

Nathan grabbed a plate and piled it with food, turning around as he searched the hall. *There he is*, he thought, approaching the table with its lone occupant.

“Mind if I sit here?” he asked.

[Mage – lvl ??]

The man nodded, barely noticeable. The food on his plate looked cold, his fork stabbing into a steak.

“Your name is Ford, right?” he asked.

The mage looked up and met his eyes. “What do you want?”

“You left earlier, right? I’m just interested in what they told you. Or did to you,” Nathan explained, the last part in a whisper.

Ford looked at him and grinned. “Nothing. Just told me to relax and take it slow. That it’s alright and that I should join again as soon as I feel ready. Trian even checked up on me three times already.”

“What?” Nathan asked.

“I agree... it’s... confusing. I don’t exactly have a better place to go so I’ll just follow their advice. Watching the corruption grow on my arm... I felt... helpless. Like an insect succumbing to something so simple. Lilith just stopped it, ripped it out. Like it was nothing,” Ford said.

Nathan chuckled. “She’s quite something, isn’t she? I feared you would be exiled... or worse.”

“With what you hear of healing orders... or other training... facilities... I expected similar. That’s why I forced myself to stay,” Ford said and leaned in. “She could tell... somehow, she could sense it.”

“It wouldn’t be the weirdest skill she has,” Nathan said as he noticed Celeste and Luke approaching.

“Still think this is a cult and Ilea will eat your heart?” Celeste asked as she sat down next to Ford, not giving him any attention.

Nathan gave the man an apologetic look, noting that he didn’t seem to care.

“They’re the smart ones,” Luke said as he sat down next to Nathan. “Doesn’t help either way. They could rip us apart if they wanted to... Lilith even did earlier. Weird,” he said and flexed his hand.

“This isn’t my arm, right? It’s a new arm. My old one is gone.”

“Didn’t you listen? As soon as you can do that yourself, your body is just another thing to use. I can’t fucking wait until I can turn off pain and regrow limbs. Can you imagine the stunts you could pull?” Celeste asked. “You could wack someone with an arm. Or you could feed a whole family!”

“That’s cannibalism,” Luke said.

“So what? Ever been hungry? I would have eaten a fucking baby on my worst days. Not that I did. I have some standards,” she said. “Plus... is it really still cannibalism if you can just regrow it?”

“You could argue that you are just eating mana,” Ford said and started to cut his steak, looking intently at a piece he held up with his fork.

“See,” Celeste said with a smile, “This guy gets it. Did you get Ash Magic Resistance too earlier?”

“I... was made to leave after the Blood Manipulation,” he said, looking down at his plate.

“Really? Ah fuck... I was scared Ilea could sense my apprehension. Guess I fooled her. Well, your loss,” Celeste said and started eating with joy.

Nathan noticed the weak smile on Ford’s lips.

“You shouldn’t call her by that name... Lilith is more honorable,” Luke said.

“Does she seem honorable to you? She seems like a normal woman who somehow came to power. With an underdeveloped sense for pride and self importance. Could you see any noble do what she does here? We get fucking amazing food! I don’t think she gives a rat’s ass about what we call her,” Celeste said.

“I agree,” Nathan said. “I believe we should keep the second name to us. Otherwise potential enemies will know more about her. There’s a reason she has two names.”

“She doesn’t seem to care much,” Ford said. “I agree of course. Either she doesn’t deem any enemies to be a concern or she is simply too uneducated to understand.”

“Who are you calling uneducated, noble boy?” Celeste asked with a full mouth.

“You should know about that too, especially with your background,” Nathan interrupted.

“Eh... I like her lack of concern. Makes me think even higher of her,” Celeste said. “I won’t use then name outside, alright? Not that we can really leave anyway.”

“We can,” Ford said.

“Yeah but that would mean leaving the Sentinels,” Luke said.

“Fuck that,” Celeste spat.

Ford didn’t seem so sure. He continued eating in silence.

“Should we bother Aki later for some training?” Nathan asked.

“Your obsession with that creepy machine knows no bounds,” Luke said.

Celeste chuckled. “You wouldn’t understand the advancements of technology, farm boy.”

“Want to learn what this farmer can do?” he asked.

“Show it to Aki,” she said.

“Want to come as well? More interesting than sitting here,” Nathan said, looking at Ford.

The man glanced at the group and nodded.

“Just follow my lead,” Claire said, one hand on her hip and one holding her hand.

“I’m trying,” Ilea said, distracted by the giggling of Cless.

The music at least made it less awkward.

I thought Dexterity helped with this stuff.

“You are blushing,” Claire said. “Focus.”

“I’m sorry,” Ilea said. “You’re just very close.”

“Keep your natural desires in check. You would be doomed at a ball. Good thing you are powerful in other ways,” Claire said.

“You grew up noble?” Ilea asked.

“I did. However I did enjoy runes and explosions more than I did lessons on proper dining and dancing,” she replied.

Cless clapped as the music came to a stop.

“I think that is enough for now,” Claire said. “It is truly striking how little your finesse in battle translates to your ability to dance.”

