

Chapter 547 Challenger

Modano walked up to the guard. He was about to speak when the man vanished.

What?

He looked behind himself but there was nothing. He gulped and tried to open the stone door.

Need a key.

It was suddenly dark.

Where am I? Did I die?

A torch burst to light to his left, blue eyes illuminated in the darkness.

He staggered back. *I'm dead.*

“Don’t shit your pants, buddy. You did well,” Lilith said as she stepped forward.

Modano saw the outline of two men on the floor next to her. Soldiers. He didn’t know if they were dead but they didn’t move.

Her form was shrouded in ash. She stepped with confidence, her obsidian armor not reflecting much of the light.

Modano tried to follow her and stumbled on a root.

A few coughs resounded nearby.

We’re in the prison. How did she? The guard. She can move people?

He felt something on the ground, something like sand.

It felt warm, energy flowing into him that seemed to calm him. The scratches on his arm that itched suddenly vanished. He didn’t see it but he knew.

Healing magic. It’s different than what I’ve experienced before. Like a soothing song from a bard. Or the sweet taste of Kilproot.

“Don’t be afraid,” Lilith said. “I’ve come to help, if that is what you want.”

People started moving now, hiding before as not to be selected for interrogation, or worse.

The only light came from the woman’s torch, suddenly replaced by a gnarled wooden staff that started shining with a pure bright light.

The ground was ash, moving through the whole makeshift prison, touching each and every one of the people present. Slaves, farmers, hunters, and even soldiers. Those who would defy Conner.

“And who would you be, Shadow?” a man asked, his voice steady and calm. He stood up and walked past the many people around, occasionally lending a gentle touch.

Jensen.

The officer had kept his armor, proudly wearing the colors of Baralia. His graying hair and beard did nothing to diminish the order his sheer presence demanded. Even here, as a prisoner.

Modano focused hard on the ground, hoping the man wouldn't spot him. His shame was big enough.

Opposite him stood Lilith. The woman didn't have the same dignity. She felt more like an assassin to Modano, or a predator. Her stance was casual, showing no concern for the gravity of the situation and her position in it.

He feared it was justified.

"I'm the one they call Lilith," she said.

A few murmurs went through the hall.

Jensen didn't laugh or dismiss her claim. He looked at her with stern eyes. "You have fought against Baralia. You have killed hundreds of our men and women. Why should we want your help?"

"Lord Harken refused to surrender. I gave him an out, and he attacked. Those who fled or didn't fight, I spared," Lilith said.

"Cowards, the lot of them," Jensen said, his voice firm. He sounded disappointed more than accusing.

"And what's this then?" she asked, gesturing around herself. "I see farmers, slaves, people scared and imprisoned in a camp that seems to be made up of soldiers. Is that the proud Baralia army you think so highly of, Prisoner?" Lilith asked.

"Don't think you-" Jensen started, a low growl interrupting him.

'ding' 'You have heard the call of Lilith. You are paralyzed for three seconds'

Atiom, protect my soul...

"I killed a man, one of your soldiers, who was torturing a woman in a small building nearby. I'm sure you heard her screams. I did. He seemed to have enjoyed it. She was barely level twenty. Now I'm not sure if she had critical information of army movements or killed a hundred of your company but frankly, I don't care.

"Your High King has abandoned you, used the Order to sacrifice whole cities for a chance to enter the Realm of Life. The rituals were stopped, the Empire is laying siege on Baralia as we speak. And you, Officer, have become bandits that hide in the woods. Deserters who shouldn't speak of cowardice."

The officer started moving again. He looked tired now, his mind reeling with the information she had shared.

Rituals, siege on Baralia... they're already there?

Modano had thought Lys would never be able to advance that quickly. He assumed they would fight at the border, in a war that would come to an end with treaties and agreements in a year's time.

"No more slaves. Everyone here that was one is free now. The prisoners too. I'll bring you all to Gyffold after I've dealt with whoever is in charge of this band of common thieves," Lilith said.

"I can't let you slaughter my men. Conner will pay for his crimes but they fought for Baralia. I'm in this prison because I disagreed with his methods and actions, as are others. He can't kill us without facing a revolt. Many are split but the power of him and his closest allies is overwhelming," Jensen said as he prepared for battle, several spells activating instantly.

He charged Lilith with a leap, his hand glowing with power.

Modano hadn't seen the man fight but he felt the heat from where he stood.

Lilith just stood there, his fist connecting with her chest as fire spread on her.

He tried to retreat but found her hand wrapped around his wrist.

"I won't kill you," she said. Grinding cracks resounded when his wrist was squashed within her grasp.

She let go of him, the man taking a step back.

His face looked slightly strained but he hadn't even cried out.

"Why?" he asked. "Are you not the Shadow of Riverwatch?"

Lilith's eyes seemed to sparkle.

She's smiling.

"That was explosion magic, wasn't it?" she asked.

Jensen didn't reply.

