in the big room either. All the people who had accompanied him were close by, some playing cards, others just drinking. Most of them had their eyes on her.

Half an hour ago that was. Now, she was pretty sure she could kill the man without anybody noticing for a couple seconds. The Corinth healer had left, apparently annoyed at Ilea's presence.

I'll find her again later. Ilea had her scent, unmistakable among the sweaty and unwashed men. Her perfume was like a poison.

There were of course things she could learn from the woman, about the Corinth order, healing magic and her class. Yet she doubted there would be much cooperation without torture and Ilea wouldn't cross that line. Not for random information she could get somewhere else.

Mauro was careful. He didn't trust her, for good reason of course. He was no fool, giving her only the information she would require as a customer. What they had in stock, where and how much of it they sold.

She was pretty sure there was little else she would learn from the man. Not if their talk continued the same way it had. "You're an ash manipulator." She interrupted, his talk on exotic monster parts reaching the worst point yet. All it did was making her want to fight them herself, instead of buying parts that were inferior to her gear anyway.

He looked a little taken aback, sitting up in his leather chair as he studied her. "As are you." He said a moment later. "Are you interested in trading class information?"

I'm an Ash Creator. Ilea thought and smirked. "I was just wondering... you're the first ash manipulator I meet. What happens if we both try to move the same ash?"

"The same that happens to two ice mages trying to move the same piece of natural ice." He said carefully.

"And what is that, Mauro?" Ilea asked and sat back, glancing behind her at the people.

He was giving her a look, not giving anything away in his expression. "The stronger one prevails." He finally concluded.

"Interesting." Ilea said and leaned forward. "I'm getting bored. Is there anything of interest you could tell or show me? Otherwise I might just buy a couple things and that would be that."

"I apologize if none of our merchandise has peaked your interest. I assure you it-"

"Cut it out. You know what I mean. Something big. A pet demon perhaps, elven mercenaries, a cursed blade that can talk. Or perhaps the guides to finding hidden classes. Those are the things I'm looking for and if you really are this massive smuggling company, then you would have at least something of the like." Ilea said, gauging his reaction both with her natural senses as well as her sphere.

There was something, when she was listing things. Some reaction she hadn't noted before. Yet she couldn't place it.

“Lilith.” The man started. “You must understand, I don’t know you. We haven’t done business before. I cannot risk endangering our goods or associates on mere interest.”

Ilea sighed. “What then? Gold?” She started summoning gold coins onto the table. One hundred, two hundred, they started spilling over the edge, rolling over the floor.

She certainly got the attention of everybody else back.

Mauro too seemed impressed but he kept his reaction in check.

“This might interest you. A Shadow I’ve come across. A hunter, looking for me.” She said, summoning her own badge and throwing it onto the pile. “You could get into some interesting places with that, I suppose. If you could break the enchantment and match the mana signature that is. Not that many would check.”

She summoned her Drowning Bear Ring and handed it to the man. “Magic items like this might interest me as well.” She said and paused, letting him have a look at the ring and her badge. “What do you think. Take the spilled over gold as a token.”

“We...,” he started and glared at one of the men about to pick up a gold coin. “... might have some things more aligned with your caliber of goods. I’m afraid we cannot accommodate you with demons or talking swords. I might however be able to offer authentic elven goods. Not a mercenary team but their armor and blades are just as good, if wielded by someone like you.”

They’re pretty bad at this point actually. Ilea thought.

“As well as magical items. Incredibly rare and often questionably useful but a status symbol if nothing else.” Mauro said and summoned a pair of plain looking shoes. Silver lining shimmered in the dim warm light, weaved seamlessly into the footwear.

Ilea took them and had a look.

[Silver Insight – Rare Quality] – [You gain understanding of Silver]

Guess that helps if you want a silver mage class. Ilea thought. “Impressive. See, that’s more akin to what I’m looking for.” She smirked. “What about your elven goods?”

He summoned a thin slightly curved blade and handed it to her. Near white and reflecting little of the light.

