

Chapter 544 Off the beaten path

Instead of visiting Meadow for another beating, she left through the gate.

The defenders tensed immediately at her appearance, magic flaring up as their varying spells were prepared.

Ilea glanced over the group and blinked up and out of the city wall. She appeared inside the lake.

Hmm, why not.

Her ashen armor moved to her back, leaving her mostly naked as she enjoyed a quick swim through the monster infested lake acting as an oversize moat.

A few of the creatures approached her but left in a hurry once they felt her Deviant aura.

My level really should be enough. How did these creatures even survive? Attacking something hundreds of levels above your own is just plain stupid.

She smiled to herself, using her insane boosts to strength coupled with her Water Resistance to move in the lake with grace and speed that rivaled or even surpassed most of the native creatures.

Ilea blinked out and dried herself with a use of her fire sphere, her ashen armor appearing once more.

Should probably put on clothes again, back in human lands.

Her training in Erendar would only lead to an obliterated wardrobe if she tried to constantly cover herself.

The bone armor didn't exactly hold up against the spirits or Meadow either. A few hits perhaps but after that it was caught in a limbo of regeneration.

I do wonder if a Primal or Divine armor would be different there.

She summoned the bone set but kept her ash intact on top of it, both pretty much had the same form anyway at this point. The bone armor just added a little padding from below.

Half a day off, she thought and took a deep breath as her wings spread.

Claire? No, she's busy. Could fly north to change my blink location... but then I'll have to reset it again afterwards. I'd rather just do the journey with Meadow in tow. Not like the storms or anything else would be an issue with that creature present. And then I have some company during the flight.

She checked her various marks. The ones for Meadow and Violence were similarly distorted and incomprehensible. *Is that little shit in another realm? Without telling me?*

Maybe he's just home.

There were Claire, Dale, Violence, Meadow, Walter, Trian, Catelyn, Ember, and Felicia.

Might be interesting to see the siege of Baralia.

Felicia had left again to join Velamyr at the front lines, occasionally back in Gyffold for various hearings, councils, or whatever else the General dumped on her.

On the other hand, I'd just get involved again.

Just some time for me then, she thought and cracked her neck.

She turned and gazed at Gyffold, the city walls seamlessly flowing into the stone island below. *I wonder if the whole island is artificial. Pretty extensive if that's the case.*

Ilea displaced herself a few dozen times, arriving in a grassy field.

“Are you some kind of eldritch being too?” she asked and crouched, chewing on a bite of food.

“No? I thought you'd know Meadow. You two look pretty alike,” she murmured with a full mouth.

Ilea checked the surroundings with her spells, finding a few tracks. Most of them likely belonged to small critters. Or large ones with tiny feet.

She chose the largest one, deep furrows visible to her sphere. Her eyes had difficulties picking up the tracks but her Huntress ability helped with that.

Skills are so weird. How does magic just give me the ability to discern this stuff?

She put on a set of casual clothes, moving her ashen armor to her neck. *No reason to hide when I'm just staying here.*

The tracks led her through the field of high untended grass. She heard a noise to her right and checked.

Nothing was within her sphere but she quickly found the two eyes staring back at her a hundred meters away. A small rabbit with two fangs sticking out of its tiny mouth, its fur brown and fluffy.

Can you see me little one? Or can you feel me?

She blinked close and displaced the creature into her arms. Healing mana flowed into it immediately.

[Vicious Hare – lvl 8]

The creature bit into her arms with ferocious attacks, screeching with anger and confusion.

Ilea carefully pet it, ignoring its failed attempts of breaching through her skin with the vicious serrated teeth. The hare soon calmed down, giving up on its attempts and settling into her arms as the soothing healing mana flowed through its tiny form.

“Level eight, hmm?” she asked, looking at the cute animal.

Pretty muscly. And aggressive. Never had any rabbits but I doubt they'd be quite as ferocious.

She continued through the fields, enjoying the cool breeze moving through her hair.