“Was cutting words also a lesson in your schedule?” Ilea asked.

“No. That was all my father. Now, I’m glad you found the dungeon to be so fruitful. Your arena training left an impression. I already had the rewards for tomorrow lowered according to the flood of interest. I will be excluding the elements you mentioned. Do let me know once you advance any to the third tier so I can readd them,” Claire said.

“Sure, will do,” Ilea said and formed an ashen armchair, sitting down as she glanced at Cless. “You enjoy this, don’t you?”

The girl looked away in clearly feigned innocence.

“Is there a resistance to her magic as well?” Ilea asked.

“Potentially. She has painted you many times already. If anybody could test it, it would be you,” Claire said.

“Cless... can you paint me more regularly? And really focus on your magic? It will help both of us enhance our skills,” Ilea said.

The girl opened one eye and glanced at her with crossed arms. “We can set up a contract,” she said.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Claire?” Ilea said.

The woman gazed at Cless with obvious pride. “She is learning so fast. Remarkable. I will set up the contract with you, Cless.”

“I have no word in it?” Ilea asked.

“You always do. Speaking of which... I know you’ve been to Dawntree before,” she said.

“I have, what is it?” Ilea asked.

“It seems the economic stress put on the city because of the elven attacks has finally caused too much tension. A group of rebels has turned on the nobles, supported by a large part of the populace as well as adventurers. It would not have been possible if a large part of the previous nobility hadn’t fled eastward after the initial attacks.”

“I took the liberty to offer some contracts in your name. Similar to Riverwatch,” she explained.

“That sounds okay to me. If we can help keep the transition period somewhat peaceful. Any clue about the new leadership? And tell me honestly, did you get involved? I know you had dealings with some of the Forkspears because of me,” Ilea said.

“The leadership is yet to be determined. The one currently in charge of the rebels seems reasonable however, mostly concerned with providing food and living wages to the peasants. I personally didn’t get involved but a few members of the Hand took it upon themselves to offer their services. It isn’t outside the rules of course. We only interfere if Ravenhall is directly endangered or damaged through a Shadow’s actions,” she explained.

“So they just want to enrich themselves. And you’re piggybacking on their success?” Ilea said.

“Precisely. Same with the war in Baralia. I assure you, my personal revenge only played a minor part in this. I will continue to inform you about the developments. It is rather difficult to get accurate information from the distant city at the moment,” she said.

“Do that. I trust you Claire. Just don’t prioritize gold alone,” Ilea said.

“Gold is just the result of a flourishing economy. Happy, well fed, productive and spending workers are of high importance, be it for economic or humanitarian reasons,” Claire explained.

Ilea nodded. “What about the Corinth order? Isn’t it based there?”

“Yes and no. Many of its members relocated to Nipha and Kroll in the wake of the elven attacks. I am keeping an eye on the situation amongst the healing orders to make sure the Medic Sentinels aren’t blindsided by the developments. Currently they are more focused on each other. The Corinth order themselves might even try to retake Dawntree,” Claire said.

“That might be bad,” Ilea said.

“Understatement of the century there. I keep them informed. However interference to a higher degree won’t be possible, nor do I think it a good idea. I will inform you if a request comes in or if contracts are formed. Only then would we be able to offer extended support. Otherwise it would be an invasive war,” Claire explained.

“Can’t stop fighting amongst ourselves,” Ilea said.

“We try to focus on our own development but yes. It is a present problem. The loose rules of the Shadow’s Hand doesn’t help much. Especially when jobs like this pay better than many monster exterminations. Plus they’re usually less dangerous too. At first glance that is,” Claire said.

“Riverwatch on the other hand had some success in rescuing and taking in ex slaves. I received a letter earlier today. They are expanding downwards too. We lent them a number of our best architects and engineers. Large sums of gold too, most of it from you,” she informed.

“How much gold do we even have at this point?” Ilea asked.

“More than you will ever need. However I try to keep most of it invested. Assets, goods and the continued employment of capable people is worth more than sitting gold,” Claire explained.

“I understand as much,” Ilea said.

“Done!” Cless exclaimed and showed off her newest creation. Ilea holding up a severed arm. “Is that your arm?” the girl asked.

“It is, want to see?” Ilea asked.

“YES!” Cless replied excitedly.

“No. Don’t encourage her,” Claire said.

“Why? You teach her contracts, I teach her about healing,” Ilea said.

“Mutilation isn’t healing,” Claire murmured.

“Ah, don’t be such a downer. Cless, I’ll show you when you’re a little older okay? It’s dangerous and hurts. Plus it’s pretty gross,” she said.

The girl was obviously disappointed but accepted the reply, already starting her next painting.

“She needs to understand the pain and damage involved, otherwise I fear she would grow desensitized,” Claire said.

Ilea nodded. “I agree.”

Cless glanced at them and continued.

“I should get going, to get some more levels,” Ilea said with a smile.

“Same dungeon?” Claire asked.

“Today, yes. Might try another one in the next few days. Thanks for the work and info,” she said with a smile.