"Not exactly an efficient use, is it?" Lilith said. "Don't worry, I'll give your soldiers the same choice that I've given to many before them. I will trust Gyffold to judge those who take my offer."

Modano's view suddenly shifted. He found himself flying, his arms flailing as the wind rushed past.

The lights below shined bright.

His vision shifted again, and again.

He nearly fell as his legs wobbled below him. Shouts resounded in the distance, far away.

More people appeared around him and yet more. Eight, maybe ten seconds had passed.

The sunlight had gone, but the early night was cloudless. He saw the frightened faces of people clad in rags, with dirtied faces, bloodied backs.

Some dared speaking, most remained silent.

Lilith appeared amidst them, Jensen close to her.

"I trust you can defend these people from a bunch of wolves," she said.

The man looked around. "Form a circle, not too tightly together. Those who can fight at the edges. No light, no noise. Will you return?" he looked to Lilith with the question.

"Shortly," the woman said and vanished.

Modano winced when Jensen glared at him.

"You brought that demon here. Look what you have done," he said. But his voice lacked bite. He felt the same shame that drove Modano to desert his company.

Ilea was surprised how many of the soldiers had noticed her quick evacuation of the prisoners. Most people supposedly didn't look up but at least ten of them had spotted her.

Cloudless night doesn't help.

Well maybe it might.

She spread her wings, flying high enough to be out of range of most mid range spells and projectiles but close enough for most of them to see a silhouette, moonlight to her back.

Her comment about common thieves had been a provocation of course. This was a war camp. She doubted that she could've infiltrated it without space magic. A few people still noticed her passing, just too late to understand the significance.

Shouts resounded throughout the camp by now, torches flaring up all around as the single entrance was shut with a quickly raised stone wall. Teams formed up, weapons and arrows at the ready. She saw the glimmer of a hundred spells amidst the light.

All of them had gathered in a central open area with various stone structures, ready to face whatever foe they faced together.

Veterans, the lot of them.

Reluctantly so.

She smirked.

Perhaps she could've used the imprisoned officer but she feared he would rally them up against her in the end anyway, causing more meaningless deaths for honor, revenge, or nationalism.

This time she chose to imitate the recent Werebear, charging down into the midst of the nearly two hundred strong group.

Monster Hunter released and washed over the people present, only a few resisting the effects entirely.

Now they know what and who they're dealing with, she thought and casually landed on the soft earth, feeling the near palpable fear in the frozen warriors close to her.

She displaced them away to make sure they wouldn't be hit by stray magic. She wasn't here to massacre them after all.

Modano had been clear and the officer she had met only confirmed her views on this group.

The head of the snake was the most important. *Ah, there you are.*

[Mage – lvl 182]

The man looked confident in the face of his new foe. A slight smirk pulled his the edges of his mouth upwards but he remained stoic. Long black hair flowed out of his helmet. He was tall and broad but not overly so, armored in what seemed to be normal officer gear. Some of the highest level warriors and mages were close to him, most of them still frozen.

He himself wasn't.

Second tier Veteran? Or maybe something else.

He looked to be in his thirties, tiny arcs of lightning moving away from his body.

“Greetings,” she said, remaining in a casual stance to make sure they wouldn’t run away or charge her in chaotic terror. Her Deviant aura remained off.

“An enemy of Baralia, don’t let her words poison you. Kill her,” the leader spoke and pointed at her.

It was clear that many hesitated but soon the spells came. Most followed suit, group pressure, fear, or uncertainty pushing them to do what was expected of them.

Others downright reveled in the joy of attacking her.

A challenge? Or because I’m the enemy?

Ilea didn’t mind. Free resistance training was always welcome.

She saw the projectiles coming. *Ice, earth, fire, poison, arcane, lightning, light*, for each type she saw, one resistance was deactivated.

Her sphere pulled everything towards her, her armor disappearing and replaced by a shroud of ash to keep her dignity.

At least the company didn’t let up, their efforts continuing, for some even until their resources seemed exhausted.

She smirked at the laughable effort, the uncertainty in the eyes of those that could perceive her still, within the bright explosions of magic, dust, mist, and smoke. She enjoyed the confidence in those who looked her way with disdain or boredom, qualities she expected from nobility and not from soldiers. *Goes hand in hand around here*, she thought.

Few of the attacks managed to deal significant damage. With her armor on, she wouldn’t even have a scratch.

Her precognition let her decide if she needed more defense. She didn’t.

Most soldiers here were slightly above level one hundred. Many waited with their weapons drawn, unable to join the ranged assault.

When the last few spells had hit, she reformed her armor. Ash swirled out in a circle around her, dissipating the smoke and mist, quenching the fires.

Many of the soldiers staggered back. Their resolve hadn’t been impressive in the first place, now challenged by the scene presented to them.

“Anybody who surrenders will be spared. You will be brought-” she started when the officer started laughing loudly.

“Don’t listen to her!” he shouted, taking a step forward. “You’re tough, I will give you that.”

He walked past his men and cracked his neck.