Ilea let the hare go after a few minutes. *Don't want you to get lost, she thought and watched it rush away.*

Dark wings formed on her back, pushing against the air a few times as the woman ascended.

Anything interesting in the area?

Bunch of trees... a hill. Thrilling.

Oh, what's that?

She sped up and closed the distance with the pack of large wolves, the animals hounding a massive elk like creature.

The scene could've come straight out of a nordic documentary were it not for the wooden roots forming near the elk to deter the attackers from time to time.

Let's be honest, if there are magic animals on Earth, it's in Scandinavia.

Or Iceland? No... those are the aliens and gods.

Ilea kept her distance from the creatures, not about to interrupt the hunt.

I could straight up fly to any interesting place on Earth now. The cold would hardly be an issue, even in winter. Nor food or shelter.

Although without monsters it probably wouldn't be super interesting, she thought.

What level would a polar bear actually be at? Ten? Twenty? The mass alone should count for something I guess.

She shuddered at the thought of high level creatures residing in the oceans.

The wolves silently followed the large animal, occasionally jumping at its unprotected side whenever it was distracted.

The elk was bleeding, stumbling now as its wood magic lashed out at empty air.

She didn't wait for the end, leaving the animals behind as she sped through the landscape. The north was definitely more interesting than this.

Hmm. I guess if wolves would be a problem for me still, it'd be plenty exciting to explore these lands.

Not a road in sight.

Ilea made sure she kept a few landmarks in mind. The mark on Meadow didn't exactly help her with finding Gyffold.

Not like I couldn't find it with my wings and eyes, she thought with a smirk.

She summoned the map Claire had given her and checked it for dungeons in the area.

Nothing in Baralia, hmm. Should've maybe checked that too before coming. Just all that useless military and nobility knowledge. Came in suuuper handy.

Could've asked in Gyffold too.

Oh well.

She smiled to herself, her idea of a day off from fighting was apparently fighting something else.

A few minutes of flying later, she spotted a group of houses in the distance. Stone with thatched roofs, surrounded by a shoddy one meter high stone wall.

Had it not been for the rising gray smoke coming out of the largest house's chimney, she would've thought the small village deserted.

No animals, no people.

Ilea landed between the five buildings, her boots digging into the mud with her weight.

All this sport and all I get is denser bones.

Her sphere allowed her to scan through all the houses instantaneously.

Interesting.

The chimney producing smoke belonged to what looked like an inn. Or at least a building large enough to house a common room with various tables and an expansive kitchen beyond.

Ilea ignored that one for now, instead displacing herself into one of the smaller buildings. *Cute*, she thought, looking at the colorful spring flowers decorating the entrance. They had faded a little.

She could hear the heartbeat now, even through the thick wooden floor. It hadn't quickened yet, displacement not producing a discernible noise.

Ilea quickly found the hidden entrance to the cellar, looking at the rug that covered it.

Didn't search very well, did you?

She announced herself with a knock on the floor.

The kid stopped breathing.

"I can see you. Don't worry, I'm not a soldier," she said.

There was no change.

Doesn't speak Standard maybe.

"I'm gonna come down, alright? Don't shit your pants," she added.

Ilea appeared in the tiny damp cellar.

She recoiled slightly. "Oh fuck," she murmured and displaced both herself and the kid upwards.

The boy looked to be around fifteen years old, his brown pants and shirt simple but sturdy. Both his clothes and body were covered in dirt, grease, and sweat.

"Let me take care of that," she said and spread her ash, healing the yelping boy. *At least he's not screaming or running away.*

The bruises and cuts recovered instantly, the dirt on his olive skin removed with a thin layer of ash, his black hair cleansed and brushed at the same time.

"Feels better, right?" she asked, checking the house with her sphere. She found a few sets of clothes in one of the drawers upstairs, displacing them into her hands.