“For you, always. Don’t get yourself killed out there,” Claire said as the door to her office opened.

“I’ll do my best,” Ilea said and blinked out.

She spread her wings and shot up, charging them as soon as she was several hundred meters above the city.

Now that she knew where the dungeon was located, the travel time was reduced. If only a little. She skipped visiting the inn this time and instead approached from behind the dungeon entrance, running over the hills.

“Hey,” she called out to the man inside the little building.

“Ah! Oh... ah it’s you, from yesterday? Yes... wait... let me get the keys,” he said and got up.

“Don’t bother,” Ilea said and blinked through the dungeon entrance.

She rushed through the tunnels and soon found the blighted section of the dungeon once more.

The golems had sadly spread out again through the tunnels but it didn’t take long for her to gather a group of them together.

Should probably explore a little more. See if this place has anything else to offer, she thought and examined the walls and corridors.

Few rooms remained that weren't completely overgrown, many of them only recognizable by the suggestion of a door frame. Ilea's sphere pierced that too of course but other than fungi and whatever else dank growth occupied the halls, she didn't find anything useful.

What an absolute rank place, she mused as her body was cut apart by the golems that followed her smoothly through the corridor. Mostly smooth, as five of them hardly fit.

About an hour passed of her casually strolling through the corridors, retching up blood and guts. The trail would lead her back once more.

"Now this is something different at least," she murmured before her jaw was separated by a diamond blade.

A rather large building had been carved into a spacious cavern. It was just as moldy and overgrown as the rest. A few glowing mushrooms illuminated the parts she could see.

Two golems were guarding the main entrance. Made of stone luckily, otherwise it would have already rotted away.

Ilea blinked twice and left her entourage behind, appearing in a rather dark hall. Some of the mushrooms were glowing in a pale blue. Enough for her enhanced eyes to see the surroundings.

She advanced deeper into the structure and found a rather spacious hall.

Much of the furniture that surely once adorned this place had joined the growth. She found at least a dozen separate skeletons. Most of them buried and half rotten within the fungi.

Arranged in a circle? she thought and looked at the sarcophagus in the center of the hall. Runes and glyphs unfamiliar to her adorned the overgrown stone.

Her sphere informed her that a person remained inside. Neither a skeleton and neither void of magic. *Rouse the old unfamiliar being, or let it sleep?*

The answer was quite simple, really.

Ilea tapped the top of the stone with an ashen limb. "Hello, anybody there?"

Nothing happened.

"Do you want to join a group of rogue necromancers? I know a guy."

This time the thing opened its eyes. It looked around before slamming its hands into the stone.

Dust and spores spread from the sarcophagus, the lid lifted a tiny bit.

Didn't break it in a single hit. Guess whatever it is, I should be able to handle it.

Ilea waited as the being grunted and gurgled, slamming its fists into the stone. Cracks soon formed until chunks of rock fell to the side.

"You're really taking your time," she said and noticed the being now had enough space to bend its elbow, grabbing the straight longsword lying next to it.

A brief slash imbued with powerful magic ripped through the stone. It pushed open the two remaining large pieces of stone and rose.

[Undead Gem Sorcerer – lvl ???]

Ilea felt the pressure of his magic spreading as he focused on her.

Large chunks of flesh still clung to his body, mostly covered by a black tunic. Both had partially resisted the decay. Various yellow and near golden gems glinted on the hilt of his sword.

Parts of the man's face remained but he was noticeably less charming than Maro.

"Still in there?" Ilea asked.

The sorcerer replied with a slash of his sword, the blade glowing in bright white light as its range was enhanced.

"Not a talker. That's also fine," she said and dodged by taking a step back.

The undead didn't relent, instantly following up with two more slashes, the latter a feint that caught her off guard.

Ilea raised an eyebrow and took the hit, trusting Azarinth Fighting to inform her about the potential damage.

Her ashen armor was cut through but the blade didn't penetrate particularly deep into her skin.

The magic was used up as soon as it reached my body, she noted as the attacks continued.

She was hesitant about just killing the undead. *He wants to kill me, can cut through my armor and his technique,* she thought and dodged another three steps back before he caught up, forcing her to blink.

His technique is incredible. Definitely much faster than me, even with my buffs. I doubt he could stand against my attacks for very long but this is already enough.

Ilea instead focused on her skills, dodging and weaving through his attacks as she spread her wings in the hall. It wasn't perfect but coupled with the Golems, she could now train a variety of her skills without killing anything and leveling up.

My offensive skills are a problem... I'd have to find something resilient enough to take a bunch of my attacks without dying. A quadruple mark would probably fulfill that.

Ilea continued for a while, deciding that this dungeon definitely wasn't the worst when it came to training, especially for her resistances. Her main skills however could benefit from a powerful boss monster. More so than this undead. Even if he managed to push her, compared to the gem golems that didn't offer much in the means of resistance.

Could go look for that Basilisk again, she thought. It was pretty far away however. Something a little more local would do the trick. *New dungeon tomorrow.*