Are you serious?

“A welcome challenge. It’s been so booring lately,” he said.

Ilea didn’t know if she should sigh or laugh.

“A duel then?” she asked.

“To the death,” the man said and checked the straps on his bracers.

The soldiers around looked at each other, a few whispering some words in the native tongue.

“Lilith. You will pay, for what you’ve done,” the man said as he entered the cleared field around her.

Absolutely delusional, Ilea thought. I guess I’d do the same though. Maybe not to the death. Is this how Meadow felt when I challenged it to a bout?

“As will you,” she said. “I will bring you to Gyffold, where you will be judged.”

“SILENCE!” the man shouted, lightning arcing out as his muscles tensed.

Ilea crossed her arms and watched him.

Excited whispers went through the ranks as the man’s magic flared up once more.

He smirked and charged.

His speed was quite impressive for someone at his level. Even for someone at two hundred.

He spread his arms and took the last step to reach her, his body freezing as his skin turned to stone.

Ilea chose not to teleport or dodge, instead slamming a few ashen limbs into the ground behind her.

The officer crashed into her, a small shock wave of air flaring out when he came to an abrupt stop.

Ilea cocked her head to the side as she looked at him.

His skin and armor returned to normal, the man staggering back a few steps as blood trailed from his brow.

He looked confused, disoriented.

“Wh-”

Ilea closed the distance with two quick steps, her fist slamming into his face.

The force sent him flying for a few meters, his head dented inward from the single punch, both his skull and brain mere pulp as his lifeless corpse hit the ground with a thud.

“As I was saying,” Ilea said, looking at her armored fist. “Remain here and we go to Gyffold together. Flee or attack and I’ll consider you my enemy.”

Commotion broke out as at least thirty people rushed her with battle shouts, ten or so ran away in the meantime and at least five fell to the ground, bowing in terror.

Ilea used Displacement on the attackers, sending them up about fifty meters into the air.

She used the spell again to bring back those who fled, her ashen limbs slashing into their legs. It was possible that terror overwhelmed them. She wouldn’t kill them just for that.

Those who attacked however, she looked up and watched them flail and scream.

Some fell more gracefully than others. No matter how injured they were from the fall, they all met the same fate. A swift send off to the Realm of Death. Or perhaps the one of Life. Erendar wasn’t exactly a nice holiday destination after all.

“Gather chains, ropes, and cuffs,” she said and watched the soldiers move.

New officer in town, she thought with a smile.

The next twenty minutes she spend hovering over the group, watching them bind each other. She marked each of them with a slashed cross on their chest plates.

“Gather supplies,” Ilea said.

The officer looked around, his eyes resting on the dead leader for a moment before he faced her again. “You kept your word, Shadow. For that I thank you.”

He still stared at her like the stubborn old military man he was.

“You won’t come with us then?” he asked.

“I’ll bring you there,” Ilea said.

Displacement proved quite useful in moving even a group of around three hundred people. The third tier was more efficient when it came to distance but everyone had to actually step through, which made it somewhat simpler to just use the normal version of the skill that allowed her to move nearly thirty people at one.

It took a while but her cooldown was short and Gyffold wasn’t too far away.

She brought the group in front of one of the two gates that led into the city.

Her presence in the city was known, at least among the guards and soldiers. A few Imperials were even present on the walls by now.

It didn’t take much convincing to get the group inside, a guard captain already talking to Officer Jensen.

His anger at the sight of Imperials was palpable but it seemed he wouldn’t start a fight with so little information and inside an otherwise peaceful city.

Ilea smirked as she looked at him, vanishing a moment later.

Quite enjoyable for an afternoon. Though I guess I remained a little too long.

More than a week left nonetheless.

Let’s put it to good use.

She appeared in the ritual hall, flying through the gate before anyone even activated a spell.

“I’m back,” she announced and blinked into Meadow’s frozen hall.

“Oh, Ilea. You’re too late. The Daughters have come. What a battle it was! We managed to drive them away but it was close. The Elemental was injured. It seems only the heart of a four mark spirit can heal it now,” Meadow rambled.

“Come on, stop with the bullshit and give me some anti teleportation to analyze. I’ll go hunt again in an hour,” Ilea said and clapped her hands together.

“You are no fun. Perhaps you’re bitter, for not evolving at four hundred?” Meadow teased.

“Each level and achievement brings me closer, great god of life and space. Doesn’t matter if it happens at four hundred, five, or one thousand,” Ilea said.

Stone platforms appeared close by, runes forming on them before the magic fields thrummed to life.

“The unending greed for power. What will you do once there is nothing left to fight?” Meadow asked.

Ilea looked at the tree and smiled. *“Cooking? Becoming a smith? Riding Dragons? Who knows really. I’m sure I won’t get bored. Worst case, I’ll have to train up a challenge. Starting with your lazy ass.”*

A chuckle flowed through space itself.

“Ambitious words for someone so frail and tiny. I’ll look forward to it.”