[Wyvern’s Claw – Ancient Quality] Enchantments [Strong Edge 5 / Fire Affinity 2]

Kinda want to test that on my skin. Ilea thought and gave him a questioning look.

“Go ahead.” The man said and gestured for her to try it out.

Ilea stood up and twirled the blade in her hand, not as adept at it as a swordswoman but she did have rather high Dexterity. *Why is it harder to use a hammer for me than twirl a blade.* Of course she would likely find her skills lacking too.

Putting away the armor on her arm, she stabbed the bone like blade into her skin with incredible force.

Mauro stood up but didn’t say anything, his mouth opening and closing once more. He apparently hadn’t expected such in depth testing.

Ilea pressed down, a sizzling resounding as the blade tried burning into her skin. *Cool effect*. “Could a fire mage set it ablaze?” She asked, pressing harder. She stopped when she felt the blade couldn’t take any more abuse. *Disappointing*. The undying skeleton could have likely produced a finer blade.

Then again, she was talking to a random trader in Riverwatch. Even if the blade was ancient, she assumed it was mostly the age itself.

“Perhaps they could.” Mauro said and received the blade.

Ilea was intrigued at least. She would get his storage item and look through it all. “Did you loot this or do you have elven associates?” She dared ask.

The man seemed a little shocked, his eyes going wide before he caught himself and calmed down. “I cannot share this information, I’m afraid.”

“Associates then. I know some too. Cerithil Hunters mostly. Are you trading with the southern domains?” She asked.

This time he was outright stunned. A full four seconds passed before he talked, “You... seem to know a great deal. We do have elven associates, yet I am not aware of Cerithil hunters or the domains you speak of.”

“Hmm...,” Ilea mused and leaned forward, more gold falling to the floor. She smiled. “I would like to meet them. Could you arrange that? I’m willing to pay what you have on your desk for that.”

“I...,” Mauro spoke and shook his head before he looked at the gold again. “Maybe we could... find a way. They are very particular in who they talk to.” He explained. “As well as... when and where.”

“When’s your next meeting then?” Ilea asked, crossing her arms as she leaned back.

Mauro seemed to be wringing with himself, unsure if he should share the information with Lilith. The gold won out in the end. A horrible mistake as he would learn soon enough.

“Today. In two hours. These tunnels... have several ways out of the city. We have a meeting in a cave near Karth. A dungeon actually.” He explained.

Cerithil Hunters then. Or some group I haven’t heard of yet. Ilea thought, even more interested now. She would have likely paid an insane amount of gold to meet them anyway. To an actual merchant of course, not a slaver.

“Good. Then we will go there later.” She said and summoned back her gold.

“I request you leave half the gold as an advance payment.” Mauro said, smiling brightly. He just made the deal of his lifetime.

Ilea smiled too. “I have to admit, you have a rather interesting assortment of things down here.”

Mauro looked at her, still smiling.

“However, there are some things that are problematic. You see.” She got up and clapped her hands once to get everyone’s attention. “I have a slight issue with people selling slaves.”

The man was getting up too, his smile gone. “We are just doing business. What we do and don’t do is none of your concern.”

Ilea grabbed the Shadow badge and twirled it through her fingers.

“We are happy to accommodate you as a customer of course.” Mauro said.

Ashen limbs started to slowly form behind her. “Mauro, you don’t seem to understand.”

The men and women in the room were looking on, some grabbing their weapons as they slowly got up. The atmosphere had changed in an instant.

Nobody made a sound as they all held their breath, watching on with various expression. Confusion being the main one.

“I’m making it my concern.” Ilea said and walked to the door, ignoring the stares of the parting people before finally, she turned around and leaned back, resting on the wall.

“You have kidnapped and sold slaves, have killed officials that were looking for you as well as a ton of other vile shit I would assume.” She said slowly, making sure everybody heard her clearly.

“What is the meaning of this?” Mauro asked, stepping out from behind his desk. Ash came from his pack as a Veil formed around him.

It covered him completely, just like her own Armor of Ash.

Seems to be available at an earlier level, or is it a different skill? She looked at him with interest.