Just a very neat skill to have. Coupled with my sphere. Kind of what I always wanted back on Earth. Never get up to the fridge anymore. I wonder if the sudden displacement would cause a tiny vacuum in a good fridge. Probably not.

The boy's mouth remained open, his lips quivering as tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Change," she said and pushed the clothes towards him, a smile on her face.

He looked scrawny. Toned muscles however still showed below his flimsy shirt, likely a farmer.

[Farmer – lvl 10]

I figured, Ilea rolled her eyes at the information appearing in her mind.

'ding' 'Identify reaches lvl 18'

Okay, that's just a slap in the face. Really? Why not do that with my ashen skills? Three times each?

The boy took a step back, uncertainty flashing in his dark brown eyes.

"No, no. You're fine. Just stay here and change while I check on the others. And eat something," Ilea said with a smile, pointing at him and gesturing around herself, then to herself and to the inn. She summoned some food too, displacing it onto the nearby table.

His eyes opened wide before he shook his head quickly, moving towards her before he suddenly stopped. He said something in the native language.

"I'll be fine, don't worry," Ilea said and carefully touched his shoulder.

A moment later she appeared in front of the largest building, hearing the muffled voices inside as if the people stood right next to her.

"I'm telling you, tis the place," a gruff voice said.

"Well he doesn't know shit, alright old man," a woman said.

Ilea saw four people inside. Three adventurer types and one Baralia soldier tied to a chair.

Should probably use my stat points just in case. Though nobody has even looked towards me. I doubt they're particularly perceptive.

She put ninety points into Intelligence and opened the heavy wooden door.

Two of the adventurers instantly took a step back, gripping their weapons. The last one stood behind a counter. He finished pouring a bottle of ale into a glass before he glanced at the newcomer.

"Hello," Ilea said and waved at the group.

The tied up soldier groaned, his mouth stuffed with a piece of cloth. A few bruises showed on his face but he seemed otherwise fine.

"What's brought ya here, stranger?" one of them said, a tall warrior at level one twenty eight holding a large double bladed battle axe. His armor looked mix matched, the pieces themselves mostly plate and of good quality. His left eye was white, a scar going across his face. The wild gray beard and hair was full, despite his apparent old age.

His one good eye was focused on her, apprehension obvious.

"Was in the area, heard some screams. Thought I'd check in," Ilea said.

The second warrior spit to the floor, a grin tugging on her lips. "What do we have here? A lone stranger? Scavenger, or perhaps a deserter looking to save a friend?" she asked, nodding towards the soldier.

[Warrior – lvl 112]

She wore thick leather armor, cradling the bloody brass knuckles she held in each hand. Long brown hair and toned skin painted an image distorted by the nasty grimace on her face.

"Pain, stand down. Not another word or we're dead," the first warrior said.

“A battle healer? Really?” the woman asked, taking another look over Ilea. She didn’t seem impressed but tensed up a little nonetheless.

“How did you hear any screams? His mouth’s been stuffed for a while now.” the man behind the counter said in a smooth voice.

He looked the youngest of the bunch, dark brown robes covering a set of light plate armor. His hair was short and black, intense eyes of the same color now focused on Ilea.

Ilea smiled lightly. “I have good hearing.”

[Mage – lvl 120]

He smiled and grabbed his glass, taking a sip as he continued staring. The motion was quick and smooth, not a drip of liquid rolling down his olive skin.

Handsome, Ilea observed.

“We’re not bandits,” the warrior to her left started. “Adventurers, here on a quest.”

“A quest? Can you pour me one too, beautiful?” Ilea asked, walking right between the two warriors before she leaned onto the bar.

“If you’ve got coin to pay,” the man said, smirking a little as he took another sip.

“Stop flirting with her you stupid fuck,” the woman said and rolled her eyes.

“Yes,” the warrior said, giving each of his teammates a short but intense glare with his one remaining eye. “A former mate vanished in this area a few decades ago. I’ve come to find him, and the beast or man that killed him.”

“Sounds good enough for an afternoon,” Ilea said. “I’ll honor you with my help.”

To her surprise, the brass knuckled woman didn’t bark at her again. Though she did look a little constipated at the sheer audacity.

“A healer is generally welcome but I doubt we could pay for your services. Are you a Shadow?” the older man asked.

“I’ll do it for one glass of ale,” Ilea said. “I’m a Shadow, among other things, yes.”

“You’re shitting me. A battle healer?” the woman said.

The mage raised his brows. “The Ashen healer? Lilith, the Shadow?”

“Don’t joke around, why the fuck would fucking Lilith of all bloody myths walk into this godforsaken shit hole of an inn, in the middle of Baralia. I veto her help,” the woman said.

“Because I needed a break,” Ilea said with a sigh, glancing at the mage. “May I have that ale, please?”

“Of course, coming right up,” he said and grabbed another glass.

“Why else would a Shadow show up here, Pain? Think about it. Because of us? To loot this place?” the male warrior said.

“Your name is Pain?” Ilea asked.

“Got a problem with that, shithead?” Pain asked, her stance changing slightly.

“It’s just very edgy. Then again, so is Lilith, isn’t it?” Ilea asked.

“We weren’t all born with gold up our asses. I earned that name,” the woman said.

“By torturing people?” Ilea asked, nodding to the soldier.

“No, I earned that long ago. This is just fun,” she said and grinned.

“That won’t do,” Ilea murmured and grabbed the glass handed to her, taking a sip as she walked to the soldier. “Why torture him?”

“We didn’t torture him. Just questioned, with a bit of violent incentive,” the old man said. “Turns out they came through here. Deserters the lot, came here and took everything of value.”

“Except a few bottles of ale,” the mage added with a wink.

“Why wouldn’t they take the ale?” Ilea asked. “And why did this guy stay?”

She leaned closer to the soldier and grabbed the cloth in his mouth, carefully taking it out before she ripped apart the rope with her bare hands.

The woman rolled her eyes at that. “We get it. No reason to fuck up good rope.”

“There was a lot of ale... we couldn’t carry all. I hid in the nearby woods and only came back a day later... I couldn’t do... couldn’t do what they did,” the soldier said, coughing a little after the words rolled out.

“Seems pretty talkative,” Ilea said.

“But he doesn’t know what we wanted to know,” the woman said.

The soldier glared at her. “I told you of the beast... the noises I heard at night. Something is out there.”

“Something is out there everywhere. We’re looking for something a little more specific,” the woman said and balled her fists.

“Lilith... if that’s really who you are. He knows what we look like, knows a few of our names. If you let him go he might bring the group of deserters to us,” the old man said.

“That would be the best case scenario,” Ilea said. “Would save me the trouble of looking. Did you take hostages from here, or did you just kill everyone?”

“I think they took people. To work for them or serve as fodder for local dungeons and ruins. We’re from Baralia still... not murderers. Not all of us...,” he said, his voice growing more quiet.

“Hmmm. I think I have some ideas. I’ll help with the monster. Any idea what it is?” Ilea asked the old warrior.

“It’s large... brown fur, claws and teeth that can rip apart a grown man in seconds. Hard to say what level it’s at but it could have only grown stronger in the past years,” he answered.

“And you... what do you want?” Ilea asked the soldier.

“I...,” he started but didn’t say anything else.

“Gyffold is cooperating with Lys. I could get you into the city if you want to,” Ilea said.

“He’s a soldier of Baralia. Do you have any idea what he’s done?” the warrior asked, taking a step towards her.

“Soldier stuff,” Ilea said. “But if I don’t have evidence or at least a few testimonies, I won’t kill him. Just for being part of the wrong side.”

“He’s gonna fuck you over,” the woman said.

Ilea looked at the man. His level wasn’t impressive. He looked fit, a look of exhaustion and fear in his eyes. *Just a man.*

You don’t look particularly threatening, she thought.