“I give you one chance, to drop your weapons and step back. You will be brought to the guard and judged.” She spoke the words loudly, ashen limbs fanning out behind her.

“You are the Shadow...,” Mauro said and chuckled. “It was you all along. Yet you come here, alone, a healer.”

He spat to the floor, “You give us no choice. Our sentence will be death.”

Ilea cocked her head to the side. “I’ll make it quick then.”

The room exploded in motion, spells and skills flaring up as tables and chairs were flung to the side, splintered by the raw power.

Ilea’s sphere lit up with various colors, projectiles flying her way as she remained, leaning on the door. She focused on what the people did, noting that three had actually dropped their weapons and stepped back.

The mage with the burn scar wasn’t doing anything either. He had fallen down and was crawling backwards until he hit a wall.

Her armor of ash moved out from her back, covering her as the spells impacted. Most of the people were below level two hundred. Not that it made a difference.

Ash exploded through the room, not her own but the one controlled by Mauro.

Ilea moved her armor to her back once more and stored her chest piece of bone armor. Her limbs rushed out, slamming through the bodies of approaching warriors, teleporting mages and aiming rogues. Each was ripped through or apart with a single strike.

She let the ash hit her, felt the weird sensation before projectiles impacted her stomach. Her chest was covered by ash still.

The only people that remained alive were the three who had stepped back, the scarred mage and Mauro.

She still needed him. For various reasons.

A couple minutes passed, Ilea adding to the thick mist of ash in the room, even healing the survivors who took some damage from the merchant's wild rage.

When he finished his barrage of spells, he rushed her and slammed his fists into her stomach. Ashen spikes bit into her flesh but finding little purchase.

She was happy to find that his power increased with each strike however. Perhaps he would actually be able to draw blood. There was of course the option to disable her armor but in a situation like this, she decided not to underestimate her opponents. Too many had fallen to her because of that, she wouldn't do the same.

The man seemed unstoppable, his strikes increasing with intensity, his shroud of ash ripping in parts as he screamed. Blood dripped from his mouth as he finally slowed down.

Ilea checked him with her healing. Dozens of cuts, internal bleeding and obvious confusion. *No, do go on.* She thought and healed the man.

"Pan...", He whispered and smiled, continuing his assault.

Minutes passed as Ilea continued healing him, supporting his self destructive power up until finally, he drew blood.

Ilea smirked and healed herself too at that point. She was a little conflicted about the whole thing. Was it torture? Or simply her playing with her prey? Perhaps that was one and the same. The intention of course wasn't to hurt the man. Her actions were driven by an interest to see how far a level two hundred apparent berserker could go with the help of a healer as well as a much more selfish reason.

'ding' 'You have learned the General skill: Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1:

Ash Magic Resistance – lvl 1

You have found a being similar to your own, wielding magic you are not just familiar with but have mastered. A small increase in your resistance but perhaps a new insight into your own connection to Ash itself.

Ilea's fist slammed into the man's head, knocking him out and to the floor. His skull was fractured from the unaided punch but he was alive. Her healing made sure to keep it that way.

She willed the ash away, returning the room to its former state. Having added of course a pile of corpses, blood and guts as well as whatever damage their spells had caused.

"You four, come on. We're leaving." She said.

Fearful eyes stared back at her and nodded, dejected.

"He wasn't necessarily right, you know. He's dead, I'm pretty sure about that but you guys are just in the team. Maybe there's a deal in store." She said. Of course there was a low chance of that happening but they had decided to face the guard at least, instead of attacking her. There was a

chance they got into this job for reasons outside of their control. It was impossible to tell of course and they could pretend or lie. She would leave that to Dale.

“We’ll get the prisoners as well as any surviving officials out before we go up. If you stay with me, I’ll at least promise to keep you alive and to make sure your case is heard by a reasonable guard captain.” Ilea explained. “As long as you cooperate of course.”

Her ashen limbs moved through the room, picking up the remaining gold pieces as well as shattering the table and taking all the contents. Mostly documents and files. Evidence for Dale. Paperwork she was very much not interested in.